

Exile, Initiation & Return

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship www.buf.org
New Year's Eve Morning (12-31-2017)
Rev Paul Beckel

*we can never be born enough.
we are human beings
for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery.*

*the mystery of growing,
the mystery which happens only
and whenever
we are faithful to ourselves.*

*life for eternal us
is now.*

e.e. cummings

e. e. cummings (1894-1962) was a Unitarian whose innovative poetry promoted intuition, human emotion, and individualism over materialism, cynicism, and mechanistic rules.

PRELUDE Music today by Eric and Sally Bowen

WELCOME

We stand today at a border. Looking back, we see the work of the ancestors, from which we receive continuing benefits. So we look back and say thank you.

We also look back to see mistakes made by the ancestors, mistakes made by ourselves, and practices that are not the fault of anyone in particular, but which we can no longer tolerate in our world.

Looking forward we see serious challenges. The need to disrupt deep-rooted habits — some habits that we will have to work on for ourselves. And also social habits — much bigger than ourselves — and in order to disrupt these, we will need each other in a big way.

We see serious challenges ahead in that more mistakes will be made (we already know this — it's like we can foretell the future!) More mistakes will be made, and we will have opportunities again, and again, to respond to mistakes ... with that miraculous combination of grace, assertiveness, and seeing the bigger picture.

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In addition to challenges tho, and those aggravating opportunities for growth, we look forward to blessings. I'll be quiet now and let you bring to mind the blessings of your own life ... for whatever these are, I invite you, in advance, to hold gratitude in your heart.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

GATHERING SONG *Morning Has Broken*

ERACISM MINUTE Jennifer Smith

MILESTONES

INTERLUDE *I'll Begin Again*, sung by Andrew Schoneberg

INTRO / GUIDED MEDITATION

20th century philosopher of religion, Mircea Eliade, wrote dozens of books on the world's religions, focusing much of his attention on primitive tribal cultures. Toward the end of his life he was asked, "What is at the core of all religions; what ties them together?"

The dominant pattern that Eliade identified, and saw repeated through religious symbols and ceremonies spanning thousands of years, was this pattern: EXILE...INITIATION...& RETURN.

Exile. Falling into chaos: disorder, loss, isolation... shutting off from life and the people around us.

Initiation. A glimpse of possibility, a spark of new life... invitation... recovery... welcome.

And Return. Re-entering into life, and into community. The conscious choice to be a part of the world of the living.

Exile, initiation, return. It's a process we repeat, in large cycles and small... consciously and unconsciously... in body and in spirit, in our families, our jobs, with friends and adversaries, and certainly at BUF.

We go through this same cycle when we experience loss, or confront our limits...and then discover an opening thru which we might take a tiny step forward...and then: we take that step.

This is the cycle of exile, initiation, and return.

What is going on with you today? By showing up here you may be — consciously or unconsciously — you may be allowing yourself to experience a moment of initiation. It may be a very subtle initiation (this year we're going to skip the ritual of walking on hot coals).

And it may not be an initiation that you *receive*. Instead it may be an initiation that you extend to someone else... again, consciously or unconsciously, by offering, with your presence, a moment of hope or respite, humor or inspiration.

Before we go on to our meditation, I should clarify some things about these terms. Eliade was a Romanian, writing in English about traditions from around the world. So try not to take these particular words too narrowly. For example, “exile” can include being shunned, scapegoated, or physically pushed away. But it can also simply mean a significant loss. Or a choice to give something up... especially when we have no idea what, or if, anything else will come to replace it.

And the word “initiation,” sadly, is often associated with hazing, or being degraded. Try to set those connotations aside for now.

And finally, the spirit of “return” is achieved by different people and traditions in a variety of ways. The extreme extravert may proclaim in body and voice, I HAVE RETURNED. A Buddhist might simply smile and pick up the screaming baby. A Muslim might humbly say, “I surrender to the will of Allah.” A humanist may make the simple choice — simple as in straightforward, but not always easy — the choice of gratitude over bitterness. All of these can be forms of Return.

MEDITATION

I invite you now to get comfortable Back straight ... feet on the floor or whatever variation of this posture is feasible for you ...breathing slowly, deeply, smoothly... I’m going to offer a guided meditation now, which will be followed by three minutes of silence...beginning and ending with a chime.

The dominant pattern in religious ceremonies, symbols, and myths spanning human history is the cycle of EXILE...INITIATION...& RETURN.

Every culture, every life repeats and repeats the pattern. I invite you now to explore your own experiences of this cycle. As you do, know that you are not alone. Everyone around you is familiar with the pattern -- each in our own way. In fact, we are connected in this way to the entire human family, throughout time, past, present and future, thru this archetypal, and entirely natural pattern – in which we recognize our dreams, our limits, and the sacred moments in which dreams and limits intertwine.

Exile.

Hurt. Disappointment. Deep loss. Or simply being pushed out of our comfort zone.

Expulsion, confinement, flight. Being shut out of something important to us, or shutting ourselves out.

Even if we go out and scream at everyone, *it may not look like* withdrawal, but it may be another way to close ourselves off.

Exile is not the aloneness we choose for rest, and reflection. Exile is a severing of the connections which link each to each in healthy community.

How have you experienced exile? Have you been told, or shown... that you, or your dreams, do not fit?

Have you been so afraid that *you might* be pushed out – that you've preemptively, defensively, allowed your light to diminish...?

Initiation. A hand comes out. An invitation. Exploring. Maybe it is the hand, or the voice, or the smile... of another. Maybe it is your own hand, a sunrise, or a splash of cold rain.

Initiation. Starting. Again.

How have you experienced initiation? How have you been welcomed back to courage ... back into relationship?

Initiation. The spark. The subtle ritual that draws us again into the orbit of life.

A refusal to be held under. Lifting. A hand. Lifting a voice. The voice of ten thousand allies. Or just one, asking, how can I help?

Initiation. Epiphany.

Discovering a space where the discomfort becomes tolerable ... or even invigorating.

Come in.

Return.

Saying yes; I accept. This here; this now.

Mindfully. Alert. Shamelessly present.

I will. I am. I belong. I commit myself. I am a part of this. I am a part of the ALL.

I am a part of the same world... with you. I welcome myself into the world we inhabit together. I dare to be. Whether you like it or not. I am. We are.

Come. We are one. Return.

SILENCE (3:00)

REFLECTIONS

Mary and Joseph had to leave their home in Nazareth to go register in the land of Joseph's ancestors, in Bethlehem. Exiled. Strangers without assistance, no room at the inn. But then the star, and the heavenly host of angels. And finally, to close this chapter, an image of serenity,

reverence, and return: as Mary ponders these things in her heart.

But then the holy family are plunged into the most grave distress. The magi warn them: King Herod knows that a greater king has just been born. So he's going to kill all the infants throughout the land. So they flee to Egypt, exiling themselves even further from home.

But in the next scene we find that Jesus has grown into an inquisitive adolescent, a precocious student of scripture. We begin to hope. And in this story there are two initiations in a row as we next see Jesus meeting John the Baptist and experiencing baptism — this novel ritual which is to represent a second birth. And finally, through the door of this initiation, Jesus returns, coming out publicly, and his ministry begins.

Then the cycle repeats, and repeats. It's the hero's journey, it's the trajectory of novels, symphonies, and nature shows, not because the ancient evangelists and modern writers are lazy, but because human beings tend to identify with this pattern even when it's embedded within twisting plots, foolery, and misdirection.

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Exile. Initiation. Return. The eternal cycle of death and rebirth is not just retold, *but performed* within the liturgy of every Catholic mass. It's in the circular imagery of mandalas, sacred hoops, reincarnation, and celebrations based on the seasons and phases of the moon.

An eternal cycle. It feels, sometimes, *exhausting*.

And yet these stories, symbols, and rituals have survived for millennia. How did they do it?

Well, a lot of different ways. For some of the ancients, re-birth was not simply refreshment, rejuvenation, or taking a little break. Instead, prayer rituals might viscerally send the shaman — or dances and music send the entire community — back to the very beginnings of time, re-creating the original creative event in which the supernatural bestowed perfection upon all being.

Reproducing the words or gestures that the gods themselves had made in the beginning, these rituals would restore the world to the state in which it had been at the moment of its birth. The cosmos became what it had been then: pure, pristine, powerful... with all of its possibilities intact.

Some primitive re-birth or coming-of-age ceremonies were about making a brand new person. So they had to include a ritual of death: the utter annihilation of the present form of being so that new being could be born. For example, an Australian initiation ceremony for boys involved a ritualized killing of the boys by one of the gods, in which their bodies were symbolically cut into pieces and burned, all so that their spirits could be restored to life. It is hard to imagine with our modern minds how seriously this was taken.

Of course different cultures over the ages have understood religion more, and less, literally. Exile, initiation, and return is a generalization that takes in a broad diversity of religious

expression, also represented in spirals, and tides, and the ever-balancing yin-yang.

I have a western worldview imbued with a linear scientific and historical perspective: a view of the world evolving... not in a particular direction but always accumulating rather than starting over. Even my naturalistic concept of god is that *the divine itself* is evolving.

With this worldview it's hard for me to truly get into the mindset of someone who understands rituals that represent the utter annihilation of the world so that a new one can be born ... or that a soul could be reincarnated into a new body in another life.

But I do understand the appeal of dystopian novels and movies — which are generally grim, but often contain glimmers of hope that humanity will be restored... and maybe even society improved once we dig ourselves out of some post-apocalyptic hell.

Maybe I take my own scientific perspective too literally — not even wanting to consider the magic and the mystery of utter transformation... stubbornly clinging to my experience of continuity — which may itself be an illusion.

It's funny. I have had epiphanies. I have had catharsis. I have been bowled over by beauty and love. I have been physically healed. I have been inspired and have found wisdom, and have gone through rich religious ceremonies. If tho, through all of this, I am still me, that's not all bad.

Staring over, completely, is not always for the best. A man who had been taking tennis lessons spoke to his instructor with some frustration. He said, "Look, I've been listening to you for ten years, but I don't seem to have learned much. What's going on? Shouldn't I be a better player now...with 10 years of experience?" His instructor responded, "Yes, except you don't really have 10 years of experience. It's more like you have had one year of experience, ten times."

So if indeed I am still me... in each new year, instead of completely starting over, I may find myself with more time to work on my defects, which are becoming painfully familiar... but they are also becoming more manageable, I think, because I'm getting to know their tricks.

So as an expression of gratitude for the experiences, the cycles, and the lessons past and those still to come, I wish myself, and all of us, as one beloved community, a blessed new year's journey.

SHARING OUR GIFTS Introduced by Beth Nyblade

SENDING SONG *Turn, Turn, Turn*

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) Born in Romania and exiled to the U.S. during WWII, Eliade became a distinguished professor of religion at the University of Chicago & Meadville-Lombard (Unitarian Universalist) federated faculty. He was the author of over 50 books, including novels, short stories, and plays, as well as works on the history of religion. He was editor of *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Today's service draws upon his *Rights and Symbols of Initiation* (1958).