

Second Reading (April 26, 2009)
Miracles by Walt Whitman

Why, who makes much of a miracle?
As to me I know of nothing else but miracles,
Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,
Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,
Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the water,
Or stand under trees in the woods,
Or talk by day with any one I love, Or sleep in the bed at night
with any one I love,
Or sit at table at dinner with the rest,
Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,
Or watch honey-bees busy around the hive of summer forenoon
Or animals feeding in the fields,
Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,
Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining so quiet
and bright,
Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon in spring;
These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,
The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place.

(Sermon-April 26, 2009) “Ordinary Miracles: Embracing the Full Catastrophe”

Every now and then we get a Sully Sullenberger and it is truly awe inspiring and people say, rightfully so, we really needed that. But what if we could count on a milder spiritual shot in the arm on a daily basis? I think we can do a little miracle mining of our own. Walt Whitman’s poem lifts up mystery, defining and finding miracles in our most basic of encounters. And this is not the self-indulgence of a sentimentalist or from one who writes from a place of relative ease. Whitman was both idealist and realist. Growing up in Brooklyn, the youngest of nine children, he began work at the age of twelve as a printer and when that press burned down, he went to work as a teacher at 17 (having been self-taught). During the entire Civil War, he worked as a voluntary nurse in DC hospitals seeing horrors that most of us cannot even imagine, caring for the wounded, the maimed, and the broken. It is estimated he cared for about 100,000 patients over the course of the war. In his later life, he suffered a stroke and continued to write. He did not shirk from the darkest places of our human experiences but instead faced them squarely on, choosing to integrate and use ALL of his personal experiences for enlightenment. What Walt Whitman is proposing here is that ordinary people doing ordinary things is itself extraordinary, miraculous.

Many of us are experiencing financial uncertainty. We are nurturing our children and our aging parents, but there are illnesses and complications. We are concerned about soldiers, civilians, and social injustice all over the globe. So what about joy, what about miracles, are they impractical side notes? Or are they our legacy as human beings? I am not speaking of happiness here, in the sense of fulfillment of desires. This derives from the Old English word, hap, which means luck. When your luck is running high, when good things are happening to you and yours, you feel happy. Joy, on the other hand, is an inner underpinning that you have whether good things are going on or not. Joy believes in eventual good, no matter the circumstances or even outcomes. It is a perspective on the world. For me that means that God is with us. I remember being distraught and anguished during my father’s losing battle with a Lou Gehrig like disease at age 56, but deep down, whatever the outcome was to be, I had flashes of knowing (faith I guess) that all was going to be OK, even if it wasn’t OK. I trusted that by putting one foot in front of the other, another day, another bead along the string, that strength would be garnered yet again.

If miracles were only delegated to “mountaintop experiences”, their universal value would be inherently limited, not gritty enough to handle the overwhelming sorrow that also accompanies the human journey. It is our ordinariness that cradles most of what comprises our lives. So to move us in any lasting meaningful way, let us base the idea of miracles in our five senses, so that they speak to things and events that hold reality and viability for each of us, and not just to those who happen to speak our own particular religious language. This means time alone, doing nothing on purpose. But it also means bringing your prayer life, your time of contemplation with you, in every moment of your day. When even the smallest of details in our routines becomes food for the soul, we don’t have sporadic wonder but wonder in the every day. “Nothing special” moments are in fact blessed and special beyond compare.

So, the question becomes, “How do I develop this attitude that allows me to see everything, both pain and joy, in a way that leads to greater spiritual acuity?”

First, by gently noticing, really noticing what is going on in our daily lives. It is a practice this if developed with a stance of openness, leads us to a place that Buddhists call mindfulness, what Christians call living in the world as a child does. In fact, all the world’s religious and spiritual traditions speak to this in one way or another. Cultivating this particular lens on the world is most certainly a gift, but not one only given to the poet or the prophet. It is an approach to the world that sees the wisdom in accepting and working with what’s right in front of you. It is what Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at UMASS calls “embracing the full catastrophe”. If we are stuck with a tenacious challenge in our lives that won’t seem to let us out of its grip, we may think of all the things we can’t do because of it, how limited we are. That’s only human and to be expected. But if that becomes the only response, our choices for action in any given moment are diminished, as we focus on the impossible rather than what is possible today, in this moment. So to live, really live with chronic or unsolved problems, an attitude of non-judgment and gentleness towards yourself and others is worth cultivating. That doesn’t mean ignoring or denying suffering, it simply means acknowledging its presence.

One of my old dear friends, now in her eighties, Dorothy always says, “Life is pleasure held by the links of pain” and often that means joy and pain are intertwined. There is tangible power in recalling the fragility of life. We need to try to resist our more reactive ways to deal with pain, which is that we can hide it, use it to win sympathy, as an excuse for difficulties in our life, or the greatest temptation, to become bitter and hardened by life, closed off to possibility. Instead, we can learn to hold and take care of our pain. One of my very favorite theologians, Frederick Buechner calls this being a good steward of one’s pain, which I find an unusual concept. He clarifies by saying, “Keep in touch with it because it is at those moments where you are most in tune with the pain of other people- you are also most open to your own deep places. It means also to be true to who you are in your depths, what you have in you to be...depths of pain and also in a way depths of joy, because they both come from the same place. I think it is often those times when we are most alive, when we are somehow closest to being most vitally human beings. And while these challenges are not punishments for anything, the experiences cause us to know that we are not alone.

If you can experience life without becoming bitter, solidarity with the whole of life becomes a natural consequence, whether that means the struggles and suffering of a neighbor, or in the faraway tents of the refugee camps in Sudan. I recently had the opportunity to attend a discussion led by a physician who had just returned from Chad, where she and others completed an assessment of the psychiatric health of the women at the camp. We know of their years long struggle in Darfur. They have been raped, abandoned, and brutalized in a myriad of ways. And while the scars are understandably and undeniably deep and while it isn’t alright or will it ever be totally alright for them ever again, the photos we saw spoke of another story. There was such love between the women, helping each other, caring for one another’s children, laughing at silly jokes, still

searching for a better life. Miracles abound in all these little things and surrounding them, the greatest miracle, the indomitability of the human spirit.

This is true in our own lives and can be witnessed everyday at cancer clinics, 12 step recovery programs, widow's bereavement groups, and the like. Then there are the gifts given to both the giver and receiver of acts of love performed in places recovering from natural disasters, like Katrina hit New Orleans, or earthquake shattered L'Aquila, Italy. The time and energy it takes to listen, to hammer nails, to hold a hand, frees and heals the participants on either end. We begin to find that in situations of horror that may make us flinch, or sadness that make us uncomfortable, or destruction that can make us despair, we discover also, moments when we get a sense of unity underneath it all, despite it all, holding ourselves and each other together in the full catastrophe. In the words of Frederick Buechner, "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid."

These phoenix-like stories demonstrate that there is a kind of serendipitous creativity always at work in the world, a phrase that theologian Gordon Kaufmann has coined to describe a way to reimagine an understanding of God in the 21st century. Simply put, it means that out of any situation, however challenging or destructive, there is always something else being created with timing that is unexplainably fortunate, not characterized as better or as compensation for one's losses, but as something growing and having the potential for increase, in the grandest sense of the word. The God of this understanding is always with us and even when the data on the ground seems to point otherwise, the Universe is on the side of creation. Forest fires wipe out miles of vegetation and animal life almost every year on our Pacific coast line, yet saplings rise up out of the ashes and after a while, animals again begin to crop up, to migrate to this fresh forest. In a concerted effort by both citizens and legislature, one of the most polluted Lakes in Michigan has been getting cleaned up, and they have seen beavers in the lake for the first time in almost thirty years. Just like that bumper sticker that says Grace happens; Creating happens. Feminist and theologian Mary Daly once said, "Why indeed must God be a noun? Why not a verb...the most active and dynamic of all?" I love that. Instead of the safer version of seeing God as static, what if we see God as a process-the process of the universe? Can we trade our need for security in something that never changes for awe, wonder, and faith in the change? If we begin to understand that we are part of the process of the universe; we then realize it is only when we live who we are that we can become one with that process.

In our first reading, the parable of the five talents (Matthew 25) - It seems that the one-talent person sounds like somebody who buried the richest treasure he had, the most alive part of himself, buried it in the ground. He was never able to become who he might have been. It is a choice made out of fear; it is based on security and not faith. It is not so much the metaphorical darkness that Jesus is referring to, but as the inevitable consequence of what it means to bury your life. If you bury your life, you don't live your life. From him who hath not, it will be taken. I know that the original meaning of talents was actual monetary currency and over the years, most pastors that I have heard preach on this, refer to it as our definition of talent, someone who is good in science or athletics and how

some people have more talent than others. I like to think of talent in this parable as meaning the core of your very best self. The other ones, those who came back with more than they started out with traded with their talents, they traded with their lives. Again, Buechner, “We were made to be life traders, because I have what you need, which is me, and you have what you need, which is you. We are the ones we have been waiting for.

Results are not usually on our own timing and many times we don't see it in our own lifetime. I think of how long the struggle went on for civil rights for African Americans in our country and how arduous the journey continues for the gay community. But sometimes we do get a glimpse of serendipity in action. Our fiscal crisis has people, out of necessity, taking a long hard look at what's important, what can give and what can not. There was a series of personal interest stories on how the financial challenges are affecting college students on CNN last month. Two in particular gave me pause. One was an articulate and impressive young woman, a sophomore at the University of Hartford, with a 3.75 cum pursuing a degree in pre-law. She had been received financial aid, is involved with the work study program at school, but at the end of the day, she found that she was still short \$5000. for her tuition payment and was going to have to leave school at the end of this year to raise more funds. My heart went out to her. And yet, however, the next day, CNN reported that both their station and the University were inundated with calls that would pay this woman's bill. A law firm in Atlanta said they would assist with her bills for the remainder of her education and offered her an internship at their firm. Surely, a miracle in her eyes, but I personally felt heartened by how many were moved to create it!

The next story highlighted a young man, a senior at one of the most prestigious Ivy League schools in the country who was in a quandary. He was graduating at the top of his class, with a degree in finance and economics, fluent in Arabic and Spanish. And his college debt is \$75,000. All along he counted on going to one of the well known Wall Street firms making millions, so all the debt would be covered. Now that those options have closed for him (at least for the foreseeable future), he is leaning towards accepting a job offered to him by the government of Kenya to help them put together a feasible budget plan and to outline strategies for improving their nation's finances. The pay is not nearly what he had hoped for, but maybe now was the time to do something philanthropic. Perhaps not the ideal altruistic motivation, but the results in the context of the broader world are the same; something good will come of it.

In addition, Teach for America has seen a 42% spike in applicants for this two year commitment to serve. Some may say that recently elected politicians motivated the youth of this country, and this is partly accurate. But practically speaking, it is really the economic downturn and the slowing of new job growth that have caused these students to “choose” to give back. The prospects are good, that while they are out saving the world, they may be ultimately saving themselves.

I like how Nathan often refers to us as religious people; we Unitarian Universalists sometimes get a bad rap in this department. Yet religion in its Latin roots simply means that which binds us together. Our covenant, to dwell together in peace, to seek truth in

love, and to help one another, is our meeting place, it binds us together, not as a set of rules or creeds, but it points to what is of ultimate concern to each of us. We are all in this together. And, in case we forget the message, or it simply hasn't been loud enough for us to hear, the globalization of our world overwhelming confirms the web of relationships we have with one another, the interconnectedness with our planet and ourselves. In fact, very reputable quantum physicists claim they have proven that once any two quantum particles have interacted, they can subsequently influence each other no matter how widely they are separated. In other words, if two electrons interact in a lab and one stays in the lab and the other ends up in outer space somewhere, anything that affects the one in the lab will immediately affect the other in outer space!

I don't know if you ever had the chance to read or see Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize winning play, "Our Town" but it speaks poignantly to the preciousness of our everyday. The play is set in the fictional community of Grover's Corners, a quintessential New Hampshire town. It is a story of daily living in a small community at the turn of the 20th century; much like life was here in Sherborn I expect. In the last act, one of the main characters, Emily, dies during childbirth with her second child. As her spirit watches over the mourners at her own funeral, she expresses to those with her, friends and family long since deceased, that she would like to return to life for a little while. They advise her against this, saying it will be too painful. But Emily says that she will return to a happy day, not a sad one, so "Why should that be painful?" The reply, "You not only live it, you watch yourself living it." But Emily has her mind set, and so she returns to the day of her 12th birthday. First, she sees the routine of life going on as usual. Howie Newsom delivers the milk, Constable Warren comes in telling how he rescued someone from a snowdrift, Joe Crowell delivers newspapers. Emily sees her mother and father, who look surprisingly youthful to her. She speaks with her mother who tells her to eat her breakfast slowly. Mrs. Webb, the neighbor up the street, gives her a dress- saying, "I had to send all the way to Boston to get it." Her father also has gifts, but Emily can't go on any longer-and breaks down, "Grover's Corners, Mama and Papa, clocks ticking, Mama's sunflowers, food and coffee, new-ironed dresses and hot baths...and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?-every, every minute?"

So, as we sit here today, recognize the miracles-your own heart beating, those who sit next to you in the pews, the way the sunlight streams into the sanctuary in just a certain way. It is the remaining awake, like the Buddha, like the Christ, it is as Thomas Merton, a mystic and Trappist Monk, wrote in his journal on March 19, 1958, "Yesterday in Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, suddenly realized that I loved all the people and that none of them were or could be totally alien to me. As if waking from a dream- a dream of my separateness, of the "special" vocation to be different. I am still a member of the human race, and what more glorious destiny is there...I have the immense joy of being a member of the human race...as if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun." But I will, tell you anyway,

today, that you are all walking around shining like the sun. Live in that. Please join me in an Amen.