

Order of Service "Two Roads Diverged ... And I Took, uh, I Took?"

Sunday, August 21, 2011 10:00 AM

Welcome and Announcements:

Board Host

Prelude: "Etude"

F. Chopin

Chalice Lighting:

Lorene Hales

Opening Words: from "This House" (#444)

Kenneth L. Patton

Opening Song: #298 "Wake, Now, My Senses" (v. 1,2,5)

Reading: from Reaching to Heaven:

James Van Praagh

A Spiritual Journey through Life and Death

Sung Response: #343 "A Firemist and A Planet" (v. 1,3,4)

Sermon: "Two Roads Diverged ... And I Took, uh, I Took" Lorene Hales

Quiet Reflection with Music: #352 "Find a Stillness"
(once through)

Spoken Response

Sung Response: #4 "I Brought My Spirit to the Sea"

Candles: Milestones of Joy and Concern/ Offering

Responsive Music: "Polovetzian Dance (Prince Igor)" A. Borodin

Meditation/Prayer

Closing Words

Closing Song: #352 "Find A Stillness"

Celebrants: Lorene Hales and Nancy Haldeman

Pianists/Accompanists: Nancy Haldeman and Sherry Litke



Chalice Lighting:

Lorene Hales

Main Chalice

We light this chalice as a symbol of that light, residing within each of us, that enlightens our minds and hearts and illuminates our path leading toward the greater Truth of all Life. May our individual flames, united in brilliance, enlighten the way for all whom we encounter so that they, too, will find their way to the greater Truth of justice, love, compassion, and a peaceful world community.

Partner Church Chalice:

We light this chalice in recognition that none of us travels alone and we owe much to those who have preceded us in this journey, making it possible to be who we are today. May we continue to honor and support each other with spirits of gratitude as the journey continues.

Opening Words:

This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature ... It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person. It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in terms of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinion. It is a house of truth-seeking, where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest, where mystics can abide in a community of searchers ... This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

Reading: from Reaching to Heaven: A Spiritual Journey through Life and Death by James Van Praagh

Everything is energy. Science describes energy and how it works in physical terms, based on earthly elements: how particular arrangements of atoms cluster together. But, it is on a higher level, in the fourth or spiritual dimension, that we find the force that actually holds the atoms together. This energy is what I call the God Force energy. Our entire universe is permeated by this God Force energy. It is what we are made of and where we come from. ...

The mind, the spirit, and the physical body are all composed of the same God Force energy; However, each is vibrating at a different frequency. When I am asked if the mind is part of our brain, I say the brain is the organ of the mind, just like the eyes are the organ of vision. Our sight is as good as the health of our eyes, and the same may be said for the mind and brain. The brain is organic, personal, and individual. The brain is constantly evolving; it is up to each of us to develop and increase the power of our brain. ... (pp.s 13-14)

Beyond the realms of physical body, mind and thought, lies an aspect of our being that is more mysterious, our spiritual nature. [] it is important to keep the door open to all our senses, including our intuition or inner compass. (p.25) ... I truly believe that as each one of us opens to his and her spiritual nature ... we can celebrate our differences by knowing that we are spiritual beings sharing a common physical experience. (p. xv) ... [] we exist concurrently in the emotional, mental, and spiritual bodies while we journey through life in our physical selves. These bodies intermingle and are dependent on one another, and make us whole beings. (p. 46)

Sermon:

"Dear Abby: I'm in a real pickle. My ex-wife "Gloria" and I have been divorced eight years, but have managed to remain civil to each other. Last year, my daughter had a big birthday party to which I wanted to bring a date. Gloria decided that she would not attend because it would be "hurtful" to see me with another woman. After my daughter called me in tears, I canceled my date and went to the party alone. Now my daughter is about to be married and I want to bring a date to the ceremony. Again Gloria has announced that she will forgo the pleasure of seeing our daughter get married [if I do]. My daughter is caught in the middle and wants us both there. ... Arizona dad in conflict"¹

Each day we are faced with challenging issues or even minor problems that demand we come to some resolution. Often the issues involve one or more of the very principles that, as Unitarian Universalists, we "covenant to affirm and promote." Would our response to Arizona dad reflect the compassion in human relations called for by the second principle? Some reader's responses would be based on the outcome of a process of rational thought. It might sound like this, "The couple is divorced with each having the right to move forward in life; the ex-wife is responsible for her decisions to attend or avoid an event. Her attempts to control the guest list is a form of emotional blackmail. Dad should tell the daughter these facts and say that he will be attending with his date but he will continue to act respectfully towards her mother." Other respondents would look more for spiritual guidance in making that decision. Their focus would be on maintaining good relationships and believe it is more important to practice the underlying values of peace and harmony than to insist on having their own way in the world. They might say, "Given that we are divorced and free to move forward with our individual lives it is certainly not improper that I would attend this event with the a date but, given the stress and unhappiness this would cause my daughter and her mother I am willing to attend by myself. Maybe after the event my ex-wife and I can discuss this and come to an understanding for future events as we continue to be civil and respect each other's inherent worth and dignity."

We are living in an increasingly complex global community with demands for decision making coming at us from many sources, not just family and local community. The decisions that are made will ultimately affect the lives and well-being of all earth's people and the very sustainability of our mother earth. Every day in the news we hear of situations demanding a response. For example, within two days this past week the followings events were reported. The first relates to the relationship between the government and the governed:

"Government workers were poised to secretly study doctors until public outcry scuttled the proposal. ...The federal Department of Health and Human Services had wanted to study how difficult it is for patients to get care when they need it and how their insurance played into that. ...[] government researchers would have posed as prospective patients and called primary care physicians to schedule appointments. They wanted to gather data about wait times to measure the extent of the oft-reported shortage of primary-care physicians ...[] some doctors decried the study for using intentionally deceptive 'Big Brother tactics" that reduced their trust in government ... [others] said that patients deserve to know average wait times and

access to care based on the type of insurance they have ... The question of access is important because as many as 38 million Americans are expected to gain health insurance in 2014 under the federal health-care overhaul."²

Because of the negative reaction the study was called off despite one doctor's statement that 'the public, patients, and health care providers' would have benefitted from the study. How did the decision to perform the study or to cancel the study reflect the use, or abuse, of the democratic process in society at large? How was the decision to do the study made? On what grounds was it cancelled?

The next situation relates to our sixth principle with its emphasis on "the goal of world community with peace, justice, and equity for all": The situation is this -

"Thousands of sacks of food aid meant for Somalia's famine victims have been stolen and are being sold at markets in the same neighborhoods where skeletal children in filthy refugee camps can't find enough to eat ... And the aid is not even safe once it has been distributed to families huddled in the makeshift camps ... Families [] at the large, government-run [] camp [] said they were often forced to hand back aid after journalists had taken photos of them with it."³

Should we cease providing emergency aid in this situation knowing that a significant part of it is going to be used, not to assist those in need, but to line the pockets of the corrupt? Some people would answer with a resounding, "Yes, we are making sacrifices in our lives to help those in need and if their government is so corrupt as to steal the resources we aren't being successful so let's stop sending them aid." Some people believe that we must continue to give aid because that is the only way to guarantee a presence in Somalia to observe what is happening. Other respondents might say that it is better that *some* of the aid gets to *some* of the people allowing them to live than to guarantee increasing death if aid is withdrawn.

And, lastly, how do we make good decisions to protect our environment and practice our seventh principle of "respecting the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part"?

Before dawn on this past Thursday a 45-foot gray whale, which had left the ocean for a river where it swam for 2 months, died after beaching itself on the river bank. The site was the headquarters of the Yurok Tribe who gathered to "s[i]ng a song and s[a]y a prayer to send the whale on to the afterlife. Then they turned her over to scientists to see if they could determine a cause of death before burying her."⁴

Truly it is difficult at times to know how to respond to the more simple frustration-problems of day-to-day living and the difficulty is compounded by the complexity of the problem and the magnitude of those affected by the response. However, the good news is that we do not travel through our life experiences alone seeking solitary fulfillment but are part of a much greater network of fellow travelers with whom we interact and influence each other's journey. As we progress along the pathways of our lives, constantly intersecting the pathways of all those other travelers and sometimes walking side-by-side, what compass is available to help us stay on track to reach our ultimate goal? I see the ultimate goal as achieving self-realization and experience of what it is to be fully human and also an integral part of a much greater web of existence.

This goal suggests that there are, in fact, two compasses available to us. 'Self-realization' suggests an intellectual (mental) process guided by the compass of rational thought. Whereas, 'experience' speaks more to a spiritual compass fed by our senses. This dichotomy brings to mind the great debate between science and religion as if the two were in total opposition. Varadaraja V. Raman, a professor emeritus of physics and humanities at the Rochester Institute of Technology and author, had this to say about the relationship of science and religion:

"So much of our (western) cultural debate about science and religion seems to assume that science and religion compose competing answers to the same questions. But in fact they pose different questions."⁵ (pp.s 124-125)

Increasingly, today, we hear both scientists and theologians acknowledge that the more they learn through their discipline the more they respect the role of the other discipline. Religion strives to provide meaning in those areas beyond science's capabilities to explain. Science works *with* faith to provide a fuller understanding of creation and our role in it. Instead of antagonistic roles they play supportive roles to each other. So it is with our two compasses. Humans have several aspects to their being: physical, mental, emotional, sensual, and spiritual. To be fully human is to utilize all these attributes to make sense of the who?, what?, why?, and how? of all that we experience and our relationship to all of creation. The capability for rational thought and spirituality are both within us and work together to provide a "true" compass reading. Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk, spiritual writer, and poet, in his book exploring the doctrine of St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), explains the relationship this way:

"Reason must serve us in our struggle for perfection. But it does not fight under its own standard. Reason alone is not our captain. It is enlisted in the service of faith. ... [] it demands critical sifting of spiritual experience ... Reason [] must question and evaluate and pass judgment on all our most intimate and spiritual aspirations."⁶

Rational thought is based on reason and logic. It uses known facts, common sense, and experiential knowledge and puts them through a logical process to reach an outcome. For example: "It's probably going to rain today given that it rained all day yesterday and the sky is still dark with clouds. I had better take my umbrella with me."

Our ability to reason and retain conscious memory of our history is part of what sets us apart from other species of life as we know them. Yet reason by itself can lead us to false conclusions. We might not have all the critical facts necessary to make a valid determination on a course of action. Also, facts - truths (small t) - change as we gain greater awareness of the world about us. After all people once believed the earth was flat. Today's scientific breakthrough is tomorrow's understood error. As Raman notes, "...the world is far too complex for us to really rigidly put everything under the strait-jacket of reason."⁵ (p.125) Or in the words of Blaise Pascal (French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher), "the heart has its reasons which reason doesn't understand."⁵ (p.125) So, we need to utilize more than just our mental/reasoning abilities to guide us true on our course. Our spiritual compass provides another perspective.

According to James Wiseman, a Benedictine monk and theologian, as noted in his book [Spirituality and Mysticism](#), the term 'spirituality' only came into common use around the mid-twentieth century and its meaning has been modified and re-modified over the past decades.

The word 'Spiritual' comes from the Latin 'spiritus'- breath - with the verb form 'spirare' - to breathe and the adjective 'spiritualis' - 'of or belonging to breathing' ... which is to say spiritual has to do with life and being alive since one must breathe to live⁷. This understanding names the 3rd person of the trinity of God - the "Holy Spirit" as well as explains references to God's spirit as "Spirit of Life." You perhaps recognize this concept in the oft sung UU song, "Spirit of Life": "Spirit of Life, come unto me. Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion. Blow in the wind, rise in the sea; move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice. Roots hold me close; wings set me free; Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me."⁸ As I said earlier our spirit is fed, in large part, through our senses which, I think, influences our intuitive nature. This is evidenced in this song through the use of sensual words: sing, stirrings, blow, rise, move, hold."

I particularly like the idea of spirituality as defined by Sandra Schneiders "the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."⁷ (p.4) In this definition spirituality is not a passive concept, we must 'consciously strive to integrate our life'. Spirituality is not static, it grows as we experience life and move from self-absorption, which is the reality of infants and young children, toward self-transcendence whereby we learn to recognize and accept a reality greater than ourselves and learn how we fit into this larger world view. And spirituality is not owned by any one religious group. 'The ultimate value one perceives' can come from any number of religious systems or from no religious system. This latter idea is being introduced as 'secular spirituality'. Peter Van Ness writes of secular spirituality that "the spiritual dimension of life is the embodied task of realizing one's truest self in the context of reality apprehended as a cosmic totality. It is the quest for attaining an optimal relationship between what one truly is and everything that is."⁷ (p. 5) It is interesting that recently, in a discussion with our interim minister - Joel, he referred to a new phrase being used to reflect movement amongst Humanists called 'spiritual humanism.'

Rational thought makes use of what we *know* (at this moment) about reality. For instance when I look at the sunset over the ocean I could rationally know that it was the result of pollution in the air and conditions of light. Depending on the nature of the question I was pondering this could be valuable information to help toward resolution. However, my spiritual side experienced beauty and wonder with nary a concern for *why* or *how* it happened. Our spirituality allows us to 'experience imagination, paradox, intuition, inspiration, even passion and sentiment ... all non-rational areas of experience.'⁹ (p. 16)

By using both our rational compass and our spiritual compass we will be able to successfully continue along the pathways of life toward our ultimate goal. Having a compass does not negate the reality that something along the path will sometimes trip us up. But it allows us to get up, re-establish where we are and move forward again. It is critical, I believe, to utilize both compasses in tangent and not allow one to dominate at the expense of the other or we find ourselves on a false trail. Neither reason nor spirit by themselves gives us the full scope of information we need to make weighty decisions -often, even minor decisions. They act to validate and balance each other. Remember the story about the river-bound whale? The Yurok people used their spiritual compass to honor the whale's life and send it on to its afterlife. Then they used their rational compass to allow scientists to study the cause of the death in order to better understand and perhaps prevent another such tragedy.

I remember one incident when I was in seventh grade at St. Mary's School here in Corvallis. I was a member of the playground patrol. And, I must admit, I often saw life in terms of black and white. A classmate was brought before the patrol 'court' for a violation of one of the rules of the playground. I was adamant that she should no longer be a member of the patrol. She had brought several other students to the group for the same violation but thought she should get away with *whatever* the dirty deed was. It seemed unbearably hypocritical. Did I mention that I saw things in terms of black and white? I presented a solid rational explanation for my decision - my rational compass was pointing true north!. I was outvoted. Later in discussion with Sr. Matthew, who was the patrol group's advisor, I learned more of this girl's background and why I was off-course in being so strongly opposed to her continuance in the group. Once my spiritual compass was brought into use along with the rational compass I could see that I had not made the best decision and that it had been hurtful to her. I was able to move to reconcile with her and also, later, to the entire group. Our smallest decisions and resultant actions can create large stumbling blocks on another's path which affects us all.

Sometimes we become so overwhelmed by the complexity of issues coming at us as we try to be good people, spouses, siblings, world community members that we want to just turn a blind eye and leave the decision making to someone else. This happened to me when it came time to make my first vows in the convent. I was caught on a fence where I didn't feel I should stay but didn't want to leave. I didn't understand why I felt I should leave and believed in what that life was about. I simply was frozen in indecision - for months. Luckily, I had a wise novice directress who realized that I was getting nowhere along the path of resolution so made the decision for me, with the expectation that if I left perhaps the distance would help me realize what was prohibiting me from solidly committing to that life and I'd return. Both my compasses seemed to be boxed up in storage. I've come to truly believe that no matter how uncertain we feel we need to make a decision and then re-evaluate once we're back on a path. This seems to free us to once again re-orient ourselves and purposefully move forward.

Let me leave you with the words of Robert Frost:

Two roads diverged in a wood and I -
I took the one less traveled by
And that has made all the difference.

Life is an adventure of exploration and growth. May your compass be true and your trip wondrous!

Closing Words: #687

As we close this sacred time together let us part with the words of John W. Brigham:

"Go your ways, knowing not the answer to all things, yet seeking always the answer to one more thing than you know."

After our closing song (# 352) please join us in the social hall for coffee, tea, and further conversation

Sources:

1. Abigail Van Buren; *Corvallis Gazette Times*; "Mom turns wedding into a battlefield"; Thursday, Aug. 18; page B-5.
2. Andrew Doughman; *Corvallis Gazette Times*; "Doctors debate: Should government's 'mystery shoppers' spy on docs?"; Tuesday, Aug. 16; . page A-7.
3. Katharine Houreld; *Corvallis Gazette Times*; "Food aid being stolen in Somalia"; Tuesday, Aug. 16; page B-8.
4. Jeff Barnard and Jason Dearon; *Corvallis Gazette Times*; "Whale dies after living two months in river"; Thursday, Aug. 18; . page A-3.
5. Krista Tippet; *Einstein's God: Conversations About Science and the Human Spirit*; "The Heart's Reason"; Penguin Books, 2010.
6. Thomas Merton; *The Ascent to Truth*; Harcourt Brace Janovich Publ.; 1951
7. Wiseman, James A.; *Spirituality and Mysticism: A Global View*; Orbis Books, 2006.
8. Unitarian Universalist Association; *Singing the Living Tradition*; 2000
9. Charles Cummings; *Eco-Spirituality: Toward a Reverent Life*; Paulist Press, 1991.

