



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Blowing in the Wind

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It is a good practice for the first sermon, the first full sermon of a year, to have a story about a whale in it. After all, this first sermon is the one I have been thinking about, or should have been thinking about, all summer – the first sermon fresh from a time of reflecting and reading, the first sermon after this whole summer with its Korans and oils spills and tea parties and floods and family deaths. The first sermon when there are usually more visitors than usual and I feel pressed to impress them with, well, with something that inspires or moves or heals or humors or entertains or challenges; the first sermon for all you regulars to justify my having two months in the summer, one of vacation and one for reading and preparation.

First – the sermon has nothing to do with Bob Dylan or the 60s or the song *Blowing in the Wind*. The title filled a newsletter deadline before I knew what the subject today would be. Maybe a better title is: ‘Thoroughly Akin to it All’

So a story about a whale –no, not that one, another story about a whale, my second favorite of the four I know. Amos and Boris by William Steig, a children’s book – Steig wrote Shrek, and was a wonderful writer of children’s books and New Yorker cartoons. He never wrote down to kids.

The story - Amos is a mouse but he is a mouse who wants to explore; he wants to break out of what is expected and learn and try new things. Amos is like us, I guess, a Unitarian Universalist – at least when we are at our best – explorers of the new, explorers in faith and spirituality, open to adventure, lovers of learning.

So Amos, this Unitarian Universalist mouse, builds a boat and sets out to sea. Like us, again, I suppose, we each one of us create our own spiritual boat, the ship of our faith. From odds and ends, from bits and pieces, we fashion a faith; we don’t just get in something made for us; we create our own spiritual craft and then we set out sailing into the great sea of life [OK OK at least one Moby Dick reference – Melville says that life is a ship on a voyage out into the open ocean where truth hath no confine, as he writes – and he says that the pulpit is it prow!]. Like Amos we set out into the unknown on boats we build ourselves.

One night, Amos is lying on his boat, looking up at the stars, the huge phosphorescent sky, lights from horizon to horizon, and Steig writes that Amos felt ‘thoroughly akin to it all.’

Thoroughly akin to it all. Ever feel that? Ever been out in the desert or in the mountains or on the great plains, or on the great oceans, away from civilization and the great sky above, under the stars, the phosphorescent sky? Ever feel that sense of oneness, that deep, deep sense of connection, of relationship? Ever feel that? Ever feel eternity in a moment, feel that somehow time is fulfilled, that eternity is within your grasp? Ever feel that sense of being just where you should be, fully, fully present? Ever feel, like Warren’s poem, filled with stars and letting your heart rejoice? Ever feel, like Barry Lopez immersed in the profound mystery of life? Ever?

Mircea Eliade is one of the great scholars of religion – not of any particular religion, but of religion itself, what we tend to call spirituality today. His book, The Sacred and the Profane is a classic, and in it he claims that we experience the world in two ways – the sacred and the profane.

Eliade writes that we experience the sacred as power; the experience of the sacred has the ability to change things. A classic example is in Exodus when Moses confronts the burning bush and he is first transfixed and then transformed. This is what Amos experienced, what Barry Lopez refers to.

So with us. These moments hold something important – meaning, belonging, something. These moments hold power. These moments contain what is sacred and holy. They are most often expressed figuratively or symbolically – in

music or in art or in poetry. Have you ever eaten stars, Warren asks? Immersed in the mystery of life? Have you? Ever felt reverence?

Thoroughly akin to it all. Of course, Steig's story does not end there. Amos is transfixed, but as the boat rolls in the waves, he rolls over and over and right off the boat into the great immensity of the sea, and watches his boat sail off. He is as alone as alone can be. Soon, though, Boris, a whale, buoys him up; they become close friends and the story goes on from there

Steig is on to something important here. These spiritual moments are real. I don't know if everyone has these experiences, but I know I have and that I long for them, and I know that I am not alone in that. There is something profound about them. They are usually private, or rather, interior – they seem to happen inside us, and they have something to do with a profound sense of connection – this is Martin Buber all over again.

But, and this is important, these experiences of the sacred take on meaning as they are translated into the life we share with others. Lopez with his hiking mates, Amos with Boris, Warren with his readers, Moses with his people, me with you.

These experiences, though often occurring in isolation, are experiences of connection. They bring us back into the world more deeply, and so, in the end, they have a moral dimension. Lopez claims that such experiences occur under the same conditions as are necessary for justice.

Are you following me? Let me get at this from another angle.

Yom Kippur, the holiest of days in this most ancient of traditions, ended last night at sundown, concluding the High Holy Days for Judaism. On the Day of Atonement Jews are asked to atone for what they have done wrong, as individuals and as a people, and move forward from there. And it so happens that the traditional text for Yom Kippur is also about a whale – the story of Jonah – my third favorite whale story.

It is a great story. Jonah is told by God to go to Nineveh and condemn the city for its evil ways, telling them to repent. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria– ancient Israel's great enemy. Jonah says no and stows aboard a ship; a storm comes up; he is thrown overboard, swallowed by a whale and spit up on land. Figuring he can't avoid God's command, he tells the inhabitants of Nineveh that they are condemned unless they repent.

And they do and God spares the city. This does not please Jonah – apparently Jonah has issues. Obviously, though, it is a story that repentance works and that we – both individually and collectively – can atone for what we have done wrong.

Another Amos, the prophet Amos of ancient Israel had a similar message as Jonah, though his was delivered to Israel itself. Like many of the classical prophets, Amos said that what God demanded from his people was justice, not ceremony, equity, not piety, and that the people should atone for their wrong doing. The word for repenting in Hebrew indicates turning – turning from wrong to right, from injustice to justice, from selfishness to generosity. Turning and in this turning we become more open to experience the holy.

The stories of Amos and Jonah argue that the spiritual and ethical are connected. We know this to be true in our lives. Just ask those who go to Tijuana about how the ethical coincides with the sacred; just ask an environmentalist how the sacred coincides with the ethical. The sacred doesn't just exit out in Joshua Tree or up in Yosemite, or out on the ocean; it is there but drives us back into the world where ethics matter.

Lopez says that these spiritual experiences, which he calls experiences of reverence, 'release us, at least for a moment of the burden of our complicity in the world's waywardness; injustice, religious contempt, ethical cowardice, rampant intellectualizing...' and are experienced almost as an absolution. Then, these moments of elevation can provide us with the courage to re-enter the world and pursue what is better than what we have. 'Somehow,' Lopez writes, 'in experiencing these feelings, we experience the profundity of our own existence. It is a specific kind of human awareness that leads to just forms of governance, to good politics, to equity at all levels of a social order.'

Abraham Joshua Heschel was a leading Jewish theologian of the mid 20th century, known for his scholarship and his involvement in social causes. His little book, out of print now, The Sabbath, has been one of my guides for a long time. In it, he says that the Sabbath is the great gift of Judaism to the world, and that its purpose is to prepare us for sacred moments. The goal of spiritual living is to be open to sacred moments, he says, and from this a life of justice and compassion might follow. That is the point of our every worship service – to prepare us for sacred moments so that we can go out into the world to work for justice. You are here and we gather, to prepare for sacred moments. Otherwise, why are we here?

Atonement is one of those practices that can help us prepare for sacred moments, purging ourselves of what is toxic, what has harmed our souls, what has damaged our spirits. This is, I believe, the universal message of the Day of Atonement.

God knows - this nation should atone for these past thirty years of turning away from the common good to private indulgence; we have confused freedom with license; we have lost our sense of the whole and our responsibilities to each part of the whole; we have turned our back on the poor and the mentally ill and the homeless; we have bankrupted our schools. We have fallen to the lie that the government is our enemy, that 'me' matters more than 'me.'

I want to recommend two books for all of you to read this year; they will figure prominently in my sermons. One is 'Ill Fares the Land' by Tony Judt and the other is a poetry collection 'Practical Gods' by Carl Dennis – I believe we have copies in our bookstore. Two other books I really enjoyed this summer were 'When Everything Changed' by Gail Collins and 'The Leopard' by Giuseppe de Lampedusa.

So, atonement – hell yes – as a spiritual practice.

But, no doubt, each one of us should atone, too. For the petty sins we commit, for turning our back on those who need help, for looking down on others, for putting pleasure before justice, for thinking we matter more than anyone else.

Here it is – the sacred, the holy – is found in those moments when we are transfixed and we are lifted up and out and are transformed, when we experience the profundity of our own existence, and then as we are transformed the holy exists as we seek wisdom and justice, equity and compassion. After, Moses doesn't stay on the mountain; he leads his people to freedom.

It takes practice; it takes time. We can only be open to the possibility. Jonah resisted the command to go to Nineveh; we resist the calls to live closer to our own highest ideals. I know I do; I bet you do too.

Boris takes Amos home [I think to Massachusetts – Amos is a UU after all] after a long and adventure filled journey and they part, expecting never to see each other again. Years later, though, a ferocious storm throws Boris up on the shore. Amos happens to live nearby and he goes down to the shore to see what the storm has tossed up, and there he finds his friend stranded in a place he cannot survive, much like Amos experienced when he rolled off of his boat into the ocean. Amos tells Boris to wait, that he will help and runs off. Boris is touched but wonders what a mouse can do for him, a whale. Soon Amos appears, with two circus elephants, and they are able to roll Boris over and over until he is back in the life-giving ocean.

The two friends part once more, their love for each other intact.

Reinhold Niebuhr said that, in the end, we are saved by love and by sacrifice. When the sacred breaks in on us, in a moment of grace, we have to sacrifice control and surrender to the fullness of the moment. And we experience love then, a fullness and an immersion, a deep connection to the heart of life. And, if we let it transform us, our lives can become better.

Annie Dillard describes such an experience of the sacred and says 'I my whole life I had been a bell, but did not know it until I was lifted and struck.'

We cannot control the sacred but we can be open for its presence, in small ways and large ways. We can practice attentiveness, listening and seeing for the mystery of life, open to its beauty and power. We, too, can be lifted and struck and become bells for freedom, for justice, for compassion.

Open your hearts, prepare for sacred moments, atone, and perhaps you might feel thoroughly akin to it all.

Amen