

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Listen Within for Beyond”

Rev. Samuel Trumbore October 4, 2020

Opening Words

Unitarian Universalists honor the mystery of what exists beyond what we can physically sense. Science is unparalleled in its ability to help us understand the material world. UUism unreservedly embraces its most excellent empirical method.

Yet, science is an imperfect method of seeking truth. It cannot answer *definitively* some of the most important questions of ultimate truth.

Rather than choosing sides in the clash of religious belief, Unitarian Universalism does not assert answers to the ultimate questions.

We encourage all of us to explore those questions for ourselves and come to our own conclusions. We declare values, like the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but we leave the theological support for that value open to personal belief. The role of the minister and the congregation is to support, encourage and even challenge each other on this individual quest for the beliefs that support our values.

We implicitly trust that within us, there is a reliable source of inner guidance we can trust as we search. Our challenge is to learn how to discover its existence, connect to it and be guided by it. Our support for each other is showing and teaching how we've done that learning process and sharing the guidance we have found.

So, while Unitarian Universalism may not take a position on the revelations of any of the great prophets or teachers as “The One Right Way,” we honor them as paths of guidance we can learn from as well. We also recognize every religious tradition isn't perfect. Some parts of each one can lead us astray, or worse could be potentially harmful. We must find our own inner guidance to help us move toward what is good, true and beautiful.

And Leah has a story that will get us started! [WISDOM STORY](#)

READINGS

[The Parable of the Sower](#)

Again Jesus began to teach beside the sea. ... he said to them:

"Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and

the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."

And he said, "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear."

From Parker Palmer's book, *A Hidden Wholeness*:

In Western culture, we often seek truth through confrontation. But our headstrong ways of charging at truth scare the shy soul away. If soul truth is to be spoken and heard, it must be approached [in Emily Dickenson's words], "on the slant." I do not mean we should be coy, speaking evasively about subjects that make us uncomfortable, which weakens us and our relationships. But soul truth is so powerful that we must allow ourselves to approach it, and to approach us, indirectly. We must invite, not command, the soul to speak. We must allow, not force, ourselves to listen.

Spoken Meditation

Now I become myself by May Sarton

Now I become myself. It's taken
 Time, many years and places;
 I have been dissolved and shaken,
 Worn other people's faces,
 Run madly, as if Time were there,
 Terribly old, crying a warning,
 "Hurry, you will be dead before—"
 (What? Before you reach the morning?
 Or the end of the poem is clear?
 Or love safe in the walled city?)
 Now to stand still, to be here,
 Feel my own weight and density!
 The black shadow on the paper
 Is my hand; the shadow of a word
 As thought shapes the shaper
 Falls heavy on the page, is heard.
 All fuses now, falls into place
 From wish to action, word to silence,
 My work, my love, my time, my face
 Gathered into one intense
 Gesture of growing like a plant.
 As slowly as the ripening fruit
 Fertile, detached, and always spent,
 Falls but does not exhaust the root,
 So all the poem is, can give,

Grows in me to become the song,
 Made so and rooted by love.
 Now there is time and Time is young.
 O, in this single hour I live
 All of myself and do not move.
 I, the pursued, who madly ran,
 Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun!

Sermon

Do you like riddles? I have a few for you this morning.

What must be broken before you can use it?

Answer: An egg

What can you break, even if you never pick it up or touch it? Answer: A promise

What question can you never answer yes to?

Answer: Are you asleep yet?

What goes up but never comes down?

Answer: Your age

What do we love more than life, hate more than death; what do the contented desire; the poor have, the rich require; the miser spends, and all of us carry to our graves? Answer: Nothing

The point of a riddle is to ask a question which does not have an obvious answer. When the answer is heard, there is a moment of recognition. Yes, my age only goes up and not down. Yet the answer isn't obvious until you hear the answer or figure it out. And if we do figure these riddles out, it happens, for many of us, in a non-linear, non-rational process. The answer bursts before us after bubbling up from someplace deep in the mind.

Today we are after the intuitive process of what goes on below the surface level of the mind. Connections and insights happen there that can be of great importance to our lives.

The Parable of the Sower is a bit of a riddle. To any farmer hearing the parable, the concepts are transparently obvious. Of course, your seed will not grow if you scatter it on rocks or in thorns and weeds. If you just leave the seed exposed on bare ground, of course the birds will eat it. If the seed falls on good soil, you'll get a good yield. Tell me something I don't already know. Then comes the challenge from Jesus, "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear." Oh, so this is about something else besides growing crops? Must be like a riddle, an allegory, a metaphor. There is some hidden meaning.

In the Gospels, when the disciples get parables like this, they are flummoxed. The disciples do not come from the ranks of the scribes or the Pharisees who have done textual study of the law of Moses and are adept at this kind of interpretation. The disciples are ordinary, illiterate folk and ask Jesus to interpret his words. The Gospel writers give ready answers, but scholars doubt these are

Jesus' words. The answers are tuned to the needs of the early Christian communities trying to codify their teacher's wisdom. Jesus might have responded to their questions with the comment, "What do you think it means?" and drive them to come up with their own understanding. I imagine he would want to teach them how to find their own inner resources, their own ability to do interpretation.

Jesus, in this way, wouldn't be so different from following the Socratic method that uses questions to encourage that inner exploration of truth and meaning. The Abrahamic religious traditions delight in digging into story or prophetic revelation to unearth deeper meanings hidden behind the words. Scholars compare different scriptural sections to deduce even more meaning by holding multiple texts next together. Their faith in the value of this interpretive method comes via the holy source of those words either from the mouth of God or God's prophets, captured in the teaching. The story of Elijah standing at the mouth of a cave and seeking a message from God gives us encouragement that we too might experience that divine voice within us as a still small voice too.

Another way Jesus may have used parables is the way Zen masters use koan stories. These stories are given as a meditation practice to students. They wrestle with them seeking deeper truth and meaning in them and bring that interpretation back to their teacher. If their answer doesn't satisfy the master, he rings a bell and off the student goes to try again. What the Zen master is seeking is to help the student break through their analytical habits to open an intuitive, more immediate understanding of the koan.

This intuitive dimension of existence is quite troubling for many of us, not so different from the frustration of the Zen student getting dinged again and again by the master. I imagine the disciples having the same problem with the parables of Jesus. Socrates was rather annoying too with his endless questions. Why doesn't the teacher just explain it to me? Can't it be just be laid out in a step-by-step process that gives a consistent answer?

Ah, there is the rub. When we are peering into the abyss, the emptiness of the mind and demanding rational, predicable behavior, we are likely to come up empty handed.

Parker Palmer is a popular Quaker inspired writer who tackles this problem. What we are looking for, he says, is soul, which he defines as follows:

Thomas Merton called it true self. Buddhists call it original nature or big self. Quakers call it the inner teacher or the inner light. Hasidic Jews call it a spark of the divine. Humanists call it identity and integrity. In popular parlance, people often call it soul.

In the Quaker tradition, Friends sit together in silence waiting for the Holy Spirit to enter them and direct their minds toward the truth of the moment. They listen for God's still small voice within, in community. In community with other people, it seems, you've got a better chance that God will touch someone in the room and bring through that divine message.

Meaning Matters and Wellspring have this as part of their design. In the intimate community of a small group, the shy soul can be coaxed to come forward. As Palmer describes it:

We must invite, not command, the soul to speak.
We must allow, not force, ourselves to listen.

I wonder if, for many Unitarian Universalists, Thoreau has a more accessible way for us to access our inner life. Many of us have developed and honed our minds. We're really good thinkers. We're great communicators. We know how to plan and get things done. It is hard for us to step out of our busy lives and push pause.

In the natural world, however, there are subtle clues and conditions that get us out of our heads and into our bodies. Hiking or biking means paying attention to the lungs and the leg muscles as they labor. The sights of the changing leaves delight the eyes. The sounds of birds and insects delight the ears. The cool of forest shade and the smell of damp earth near puddles delights the skin and nose. The enveloping experience of body sensations calms and centers the mind in the joys and sorrows of present moment. We revel with our Transcendentalist forbearers in the natural world.

Whether through nature, or in listening circles waiting for the shy soul to reveal herself in someone's words; Whether through pondering sacred text or introspection; these inner adventures are very unpredictable. For many of us, this erratic access to our inner life is both frustrating and discouraging. We try to listen deeply, and we just don't hear anything!

I remember this so well when I was in high school English. I'd read the class assignment and just not get much out of it. My elitist honors classmates would have deep and profound interpretations and I'd feel confused that I hadn't seen what they were seeing. I couldn't figure out the code and unlock the author's secrets. I felt the same way about the Bible and other sacred texts. There wasn't much meaning for me. I got so much more out of my science and engineering classes. This was practical knowledge I could use. It wasn't until I had some sudden, unexpected, awakening experiences in my 20's that I discovered I could start breaking open some of these literary codes.

In Buddhism there is an endless debate about how to bring people to enlightenment. Should students follow a gradual path of incremental steps to awakening or should they give up any practical skill-based approaches and just hope it will happen suddenly. Enlightenment seems to happen for people on both paths so it might just be one's personality that helps decide what path will work for you. I like Joseph Goldstein's analysis that *it is both*. Yes, one cannot follow a rational, step-by-step method to enlightenment. And, by doing the step-by-step approach, you're making yourself prone to the sudden awakening experience. You are increasing your odds.

Not that the experiences I've had mean I'm enlightened, far from it. I'm reminded daily how unenlightened I am (marriage and parenting are humbling processes) ... And I have a sense of recognition now when I read wise Buddhist teachers.

I often recognize the direction they are pointing and the connections with the growth and development I've experienced. That recognition is built on the personal experience of little spontaneous insights over many years of dedicated practice.

One of the wisest Sufi sayings I've encountered is communicated through the words, "If you take one step toward Allah, Allah enthusiastically takes ten steps toward you." The challenge is recognizing those steps. This sense of eagerness of the Beloved to embrace us can be a great source of comfort and encouragement.

Not that bad things do not continue to happen in our lives. What I'm talking about doesn't operate in the material realm of daily events. It happens in this inner space, this inner life we experience

when we turn inward to cultivate it. Certainly, the material world and the inner world touch and overlap with one another. Yet there is a kind of freedom, a kind of liberation, a kind of release from bondage of which the material world is ignorant.

If my words are familiar to you or resonate with what you already know, enough said. If not, I invite you to consider deep listening as a doorway to this experience of your inner life. When we listen deeply to another person, when we listen deeply to the natural world, when we sit quietly and listen deeply to our own bodies, we invite the shy soul, our inner life, to come forward and make itself known.

We may find it best however in the interplay between solitude and community. In Parker's words,

“To understand true-self—which knows *who* we are in our inwardness and *whose* we are in the larger world—we need both the interior intimacy that comes with solitude and the otherness that comes with community.

May this congregation be a place for you to do that inner work. May the seeds you plant here yield thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

Prayer of Affirmation

For all the joys and sorrows left unspoken let us hold all that we've heard and felt in our hearts.

This has been a tough week with the Presidential debates
Being stressed by 90 minutes of bad behavior by the President
And a disciplined, restrained response by Biden
with occasional flashes of anger and contempt.

Our anxiety has been stoked by
the President's message to white supremacists
to stand down and stand by
and an unwillingness to accept any outcome but his reelection.

November is looking pretty scary right now.

And the next day the President and the First Lady got the virus
he mocked Biden for protecting himself against by wearing big masks.

May he recover from the virus ... but also experience
a change of heart that can come with an inner struggle with disease
and a close encounter with his morality.

Similar to what the Grinch experienced contemplating Whoville without presents.
I hope his heart grows at least two sizes and
he discovers a much greater sense of compassion
for others, for those who also have this virus and all for humanity.

In turbulent moments like these we need to draw on inner resources
and communal resources to face these days ahead.

Benediction

“Ask Me” by William Stafford

Some time, when the river is ice, ask me
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
what I have done *is* my life. Others
have come, in their slow way, into
my thought, and some have tried to help
or to hurt: ask me *what difference*
their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look
at the silent river, and wait. We know
the current is there, hidden; and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.