

BURNING BUSHES?

A Service by Fritz Hudson

Presented October 15, 2006

Chalice Lighting

*To worship is to stand in awe under a heaven of stars, before a flower,
a leaf in sunlight, or a grain of sand.*

*To worship is to be silent, receptive, before a tree astir with the wind,
or the passing shadow of a cloud.*

*To worship is to work with dedication and skill;
it is to pause from work and listen to a strain of music.*

*To worship is to sing with the singing beauty of the earth;
it is to listen through a storm to the still small voice within.*

Worship is a loneliness seeking communion; it is a thirsty land crying out for rain.

*Worship is kindred fire within our hearts;
it moves through deeds of kindness and through acts of love.*

Worship is the mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond.

*It is an inarticulate silence yearning to speak;
it is the window of the moment open to the sky of the eternal.*

Jacob Trapp

Sermon

"I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say me to say I would go to church no more." Have you perhaps said something like that to yourself once or twice? Was it perhaps in this church, about me? Even if so, you're in good company. Those words are exactly what Ralph Waldo Emerson said in 1836, as part of his famed Divinity School Address to Harvard's graduating class. And, as a later Harvard professor conclusively demonstrated, the minister of whom he spoke could only have been the Rev. Barzalai Frost, then pastor of Emerson's own home Unitarian Church in Concord Massachusetts.

"A snowstorm was falling around us," Emerson explained to the students. "The snowstorm was real; the preacher was merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had not one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived or acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely to convert life into truth, he had not learned."

"To convert life into truth." This is not just the capital secret of the ministry as a profession. It is also the work each of us shares, as spiritual and religious beings. It is our common calling, our shared ministry, if you will. Before anything else,

- before "the words and deeds of prophetic women and men,"

- before "the wisdom from the world's religions,"

- before "the guidance of reason and the results of science,"

we affirm that "The living tradition we share draws" from this source: from "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life." (U.U. Association Principles) But how do we acquire such experience, this "transcending wonder," or how do we recognize it for having this life

creating power. And perhaps even more challenging, how do we interpret or tap these experiences to actually create or uphold our lives, indeed to uphold life itself. Of Rev. Frost, that day, Emerson next said, "not one fact of his experience had he yet imported into his doctrine." How do we that: import our experience into our doctrine? These are the questions I set before us today, but they will be our work for several days to come.

Let me go back to the first question first. How do we acquire or recognize such moving, renewing experience? What models do we have to guide our expectations? Let's look first at the larger tradition out which our own has grown – the western religious tradition grounded in the experience of the ancient Jews. What was Moses' first direct experience of transcending wonder?

- Born a slave in Egypt, but raised in Pharaoh's house;
- so enraged upon seeing an Egyptian beat a Hebrew that he murdered the Egyptian and fled to distant Midian;
- taken in there by a priest's family among whom he found his wife, it is then written in the book of Exodus:

Now Moses was keeping his the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt." When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses! . . . I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. . . . I have seen the affliction my people in Egypt. . . . I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them and to bring them . . . to a good and broad land . . . flowing with milk and honey. . . . Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you shall bring forth my people." (Ex.3:1-10)

Moses' life-directing experience comes to him unbidden. He had hardly prepared for it. It comes, as well, in a form that no one could have missed – in a bush that burns unquenchably, a disembodied voice that makes a clear claim: "I am the God of your father." Finally it gives him a strong command: "Come, I will send you . . . to bring forth my people." To a life already formed by the willingness to risk safety to protect its tribe, such an experience could not help but shape its next step.

Have you ever had such an experience – clear, energizing direction almost forced upon you from a powerful mystery? If so, I trust you've had little trouble recognizing its significance or following its lead. But led me place beside this model another – this time from the other major human strand of culture-transcending faith, the eastern religious tradition grounded in ancient India. How does Siddhartha Gautama, for example, arrive at his enlightenment, to become the awakened one, the Buddha?

- Born and raised a prince who renounces his comforts;
- for six years a seeker of wisdom by living in the wilderness and starving his earthly appetites, in the scripture called the *Majjhima-nikaya*, he speaks:

"I thought: . . . By this grueling penance I have attained no distinction higher than the human state . . . Might there be another way to enlightenment?" I thought of a time when my Sakyan father was working and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree: quite secluded from sensual desires . . . with happiness and pleasure born of seclusion. I thought: 'Might this be the way to enlightenment?' . . . 'Why am I afraid of such pleasure?' . . . (Then) "I thought: 'It is not

possible to attain that pleasure with a body so excessively emaciated. Suppose I ate some solid food, some boiled rice and bread?'

"Now when I had eaten solid food and had regained strength . . . I entered upon and abode in the first meditation, which is accompanied by thinking and exploring, with happiness and pleasure born of seclusion. . . . With the stilling of thinking and exploring I entered upon and abode in the second meditation, which has internal confidence and singleness of mind . . . with happiness and pleasure born of concentration. . . . With the fading of happiness, I abode in onlooking equanimity, mindful and fully aware; still feeling pleasure with the body, I entered upon and abode in the third meditation. . . . With the abandonment of bodily pleasure and pain . . . I entered upon and abode in the fourth meditation. But I allowed no such pleasant feeling as arose in me to gain power over my mind.

"When my concentrated mind was thus . . . bright . . . and rid of imperfection, when it had become malleable, wieldy, steady and attained to imperturbability, . . . I inclined my mind to the knowledge of recollection of past lives. . . . 'I was there so-named, of such a race, with such an appearance, such food, such experience of pleasure and pain, such a life term; and passing away thence, I reappeared elsewhere . . . Ignorance was banished . . . as happens in one who is diligent, ardent and self-controlled. . . . (Then) I inclined my mind to the knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings. . . . beings . . . inferior and superior, fair and ugly, happy and unhappy in their destinations. I understood how beings pass on according to their actions. . . Ignorance was banished . . . But I allowed no such pleasant feeling as arose in me to gain power over my mind.

"When my concentrated mind was thus purified . . . I inclined my mind to the knowledge of exhaustion of taints. I had direct knowledge . . . that 'this is suffering,' that 'this is the origin of suffering,' that 'this is the cessation of suffering,' and that 'this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.' When liberated, there came the knowledge . . . 'what was to be done is done, there is no more of this to come. . . . But I allowed no such pleasant feeling as arose in me to gain power over my mind. (M.36)

Siddhartha's life-directing experience, in contrast to Moses', is no instantaneous surprise. It is the product of years spent traveling down a dead-end path, followed by a reversal of course and a highly disciplined, self-conscious refinement of vision. Have you perhaps known experiences more similar to this one, in your work as a scientist or a craftsman, as a teacher or parent, perhaps? Have you attended to all your experience in its cumulative effect, then seen suddenly a new possibility within it, and then applied all your acquired skills to take that new tack? Has your change of course brought you to a new level of creativity, of productivity, of truth? If so, I would ask you to look at your experience in that light of our faith's source: what there not something transcendent, something wondrous in that turn?

The first element of this direct experience we draw upon is that it takes us outside, perhaps even above, our day-after-day existence. The two examples I've given you from these major traditions might be called "peak experiences", as psychologist Abraham Maslow catalogued and analysed them a generation ago in his book Religions, Values and Peak-Experiences.

But I want now to introduce you to the broader reach of our source, of its multi-valent faces. They are opened to us in a program entitled "Building Your Own Theology" - first introduced as I was entering our ministry 30 years ago. It has been revised and updated several times since.

Not only might our experience of life-renewing power require preparation and discipline of us, it suggests. It might also come to us, not as a "peak" in our emotional life. It might also come to us in what might be called a "valley," or even a "plateau."

In our time today, I can only introduce you to the possibilities in these other places. Let me take you first just part way now into such a valley:

*when he was eight he tried
to say my name; he planned
it as a birthday treat
for me, his eyes
grew wild and terrified that he would not
remember it, then suddenly
his thickened tongue came creeping
forth to mash against his lips
and frightened eyes blinked endlessly, each time
he moved a new and wondrous vista came
to him like oldtime nickelodeons where
every time you put a nickel in the slot
the song was changed: he whispered sounds
to me and to the fading afternoon
that were not like my name at all,
but i could see behind the slipping veil,
a love that tried to smooth and move his lips
and wrinkle them
and say my name – and so he did (or something close
enough that now, remembering it, my name hung
crystal in the dimming afternoon: a perfect
word.) my wife ran moaning from his room, i stayed
behind and watched his sausage fingers opening
and closing uselessly, the drooling
smile that changed his face
into an open wound, the vein
that throbbed behind his ear
like music swelling
to a deep and constant theme,
the widening stain upon the mattress
where the bladder of his effort and his love
had overflowed: the clothes, the toys, the furniture
my wife will tie in bundles for the poor.*

The poem is entitled "for a mongoloid child dead at age 12" by j.j. clark. Psychologist Greg Mogensen catalogues and analyzes many such experiences in his book [A Most Accursed Religion: When a Trauma Becomes God](#). Next Sunday, when I take you to this poem's ending, I will explore the power in such pain to renew our spirit.

Today though, let me also take you just part way onto the kind of plateau which my ground our faith:

One endless summer afternoon my father sat in the eternal shade of a peach tree, carving on a seed he had picked up. Finally he had fashioned a small monkey out of the seed. The boy Sam asked for it when it was finished (on the sixth day of creation.)

His father replied, "This one is for your mother, but I will carve you one someday." Days and years passed and the someday on which he was to receive the monkey did not arrive. In truth I forgot all about the peach seed monkey. Life in the ambiance of my father was exciting, secure and colorful. He did all the things for his children a father can do, not the least of which was merely delighting in their existence. One of the lasting tokens I retained of the measure of his dignity and courage was the manner in which, with emphysema sapping his energy and eroding his future, he continued to wonder, to struggle, and to grow.

In the pure air and heat of an Arizona afternoon on the summer before the death of God my father and I sat under a juniper tree. I listened as he wrestled with the task of taking the measure of his success and failure in life. There came a moment of silence that cried out for testimony. Suddenly I remembered the peach seed monkey, and I heard the right words coming from myself to fill the silence: "In all that is important you have never failed me. With one exception, you have kept the promises you made to me – you never carved me that peach seed monkey."

This is the beginning of Sam Keen's experience, as told in his book To a Dancing God. Next Sunday, when I follow it to his conclusion, I will explore the faith creating power emotional resting places as well.

Now I know I'm being a tease. What I'm hoping is that by leaving this experiences open, unfinished before us, I might entice us to look for similar openings in our own lives – similar doorways to wonder in our own experience. When I return to pursue these authors' conclusions next Sunday, I hope not only to expose their life-creating power, but also to see how they might be "imported into our doctrine." – specifically into our doctrine, our teaching, about the very nature of our humanness. I'll be asking "how are we equipped and constrained "By Our Nature" in our quest to connect our lives to the creativity of life itself. Our answer to this question, I think, must form the first building block in the foundation of a Unitarian Universalist faith.

Next week's exploration of our nature will, in its turn, lead to me to three further Sundays scraping at the sand surrounding more foundational blocks. I'll be doing so, though, only as an invitation – an invitation for you to do your own construction. On the Thursday after next Sunday, October 26, Lori Allen, our Growth Director and Karen Dienstbier, our Membership Associate, will hold the first session of our program "Building Your Own Theology." It will continue for the four following Thursday nights, skipping Thanksgiving night. If you can make space for it in your life right now, I invite you to sign up in the church office as soon as possible. If you can't do it now, I invite you to mark it in your memory for a future offering.

It is the core discipline of our quest. For as a Universalist minister Clinton Lee Scott once wrote,

There was a certain man that for many years did frequent the Temple on the Sabbath day. Then did he cease to be found in the Great Congregation. And a neighbor inquired of him saying, "How is it that thou art no more seen in the Temple on the Sabbath day?"

And the man did answer, "I like not the words that the Master speaketh; for he putteth not an end to the questions that vex my mind, neither provideth me with a sure salvation for my soul: verily he leadeth us into deep waters, and leaveth us there without means of rescue."

Now when this conversation was told to the Master of the Temple, he answered saying, "Go tell him that remaineth away from the Great Congregation that the Temple standeth not to provide life preservers, but is a place wherein one learneth to swim. (Parish Parables)"

Chalice Extinguishing

Let religion be to us life and joy.

Let religion be to us the wonder and lure of that which is only partly understood:

an eye that glories in nature's majesty and beauty,

and a heart that rejoices in deeds of kindness and of courage.

Let religion unite us with all that is admirable in human beings everywhere;

Let it be a voice of renewing challenge to the best we have and the best we may yet be.

Vincent Silliman