

PRESENCE – AND ABSENCE

A Sermon Delivered for the Congregation of
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist

The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Sunday, September 23, 2007

Temple Beth Shalom

Reading

“The Basket”

An African folktale,
retold by Robert Bly

Once upon a time there was a man who had about twelve cows, and he loved his cows. Every morning and evening he would praise them for the amount of milk they were giving and praise them for their beauty. One morning he noticed that the amount of milk had lessened. Each day for a week he noticed the same thing. So that night he decided to stay up and see what was going on.

About midnight, he happened to look up at the stars, and he saw one star that seemed to be getting larger. It was – and the light got stronger as the star came closer and closer to earth. It came straight down towards his cow pasture and stopped a few feet from him in the form of a great ball of light. Inside the light there was a luminous woman. As soon as her toes touched the ground, the light disappeared, and she stood there like an ordinary woman.

He said to her, “Are you the one who has been stealing milk from my cows?” “Yes,” she said, “my sisters and I like the milk from your cows very much.” He said, “You are very beautiful. And I’m glad that you like my cows. And so this is what I want to say: If you marry me, we can live together, and I will never hit you and you won’t have to take care of the cows all the time. I’ll take care of them part of the time myself. Will you marry me?” She said slowly, “Yes, I will. But there’s one condition. I have brought this basket with me, and I want you to agree that you will never look into this basket. You must never look into it, no matter how long we are married. Do you agree to that?” “Oh, I do,” he said.

So they were married, and they lived together very well for six or seven months. Then one day, while she was out herding the cows, he happened to notice that basket standing in a corner of the house. He said to himself, “Well, you know, she is my wife, so it could be considered to be *my* basket. After all, this is my house, and the basket is in my house, and so it could be considered *my* basket!” After he had said this, he opened the basket and then began to laugh. “There’s nothing in the basket! There’s *nothing* in the basket! There’s absolutely nothing in the basket. Nothing! There’s nothing *in* the basket!” He kept saying these words and laughing so loud that his wife soon heard the laughter.

She came into the house and she said to him, “Have you opened the basket?” He began laughing again. “I did!” he said. “I opened the basket! There’s nothing in it! There’s nothing in the basket at all! There’s absolutely nothing in the basket! Nothing in the basket!”

She said, “I have to leave now. I have to go back.” He cried out, “Don’t go! Don’t leave me!” She said, “I have to go back now. What I brought with me in the basket was Spirit. It’s so like human beings to think that Spirit is nothing.” And then she was gone.

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Woody Allen once said that 90% of life is showing up. Which may be why I find myself, whenever we gather, looking out even more than usual this fall to see who is present, especially newcomers, and who is absent. Because, frankly, I'm more than a bit anxious about keeping us together this year, without the comforting stability of our Meetinghouse.

Still, it doesn't keep me from going around doing what I think is needful. So this week, when I probably could have been here, being a "non-anxious presence," as we clergy try to be, I was an anxious non-presence, off to New Orleans, with some UU colleagues, to revisit people in a city where we UUs have not only tried to help out in practical ways, but also to bear witness to the struggles of ordinary people against governmental failure, institutionalized racism, and outrageous forms of economic injustice.

Just before I left, I got the call that Joan Valdina had died. Proving again my corollary to Murphy's Law, as applied to the practice of parish ministry: namely, that the probability of a prominent parishioner expiring is in direct proportion to the distance of the trip planned by the parson, and the proximity of his departure. So I got her son Eric by cell-phone as I stood in the Albert D'Orlando Chapel at First UU Church of New Orleans. Named for Joan's first cousin, who, as feisty as she was, was minister there for 35 years.

New Orleans is today a paradox of vibrant, resilient, spirited people – and of absence. There are 200,000 homes that haven't been rebuilt. The population is 60% of what it was. People who are rebuilding their lives are grateful to visitors who come to help, and can laugh and celebrate and be grateful, even while expressing their anger at the government. Then the next minute the same person may be in tears, turning away, saying, "Scuse me, it just got to me again." Rates of post-traumatic stress, despair and even suicide are huge.

In the spiritual practice some of us here have been taking up, called “Living by Heart,” we’re advised to try to cultivate a sense of Presence – an awareness of being meaningfully connected to a sustaining Reality that is bigger than our own lives. This week, before meeting with folks in N’walins, I had to remind myself how easy it is to go into such encounters full of one’s own opinions and emotions, preconceptions and questions.

Like the American professor who went to study with the Zen master, who welcomed him with the tea ceremony. In which he poured the professor’s cup full until it overflowed. “Stop!” said the professor, “It’s too full.” The Zen master set the kettle down saying, “You too are too full of questions and opinions now. Empty of self. Then you learn.” Or as May Sarton says in a poem we use in “Living by Heart,” “Beyond the Question,”

But first you must become small,
Nothing but a presence,
Attentive as a nesting bird,
Proffering no slightest wish,
No tendril of a wish
Toward anything that might happen
Or be given.

It was good to see some of the places where our Youth Group and I had worked in April of 2006. Like the parts of First UU we had gutted, now all set up for 30 volunteers to sleep and eat and reflect together. Like the famous p’oh folks restaurant, Dooky Chase’s, where we cleaned furniture, now open for business again. Like the Gentilly area where we helped a teacher clear out her flooded house, now being re-occupied. Or the 9th Ward, where we stayed in a school, now slowly coming back as a working class community, despite a redevelopment emphasis on high-end condos, real estate speculators, and a deliberate neglect of rental, public and affordable housing.

What I learned this time, more than anything else, is that if New Orleans did not exist, there at the mouth of the Mississippi, absentee economic forces would have to rebuild it – and that even the ecological problems, like the loss of wetlands, which have made the city more vulnerable – have largely been caused by the dredging necessary to ship out grain and cotton, and import coffee and oil, and keep the port going. The people of New Orleans are very present. But the power over their lives is often absent elsewhere, and has been ever since, in colonial times, some of them were sent from Acadia, and others bought from Africa. But enough about me being there!

Here and now what I want to say is that what I wish for each of you, and for all of us, everywhere, is a sustaining sense of Presence. It may not be constant, or all positive. Harry Scholefield, the UU minister whose spiritual practices form the basis of “Living by Heart,” once wrote in his notebook, “I find You in my faults and failures. I find You in my growing openness. I hear You in the singing river. You enlarge my imagination.”

He began to use that term, You, not out of a conventional belief in God, but encouraged by poets like Walt Whitman singing, in his *Song of the Open Road*,

You air that serves me with breath to speak!
You objects that call from diffusion and give them shape!
You light that wraps me and all things in delicate equable showers!
You paths worn in the irregular hollows by the roadsides!
I believe you are latent with unseen existences, you are so dear to me ...

And out of the teaching of the great Jewish sage, Martin Buber, that only in I-Thou, I-You, relationships, when we don't treat others as objects, can we cultivate the reciprocity that reflects some of the nature of the Eternal Thou.

He knew that when the Temple still stood in Jerusalem, there was only one day each year, at the end of the “Days of Awe,” when one person, the High Priest, was allowed to enter into the innermost sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, into the very presence of the Almighty.

But that what the Bible also makes clear is that there was no person or image there. Only an absence: an empty throne, symbolizing the One who should be the ruler of our lives, the One ‘enthroned on the praises of Israel,’ as the psalmists say, and on the throne, the Tablets of the Law, rather like the Torah scrolls in the Ark behind me, reminding us how we should treat one another.

In a later Jewish story, a great Hasidic rabbi is meeting with some learned colleagues, preparing for the Days of Awe. Suddenly he surprises them by asking this question: “Please tell me,” he says, “where now is the dwelling place of the Eternal?” And they look at him strangely. “Why friend,” they say, “the scriptures are clear, and so is the book of nature: the heavens and all the earth are full of the Divine glory!” “No,” he replies. “No. Now the presence of the Most High dwells only where we let God’s spirit in.”

Yet as the sages and saints, the poets and wisdom traditions make very clear, for the greatest and most sensitive of souls, a sense of absence and abandonment may be just as real as a sense of presence. Evidently even Mother Theresa felt that way, profoundly. This summer, as you may have read, a startling new book was published, consisting largely of letters she exchanged with her confessors and superiors over many years.

Just weeks after she received, in 1979, the Nobel Prize for Peace, going from Calcutta to Oslo in her simple sari and sandals, an telling the world that it is not enough to love God without seeing Christ in every hungry, naked, homeless, abandoned person, and being a healing, loving presence, she was writing to confessor about how a vivid sense of Christ’s presence may have begun her vocation, and that Jesus surely had a special love for him, “[but] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, -- listen and do not hear – the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak – [so] I want you to pray for me.”

This sense of absence was not intermittent for her. It went on almost without interruption for more than fifty years. Leading some critics, like the atheist Christopher Hitchens, to say, “She was no more exempt from the realization that religion is a human fabrication

than any other person, and that her attempted cure was more and more professions of faith could only have deepened the pit that she had for herself.” Well, perhaps. But surely what is amazing in her story is that despite her deep, painful sense of spiritual absence, she herself never stopped being a presence. Instead, she kept showing up.

I am not suggesting that she or any other saint or sage need be our spiritual model. Each of us must find our own spiritual path to being more fully and vividly present in this life. Nor am I suggesting that a sense of presence need always be some intense ecstatic or mystical experience, such as Theresa evidently had only once, at the beginning of her life of service to others. Indeed, as Mary Oliver reminds us in her poem, “Praying,”

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones, just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

So may it be. As they say down in New Orleans, “Don't be a strangah now, ya heah?”
Much love. Hope to see you next week. After all, 90% of life is just showing up!