

Bell, Book Candle, and Robe

A sermon offered at Countryside Church

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Readings

This reading is from a conversation between Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers as part of the Power of Myth.

Bill Moyers asked: What is the metaphor?

Joseph Campbell answered: A metaphor is an image that suggests something else. For instance, if I say to a person, "You are a nut," I'm not suggesting that I think the person is literally a nut. "Nut" is a metaphor. The reference of the metaphor in religious traditions is to something transcendent that is not literally any thing. If you think that the metaphor is itself the reference, it would be like going to a restaurant, asking for the menu, seeing beefsteak written there, and starting to eat the menu. For example, Jesus ascended to heaven. The denotation would seem to be that somebody ascended to the sky. That's literally what is being said. But if that were really the meaning of the message, then we have to throw it away, because there would have been no such place for Jesus literally to go. We know that Jesus could not have ascended to heaven because there is no physical heaven anywhere in the universe. Even ascending at the speed of light, Jesus would still be in the galaxy, Astronomy and physics have simply eliminated that as a literal, physical possibility. But if you read "Jesus ascended to heaven" in terms of its metaphoric connotation, you see that he has gone inward – not into outer space but into inward space, to the place from which all being comes, into the consciousness that is the source of all things, the kingdom of heaven within. The images are outward, but their reflection is inward. The point is that we should ascend with him by going inward. It is a metaphor of returning to the source, alpha and omega...

Moyers interrupted asking: Aren't you undermining one of the great traditional doctrines of the classic Christian faith – that the burial and the resurrection of Jesus prefigures our own?

Campbell responded: That would be a mistake in the reading of the symbol. That is reading the words in terms of prose instead of in terms of poetry, reading the metaphor in terms of the denotation instead of the connotation.

Moyers, trying to get ever deeper offered: And poetry gets to the unseen reality.

To which Joseph Campbell replied: That which is beyond even the concept of reality, that which transcends all thought. The myth puts you there all the time, gives you a line to connect with that mystery which you are. ... all of these wonderful poetic images ... are referring to something in you. When your mind is simply trapped by the image out there so that you never make the reference to yourself, you have misread the image.

The inner world is the world of your requirements and your energies and your structure and your possibilities that meets the outer world. And the outer world is the field of your incarnation. That's where you are. You've got to keep both going. As Novalis said, "The seat of the soul is there where the inner and outer worlds meet."

This reading come from an article in the Guardian December of 2006 by the poet Adrienne Rich:

... when poetry lays its hand on our shoulder we are, to an almost physical degree, touched and moved. The imagination's roads open before us, giving the lie to that brute dictum, "There is no alternative".

Poetry has the capacity to remind us of something we are forbidden to see. A forgotten future: a still uncreated site whose moral architecture is founded not on ownership and dispossession, the subjection of women, outcast and tribe, but on the continuous redefining of freedom - that word now held under house arrest by the rhetoric of the "free" market. This on-going future, written-off over and over, is still within view. All over the world its paths are being rediscovered and reinvented.

To Music: A poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Music: breathing of statues.

Perhaps:

silence of paintings.

You language where all language ends.

You time standing vertically

on the motion of mortal hearts.

Feelings for whom?

O you the transformation

of feelings into what?--:

into audible landscape.

You stranger: music.

You heart-space

grown out of us.

The deepest space in us,

which, rising above us, forces its way out,--

holy departure:

when the innermost point in us stands

outside,

as the most practiced distance,

as the other

side of the air:

pure,

boundless,

no longer habitable.

Sermon

I was very excited when I got to Manger Square in Bethlehem, to the Church of the Nativity. There's a passage by Annie Dillard in which she describes, in brilliant detail, her visit to that place and down the awkward stone stairs, into the subterranean chamber where, in a time when people often lived in caves, the baby Jesus is said to have been born and then cradled in a manger. She brings the place accurately to life – the heavy, mismatched gold brocades, the dank smell, the cheap grating where the manger

would have been and, in her words: "A fourteen-pointed silver star, two feet in diameter, covered a raised bit of marble floor at the cave wall. This silver star was the X that marked the spot: Here, just here, the infant got born. Two thousand years of Christianity begun here, where God emptied himself into man. Actually, many Christian scholars think "Jesus of Nazareth" was likely born in Nazareth. Early writers hooked his birth to Bethlehem to fit a prophecy. In the center of the silver star was a circular hole. That was the bull's eye, God's quondam target. Crouching people leaned forward to wipe their fingers across the hole's flat bottom. When it was my turn, I knelt, bent under a fringed satin drape, reached across half the silver star, and touched its hole. I could feel some sort of soft wax in it. The hole was... six inches across, like a wide Petri dish. Any patch of ground anywhere smacks more of God's presence on earth, to me, than did this marble grotto -- some human's idea of elegance -- bespoke grand comedy, too, that God put up with it. And why should he not? Things here on earth get a whole lot worse than bad taste. "Every day," said Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, "the glory is ready to emerge from its debasement."

I appreciate Dillard's perspective -- for she's a Christian visiting that holy place. And, well, she's right -- it was tacky and likely Jesus *was* born in or outside of Nazareth.

But there they were -- believers, non-believers, literalists, visionaries, activists, poets, and families carrying their babies to be blessed and seeking the holy.

What is the holy anyway? For a working definition, let's say that the holy is ultimate meaning, inherent worth, the tug of purpose, the deep self connected with all Being, the razor sharp edge between the incisive knowledge of mortality and the keen will to live, the spark and tenacity of life.

I have to admit -- tacky as that grotto was I found the holy there -- in the faces of the infants and the hope and joy of the parents. In bent knees and backs as people knelt over the metal star and touched the unlikely spot. Holiness rose as we descended into the earth -- into the womb-like place deep in the ground -- already deep when Constantine's mother was pinpointing the locations of Jesus' life in her visions and Constantine was erecting the cross in his dreams -- some 300 years after the life of Jesus.

There is a feeling of holiness, of entering sacred space, as you go deep in the earth -- of expectation, waiting, the approach of a holy among holies. As a Jewish Unitarian Universalist of humanist grounding I'm here to testify that any patch of ground is and can manifest holiness -- even when generations of bad aesthetics committees have been in charge. Any place, itself, is really no more holy than any other place -- but people are called into an awareness of holiness by symbols and symbolic acts. And awareness is deepened by the feeling of reverence around us.

Reverence is a quality of recognizing something as being of worth, and of recognizing yourself as recognizing that -- strongly -- being in awe. I felt reverence at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem -- not only because of the ancient stones, not only in the people facing the wall and praying, but in the power the Wailing Wall has had as a symbol of Jewish longing, sorrow, and hope. I also felt reverence in a grove in Michigan, in a large circle of women, as Z. Budapest, a teacher of earth-centered religion, called our circle together and our joined hands formed the sanctuary.

What brings you to this sanctuary on Sunday? Just take a moment to think on it. Now -- rule out everything you could, really, find somewhere else -- friends, intellectual stimulation, news of upcoming events, meetings, social justice work, and, yes, coffee.

There are other things as well. They're worthy things – but what calls me here and, I suggest, as you translate on your own terms, that what calls us all here is a hope – as Unitarian Universalist ministers the Reverends Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz put it – “To be in the presence of the holy.” They go on to say that “this is an experience that exists both in time and out of time, an experience where the body and mind drop away and we have a sense of beauty, awe, and oneness with the world around us. They are experiences that transcend theology...” So end the words of my colleagues.

I've been in the presence of the holy in sound and in silence. I've experienced the holy at the Jewish High Holy Days when the ram's horn called loud with its ancient cry and at Christmas Eve in many churches when the last electric light goes out and the congregation stands, singing, tapers dancing light across dear faces. I've experienced the holy here, as the choir, through harmony and word, raises up something that was hidden amongst the world's piles of ideas but is, in fact, a powerful reality: Change, Loss, Commitment, Covenant, Mystery, Hope, Love...

I *can* find the holy in humor – like the one about the Dalai Lama who attends a baseball game, and, going up to the hotdog vendor, says “Make me one with everything.” Or – when I found, in a sermon by the Rev. Meg Riley, that she'd encountered a bumper sticker that read “Metaphors be with you.” She liked it but said that she didn't catch all of it at first. Metaphors are useful. They give us the power to express things we can't otherwise, quite put into words. Metaphors are the stock in trade of religion. When Joseph Campbell says that Jesus rising to heaven is a metaphor – he is not diminishing reality – he is, instead, speaking of an event outside of history, in which a human being sees the oneness of everything and achieves enlightenment – an event which it's said took place not far from the spot where Mohammad is said to have risen up to heaven and that not far from where Isaiah was said to have risen up to heaven, or where Moses is said to have arisen to heaven to receive the Torah. At the very least, the Holy Land is holy because so many people are said to have achieved enlightenment there – or risen up. Aliyah – in the Hebrew – to go up – to the bima.

Metaphors are ways that our extraordinary minds can touch extraordinary realities. They have power – as symbols have power – to shift awareness – willing awareness. There must be an openness. Metaphors carry a force of meaning – if I light a candle in the darkness, hammer out justice, ring a bell of freedom, or sing of love between my brothers and my sisters – then the metaphors are with us. As Rev. Riley divined in the bumper sticker -- their force is with us and in us. Therefore, I ask that when I say Metaphors be with you that you respond: and also with you. Therefore, metaphors be with you. And also with you.

Because I need the metaphors, the symbols. They are my medium and my message.

I light them, wear them, stand in this sanctuary – a room with a metaphorical view. I share them as stories. I tell stories and anecdotes to surround meaning from all sides since it is hard to say meaning and speak being directly. Symbol, poetry, story, the word as pointer. For the words are always pointing toward ideas. As the poet Jellaludin Rumi said, the 13th century Persian mystic wrote:
A story is like water that you heat for your bath.
It takes messages between the fire and your skin.
It lets them meet, and it cleans you!

Very few can sit down
in the middle of the fire itself like a salamander or Abraham.

We need intermediaries.

A feeling of fullness comes, but usually it takes some bread to bring it.

Beauty surrounds us, but usually we need to be walking in a garden to know it.

The body itself is a screen to shield and partially reveal
the light that's blazing inside your presence.

Water, stories, the body, all the things we do,
are mediums that hide and show what's hidden.

Study them, and enjoy this being washed with a secret we sometimes know and then not.
So ends the poem.

There's one hour, more or less, out of the week, set aside for this knowing. We're in that hour right now. Thus each week we work with symbol and story to express or embody the inexpressible. Even in our highly individualistic congregations we recognize that symbols have the power to bring us together and closer to an experience of the holy.

I use bells not only because they call for attention, not only because they reverberate through the body, but also because throughout many human cultures, bells have summoned people to times of prayer, of mourning, of contemplation, of celebration. They are sound, signal and symbol.

Despite the many varieties of Unitarian Universalist worship Arnason and Rolenz found that almost all of us light a chalice. With that act we evoke our history and we join in common worship with thousands of Unitarian Universalists. *And* we light candles – not because we believe in some magic power inherent in candles – but because light calls to light – because they're ancient symbols of sight and insight, of miracles, warmth, enlightenment, and sharing our inner fire with the fire that burns in all life.

We use a covenant – as Arnason and Rolenz point out – in large part because we are a faith that based less upon creed than upon the commitments we make to one another and to this world. As we say our covenant aloud we reaffirm our core values and that commitment to walk together co –venant in the light of those values. It is a symbol of our faithfulness to speaking, working, walking together.

In our worship we set side time to reflect upon things of worth, to consider the many scriptures of humanity – so-called sacred and so-called secular all being sacred to us in some way. We set aside time to reflect upon the scripture of daily life and experience that opens us to greater understanding.

I wear this robe to symbolize that this hour is set aside and I that I speak with you in deep appreciation of the honor and responsibility to reflect on things worthy of your attention and that may open doors to deeper realities within you. I wear this robe in recognition of the expectation that Unitarian Universalist ministry should be a learned ministry – educated in the many, diverse, as a colleague once put it -- scriptures of humanity. I say -- We are people of the books.

We are part of a living history of covenantal communities and traditions. Skeptics, heretics, cultural innovators, free-thinkers, and people with some yearning for the familiar – we have and will look with respectful but reasoned eyes upon the traditions we have been given. Some live on. Often out of old timbers we build new holy places – such as flower communion in which the people bring flowers to the service in June, blessed by your own hand, and you receive in return a flower brought by someone else.

Or water communion, created at a Womanspirit Conference. In that communion we bring water symbolic of lessons learned, places that gave us blessing, tears we have wept, places where we've been baptized by life. We mingle those waters – to represent our gathering in and being as refreshment and life to one another.

This is one precious hour – let's use it wisely and with intention.

Over time and history, as generations before us, we shall create new forms that will speak out of us and speak to us. Some will arrive and pass on and others will endure. It is part of our great adventure as a free church: that we know it's in all our hands to shape our worship life together.

With Bells, Books, Candle, and Robe – with hymn and word we begin – but we are free to go out into the cosmos for symbols that spark and deep into the earth for the metaphors that will remain with us.

This is our holy time and place – if you enter it with that intention – open and ready for surprise and wonder. This is a holy time and place if you are open enough to find something of yourself here -- something precious needed like a piece of a puzzle to further your picture. This is a holy time and place if you have found some offering here that fills you up so that you can go forth from this place to bring your offerings to the world. Above all, this is a holy place and time if you recognize that the people around you – in all their diversity of expression – come here only in part for those things they can find in other places – but much more for that rare thing they can only find here – that rare glimpse of the holy offered in a form they can recognize. Joseph Campbell said: “Eternity isn't some later time. Eternity has nothing to do with time. And if you don't get it here, you won't get it anywhere. But the experience of eternity right here and now, in all things, whether thought of as good or as evil, is the function of life. This is an absolute necessity for anybody... You must have a room, or a certain hour or so, a day... This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation. At first you may find that nothing happens there. But if you have a sacred place and use it, something eventually will happen.”

Yes – Mr. Campbell, this is the place. It is within us and among us – it is made more possible by our gathering in this hour.

Each week as we open our doors it is as if we were each going down into some sacred subterranean space – the space within and among us. Holy of all holies. A womb from which new life emerges. It is up to us to open the doors, to descend inward, to ascend outward. It is in our hands to bring the glory up: to light the new life, the life of worth, the new birth. As we kindle the candles of Advent and wait; later in December as we will kindle the lights of the Menorah, we will wait. We will wait for the saviour who sits already beside and within you. We will wait for a miracle which is already here – partly revealed, partly hidden already here for us – waiting.