

Beyond the Good

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

March 25, 2017

Debu Majumdar & Rev Paul Beckel

WELCOME

Welcome to Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship. All who come in the spirit of goodwill are welcome here. Today we celebrate our religious freedom by gathering to explore its multifaceted expressions over the eons: contemplation – community – ethics – investigation – and critique. All paths to the Holy.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE / COVENANT

GATHERING SONG #194 *Faith is a Forest*

CHILDREN'S FOCUS Yoga demonstration by preschool class

ERACISM MINUTE

RESPONSIVE READING #611 "Brahman"

INTRODUCTION

I've always been struck by a poem by Mary Oliver, one of contemporary Unitarian Universalism's unofficial laureates. It's her poem, "Wild Geese." Or more specifically, its appearance as a responsive reading in our grey hymnbook. It begins: "You don't have to be good."

Wow. This is in a church book? Moreover, in a Unitarian church book? Because Unitarians, of course, are not about salvation by faith. William Ellery Channing, who brought Unitarianism from an emerging idea into institutional form in the early 1800s, spoke instead about salvation by character. Instead of a focus on dogma, we would focus on the practical elements of religion: ethics; living in the world.... And most importantly: living in relationship with and in service to humanity. Honoring and serving god not through adoration and prayer but through good works.

But "You do not have to be good," she writes, "You do not have to walk on your knees / For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting."

Well, that sounds a lot like the Buddha. The Buddha began his quest for enlightenment with the equivalent of walking on his knees for a hundred miles through the desert. Essentially living *the most uncomfortable existence* he could without dying, or losing his mind — because he anticipated that this was the antidote to his prior life of luxury and indulgence.

In his prior life, as prince, he'd had no spiritual breakthrough. More importantly, he discovered, he could not escape the fundamental truth that life involves suffering and death. So, before he became the Buddha, he went on this over the top rampage against himself, denying himself food, shelter, and clothing. But to make a long story short, he discovered, in time, that this was not the answer either.

*You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves.*

To make a long poem short, Mary Oliver's poem reminds us that we are kind to share with one another our anguish and distress... but the world goes on. And its harsh beauty is an invitation, a call to us — like the call to the wild geese — to live a real life. Not a perfect life. Not imagining that our particular lives are extraordinary, but that life is extraordinary, the entire scheme of things is miraculous. And we are called simply to find our place within the all of it.

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It was funny to hear Mary Oliver referred to earlier today in the canvass skit. Do Unitarians desperately love Mary Oliver because she offers, within accessible Western idiom, an antidote, a balance, to our own relentless theology of activism?

Debu today invites us to reflect upon the tendency within our liberal religious movement (which he's enjoyed and supported for decades) our tendency to focus on *fixing* the world. Not that we should abandon our call, if we sense that humanity is called to build societies of freedom, reason, and justice for all... if that is our call in the same sense that the call of the wild geese is to expend heart and soul to fly thousands of miles, reproduce, and then fly back again, repeat.... If our place in the order of things is to desperately strive, back and forth, then so be it. May we do so with as much beauty and grace — at least viewed from a distance — may we do so with as much beauty and grace as the wild geese. And may we actually reach our destination from time to time to give birth to another generation like ourselves.

If that is our call, then away we go. But while we're up here, furiously beating our wings, can we get some perspective? Can we recognize our unaccountable buoyancy here on the invisible ether?

I tend to argue that inner peace and social justice *need one another* like yin and yang: interdependent, synergistic. Today Debu invites us to consider, though, whether we may be flapping less gracefully, less delightfully, and god forbid less effectively, if we are insufficiently attuned to that which is at once broader, and more intimate... gentler, and more intense... than this speck bound by time and history.

MUSICAL MEDITATION *Moonshadow*, by Cat Stevens

MESSAGE Debu Majumdar

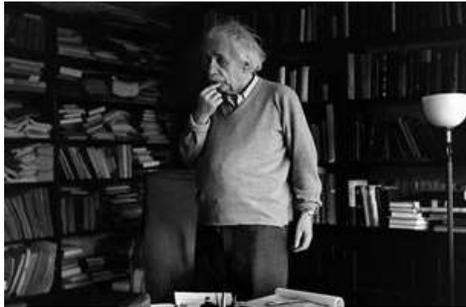
Suppose a day comes when there is no injustice in the world. There is equality and compassion among all, and every person respects the inherent worth and dignity of others. No one goes hungry and homeless.



No need for protests
(The picture is taken from UU World magazine)

The central premise and the goal of the UU fellowship is achieved. Would there be a need then for our UU Fellowship?

This question, a thought experiment, has haunted me for several years.



Gedanken Experiment – Time Magazine

The history of the Unitarian and the Universalist movement reveals that we have always questioned the existing dogmas of religions and of our own. We have raised fundamental questions about: the divinity of Jesus, the myth of Adam and Eve and original sin, why the church thinks some cannot get redemption. Today the UU movement has evolved into an open-minded fellowship with the principles centered around equality, justice, compassion and respect for all. So, if these are achieved, would there be any role for our fellowship anymore?

It is enough for some to devote their entire life to good causes, but I speculate if some still do not marvel about a deeper meaning of life—wondering, ‘Is this what life is all about?’ Is the existential philosophy ‘there is nothing more beyond current existence’ completely fulfilling? Is the meaning and fulfillment of my life in only seeing an upgrade of disadvantaged people in my community? I have been asking this for some time as my own reflection of our UU movement.



Finding Balance – UU Church Cheyenne

I have seen sincere questioning in other religions too. Take the case of my ex-Mormon friend's aunt who loved drinking, and who vehemently questioned the faith of the Mormon Church. She got happily ex-communicated and joyously lived her life the way she wanted to. But then when she became old, she wondered if, after her death, no one would call her to the heaven her family would be in. She would roam around some dark place all alone. She crawled back to the Mormon Church.

Then there is the example of my mother-in-law which goes in the opposite direction. A born Italian Catholic and a strong believer, she secretly sprinkled water on our sons (baptizing on the sly) because she wanted to see her grandchildren with her in heaven. Then with time, when the awful news of the Catholic priests' misdeeds came out, she stopped going to church services, watching Mass on TV instead, and started to question the actions and dogma of the church. She didn't like what the Church had done in the name of religion. In the end, she told my wife, her only child, not to have her funeral service in any Church, no Mass, and to cremate her body and put the ashes in nature. I do not know if, with age, my mother-in-law became stronger in life, outgrew the Catholic religion, and was convinced that there is nothing beyond or concluded she didn't need church's help to get into heaven.

These are only two examples. Countless seek an answer from somewhere for solace when the end approaches.

Many UUs have come to the Fellowship because they were disillusioned by their own or their family's religious beliefs. I believe there is in us a deeply hidden, currently set aside, desire to find some meaning, some sense to our individual lives. A quest for a sacred meaning, a sacred something.

Going back to my original question, does our spirituality lie in just seeing the world free of injustices? Is that my Dharma, the solid trunk I hold on to sustain me and lead me toward a life of ultimate peace, tranquility and bliss—my right path?



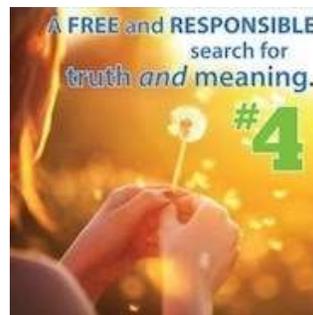
What is my Dharma that sustains me?

In Hinduism, dharma signifies behaviors and spiritual goals in accord with the order that makes life and all our surroundings, and it includes duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues, and ‘right way of living.’ Whether they go to a temple or not, all Hindus know their spiritual goal, which is self-realization, that is identifying one’s existence as a part of the universal existence of all beings. In popular language they call it ‘Mukti,’ freedom from this life. In Buddhism, dharma means ‘cosmic law and order,’ embodied in the teachings of the Buddha.

The Indian concept of Dharma not only encompasses all the principles of the UU Fellowship as its primary basics, but they go to the heart of one’s spirituality more resolutely—encouraging one to find the meaning of one’s life and the ultimate goal.

I have been with the UU Church for 30+ years. At this time, it seems to me the UU philosophy is not seeking an answer to define its dharma beyond encouraging members to seek a better world for all to live in. I wish BUF would articulate more robustly and encourage all on a search for spirituality beyond good community works.

The spiritual quest is actually in our 4th principle: free and responsible search for truth and meaning.



Our 4th Principle

Wikipedia defines a search for meaning of life as finding significance of living or existence in general. They highlight the meaning by a Post-impressionist painting by Paul Gauguin: “Why are we here? What is life all about? or what is the purpose of existence?”



Early thinkers of the Unitarian Church such as Priestley, Jefferson, Adam, Emerson, and Thoreau looked toward the orient for ideas and inspiration, although they had varying and differing objectives in their studies. Were they simply wasting time in irrelevant pursuits instead of devoting their lives to the modern goal of justice and equality for all as our life's true purpose and meaning? I am certain they were searching for something more fulfilling, something sacred. From the perspective of Indian thoughts, I'd call their efforts a search for self-realization.

Several thousand years ago, Indian sages contemplated the meaning of our existence. In the pursuit of their search, they moved away from populated places to the quietness of serene forests and lofty mountains. In this process, they mastered what is now known as meditation. They found that true reality is not what our senses and conscious mind perceive; it is as if we see the world through a colored glass. True reality is not what our physical senses perceive—there is a deeper reality that is experienced in a super-conscious state, achieved in meditation, known as Samadhi. In Samadhi they found that there is an inner essence within us that is common within



Samadhi – beyond normal existence

all living beings, and that is all pervading in the universe. They called it the Brahman, the immanent existence. They found the realization of the Brahman is like achieving absolute bliss. However, with our physical senses, we do not realize this and we think of ourselves as separate objects that die after some time. But nothing dies the way we think of death. Nothing is insignificant either, nothing is higher or smaller than anything else. All parts represent the whole just as a tiny seed contains the whole. The ultimate goal of life is to achieve realization of this truth that you are a part of the Brahman and an equal part of nature along with all beings. Self-realization or Enlightenment is just this realization and then a higher power awakens in you and merges you (or rather, your individual consciousness) with the cosmic consciousness or the Brahman.

This realization by many sages has led to the establishment of a dharma that not only includes the 7 principles of the UU Fellowship, but goes beyond because self-realization requires good karma, good ethical behavior as only a first step. It is much stricter than saying 'Thou shall not kill.' Thou shall not lie. Thou not only shall not kill or lie, thou must not encourage others to kill or lie or misbehave. Good ethical behavior is one of the three basic pillars of Buddhism's Eight-fold path: ethics, meditation, and wisdom.

When you achieve self-realization, you are awakened. That is what happened to Gautama Buddha. After his realization of the workings of the universe, he glowed. When an ordinary



Gautama Buddha delivering his first sermon

person saw that glow, he asked him in wonderment, ‘Who are you?’ The Buddha only replied, ‘I am one that is awake.’ The Buddha preached that through awakening, one not only reaches the end of suffering, but the awakened one also brings love for all sentient beings, because there is no difference between one’s own Self and that of all others.

Thirty years back my wife and I published an article in the UU World magazine proclaiming that Unitarian Universalist Fellowship provides a unique space for one to grow in one’s quest for spirituality. Following the past UU history, I believe it is time again for a move toward encouraging the search for spirituality. . . and the Search for true bliss.

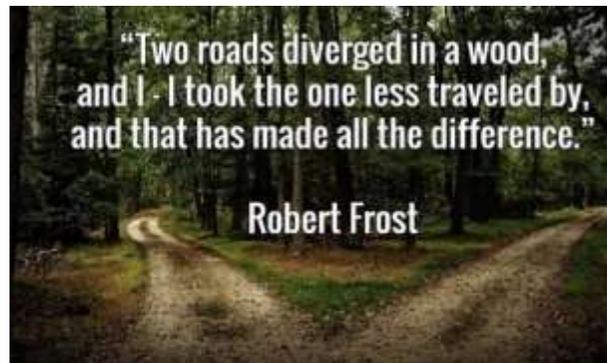


Carl Jung said, “Your vision will become clear when you look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.

The ancient sages had urged us to wake up from our sleepy nature and approach the great unknown, even though the path is like the sharp edge of a razor. They also emphasized that there is no one path for all. You have a choice. You will have to work it out for yourself.

Robert Frost wrote, “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less travelled by,

and that has made all the difference.”



As an example of different paths, Rev. Rick Davis of the Salem, Oregon Fellowship, a Zen Buddhist, thinks UU spiritualism is “about discovering connections - with one’s true self, with other people and beings, the world around you, your highest ideals, the sacred.”

Let me conclude with a story from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. When the world was young, the newly created beings—the Devas, the Asuras and the Humans—were trying to understand their place in the world. The Devas went to Brahma, their creator, saying ‘Lord, please tell us what we should live by.’

Brahma looked kindly at the Devas, who were endowed with great character and God-like intentions, and simply uttered a single letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, ‘Daw.’

The Devas pondered over what they heard until Brahma asked them, ‘Devas, do you understand what I said?’

They stated, ‘Yes, Lord, we understand. ‘Daw’ stands for Damyata—control. You want us to live a life of restraint.’

Brahma said, ‘Yes, you have understood it. Be self-controlled.’

Next, the Humans went to Brahma and reverentially asked for His wisdom. ‘Lord, please tell us what we should live by.’

Brahma observed the Humans. They had great intellect and passion but were weak in body and petty in their dealings with others. He again pronounced the same letter of the alphabet, ‘Daw.’

Brahma paused, allowing them time to reflect. Then he asked, ‘Humans, do you understand what I said?’

The humans grasped the meaning of the ancient language quickly. ‘Yes, Lord, we fully perceive what you said. ‘Daw’ symbolizes Datta—give. We should be generous. There is great joy in sharing.’

Brahma was pleased with their answer, ‘You have understood it. Go and live accordingly.’

Lastly, the Asuras went to Brahma and asked for his wisdom. Although the Asuras were created in darkness, they were still his children. Brahma looked at them carefully. They were strong in body and in their determinations. They were the rivals of the Devas. But once again Brahma said, ‘Daw.’

The Asuras mused over what they heard until Brahma inquired, ‘Asuras, do you understand what I said?’

The Asuras clearly discerned the message of Brahma. ‘Lord, when you said “Daw,” you meant Dayadhyam—compassion. You want us to be compassionate.’

Brahma smiled. ‘Yes, you have understood it. Live a life of compassion for others.’

Then Brahma rose up and vanished.

Brahma didn’t say anyone was wrong. He accepted the different interpretations of his message. The Devas, Humans, and the Asuras understood his message according to their situation, according to their own frailties. And because of these frailties, each needed to travel on their own path to self-realization: some the path of restraint, some the path of generosity, some the path of compassion. We can perceive wisdom only at our own level of cognizance and consciousness.

In the same way, we will find our path if we keep at it. Amen.



I sincerely thank Rev. Paul Beckel for encouraging me to express my thoughts and for his comments on my initial draft.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

#178 *Raghupati*

BENEDICTION

#612 “Fearful Joy”

CIRCLE ‘ROUND