



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

The Beauty of Emptiness

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The story goes in Hasidic Judaism that in the beginning, or in the time before the beginning, before history, before there was anything other than God, God decided to create the world. Why is a mystery; perhaps he was bored, perhaps she was lonely; maybe he had read a self-help book about expressing her inner artist. No one knows.

But there was nothing but God, the tale says, and that so in order for the world to come into being, God had to make room within himself; she had to create space, a place of emptiness into which the world could become.

And the space he created, was in the part of herself that is known as the shekinah. This is a word used often in the Hebrew Bible and usually refers - the translation is difficult- to the presence of God, the sense of God's holiness. It is a feminine word - Hebrew has genders, so it is perhaps the feminine aspect of God's presence. As the world was created into the empty space of God, bits of the shekinah were embedded, so that everything that exists has a bit, a spark of the sacred, a piece of the holy in it.

Our task as humans, it is thus believed, is to see the sacred in everything and so release it [how that happens is a mystery] until ultimately God will be one again.

I have always loved this view of the world - that each thing in the world has a bit of the sacred and that our task is to recognize that. That God made room for the world - the image is striking and not too far off from what in fact happened in the big bang that started it all.

It is that sense of emptiness, of creating space. Space into which life might flow, the emptiness of sound into which melodies might flow. Being empty, being silent. In this over-crowded and noisy world, we need that emptiness from time to time.

This is my last Sunday in the pulpit until Fall. I earn a month of vacation leave and a month for study and preparation for the coming year. Many of you scale back now - kids are out of school perhaps; you are planning a vacation.

Vacation - from vacate - to leave empty. Creating space. How many of you would like to create space in your lives? How many feel your life is sometime too full?

One the lessons of the religions of the world is that emptiness is a blessing, that we have to empty ourselves from time to time, so that we might then be filled. You know what I mean. You create space in your life for what is new. The lesson of the religious life is that emptiness is essential for our spiritual well being. You may meditate - you empty your mind. You do yoga - you empty the spaces your body inhabits so it can move into those spaces more freely and gracefully. In our courtyard the new labyrinth will be an empty path until you enter and walk to the center and then out.

Emptiness. It is essential. It is at the heart of Buddhist thought. In the Heart Sutra, often considered the most important Buddhist scriptural text, the Buddha says: form is emptiness and emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form, the same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness. [Think about that one for a while!]

It is central in Taoism - wu wei, non-action is at the center of the thinking in the Tao Te Ching. A central symbol of Buddhist and Taoist thought is the wheel - the rim, and the spokes, but what is essential for the wheel to operate is the emptiness in the middle - the hub, the hole into which an axle can turn.

Vacate, vacation, emptying. This is the inner journey I am talking about – the spiritual journey – the vacation from everyday life, the emptying of the demands of the world, the setting off on a journey into our own interior – creating space like God did. As we take this inner journey, what do we take with us on this spiritual road? What things do you need to let go of as you travel – what do you take with you and what do you let go of? Asking what you take with you means you make a decision about what you leave behind. Letting go and holding on. It's an age-old question.

James Carse teaches Philosophy and Religion at New York University and has spent much of his academic career investigating mysticism. For most religious traditions, mysticism is characterized by images of a journey to a deeper level of awareness or consciousness or knowledge. The goal is to finally have a mystical experience – the kind of experience where you feel 'one with.' One with – well – with God, with the divine, with the universe, with something greater than what seems to be. It's known as an oceanic experience. The experience of being emptied and then filled.

Carse tells about stopping to see a friend on his way to begin the great pilgrimage route in Europe – the route in northern Spain ending at Santiago de Compostela. His friend had walked the route years before and Carse went both to say good-bye and talk about the trip. His friend was dying from cancer. [This is from his wonderful book 'Breakfast at the Victory.']

This route has become a popular one and apparently now is crowded in the summer where once it was a lonely walk through mountainous and somewhat deserted countryside. In 1999, 154,000 people walked the 300-500 mile route, and there are now tourist stands offering t-shirts, bottled water and key chains along the way. Our daughter Claire walked it. What was once a difficult walk is now mostly a long walk, with a variety of lodging and eating opportunities along the way. Shirley MacLaine has walked it and written a book about her experience. The route dates back to the middle ages and it ends in Santiago de Compostela, where the Apostle James, St. James, is believed to be buried.

Carse, like most pilgrims, hoped to discover something about himself and his faith on the walk. When he visited his friend he was asked what his spiritual goals for the pilgrimage were, and replied that he hoped to discover them on the route. His friend was not satisfied with his answer and Carse tried to make the same point in a more complicated way but to no avail.

His friend had gone to Europe after he graduated college and walked all over, trying, as he said 'to find the meaning of it all.'" At one point on his pilgrimage, his boots gave out so he put them on a stone wall by the road and limped on in his bare feet.

He didn't find what he was looking for so came back to the US, got married, had children, was a carpenter, and he learned, as he had with his boots on the trip, that the spiritual life is every bit as much about sore feet as it is about grand hopes and oceanic experiences. It is, he learned, about letting go of things – a kind of emptying.

So Carse went off to walk the route himself. About four weeks into the trip, trudging down a farm road ankle deep in mud and cow dung after days of snow and rain; Carse could feel blisters forming on his feet as he slogged through the muck when he noticed something partially buried. He carefully pulled from the mire an old boot - the sole was long gone but it was still obviously a boot – he put it on a nearby stone wall and took some pictures. He mailed them to his friend.

His friend's wife framed the picture and hung it above his hospital bed, and he loved to regale people with stories about the boots and the folly of his youthful quest, that he would, on this pilgrimage, finally find it all, rather than seeing his life as a pilgrimage, with moments of clarity and insight along the way.

So what should we let go of? I guess we need first to let go of our egos. This is what the Buddhists say, and I think it means to let go of the notion that we exist alone or that we exist at the center of the universe. It

means to empty our selves, make of ourselves a vessel so that we can receive the world. For the spiritual journey, it is to let go of mastery and the fantasy that we can control the sacred. We empty ourselves so that we can be filled.

On the wall in front of me, in the room at home where I write these sermons, I have three photographs from the exhibit *Ashes and Snow* by Gregory Colbert. Some of you may have seen the installation – in 2005 in Santa Monica. The picture in the middle is of a young Burmese Buddhist monk, just a boy, in lotus position, leaning over into a circle of light, his eyes closed. In front of him is a chambered nautilus. The background is dark. The photo is primarily in sepia tones. The picture to the left is of an elephant, just the head and the trunk in the picture, it's trunk resting on the top of a bowl, and three young Buddhist monks, in a line, receding into the back round. It is also sepia and the focus on both photos is soft. The photo to the right is of the photographer – Colbert, suspended in the ocean with three smallish finback whales.

The sense of the photos – this was true of the whole exhibit – is of eternity, and as I have looked at these photos for these years, the experience of emptiness has come through more and more. The photos are like vessels, empty vessels, into which images have been placed, and so the emptiness is a fullness, not a void.

Is this making any sense? We so often think of emptiness as a negative, and it can be to be sure. But in the spiritual sense emptiness is more often a positive; it is paradoxically a fullness, something to attain rather than something to avoid. And it is out of that emptiness that meaning or connection or the sense of oneness, belonging – all those religious ideals – can arise.

Let me end with a string of metaphors, or images: you can imagine your own.

I love coming here Sunday mornings usually by 7:30 or 8:00 and sitting for a bit, or standing here in this room when it is empty. I come on weekdays, too, but I love standing here early before anyone else comes. I love it because I know you will soon come and fill it up, and what was empty will be full.

When I was little we went every summer to my Uncle Harry's farm in western Minnesota, out on the plains. He would take walks with me, or take me out on his tractor, past the wind breaks to where to horizon was as far away as it could be. It was like being on the middle of the earth, with nothing but emptiness around us. And then I would pick up the smells of wheat or corn, the dust in the air, perhaps of animals, and here the gentle sounds of the plains, and the emptiness would be a fullness.

A bowl is a beautiful object, wooden salad bowls, porcelain bowls, clay bowls, the bowl of my hands, this singing bowl, empty but filled with a fullness of sound. The sun of my heart in the morning light, and the dawn of the soul, the dew of the rose and the woven whole, the grace of courage and the peace that lasts, the face of the stranger and the wings of joy, the deep that calls us and the steep way, my daily bread and my spirit lifted, the streams flowing to the sea, and all of our days, and the deathless dream – they are all in here.

And our chalice, a bowl holding us, like this congregation is a bowl holding us – empty yet full, formless yet strong.

I love you all. Amen

On observing the beauty of the natural world John Muir said, "Going out I found that I was really going in," because the beauty found in nature was like a mirror to his soul.

In Emptiness, there are no complications, just simplicity.

In Emptiness, there is no confusion, just clarity.

In Emptiness, there are no costs, just freedom.

In Emptiness, there is no selfishness, just selflessness.

In Emptiness, there is no waste, just efficiency.

In Emptiness, there is no pollution, just purity.

In Emptiness, there are no distractions, just mindfulness.

In Emptiness, there is beauty.

...Empty a space, and make it beautiful today.

Readings:

From "Arctic Dreams" by Barry Lopez

"Fishing in the Keep of Silence" by Linda Gregg