

November 5, 2006

## **“The Pilgrimage of Faith”**

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You have heard the tragic news: Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley has advanced malignancy and will not be able to join our staff as she had planned. We care for Marjorie and Clyde more than we care for ourselves. I invite you to a few minutes of affective thinking. Affective—feeling; thinking—reason. Affective thinking has sometimes been equated with thinking spiritually.

Not long after the 9/11 attacks, Bill Moyers interviewed James Forbes, Minister of Riverside Church in New York City. When Moyers asked Forbes what should be done in response to the tragedy of 9/11, Forbes replied by suggesting that the first thing people should do is “center themselves,” that is, engage in quite, reflective thinking.

How do we think religiously or spiritually about Marjorie’s tragic situation, or times of personal tragedy—relationships gone bad, illness, death of friends or family members? How do we respond to the tragic situation in Iraq, or the tragic situation in Darfur, or the tragic situation...? We could go on and on with a proverbial laundry list of tragedies. For some people, tragedies elicit reactionary thinking, all affect and little thought.

The reaction of some people to tragedy is to blame God as in “Well, that’s God’s will.” The reaction of some people to tragedy is simply to chalk it up to a universe which is meaningless which has nothing to do with religion. I believe life is irrational, that bad things happen to good people. However, I also believe that Love cares.

Love is another word for God, or Higher Power, or Divinity or Ground of Being. We Unitarian Universalists talk about “Transcending Mystery.” Alfred North Whitehead, physicist, mathematician, and philosopher turned his back on the traditional images of God as “ruling Caesar” or “ruthless moralist.” Rather, Whitehead said, his image of God is the “tender element of love” which is present in but not controlling what Whitehead called “all energy events.” (Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p.520-521)

Someone once asked Rabbi Abraham Heschel, “Where was God at Auschwitz?” Herschel responded, “God was weeping.” When I try to think affectively or religiously about tragedies, I find some solace in the reality of Love which does not will horror. I find hope in Love which is not based in a notion of God as in control and all knowing. Rather Love which cares.

I did not arrive at that conclusion easily, indeed, as the bumper sticker says, “Be patient, God isn’t through with me yet!” I have found help in our UU Principles. These Principles may be found in various places, most readily available on the final page of the Preface to our Hymnbook. The Principles are not “leashes” but “fences. Thank about the difference. Orthodoxy or fundamentalism is based on leashes of thought control, chains which bind people to a specific religious system.

Rather our UU principles define wide parameters within which each one of us is encouraged a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” which is another way to say “affective thinking.” My own personal search has been enriched by these Principles; but more.

For over fifty years I have been on a pilgrimage, a pilgrimage of faith, a pilgrimage which could be called a “search for meaning.” I have found the best way to talk about that pilgrimage is an article by Rev. Gene Ackerman which I found over thirty years ago. Ackerman drew a picture or diagram symbolizing what he called “The Pilgrimage of Faith.” That diagram is found on the

white insert in today's Order of Service. You may wish to refer to the diagram as I talk about affective thinking as one part of our common pilgrimage.

The first stage of the "faith pilgrimage" is shown at the extreme left end of the diagram. It is what Akeman calls "innocent faith." Generally speaking at this stage, one's faith is an imitation of the faith of parents or other significant adults. Akeman says "innocent faith is like living in the Garden of Eden. There are no questions, and no doubts to shatter the faith."

"Innocent Faith" may also be no faith. I have observed that Unitarian Universalists sometimes come from other religions, usually more conservative, but also some UUs come from no faith. I've met several young adult parents whose testimony is that they grew up in non-religious homes, with parents who thought all religion was "bah, humbug." However as these young adults began to think for themselves, they left the innocent faith of "no faith" and began their search for truth and meaning.

You get the point, innocent faith is shattered the first time one begins to raise questions. That questioning can come at any time, usually in adolescence or when one is in college. Those of us who are older can testify from personal experience that questioning is a life-long occupation. Tragedy frequently triggers questioning. We are never "done" with our free and responsible search for meaning.

Once someone begins to raise questions one enters a kind of "wilderness" of uncertainty. Akeman calls this stage "searching faith." During this part of the pilgrimage people not only search for faith, but also look at the possibilities of non-faith. Akeman says there are three choices open to the searching pilgrim.

The first choice appears to be the most risky. It is to go right up the middle of the wilderness through all the thorns of doubt and the desert of questions, trying to find some meaning. This is a time of uncertainty which Akeman describes in this way:

"It is a threatening route which I envision like a dark, steep canyon, filled with rocks and boulders and briars, which gives little hint as to what the end of the journey holds."

The point is this is the most difficult path, requiring determination and the willingness to risk.

I assume many of us are aware of this movement from the innocent faith of childhood toward, but not yet having arrived, at a more meaningful faith. Most of us know about this searching struggle; about uncertainty in the face of tragedy.

This pilgrimage will be easier if we find ourselves as part of a community of searchers. That is one of the reasons this Congregation offers Covenant Groups. You are invited to participate in a group of searchers, who can encourage and care for one another during this part of the pilgrimage.

In addition to this narrow, difficult path, there are two other choices which are available to someone leaving the innocence of childhood. One of those choices is the "Rectangular Church" shown in the picture at the top of the diagram. The Rectangular Church is very much aware of the dangers of the wilderness and of the struggles and uncertainties facing each pilgrim. So the Rectangular Church invites the pilgrim to come in to safety, to trade questions and doubts for answers which are provided by doctrine or creed; answers which are provided on the basis of authoritarian truth.

The Rectangular Church is very attractive at times of cultural uncertainty or tragedy. I believe one of the reasons people flock to some of the more conservative, evangelical churches is security. In a culture where people are considered important only if they add to the bottom line; in a culture where people feel manipulated and used by politicians who provide simplistic answers to complex questions; in a culture of personal tragedy, people seek spiritual security.

I used to be more impatient with people who find meaning in Rectangular Church. I now realize that some people need this kind of security. They can rest secure from the thorny issues of searching for truth. They find protection in the definitions of religious authorities.

There is also another choice for the searching pilgrim. Some pilgrims leave the innocent faith of childhood to go into what Akeman calls the "Avoidance Oval," pictured at the bottom of the diagram. These are people who get locked into a treadmill of meaninglessness. They become content with their cynicism. Some of these people have been wounded by a too strict religion, perhaps coming from fundamentalist or very conservative religious backgrounds. In a pendulum swing away from that kind of approach, these people can say more easily what they do NOT believe than what they believe. They frequently avoid the search by going around the track making light of other pilgrims; failing to accept people who have found other meanings. I have experienced some of these skeptics as frequently beset by unfocused anger or free-floating malaise.

There is another alternative in our search. Let's assume that some of us have left Innocent Faith, and moved through Searching Faith. We have decided against both the "Rectangular Church" and "Avoidance Oval." Akeman describes the choice open to us as going straight up the middle of the diagram, through all our doubts and fears. He describes this part of the journey in this way:

"Once the dark, steep difficult canyon has been followed and the faith issues wrestled with, there develops a confidence in (the search). It is not unlike the experience of the person who takes piano lessons. In the early years it is struggle, but if the discipline is maintained there comes a day when the skills are mastered and you are free to improvise and interpret. ...Likewise, though the struggle, doubts, and questions are not all gone, you now have confidence."

That does not mean dealing with tragedy will be any easier. What it does mean is that we are freed to think affectively. For me it means that in the face of life's irrationalities, if I stop long enough I may find a source of Loving care.

Love is almost always, if not always, embodied in other people. One of the key Unitarian principles is "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." In the words of the old Spiritual, we really "do not have to cross Jordan alone." We are in a community of searchers.

There's one other symbol on Akeman's diagram. Toward the right edge of the page there is an open circle. This open circle represents an open, accepting community which encourages a multiplicity of understandings and interpretations. The "Open Circle Community" doesn't claim to have absolute answers. This is the Community of Liberating Faith...the "accepting Congregation."

That is why I included the reading from William Schultz, who characterizes Unitarian Universalists as people who respect answers from many faith traditions. Schultz says, "We

believe...that no single religion (or academic discipline for that matter) has a monopoly on wisdom..."

I am concerned about two kinds of fundamentalism. There is the fundamentalism of the right, which Akeman calls the "Rectangular Church," claiming to have all the answers anyone needs. However there is also a "fundamentalism of the left" which is something like Akeman's "Avoidance Oval," which angrily dismisses all religious understanding and belittles pilgrims who are searching."

Both these fundamentalism are unrealistic because both are escapist refusing to join in the pilgrimage of a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." By contrast Unitarian Universalists provide an "open circle" approach. We do not claim to have absolute answers, but neither do we suggest the search is meaningless. When we are at our best we encourage one another in spiritual growth. My experience is that pilgrims need fellow pilgrims. We need this accepting community where our questions are honored and where our answers are enriched by the questions and answers of other pilgrims.

Marjorie's tragic illness reminds us of our finitude. The reality of life includes uncertainty. We need not live on the surface of life without thought. We have been given marvelous abilities to think and to feel. When we think affectively—what I call religious thinking—we are bringing together intellect and emotion; sense with sensitivity.

If this Congregation had no other reason for being it would be enough that we are a community engaged in reflection about all the events of life and death.

We encourage one another to use intellect with emotion; helping one another come to grips with life's uncertainties. In plain, non-theological talk what that means is that we care for one another.

We do not claim to cure, but to care. We do not claim to have all the answers, but to encourage one another in our mutual search for truth and meaning. As we "face futures yet unknown" let us be carefully tender with one another.

Amen.