

SACRIFICE, COMMUNITY, FULFILLMENT - #3: Do You Want to be Transcendent?
Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church - St. Petersburg, Florida - 04/29/18

READINGS (texts below, after sermon)

<u>Gathering</u>	<i>Tao Te Ching 15</i>
<u>Meditation</u>	<i>In This Enchanted Mood</i> from <u>Moby Dick</u> by Herman Melville
<u>Reading #1</u>	<i>Something Wonderful Happened</i> from <u>Siddhartha</u> by Herman Hesse
<u>Reading #2</u>	<i>Rejoice and Be Glad</i> , from Jewish Scripture, Psalm 118
<u>Closing</u>	<i>The Beauty</i> adapted from Starhawk

TIME FOR ALL AGES, TIME WITH CHILDREN *Selfishness is Foolishness*

One Thanksgiving day in a town near where I grew up, but maybe 100 years before I was born, a young woman named Margaret Fuller was asked by her dad to go to church with him. Margaret was 21 years old – old enough to say no if she didn't want to go. But her dad was a United States Senator from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts – and all her life he had been her teacher in the days when girls didn't get a chance for a good education. And Margaret was already well-known for having one of the finest minds in all the United States.

So she went. But she was quite grumpy about it. The Thanksgiving Church service had, as she wrote about it, a "grateful and joyful tone" and that, she wrote, made her mood even more foul. And as soon as she could after the service, she went off alone to the woods, which she called her "meditative woods" – where she could just rest and be at peace as she listened to the burbling of the brook that ran there.

And comparing the goodness and happiness of the church people celebrating Thanksgiving to her own grumpy mood, she found a question come into her mind: "How is it that I seem to be this Margaret Fuller? What does it mean? What shall I do about it?" She sat by the stream and she thought and thought and relaxed – and later she wrote,

"And then, I saw that there is no self; that selfishness is all folly (foolishness), the result of circumstance, that it was only because I thought the self real that I suffered; that I had only to live in the idea of the All, and all was mine. This truth came to me, and I received it unhesitatingly; so that I was for that hour taken up into God."

Margaret was a Unitarian, and for her, the word "God" meant the same as what Star Wars calls The Force – the One Energy of All Things. And for that hour, she felt her oneness with it. She knew and later taught others – especially women and workers – that she and everyone had that kind of power, if they could only be still long enough (perhaps by a burbling stream) to become aware of it.

That may be why this church was built on the shore of a lake into which burbling streams once ran and in which now we have a burbling fountain – to give us a place to sit and relax and realize what a wonderful world we have. If you don't feel you have to own something to have it, that lake is yours.

Hold hands and sit with me a couple of seconds and picture all of us holding hands around Mirror Lake. We can see all of us in its reflection. And it belongs to you and all of us.

SERMON *Do You Want to be Transcendent?*

One day when I was home from college on a vacation break, my childhood friend Rob and I were eating at Howard Johnson's in our hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. I was devouring fried clams and ice cream cake roll with hot fudge sauce – and perhaps because of this act of devotion, Rob the seventh generation Unitarian asked me if I believed in God.

Truth to tell, I did not know the possible depths that question might cover for Rob, a very thoughtful fellow. Rob was a seventh generation Unitarian. He was deep, I knew, but he did not talk religion, at least not with his Catholic blood brother. And despite having been best friends since third grade, I did not know that he thought of himself as an atheist.

“Yes,” I said simply. “I do.” I was twenty, about half way through college. I had not yet questioned whether my church's belief system should be my own or not. But Rob had. “Why?” he asked. “Because I feel it,” I said. With a sigh he replied, “Well, that's the right answer.”

Why was that the right answer for my Unitarian friend? I did not know it at the time. But in the 1820s, when the rational empiricist Unitarianism of Thomas Jefferson and Sam Adams had gained a foothold in American culture, others including Unitarian ministers William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson, while not denying reason, were adding to rationalist Unitarianism a kind of nature-based mysticism, emphasizing feeling and intuition as a basis for understanding life and how to live it.

Taking a word from the German philosopher Emanuel Kant, they called their thinking Transcendentalist. With them, feeling became a legitimate Unitarian authority for knowing reality and morality. (I think for the Universalists it was never in question.) So, personal individual feeling was an authority that my friend had learned to accept, along with science and reason. He accepted my feeling as a legitimate authority. Neither of us thought to question it further.

And why would we two young Concordians question Concord's American deities - Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, frequent visitors Margaret Fuller and Walt Whitman and many others -- these gods who had as followers Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, Mohandes Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy, Martin Luther King and a large swath of American culture?

The primacy of individualism, self-cultivation, non-conformance, naturalist spirituality, intuition, feelings, and personal conscience which these eminences taught were part of who Concordians Rob the Unitarian and Jack the Catholic, along with much of American culture, were. From that day to this, the knowers through feeling and intuition share the UU pews with the knowers through rational empiricist naturalism, sometimes in one and the same person.

I have come to trust and believe in that individualistic conjoining – just like I have come to let go of my youthful view of the divine in favor of a more Transcendentalist view as shaped from Hinduism, Buddhism, Indigenous America, Unitarian Christianity, and also as an intuitive forecasting of modern science.

But also, on this Beltane and May Day Sunday, I remember the Maypole and the dancing, not only to celebrate Spring's display of Earth's fertility, but as the symbol of the *Axis Mundi*, the center axel of this

rolling world to which all is connected in exquisite interdependence. I must take time out from Emerson's and Thoreau's hyper-individualism to remember other American and world truths – that belief without dialogue is blind, justice without democracy is tyranny, and individualism without community is death. I believe in the life-giving journeys of heroes and saints and spirit questers. And I believe in due caution lest the center cannot hold and things fall apart.

Earlier this week, I saw a young person walking by our church wearing a tee-shirt with the epigram, *God is Within... Everything*. I love that. Sad to say, I doubt the passer-by had any idea that in America we are the origin and home of that belief.

Paraphrasing closely from something I read somewhere, the Transcendentalist stream of Unitarianism claims that, *There is an ideal spiritual state that transcends the physical and the empirical, a divine force evident in each being, linked and evidenced in Nature, an inner spark or light, transformative in potential, and perceived through feeling even more trustworthy than sense or thought*.

Emerson called that spark the human soul, containing all the potentials we might cultivate to grow into the human spirit.

What is the consequence of such an understanding of Reality? Waldo Emerson said it was that we must learn directly from Nature and speak our learning with our own minds. Henry Thoreau said it was that we must live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life ... and be able to give a true account of it and to then march to our own drummer. Margaret Fuller said it was that our only object in life is to grow.

I think we would agree that each of us has a storehouse of potentials - and that their nature and fulfillment have been influenced by human evolution, cultural heritage, communities, families, genetic development, happenstance, and by our own individual awareness and choice. With that, our question boils down to, What is your point in life? What are you devoted to? Surviving? Thriving? Something else transcendent?

What is the state of being you want your spirit to feel – what feeling from your relationship with the world, what feeling from development of your potentials? If you want to feel and be transcendent, what do you want to transcend? There are many choices. Fear, aversion, ignorance, loss, struggle with the human condition, death, life, culture, nature, human nature, mood, temperament, fallibility.

What is to be felt in this transcendence? You've heard a few choices this morning in our readings and music.

The ancient Chinese *Tao Te Ching* suggests feeling patience so that the murky tumult of life settles out and you feel the liberated temperament of a clear spirit. Is that for you?

Melville doesn't so much recommend, but revels, in the feeling of oceanic bliss high in the ship's riggings on the inscrutable tides of God. (He also warns ships' captains that such meditator-types miss calling out a lot of whales.) Is that for you?

Margaret Fuller invokes the moment of transport by the forest stream, swept up suddenly into the oneness of God where all self disappears in a much vaster wealth of being. Is that for you?

Herman Hesse holds up as most worthy the single all-inclusive state of mind of Siddhartha, the Buddha, hearing the divine word *Om* flowing like a river of the harmonized voices of all beings.

Hesse holds up as similar, the experience of Siddhartha's follower Govinda, feeling the fullness of love upon seeing humankind with all its passions of joy and woe resolved into holiness in the bliss of Siddhartha's all-accepting compassionate smile.

And for the Psalm, identifying the righteous justice of caring for all as the entry door into the divine realm.

Are any of these for you?

Or for Jesus, in the Gospel According to John, feeling the sense of wholeness or completion from doing the divine work of unfailing assistance to all for the actualization of their divine potential.

Or for Walt Whitman, advocating looking deeply at what is close and familiar to discover the best state of life.

Or for Robert Frost, calling for loving the present moment and its beauty and life as enough to fulfill divine love on Earth.

There are many ways the spirit of life can come unto us - ways for each spiritual type; thinking, feeling, sensing, intuiting. Take your pick. Those who have been long devoted say all paths lead there, and get you close enough to be glad in the day and the journey.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow at one point says the peak experience is in the out-of-body sensation where one is simultaneously humbled and glorified as a tiny indispensable being of the Being of beings. At another point he says the peak experience is to help others actualize their own vast potentials.

Here we have the bodhisattva, the saint, the hero on the journey of the spirit. And though you don't have to feel heroic to do it, you can do it and you will be a blessing. You will, at the least, move one portion of life from potential to fulfillment, from sacredness to holiness. On the journey of devotion to the spirit of life, to the worth and dignity of all, to the vitality of the interdependent web of all existence, your heart will be in a holy place.

Let this be our question for the week to each other and to those who are not here today. To what transcendence or fulfillment are you devoted? Perhaps it is transcending fear and greed. Perhaps it is fulfilling the profound potentials for comprehension and growth and compassion. Perhaps those you ask will have never thought about it before, but will be glad to do so and rejoice.

May your sacrifices be devotions and fulfillment.

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READINGS

Thoughts For Gathering *Tao Te Ching 15*

Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear?

Meditation *"In This Enchanted Mood"* from Moby Dick by Herman Melville

In the serene weather of the tropics it is exceedingly pleasant, the mast-head (of the ship); nay, to a dreamy meditative person it is delightful. There you stand, a hundred feet above the silent decks, striding along the deep, as if the masts were gigantic stilts..., lost in the infinite series of the sea, with nothing ruffled but the waves.

The tranced ship indolently rolls; the drowsy trade winds blow; everything resolves you into languor; a sublime uneventfulness invests you; you hear no news; read no gazettes; extras with startling accounts of commonplaces never delude you into unnecessary excitements; you hear of no domestic afflictions, bankrupt securities, fall of stocks; are never troubled with the thought of what you shall have for dinner....

lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie ... by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last you lose your identity; take the mystic ocean at your feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul pervading humankind and nature...

thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over.... no life in thee now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God.

Reading #1 *Something Wonderful Happened* from Siddhartha by Herman Hesse

Siddhartha listened to the river's voice... (and heard) all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and evil. All of them together was the world. All of them together was the stream of events, the music of life – and when he did not bind his soul to any one particular voice and absorb it in his Self, but heard them all, the whole, the unity; then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one perfected word: Om – All."

Many years later, Siddhartha's old friend said to him, "Siddhartha, we are now old men. We may never see each other again in this life. I can see, my dear friend, that you have found peace. Tell me one more word... something to help me on my way. My path is often hard and dark."

Govinda looked steadily at Siddhartha's face, with anxiety, with longing. Suffering was in his look. Siddhartha smiled. "Bend near to me!" he whispered. "Kiss me on the forehead, Govinda."

Although surprised, Govinda was compelled by great love and presentiment to obey him. As he did this, something wonderful happened to him. He no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha. Instead he saw other faces, many faces, a long series, a continuous stream of faces – hundreds, thousands, which all came and disappeared and yet all seemed to be there at the same time, which all continually changed and renewed themselves and which were yet all Siddhartha. Each one was mortal,

a passionate, painful example of all that is transitory. Yet none of them died, they only changed. Only time stood between one face and another. And all were Siddhartha's smiling face, this smile of unity over the flowing forms, this smile of simultaneousness over the thousands of births and deaths.

Govinda bowed low, overwhelmed by a feeling of great love - of the most humble veneration of the man sitting there motionless, whose smile reminded him of everything that he had ever loved in his life, of everything that had ever been of value and holy in his life.

Reading #2 *Rejoice and Be Glad*, from Jewish Scripture, Psalm 118

(In which the Hebrew name Yahweh is translated/interpreted in accord with its gerund form to mean not "I Am Who Am" or "I Am Who I Will Be," but "Being of beings.")

Give thanks to Yahvah, the Being of beings, the Being of ceaseless embodiment and empowerment of all beings. Being is for us, so what are we to fear of beings? Open in us the gates of caring, to enter and give thanks. This is a day the Being of beings has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Closing *The Beauty* adapted from Starhawk

The beauty of the green earth
and the white moon among the stars
and the mysteries of the waters
call upon your soul.

The soul of nature gives life to all and receives it back
in hearts that rejoice, in love that acts, in pleasures of devotion.

Feel, within, your beauty, strength, compassion,
honor, humility, mirth and reverence.

Know within you the mystery of all this
and then within all else.

Let that be your devotion.