2007-11-11 SpiritualClaustrophobia

Opening Words

We are here
on a Sunday morning in the middle of autumn,
only the seventh such season in this century,
to worship. Now, we pause to remember
that we too are subject to the seasons,
seasons of both the earth and the human spirit
for everything that lives, moves. So we say:

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence

Leaves fall now.
They fall from me as well as from the trees.
So let me set free the dreams I once had
that didn't stay green but grew brittle.
Let me set adrift all the unfulfilled hopes.
Let the wind take them away.
Let me too stretch out bare branches for a time.

Leaves fall now.
Red and yellow, light itself made tangible.
They carpet the road I take homeward,
and light up the path I walk.
Whether the road outside me,
or the road inside me,
the tangible light is there…
bright leaves on the one,
the great seers and teachers and lovers
on the other, more inward road.
Somehow, trudging through all that light
makes the journey itself
feel like the very home which calls me.

Leaves fall now, fragile, crisp, easily shattered.
Let me drop all that is dried up in me,
all that is easy to crack and crumble.
Let those pieces fall in silence, with no regret.
And let them too lay there
in silence on the ground.
And let that ground of being itself welcome my silence. *silence*

Leaves fall now. The sun slants just so. Memories call from autumns past.

There are many roads. Some we have taken,
some we have not taken for long.
Remembering those we have met on all
of our roads, we call to mind the faces of those
we love, those we wish we could love better,
those who have loved us, those we miss,
and those whom our society pushes away.
We imagine them, or speak their names quietly,
that we might reach out as we can. *naming*

Leaves fall now. Songs are sung. Journeys are begun. Tell me, where is the road I can call my own?
For there is no such beauty as where I belong…rise up now, singers, and lead us home. *choir*

The First Reading *comes from the late sage Anthony de Mello, from his little book*
One Minute Wisdom:

To a visitor who described himself as a seeker after Truth, the teacher said: "If what you seek is Truth, there is one thing you must have above all else." "I know," answered the student, "an overwhelming passion for it." "No," said the teacher, "an unremitting readiness to admit you may be wrong."

The Second Reading *comes from a brand new book written by a friend of mine from college,*
Mary Jo Firth Gillett. She and her family and I and some other friends from university days always
share a meal just before New Year's, something we have done for the last 35 years.
The book is Soluble Fish, and the poem is called
A Note to the Skeptics. I am only giving you an excerpt this morning.

Wedded to life, what else is there
but an oddball wacko longshot, a "take"
on the moment as I pass it?

So, don't tell me it's nothing
–-the sublime slant of this
extraordinary light hitting the trilobite
I keep on my desk to remind me,
take it in before it's gone.

Don't tell me happiness is irrelevant –
because there is death in the Dead Sea,
there is no beauty, no life in Yosemite?
There *was* the Spanish Inquisition,

there *is* whimsy – an armada of piñatas
without which I'm a curled armadillo,
a snail within its shell. What is there
but to be lashed to the mast, to take
my chances with the sirens?

Sermon

In the last three months, I have had brief conversations with five different Unitarian Universalists. About theology. And how, in each of their cases, they felt somehow out of touch, or inadequate, because they didn't seem to be able to, or want to, articulate their theology. Their world view. They were not even sure they had one. I want to address that issue this morning in a general sort of way.

I was clearly raised within a religious tradition. Some of my earliest memories as a child have to do with that tradition. The paintedstatue of the gentle woman in a blue mantle. The scent of beeswax, which gave off a warm hint of honey, very subtle. I remember the haunting rhythm of the Latin psalms, many of which I could recite from memory even as a five-year-old child: *Et introibo ad altare Dei, ad Deum qui laetificat iuventutem meum.* Sort of like singing a regular song like *Spirit of Life* from memory, which many here did.

As I got older, the sensual side of my religion, the sounds and scents, gave way to strict theology, the basics of which were very, very clear: God was invisible and everywhere. God was not a man, nor did God have a beard, and it was not wise to think so, no matter what the paintings suggested. God was a mystery: God was really three, yet God was really one. A woman named Mary was a virgin, a word which, I have to admit, had simply no meaning to me. The bread we ate was not bread, but something more. The story of Adam and Eve was not to be taken literally…only silly people did that, the nuns said. But the story was still true in a "spiritual" sense, and each of us had to baptized in order to take away the sin that came down to us all the way from the Garden of Eden. Clear theology.

Move ahead ten years. That's when I can remember a day when all of that clarity,
all of those sharp edges, quite simply dissolved. I was in high school. It was late afternoon. Classes were over, and I was walking down the long glass hallway toward the front door where I'd begin my two-mile walk home.

The sunlight was slanting through the windows in front of me. Dust motes rising from the floor were kindled in that light, so that for a moment they looked almost like stars scattered across the abyss. At that moment, and for a few moments afterward, I felt something I can't really describe very well. All I can do, really, is offer you words and phrases like "warmth" and "a sense of deep communion" and "direct experience of the mysterious" and "absolute acceptance and belonging." All the words of the creed I recited melted in that wordless warmth. The idea then of either affirming God, or denying God, or getting all worked up about *any* theological word seemed beyond my capacity. All I know is that from that day forward, the theology I had learned since childhood had to relate somehow to my experience in the hallway. My experience in the hallway did *not* have to relate to the theology of my childhood.

Here's why. The experience in the hallway seemed spacious to me. Wide open. But the theology, with which I was both familiar and delighted, felt more and more claustrophobic. There was not enough room in the theological box I was handed as a child in which to move, or be moved. For me, I mean.

So one by one, over another seven years, I personally stopped using those words in the old way. Some people would probably say that I stopped "believing" that certain things were true. But to contrast belief with unbelief still reminds me of a kind of dualism, a split-level view of the world. And dualism also seems to cause my claustrophobia to rear up, so I don't often speak of "not believing." But metaphorically speaking, I can say this: the meaning of most of the theological words I was taught simply evaporated. They no longer worked for me, like sails falling flat on a windless day. But, the

vividness of that experience in the hallway never left, even though it has been hard to describe to others, including now, in this sermon.

And please, I beg you, do NOT interpret my talk this morning as one that "disses" the theology I grew up with, or the people who find it spiritually rich and challenging to this day. I am not doing that in any way, and I find myself getting angry at people who do such things. I can only speak of my life and my personal experiences, not anyone else's. Theology, as I have said many times before, is probably a lot more like a form of autobiography than it is about some strict philosophy of what's holy.

But, my hallway experience of "absolute acceptance and belonging," of "communion with all things" spilled over into other aspects of my life. When the press and popular culture in the sixties tried to portray the Vietnamese communists as monsters worthy of our warring ways and napalm, I could not agree, as young and as unworldly as I was (especially since my grandfather, I had learned, was also something of a communist). Was I to think that the Vietnamese people as a whole did not *belong* to the world, and that the same dust-mote stars didn't shine in their eyes as much as in my own? My hallway experience helped me to see that the far away Vietnamese, no matter what their politics, were human beings with the same innate dignity I had. When I saw Vietnam war veterans coming "home" and yet ending up homeless on the street, often drugged with alcohol, or half-deranged from holding hands with violent death, I wondered why all the theology of compassion I learned about didn't seem to apply to them. Did they not belong either? Was there no *acceptance* for them and *their* experience? Did the stars turn from them? My hallway experience, instead, convinced me they were my own brothers.

And when, at the end of my high school life, I experienced the great uprising, or riots, in Detroit, with smoke, soldiers and gunshots all around me, it was my hallway experience of almost visceral communion with all things which prompted my sympathies with those who rioted. The memorial communion, symbolized by the wafer I took each Sunday, did not do that, even though it famously dated back to a dignified and moving supper some 1900 years earlier.

I slowly began to realize that for me, any theology rooted only in the authority of long past events, theology which did not make room for my own present experience of the mysterious, did not offer me what I needed to respond to the hard realities of the world. My theological and sensual past was formative, sure, but it was no longer real for me. I, however, am alive now.

In the Book of Qoholeth, or Ekklesiastes (a book in the Hebrew Bible found among the Kethuvim, or Wisdom Writings) you will find this amazing passage, in chapter 7, verse 10: "And don't go around complaining that the good old days were better than now. For there is no wisdom to be found in grumbling about such things."

The good old days. The familiar comforts of the past. The culture…theological *or* non-religious, in which we were stewed when we were younger. That culture which WAS the whole world to us. A Catholic world. A Baptist world. An Agnostic world. A Jewish world. A Muslim world. A Bolshevik world. A Hindu or a Buddhist world. A Unitarian Universalist world. Even a Consumerist world.

But my particular good old days did not last. Neither for me, or for anyone else raised in the religion of my youth. Our old world gave way to the present world. Why? Because of a forward-looking Pope named John XXIII? No, not so much that, I'd say, as "How Else Could It Really Be?" My observations seem confirmed about this idea every day. Everything ALWAYS changes. Everything ALWAYS moves. The past ALWAYS gives way to the present. Without any exceptions I can think of.

And so I didn't just lose my childhood theology, I lost the whole world of my childhood religious culture. No more chant. No more Latin. No more beeswax candles. Worship changed drastically my former faith.

But please, among Unitarians and Universalists, *things were not much different.* Whole worlds were perishing there too. Worship in Ralph Waldo Emerson's time, say 1830, was *not at all* like worship in 1930. The music was different. The words were utterly different. Even the architecture was different. And Humanistic worship in 1930 was different from worship in mid-century, when the Universalist Humanist Ken Patton tried to enrich the Sunday morning experience with liturgical complexity that left some of the 1930 vintage folks reeling with dismay. And today, in the year 2007, you'll find a lot more singing than there used to be in our congregations. Periods of silence, too. Children's stories every Sunday? I doubt that Emerson could ever have foreseen such a thing. Nor any of the great Humanist preachers.

No, everything changes. Everything. All the time. It seems to be the nature of things. If you are really having trouble understanding what I mean by that, just look at your own picture in your high school yearbook when you get home. You'll get it.

Yet somehow, despite all this change, we are all still part of a congregation which is undeniably rooted in both the mystical world of Emerson *and* of the Humanist controversy of the 1930s. And in the liturgical world of Ken Patton. Change, you see, does not necessarily erase identity, as most of you will have thankfully figured out once you get over the shock of looking at your high school yearbook. More often, change *enriches* identity.

Yet even though most folk are aware of the constancy and inevitability of change, they still worry about it. And often complain about it. Maybe they fear a loss of identity anyway. But the author of Qoholeth retorts back, "Fine, grumble away. But to what end? To grumble under our breath that things are different now simply is a waste of your time. *Of course* things are different now. The flux and flow of reality *guarantees* that this will be so. In fact, that's the only guarantee we have." Even if the king, as in our children's story this morning, wants everything to stay the same, the next generation will eventually see to it that any illusion of changelessness is shattered. No, all religious forms and all styles of spirituality change over the years. And what *is* a spiritual path, asks David Richo, unless it's *the continual shedding of illusions?*

Which is why our movement has always *blessed* the idea of theological diversity and spiritual growth. It's ok to reshape, reinterpret or even change beliefs. It's ok to be open to new ideas, even if you don't understand them right off the bat, or have a hard time articulating them. In fact, you can still be a Unitarian Universalist "in good standing" even if you don't have a list of beliefs at all. Our principles support this amazing radical idea in this way: "Our living tradition which we share draws from many sources…" And the first of these sources is the personal "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life."

An "openness" is the word which first speaks to me. And this "openness," in the words of Anthony di Mello, is "an *unremitting* willingness to admit you may be wrong." The seeker after Truth does not need passion, insists the seer, as much as openness, a willingness to be wrong. Or to say it in a more positive way, a willingness to go on another path. Take the alternate road. Change directions.

The second words that grab me are these: “Direct experience of that transcending mystery…” Ah. Mystery. A word from my childhood theology. A good word. One I didn’t let evaporate. And “direct experience”? Isn’t that a good way of describing my experience in that high school in the hallway? Not some teacher telling me about a great saint addressed by an angel five hundred years ago, but my own present experience of wonder itself, trans-forming me and so renewing my spirit that I could allow myself to admit that I had been wrong. Wrong to think that my spiritual life could be claustrophobically confined to a simple and certain creed which I once claimed I *knew* to be true. *I was wrong about being right.* After all, when I know something for sure, and I refuse to accept any more evidence or contradictory experience, I cannot admit I’m wrong. I have to be right. I have to be on top. I have to be better than everyone else.

But if I am open, as our tradition and heritage suggests, I might change and grow and deepen and shed illusion after illusion on my free and responsible search for truth. I might even companion you in my uncertainty, instead of rule over you with my certainty.

But Mark, aren’t you confusing some chemicals in your brain with a direct experience of the transcendent? Many psychologists, like Abraham Maslow, for example, view your experience in the hallway as a rather common affair. What he called a “peak experience.” Sure. We’ll admit that. But it’s just chemicals in your brain, that’s all. Your sense of connection to all living things, your brief spasm of happiness and communion were themselves an illusion, and if you mean what you say about spiritual growth being the shedding of illusions, then isn’t it best you shed the illusion that you ever *really* experienced any transcending mystery and wonder?

Here is where I need to call on my friend Mary Jo to address these skeptical assertions very forcefully. Which, thankfully, is exactly what she does in her poem. She asks, *Wedded to life, what else is there but an oddball wacko longshot, a “take” on the moment as I pass it?*

In other words, what can we really know for sure? Do you think you are downgrading experience by saying it’s mere chemistry? Is chemistry really “mere”? We are “wedded” to life, she insists plainly. That is, *all* of our experience is in this world, in our brain and senses and bodies… is in this world. *What else is there?* she asks the skeptical questioner. Are you actually holding out for something that is not chemical, that is more real, more authentic? Apprehended by what? That doesn’t make any sense to me, she says. We work with what we have and, as the moment passes, we get a “take” on it. Call it oddball if you like. So what? It’s my take, not yours. So first off, kindly stop telling me I’m a fool.

Then, secondly, she describes her own direct experience… *So, don’t tell me it’s nothing -the sublime slant of this extraordinary light hitting the trilobite I keep on my desk to remind me, take it in before it’s gone.*

I was surprised how much her experience seemed very similar to my own. Even the slanting light. But the phrase “take it in before it’s gone?” Take *what* in? Just the pretty leaves of fall and the light on fossilized creatures on your desk? No, *all of it:* Iraq War veterans homeless on our streets, children dying of HIV in Africa, the abject poverty in neighborhoods of Mumbai or Mexico City…or Columbus. Take it in. Don’t deny your experiences. Feel them, even if they ache. Yes, dance when the leaves fall, too, and when your children laugh as they jump into a raked pile. But, *Don’t tell me happiness is irrelevant -,* she writes, *because there is death in the Dead Sea, there is no beauty, no life in Yosemite? There* ***was*** *the Spanish Inquisition*, she agrees. And it was terrible. But there is also *whimsy,* she remembers. *Pinatas!* The terrible does not cancel the sublime. Cruelty doesn’t define the whole of humanity. She freely acknowledges both the good and evil in the world…she’s hardly the

escapist her skeptical friends try to paint her. No. She actually turns *to face* the reality of the world, the heartbreaking mixture of its experiences. She even refers to the famous story in Homer's Odyssey when he wants to experience what he has been warned will hurt him. So he has himself bound to his ship's mast, so as to experience, directly, what heretofore was only a doctrine…the seductive song of the sirens. She only wants to be open to that experience. She does not need to make strict theology of it, a list of beliefs and disbeliefs. She does not need a creed, or an elegant philosophy, crafted in spun gold. She insists on keeping her heart open. And, thus, guarding her precious right to be wrong.

Let me conclude with a true story, which I hope can make at least some of what I have said clearer.

At my former church, there was a woman named Phyllis. She was a cultural Jew, raised a Bolshevik and an atheist. She was married to an even stronger atheist, himself an avid member of the Communist Party. They had no truck with ordinary religion, which they considered, with Mr. Marx, an opiate, a drug…"mere chemistry," you might say.

Phyllis contracted cancer, and died after a long, painful time of it. She was in a coma of some sort when I left for my vacation that year. She died while I was gone. Gladly, they waited for me to come home to do the memorial service. Her three children told me that, on the day before she died, she had called each of them on the phone. She was totally awake, totally energetic, when she called. "I'm going to die tomorrow," she said to each of them. "The angel told me everything would be fine. So I am calling to tell you that I love you, and that everything will be OK. Goodbye, my darling." Then she hung up. The nurse saw her make the calls, and said that, after the third one, she slumped back down into her hospital bed, and returned to her coma. She died the next day, as she had said. The children each told the same story to me, though they had not told each other. They were too embarrassed. I don't think they ever told their father.

Now, do I "believe" that there were creatures called angels who spoke to her? No. Do I have a clear idea about what happens to any of us after death? No. Am I open to the transforming power of this story? Yes. Because I don't have to cram this story into the claustrophobic box of some particular theology of unbelief any more than I need to interpret it by a clear belief system. I only have to remain open to the direct experience she reported of something wondrous, however strange it might have been.

Now mind you, this kind of story is frequently experienced by clergy, including Unitarian Universalist clergy. We often talk about it. It amazes us. And sure. Was Phyllis having a chemical experience in her brain that she vocalized as having to do with an angel, and her coming death? Sure. Probably. But was what she did with it beautiful and significant to her non-religious children? Oh yes. They told me so. They were deeply moved. It meant everything. Does this experience make me want to believe in one sort of theology over another? No. It does not. I simply bow to the mystery and say, as I have been saying a lot lately, "I know less today than yesterday."

What matters is not the purity or elegance of your theology. You don't have to have any theology that you have to articulate in some compelling, literate way. But what *does* matter is articulating, by one's actions, deeper compassion for the bullied, the disenfranchised, the denied. What matters is not whether we celebrate the Virgin Mary or not, worship God or not, but that we can flow with change and growth without panicking, or spending all our time bitter and resentful that the former days are gone for good. What matters is whatever keeps me open, not closed; welcoming, not entrenched; and thankful, not defensive. What matters is anything that lessens spiritual claustrophobia, and invites us to live in the land if Is, not Was.

Offering

The church is independent of any voice from
somewhere else telling us how to do things.
We are an assembly of free people who choose to do what we do.
The church IS dependent on those who
make up the congregation, however.
Thus we set aside this time for receiving and
giving the offering of our pledges and gifts. The ushers will now come forward.

Less Light Litany

There is less light now. (sung, call and response)

What light is left shines on fewer things. Narrows its focus. Allows me to see what it spotlights all the more than summer allows.

There is less light now.

What light is left seems brighter, and the darkness which embraces us no longer seems to hide things so much as it becomes a strong shoulder on which to lay my tired head.

There is less light now.

Less heat too, but no less love in my heart, o Spirit of Life, no less commitment to justice and peace. Darkness of the season, come. We welcome you now. Slow us down. And help us find gladness that you shelter us these days from the glare of too much.