

## "BY OUR NATURE?"

A Service by Fritz Hudson  
Presented October 22, 2006

### Chalice Lighting

*Let us worship with our eyes, and ears, (and mouths) and fingertips.  
We feed our eyes on the mystery and revelation in the faces of our brothers and sisters.  
We seek to know the wistfulness of the very young and the very old,  
the wistfulness of people in all times of life.  
We seek to understand the shyness behind arrogance, the fear behind pride,  
the tenderness behind clumsy strength, the anguish behind cruelty.  
All life flows into a great common life, if we will only open our eyes to our companions.  
Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings,  
with the full outstretching of our spirits.  
Let us worship, and let us learn to love.*

Kenneth Patton

### Song #1051 "We Are"

Story: **The Dog Who Thought He Was a Boy**, by Cora Annett

### Sermon

*Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,  
A Being darkly wise, and rudely great:  
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,  
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,  
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;  
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;  
In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer;  
Born to die, reas'ning but to err;  
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,  
Whether he thinks too little, or too much:  
Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confused;  
Still by himself abused, or disabused;  
Created half to rise, and half to fall;  
Lord of great things, yet a prey to all;  
Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurled:  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!*

Alexander Pope wrote this description of us, in his Essay on Man, in 1734. "Know thyself, presume not God to scan," he said. "the proper study of Mankind is Man."

"Humanity", of course - not just "man" as opposed to "woman" - humanity is what Pope is talking about. The nature of humanness is what he is trying to describe in his tensed pairings – darkly wise, rudely great, God or Beast, Lord or prey – created half to rise and half to fall.

That you and I are here, all under our name, Unitarian, is attributable to our western culture's ancient tradition of understanding ourselves as so divided between such opposite realities and possibilities. Last Sunday, I introduced this series of "BYO" sermons – on Building Your Own Beliefs (or Theology) – by talking about the experiential wellsprings of any religious or spiritual stance. I introduced Emerson's "capital secret" of ministry, of all our ministries: to "convert life into truth" - to import our experience into our doctrine, or teachings. The first building block, the cornerstone of our faith, I believe, is the truth our experience teaches us about our own nature, as human beings. The questions are: "What are our gifts? What are our capacities? What are our limitations, both real and only imaginary? What are our challenges – both superable and insuperable? That's the scavenger hunt I'm off on today.

We are called Unitarian because our forebears imaged the creative power of the universe, God, as One, unified. They were distinguishing themselves from the image then dominant in the Western Christianized world – God as triune, somehow three-in-one: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What moved our forebears to make this claim about God, however, is what they felt to be true of themselves, of all human beings. They experienced a growing human power to read the records of their tradition, the holy scriptures, and cull from them grains of truth freed from the chaff of fantasy or ignorance. They saw in themselves, and in all humanity, the capacity to earn their salvation from life's vicissitudes by moral action, to be part of perfecting creation as they found it, rather than simply as incorrigibly unworthy subjects of the all-powerful creator, limited to hoping or wishing for his (her or its) miraculous action to save them.

Much in our practice arises from this faith. Have you been here for one of our naming services for a new born child? Whether we understand ourselves as Christian Unitarians, Atheist Unitarians, Naturalist Unitarians, Buddhist Unitarians, whatever, we eschew any doctrine that the birth of a child imparts to him or her some "original sin" that calls us to welcome him or her by washing that sin away with baptismal water. Our ritual, the "raising of the child's name for all to hear", bespeaks a spirit far more closely in tune with the African ritual many of us remember from Alex Haley's book and television series Roots. In his ancestral Mandingo culture, you remember, once the baby's name is pronounced, "Kunta Kinte", his father takes him into the night and raises him to the sky to say "Behold the only thing that is greater than yourself."

As we Unitarians and our fellow travelers have tried to live out this faith in human capacity over more than 200 years now, though, we've also been burned by our reluctance to hold it in proper tension with its opposite. How many of you, by now, have read this year's "One Book, One Lincoln" selection, Erik Larson's Devil in the White City? You know that it is the well-written record of how that colossal human achievement, the white city of 1893's Chicago World's Fair, cast the shadow under which H.H. Holmes, a physician, could erect a hotel, equip it with its own gas chambers and crematorium, and then seduce to their deaths multiple young women attracted by the fair's far-reaching light. As a Chicagoan, I feel the pain of acknowledging the all-too-near reality of such a challenge to my faith. My own grandfather, Freddy Hudson, at 12 years of age (not much older than Peter Popperson in this morning's introduction story), was actually forming his impressions of human capacities in that very same Englewood neighborhood in Chicago then. He quite likely knew something of that hotel, though perhaps not of the horrors it hid. As Unitarians, in fact, we can all feel the corrosion the events of that time and place threatens to our belief in the human moral capacity. It was in the light of that White City, that my processor as minister of the Iowa City church, the Rev. Augusta Chapin, created the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, the birthsite of our global association of liberal religious spirits from all human

traditions – the International Association for Religious Freedom. We still sing songs whose lyrics were born in our not-so-securely grounded self-understanding of that time:

- "*Hail the Glorious Golden City*, we still sing, at #140 in our book

"We are builders of that city," we go on.

Also, we sing:

- "*These things shall be:*

*a loftier race*

That's #138, still central to our congregational repertoire.

As Erik Larson shows with excruciating skill, however, Dr. H.H. Holmes' extended repeated success at proving the human capacity for horrifying, grizzly cruelty could not have continued for so long but for the absolute inability or unwillingness of many around him to even imagine that such a charming man could possibly have done anything to cause his several victims to disappear. My great-grandparents could well have been among the "builders of that city." Are we, as legates of their faith, better builders now?

We have learned some things since then. We know now, for example, that about our blood proteins and DNA evidence about a 99% match with that of chimpanzees and apes. We are far, far more animal than we are angel; and almost all of our instincts and inclinations have been selected by evolution for competitive survival. I appreciate being reminded of this whenever I find myself behind a car whose bumper sticker reminds me "Tool-wielding biped driving." I reminds me again to be wary of both the animals around me and the animal within me. Even our dog, sweet as Ginny ever reminds me that she is, at times lets her teeth tell me that there are limits to our compatibility. Two Sundays ago, in the New York Times Magazine, we could read elephants' newly violent attacks on Bangladeshi villages. Apparently it is their response to being driven crazy by human encroachment. Can we wonder whether our increasingly urbanized lives won't call out our own natural, but similarly destructive, response?

We've learned too from our own inter-cultural experiences over the past century – a world war against a Hitler, nuclear brinkmanship between a Kennedy and a Krushchev, suicidal terrorism fueled by Muslim leaders' questionable understanding of Mohammed's prophecy, responded to by a imperialistic occupation fueled by our own leaders' equally questionable interpretation of Jesus' spirit.

Here's something you should know, if you don't know it all ready. You undoubtedly know that Neville Chamberlin was the British Prime Minister who bargained with Hitler, and agreed to permit his occupation of the Sudetenland. He told his people, afterward, that he trusted Hitler's promise of "peace in our time." What you should know as well is that Chamberlin was a Unitarian. Did our faith's inability to see Hitler's untrustworthiness fail all of humanity in that cataclysmic instance?

You should also know that Martin Luther King Jr. found our faith wanting for his life. You know perhaps that King pursued his Ph.D. studies in Boston, and attended Unitarian churches while there. In his essay "Pilgrimage to Non-Violence" in 1960's *Christian Century* magazine series "How My Mind Has Changed", King speaks of his theological formation in this way. *Liberalism provided me with an intellectual satisfaction that I could never find in fundamentalism. . . . I was absolutely convinced of the natural goodness of man and the natural power of reason. There is one phase of liberalism that I hope to cherish always: its devotion to*

*the search for truth, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason. . . . (But) It was . . . the liberal doctrine of man that I began to question. The more I observed the tragedies of history, and man's shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin. . . . I came . . . to see that liberalism's superficial optimism concerning human nature caused it to overlook the fact that reason is darkened by sin. . . . Liberalism failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations.*

King goes on to speak of the power he found in existentialism's understanding of a "finite freedom" in our nature.

So how do we convert this experience of humanity's tense pairings – of dark wisdom and rude greatness – into truth – how do we import it into our teachings?

Let me return now to follow now their endings the paths I led us down last week – to their authors' endings and my own. What truth, what teaching, can come from such passings through a valley as j.j. clark describes in his poem "for a mongoloid child dead at age 12?"

You remember:

*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, . . . and you remember*

*the clothes, the toys, the furniture  
my wife will tie in bundles for the poor.*

(He continues) *in parts*

*of this grey city there are those who  
live on things that others throw away, who clothe  
themselves in rags: in years to come my  
wife will smile to know that david's clothes are worn  
and used and washed and laid to dry  
by children who have been without so long that  
something old is often something very fine  
to them. a pair of sneakers with a running  
boy inside them is a total living thing; the insteps  
mold and change to fit the feet; they fuse,  
the rubber and the flesh, until the act  
of shedding them at night is like  
an act of mutilation. on a winter's*

*night, a million years ago, my david  
woke and touched along the darkened  
hall into our room and stood*

*there blinking blinking  
pointing to his feet as though he had just  
found them for the first time with his fingers in the dark.  
he stood there moaning moaning  
and the winter wind went moaning moaning  
through the night outside. i walked him back  
through the dark and darkness  
held his fingers in the blackness  
hand in hand like quiet lovers  
till the wind outside would let him sleep.*

*i stand beside his crib tonight: his animals are  
stored away, his clothes are starched and boxed  
and it is wintertime again: the darkness taps  
outside for david on the windowpane: that darkness  
where strange people did not need  
to look at him; that darkness where  
his fingers wormed like snakes along  
the edges of his crib and found  
each night a thousand cracks and crevasses  
to learn. and yet for him  
to see me standing here in pain like this*

*would make him think somehow he has done  
some terrible wrong thing, and he  
would turn his great and lolling head from me  
a moment  
then turn back;  
then he would smile at me, for all the terrors  
and the crimson longings of his mind would be forgotten  
and his memories would then be fresh and new  
and he would not remember sadness  
any more than he remembered pain  
or loneliness. we crate*

*our sadness and our sorrows up, and bind  
them in forgetfulness  
and stack them high, like autumn leaves,*

*for later leisurely destruction.*

j.j. clark is clearly experiencing the limits of human capacity – limits in strength, limits in mental power, limits in self-control, limits in time. To at least someone else, we all, though less starkly, show ourselves similarly limited.

What can he "import" from his experience, as a "doctrine"? I think he's already begun. He's "binding up his sadness and sorrow" preparing if slowly, painfully, to destroy them – to forget them as his son David forgot his own sorrows so much more quickly. He's preparing even, with

david's model, to smile – just as he knows his wife, - you remember how she ran from david's room moaning when her son tried to say his father's name- just as he knows that she will, in years to come, will smile to know that david's clothes are worn and used and washed and laid to dry by (other) children.

Resilience is a piece in my doctrine of human nature.

So now, what truth, what teaching, can come from a momentary arrival on a plateau in our emotional life, even if it is but a small ledge in life's climb? You remember the beginning of Sam Keen's experience from To a Dancing God:

One summer my father sat in the shade of a peach tree, and carved a small monkey from one of its seeds. When I asked for it my father said that one was for my mother, that mine would come later. Years later then, when emphysema was sapping his energy and eroding his future, I sat with him in a heat of an Arizona day, listening as he wrestled to measure his success and failure in life. In a moment of inspiration, I said to him, "In all that is important you have never failed me. You've kept all your promises to me, except one - you never carved me that peach seed monkey."

He goes on now:

*Not long after this conversation I received a small package in the mail. In it was a peach seed monkey and a note which said, "Here is the monkey I promised you. You will notice that I broke one leg and had to repair it with glue. I am sorry I didn't have time to carve a perfect one." Two weeks later my father died. He died only at the end of his life.*

Sam Keen does his own belief-building from this experience. He says,

*For me the peach seed monkey has become a symbol of all the promises which were made to me and the energy and care which nourished and created me as a human being. And even more fundamentally, it is a symbol of that which is the foundation of all human personality and dignity. Each of us is redeemed from shallow and hostile life only by the sacrificial love and civility which we have gratuitously received. As Nietzsche so aptly put the matter . . ."man is the animal that makes promises."*

Promise-keeping is another piece of my doctrine of human nature.

My doctrine is not that we do these things naturally – "by our nature." No, actually far from it. We are more than capable of non-resilience – of wallowing in despair at life's unfairness, at wasting opportunities to love all around us. We are also more than capable of making promises carelessly and then breaking them cruelly. My doctrine is encapsulated in a cartoon I've saved now for many years, so many that its newsprint is beginning to yellow. I believe the strip was called "Small World." Its main character is a simple, sympathetic man called Mensch. In this cartoon, with the U.S. capitol in the background, another man is standing next to Mensch with a briefcase at his feet and arm raised as he speaks. He says, "To err is human, Mensch." Mensch, looking off to our side with shoulders shrugged, says in response, "So is doing the right thing, Senator."

*We are our grandmothers' prayers.  
We are our grandfathers' dreamings,  
- the breath of the universe, the spirit of God.  
as we sang to open this morning.*

So, still, with William Ellery Channing, spokesperson of our founding generation, I can say,

*I do and I must reverence human nature. Neither the sneers of a worldly skepticism, nor the groans of a gloomy theology, disturb my faith in its godlike powers and tendencies. I know how it is despised, how it has been oppressed, how civil and religious establishments have for ages conspired to crush it. I know its history. I shut my eyes on none of its weaknesses and crimes. ... But, injured, trampled on, and scorned as our nature is, I still turn to it with intense sympathy and strong hope. (Likeness to God. 1828)*

Song #303 "We Are the Earth Upright and Proud"

### Chalice Extinguishing

*I am a single cell in a body of (six) billion cells. The body is humankind.  
I am a single cell. My needs are individual but they are not unique.  
I am interlocked with other human beings  
    in the consequences of our actions, thoughts, and feelings.  
Together we share the quest of a society of the whole equal to our needs;  
A society in which we need not live beneath our moral capacity . . .  
We are single cells in a body of (six) billion cells. The body is humankind.*

Norman Cousins