

White Bear
Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday 27 June 2010

Pride Sunday

Fried Eggs/Unexpected Blessings

Doug Federhart

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Doug Federhart, M.Div.

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Readings

The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life you could save.

~ Mary Oliver ~

I was walkin' down 42nd Street one day—I wasn't *workin'* 42nd Street, I was *walkin'* 42nd Street—and this amazing thing happened to me. It was July—it was about 89 degrees. It was hot, hot for New York—you know—and I was walking east and this humungous person was coming west. And she had this big blue house dress on peppered all over with little white daisies. She was almost bald but sitting on top of her head, her forehead, you know—on her forehead was this fried egg. Which I thought was really unusual. Because in New York City the ladies with the fried eggs on their heads don't generally come out until September or October, you know. Here was this lady—this demented lady—with a little fried egg on her head in the middle of July. God, what a sight! And ever, ever since I saw that lady not one day goes by that I don't think of her and I say to myself, “Oh God, don't let me wake up tomorrow and want to put a fried egg on my head. Oh God.” Then I say real fast—I say “Oh God, if by chance I should wind up with a fried egg on my head,” (cause sometimes you can't help those things you know, you can't. I say to myself—) “don't let anybody notice.” And then I say real fast after that “If they do notice that I'm carrying something that, that's not quite right and they want to talk about it, let 'em talk about it but don't let 'em talk so I can hear. I don't want to hear it.” 'Cause the truth about fried eggs is, you can call it a fried egg, you can call it anything you like, but everybody gets one—some people wear 'em on the outside, some people they wear 'em on the inside.

— **Bette Midler**, from *The Depression Tour* and the album *Live At Last* (1977)
[Spoken intro to John Prine's “Hello In There.”]

“Fried Eggs/Unexpected Blessings”

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Certainly we’ve heard Mary Oliver read here before, for readings or for our meditation moment. But I’ll make a wild guess that this is the first time that anything by the Divine Miss M. (the divine *Bette Midler*, that is) has been used here as the reading on a Sunday morning. It is even less likely that words of Bette have been used in a more traditional Christian congregation anywhere, so yet again, the UUs lead the way...

All I can say is, *we are so gay!*

Now: I know we aren’t supposed to say that. And I know that our kids in various levels of public school get in a fair amount of trouble (as they well should) if they use that expression with derogatory intent—which is to say, whenever they use it. Because no one ever uses it when they want to compliment someone or praise something. Like, how often does it happen that any of us go up to our Sunday morning treat-providers, our wonderful bakers—say, Dee Smith or Bobbi Freeman or Barb and Celeste, or Jennifer Fischer and her mom—and hold up some fresh and fabulous, melt-in-your-mouth cookie and exclaim, “Dee, these are *so gay!*”

Chances are, Dee might take it the wrong way.

But then again—maybe not. Because, if we pause and take a moment of inward reflection as Unitarian Universalists and friends exploring this path, who among us has not, at some point, felt like an outsider? Ours is not a widely-accepted spiritual path. I think of that moment from Mel Brooks great movie, *Young Frankenstein*, when Igor (played by the late Marty Feldman) says, “Walk this way,” and everyone follows him, imitating his hilarious lop-sided (and certainly politically incorrect) gait. UUs, I assert with love, have a distinctly lop-sided walk. But: do we feel like we’re walking down the street with a fried egg in the middle of our forehead? Maybe not so much—maybe not any more.

But let me retrace my own walk—my own process—that led to choosing this topic for today’s sermon.

Most immediate in my mind was the fact that today is not only a big day in our UU world—the final day of our annual General Assembly, which has brought over 3,500 Unitarian-Universalists from all over the country to our fair cities—but it is also the day of the annual Twin Cities GLBT Pride Parade, the day when gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, and their families, friends and allies from all over the region gather together to celebrate our humanity—and our general fabulousness—by walking the route from 3rd and Hennepin in Minneapolis, to the festival grounds in Loring Park. The Ashley Rukes Pride Parade steps off in just a short while—11:00 a.m.—so you might want to leave here as soon as the service is over and head that direction.

(Two asides about the Parade, by the way: it is the largest one held as a regular event in Minnesota, surpassing even the Aquatennial, the Torchlight, and the Holidazzle events; and it is named after my friend Ashley Rukes, a wonderful, creative and irreverent transgender woman I knew for many years through my work at OutFront Minnesota. We were all deeply saddened when Ashley died very prematurely in 2000 from complications related to her asthma. For several years prior to her death, she was the organizer extraordinaire of the Pride Parade—and in fact got her on-the-job experience that

prepared her for this huge task by directing the Aquatennial parade itself in 1975, quite some time before she transitioned into the woman I got to know.)

So: I was glad when it worked out that I should be the “person on board” for today’s service, but as usual, I began right away to worry about what topic or idea to use as my focus. It’s not that I don’t like to speak—I do—but I also have a tendency towards fretting. (I come by it naturally, being just one in a long line of Class-A fretters.) Something to do with GLBT Pride was an obvious choice of theme—but that’s a very broad subject. I began to reflect on my own relationship with my identity as a gay man, and my mind made one of those surprising leaps that minds often do, and I found myself recalling that “Fried Egg” piece of patter that Bette Midler used in her Depression Tour during 1975 and ’76—and which Roxy Cruz (our own answer to the Divine Miss M) shared with us a few minutes ago. (And if Roxy is Bette, then Joe must be—oh, I’m so sorry—Barry Manilow...) Anyway...

Time was—long before I’d ever heard of Bette Midler—when I felt that my sexual feelings were my particular “fried egg,” in my case one that I wore (so I hoped) on the inside. I felt tremendous shame about my feelings; I knew they weren’t “right”—that if I were going to be “normal” and happy, I would have to change. I prayed often for the feelings to change, and for my Self to be “made right.” The fact that this didn’t happen was the beginning of my giving up on God and religion. Yet I was one of the lucky gay people: though I’d been raised in a church, at least it was Congregational, and at least the ministers I knew during childhood and adolescence did not heap a load of hell and damnation on me.

But still, I knew “in my bones” that something was wrong with me, and that if I were going to be an acceptable human being—and in particular, a “real man”—I would have to change. I lived with that sense of shame and foreboding for several years, during my adolescence and up through the first months of college.

But then: college! And *freedom*! And, most important of all—*community*! Which I began to discover, little by little, starting with a couple of the guys on my same floor in Cather Hall at the University of Nebraska in 1968. Yes, I am old enough that I began my coming out process well before the Stonewall Riots rocked the streets of the West Village in Manhattan in 1969—those nights of “taking it to the streets” when the drag queens and the bull dykes and the effeminate fairy men picked a up bricks and stones and even turned a ripped-up parking meter into a battering ram and fought back against the New York City Police. I was living at home that summer, working for Iowa Public Service Utility Company on one of the outdoor summer crews—the sons of employees got first crack at summer jobs, and there I was on an overhead electric crew, dying of a different kind of embarrassment when asked to fetch a ratchet from the side bins back on the truck...and I had no idea what to look for... But the news of the Stonewall protests came to my attention because Mom saw some item in the Sioux City Journal, and told me about it—and that’s all I knew, until several years later when I realized I’d been nearly unconscious through a major moment of gay liberation. My awareness of the Viet Nam War and the protests was similarly distant—but then, when you’re focused on your own survival, and on doing whatever you have to do to numb your own pain, you become pretty self-centered. At least, I did.

We did things with less drama in Lincoln, Nebraska than they did in new York City—no riots, though some anti-war students did take over the Military and naval Sciences building on campus, probably in Fall of 1969? But when it came to “gay liberation,” there were no riots—just an announcement posted on a bulletin board in the Student Union, inviting all gay students and their friends to a Coffeehouse to be held on a Sunday evening in the basement social hall of the United Ministries in Higher Education Center. By that time I had a boyfriend—my first partner—and we gathered up enough courage to go

check it out. And what a shock for both of us small-town, hidden-life kids, to discover a basement social hall full of queers like us, drinking coffee or sodas, *talking* to each other, and dancing to the music—together! It was love—and liberation—at first sight. So with those first tentative steps into liberation and community, began this journey that I’m still on. And so far it is not a done deal; like all of us, I’m still a work in progress, very much in the sense that an artist or writer has some opus still in the midst of creation.

In ministry work I do outside of White Bear Church—serving as a spiritual director associated with Sacred Ground Center for Spirituality in St. Paul—I am privileged to sit with people, one at a time, and hear their stories, their own tales of fear and shame, and liberation and often faith. I frequently hear people confess about their own “fried eggs” and secret longings. And there is a common thread: everyone has at least one fried egg somewhere, something we’re ashamed of, that we live in fear of being exposed—being *seen*. I have a particular tale, set in a specific time and place, when I heard Society saying I was bad—wrong, sinful, sick. But that tale, when we set aside the specifics, is not unique.

Society encourages, reinforces, the fears. Mary Oliver frames it so well in “The Journey.” She speaks of the voices around us that “keep shouting their bad advice.” For so many of us, those voices are making demands that we be servants to *their* needs and wants—that we comply with *their* standards and expectations. How often have we felt “the old tug” at our ankles—those forces that would ultimately pull us under and drown our individuality in the ocean of conformity? They want us to be anything other than our Selves.

Again, Oliver gets it right when she writes:

...little by little,
 as you left their voices behind,
 the stars began to burn
 through the sheets of clouds,
 and there was a new voice
 which you slowly
 recognized as your own...

It happens, little by little, this coming into our own voice, our own sense of being, our own feeling that at last we are “at home”, inhabiting our bodies. Of course, in those early days of my coming out, of my getting used to the fact that being gay was one part of my human identity, I could not then explicitly name what was going on for me. But hindsight can in fact be useful, when used as a tool of reflection to inform and increase our understanding of the present; and what I see now is that that “fried egg” I carried had turned out to be a blessing. The very difference that first terrified me became a source of community and liberation. As I discovered others who had questions and experiences—and *feelings*—similar to my own, I began to find the strength to *question assumptions*—a vital step in any kind of liberation. I found encouragement to question the idea (imposed on me through Society and family) that I was sick and sinful, that I was “abnormal.” And as I engaged in this revolutionary act, it pretty much cracked open *everything*. Little by little, as I “strode deeper and deeper into the world,” I found out that there were just an awful lot of things I’d been taught that simply weren’t true—at least not for me, not for my own sense of existence. And now I believe, with as much conviction as I can hold, that this process of questioning itself is a true blessing—certainly one I never foresaw back in 1967 when I first told my parents that I thought I was “homosexual.”

So, ideally, over time we see and gradually become our truest Selves. But let me stipulate: I am not advocating for a selfish kind of existence. when I promote the idea that we best serve the world and ourselves by being our truest, fullest Self as possible, I do not mean to suggest that this is a selfish, self-centered endeavor. Just the opposite: I have a belief that as we go deeply into these questions as to who, and what, we really are, we discover our profound *humanity* as well. And time after time, when we are *grounded* in that reality, we also become truly *humble* in the process—we discover where, and how, we are *rooted*—which is the fundamental meaning of humility (derived as it is from the Latin, *humus*, meaning earth or ground).

So as you stride “deeper and deeper into the world,” may you find that your own fried eggs are, in fact, blessings. May you continue on your own path of surprise and blessing. It is, after all, the only thing we can do with our “one wild and precious life.”

Amen, and—*Happy Pride!*