

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday 6 May 2007

Ora et labora

The Reverend Victoria Safford

\$2.00 two dollars

**WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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The first reading is from a poem by C.K. Williams.

I'm trying to pray: one of the voices of my mind says, "God,
please help me do this."
but another voice intervenes: "How conceive God's interest
would be to help you believe?"

Is this prayer? Might this exercise be a sign, however impure, that
such an act's under way,
that I'd allowed myself, or that God had allowed me, to
surrender to this need in myself?

What makes me think, though, that the region of my soul in
which all this activity's occurring
is a site which God might consider an engaging or even an
acceptable spiritual location?

I thought I'd kept the lack of a sacred place in myself from
myself, therefore from God.
Is this prayer, recognizing that my isolation from myself is a
secret I can no longer keep?

...

If I believe that there exists a thing I can call God's mercy, might I
be praying at last?
If I were, what would it mean: that my sad loneliness for God
might be nearing its end?

Is this prayer now...?
I'm trying to pray, but I know that whatever I'm doing, I'm not:
Why aren't I, when will I?

The second reading is by John Unger Zussman.

At the customary point in the service, the rabbi asks anyone who's in mourning to rise for the *kaddish*, the Jewish prayer for the dead, which famously does not mention death. I'm technically not mourning someone, but I stand anyway. I rarely attend synagogue, so I want to get my money's worth.

I learned the *kaddish* years ago, after my bar mitzvah. My ancient Hebrew teacher had explained that now that I'd reached adulthood, I needed to say it for my deceased father. Today the Hebrew words roll off my tongue despite years of disuse. Their rhythm is mesmerizing, like music, like a chant, like poetry. I don't know exactly what they mean, but I get the gist: the *kaddish* praises God, over and over.

I'm no longer religious. When people ask, I say "I'm Jewish on my parents' side." I don't know why I'm reciting *kaddish*. Perhaps to honor my father, my sister, my grandparents.

Oseh shalom bimromav...

I ask God to send peace from heaven.

I'm praying to a God I don't believe in. So why do the words comfort me? Why, before it's over, do I break down, sobbing and clutching my wife as close as I can?

The third reading is a poem from Philip Appleman.

O Karma, Dharma, pudding and pie,
gimme a break before I die:
grant me wisdom, will & wit,
purity, probity, pluck & grit.
Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, kind,
gimme great abs & a steel-trap mind,
and forgive, Ye Gods, some humble advice -
these little blessings would suffice
to beget an earthly paradise:
make the bad people good -
and the good people nice;
and before our world goes over the brink,
teach the believers how to think.

Ora et labora

*Have you ever had the experience of stopping so completely,
of being in your body so completely,
of being in your life so completely,
that what you knew and what you didn't know,
that what had been and what was yet to come,*

*and the way things are right now
no longer held even the slightest hint of anxiety or discord?
Have you ever had the experience of being... so completely?*

The question comes from teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn. He goes on,

*It would be a moment of complete presence,
beyond striving, beyond mere acceptance,
beyond the desire to escape or fix anything or plunge ahead,
a moment of pure being, no longer in time,
a moment of pure seeing, pure feeling,
a moment in which life simply is,
and that “isness” grabs you by all your senses,
all your memories, by your very genes,
by your loves, and
welcomes you home.*

*The Lord is my shepherd, sang the Psalmist, and Bobby McFerrin, and our choir,
I shall not want.
She makes me lie down in green meadows,
She restores my soul.*

What restores your soul? For a congregation of free-thinkers who do not agree among themselves as to whether the human animal is even equipped with such a thing, “*what restores your soul?*” can be a difficult question to answer, at least collectively. But as individuals, one by one, we avoid it at our peril. What restores, replenishes, reassures, revives, repairs whatever deep in you is broken or tired or terrified? Not *what gives you a fix, helps you to sleep, makes you wake up, helps you forget, makes you feel good, distracts you a while?* – but: what reminds you what and who you are, and keeps you steady, keeps you, amidst all the daily distractions, mindful of mortality and eternity, and welcomes you home to this mindfulness, as to your own true country? To whom or to what, for whom and for what, and when and where do you pray? How do you define it?

“In my garden,” says one, with dirt under her fingernails already in March.

“Through my journal,” says another.

“When I’m singing.”

“At A.A.,” says someone else.

“Every morning in my yoga practice.”

“Every night.”

“Five times every day, facing east.”

“Once a year,’ says someone else, at my mother’s table, when I go home for Thanksgiving – and I resent it.”

“I never pray,” says someone here, “but when we were gathered at the bedside, almost ready to say our last goodbyes, and words were spoken, something happened, that I can’t explain...”

“Here in this room,” says someone else, “when I speak the names of those I care about out loud, or say them silently to myself, or hear the names spoken by others...”

“When I hear the call to worship...”

“When I say the Closing Words, *May peace dwell within my heart, and understanding in my mind...*”

Ora et labora said St. Benedict, sometime between 480 and 547 in Italy. *Ora et labora* – pray and work. This was the principle underlying the 73- point Rule Benedict constructed to govern the common life of monks in the monastery. The Rule of St. Benedict, which is still closely followed in many convents and monasteries today, prescribes everything from the order of psalms to be sung and prayers to be prayed at each of the seven hours of the day devoted to that purpose, to what they will eat and what they will wear in the summer and winter, when they will sleep and talk and walk, and how much wine each brother may consume (*We believe that half a bottle a day is sufficient for each one... the superior will determine when local conditions, work, or the summer heat indicates the need for a greater amount... We read that monks should not drink wine at all, but since the monks of our day [1,600 yeas ago!] cannot be convinced of this, let us at least agree to drink moderately... Let us bless God and not grumble...*) The Rule provides a job description for the abbot of the monastery (*Excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous or over suspicious he must not be... Let him strive to be loved rather than feared...*) and it specifies how to deal with lazy monks, artists, visitors, women, and noblemen who leave their young sons at the gate. Mostly, though, the Benedictine Rule establishes a rhythm of life in community, with work and prayer so deeply interwoven through the hours of the day and the night that it’s hard to tell where one leaves off and the other begins. Solitude, stillness and silence are balanced by reading, music, and common work, much of it physical, and much of it not. (The abbey accounted for accountants, scribes, poets, composers, as well as gardeners, carpenters and bakers.) It is the life of action and reflection, contemplative life and the life of engagement, a continuous cycle modeled on the sun and the seasons and the natural order of all living things - a balance most of us can barely recognize, no matter what our current work.

Thomas Merton, a modern day monk, wrote

There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence... [and that is] activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate

violence. To allow one's self to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit one's self to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.

A multitude of badly performed actions and of experiences only half-lived exhausts and depletes our being... and our malformed conscience can think of nothing better to tell us than to multiply the quantity of our acts... And so we go from bad to worse, exhaust ourselves, empty our whole life of all content, and fall into despair.

There are times, then, when in order to keep ourselves in existence at all we simply have to sit back for a while and do nothing. And of those who have let themselves be drawn completely out of themselves by their activity, nothing is more difficult than to sit still and rest, doing nothing at all. The very act of resting is the hardest and most courageous act they can perform, and often it is quite beyond their power ...

What is your true work in this short life? What restores your soul? If you had the time, if you so ordered the hours of your days, to whom or to what, for whom and for what, and when and where might you pray?

A woman writes:

My mother taught me the golden rule, but kept me away from organized religion... When I was twelve, I saw a TV program about Islam and learned that in some parts of the world people prayed to Allah. I liked the sound of "Allah." I could say that name over and over and not get tired of it. Because there were no images of Allah, you could imagine him any way you wished. I decided that I would pray to Allah. I knew intuitively that Allah was not the type of God you prayed to for material things, like a new bike or help on a geometry test. My prayers to Allah would all be prayers of thanks. Whenever I saw a rainbow or a hawk soaring in the sky, I would silently pray, "Thank you, Allah." When I saw an animal lying dead along the road, I would visualize Allah laying himself over this poor creature's twisted body to protect what remained of its spirit. I never revealed my prayers to anyone, thinking that perhaps when I married, I might share them with my husband or my children. I married a lapsed Catholic who believed in God but wanted nothing to do with organized religion. Soon after we married, the Gulf War began. I decided never to reveal my secret.

The life of prayer is conducted mostly in secret, mostly in private in our congregation, but I know, I have seen, I've been honored to be shown, that it is rich and various, more rich and more variegated, perhaps, than our various beliefs. Our theologies here, the ways we each think about God and nature and human nature, and form opinions and make meaning and argue all of this, and stand our ground as agnostics, atheists, liberal Christians, Buddhist Jews, and so on— these are mostly intellectual endeavors, as they are, I think, in many communions, even congregations full of believers. The way you think about God is precisely that- the way you *think* about God. But the life of the spirit and the way that it speaks, is something else, not separate from belief, but not dependent on it. The woman who's prayed to Allah all her life doesn't actually believe in

him – not the all-merciful, all-powerful God of the Qur’an, which she has never read, and about which she doesn’t care – but the word “Allah” somehow put a name to a longing within herself to speak to something outside herself. It may sound like she’s just conjured the kind of cardboard God who looks and acts like a grown-up imaginary friend, and that may be why she hesitates to mention him/it – but “it” is not a person. “It” is nothing, it may not even be “god” - and it is everything that is.

So often I hear people say, “I long to pray, but I don’t know to whom, and therefore I can’t. My childhood gods all ran away, or I chased them from the house, and it seems crazy to sit there and talk to myself, or to address my prayers ‘to whom it may concern.’” How can you talk to God if you’re not sure that God exists, or if you’re sure God doesn’t? I remember hearing John Shelby Spong speak in a lecture once about the Trinity. Spong is a very liberal and outspoken Episcopalian, a retired bishop. He said that for him the metaphor of the Trinity is very appealing and helpful, spiritually. He grew up in the Anglican tradition with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and these concepts are familiar and accessible to him; they have always felt natural to him. “But,” he said, “My personal, self-proclaimed orientation as a Trinitarian says nothing about the reality of any actual Trinity. That I call myself a Trinitarian tells you a lot about me, and says nothing whatsoever about God.” In prayer, we name the unnamable, with any words at hand. We speak the unspeakable, with any words at hand. We’re such precisionists, such literalists, that so much of the time we’re like the poet in the reading, who says, “I’m trying to pray,” and then stumbles over obstacle after obstacle, like some kind of slapstick routine, with questions like, “What makes me think that the region of my soul in which all this activity’s occurring is a site which God might consider an engaging or even an acceptable spiritual location?” and on and on, till at the end you realize that these questions themselves, some of them goofy, some curious and playful, some poignant, some of them lonely and frightened, these comprise the prayer. Whether any god listens or not, it’s been spoken. The work is begun. That poem is called “The Vessel,” as if to say that a human being is like a container full of wondering. However clumsy or inaccurate our language, it’s better to be full of, rather than devoid of, wondering.

The words may not matter at all. A man speaks of visiting a synagogue after many years away, and standing with the congregation to recite the *kaddish*, the Hebrew words of which he can still recite from memory, though they hold no meaning for him any more at all. “I’m praying to a God I don’t believe in. So why do the words comfort me? Why, before it’s over, do I break down, sobbing and clutching my wife as close as I can?” That could be nostalgia, or old, unfinished grief, or maybe the prayer is a gateway to the heart.

There are intercessory prayers, which we speak out loud, or under our breath, on behalf of others. There are petitions, for oneself or for the world. There are invocations, asking only the Holy be present, and benedictions, which ask for grace in parting. There are prayers of praise, wonder, awe, thankfulness, and there are devotional prayers, more formal or formulaic: the rosary, the *kaddish*, the Lord’s prayer and the prayer of St. Francis, and “Now I lay me down to sleep,” and ancient mantras, chants, sweat lodge litanies, and the intricate steps of whirling Sufi dances. There are mediations addressed to no one, seeking only to clear or clarify the monkey mind, and there is gardening, writing, breathing, walking, the nursing of babies in the night. There are

prayers that ask nothing, but only continue some kind of interior conversation, with words or with no words.

How do you ask – or do you ever ask- for help or an answer or a blessing, or forgiveness?

How do you quietly, regularly, constantly say thank you? And what do you do with the consequences of gratitude? One person came in not long ago and said they'd had it with gratitude, because once you acknowledge the gifts of this life, which are abundant and always disproportionate to other people's lives, there are two choices before you, both disturbing: you can allow your gratitude to dissolve into guilt (a depressing and ignoble little swamp), or boldly shape it into generosity, into active compassion -- and both roads are difficult and both are threatening to comfort and complacency. What do you do with your gratitude? Where do you go with such questions? With what words do you risk speaking them, and to whom, and how often?

There is an infinity of questions.

In what ways, when there's no person to blame, not even yourself, do you silently scream outrage? To whom, or to what, are you accountable, ultimately –and if you answer, “to myself,” or “to my conscience,” how did you acquire such a conscience? Where did it come from – not only the teaching, whatever it was, but your openness to it, your need for it -- and what difference will it make in the end that you tried all your life to be good? If you understand that your entire life truly is just a pin point, a drop of water, a breath of air exhaled, a mite of dust within eternity, what difference will it make?

Why does it matter? And what answer would you make if you were discouraged or despondent, and what answer might you make if the question were posed to you by, say, a 16 year-old?

Has there ever been a time when you've been tempted to cry out, or to whisper in the night, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

In what rooms of your house, what hours of the day, what part of your life, are these questions held?

Thomas Kelly was a Quaker mystic. In an essay called *The Light Within*, written in the 1930's, he said,

There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings. The secular world of today values and cultivates only the first level, assured that there is where the real business of humanity is done, and scorns, or smiles in tolerant amusement, at the cultivation of the second level, a luxury enterprise, a vestige of superstition, an occupation of special temperaments. But in a deeply religious culture it is known that the deep level of prayer and of divine attendance is the most important thing in the world. It is at this deep level that the real business of life is determined. The secular mind is an abbreviated, fragmentary mind, building only upon a part of

our nature and neglecting the larger part. The religious mind (we might say the spiritual mind, the mystical mind) involves the whole of us...

...O Karma, Dharma, pudding and pie,/ gimme a break before I die:

Ever since I heard that poem, I've wanted to add a line at the end. The poet says,

and before our world goes over the brink,/ teach the believers how to think.

And I'm always tempted to add,

Before our world falls into the sea,/ teach the thinkers and doers how, simply, to be.

Teach the thinkers and doers – that is, our people, here, all of us – how, simply, to be. May we learn before we die, and ideally long before we die, how simply to be. May we learn the art of human being.

- silence -

From India, come these words of the great poet Rabindranath Tagore:

When the heart is hard and parched up, come upon me with a shower of mercy.

When grace is lost from life, come with a burst of song.

When tumultuous work raises its din on all sides

shutting me out from beyond, come to me, my lord of silence, with thy peace and rest.

When my beggarly heart sits crouched, shut up in a corner, break open the door, my king, and come with the ceremony of a king.

When my mind is dull with delusion and dust, O thou holy one, thou wakeful, come with thy light and thy thunder.

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- Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses*
 - The reading from John Unger Zussman, and the passage by the woman who prays to Allah, are from the April, 2007 issue of *The Sun*.
 - Thomas Kelley's essay, "The Light Within," is in his *Testament of Devotion*.