

WHOLLY/HOLY : AND THAT'S NOT A PUN
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The Unitarian Fellowship of PEterborough
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There's a story told of a little girl named Merry. Being what is sometimes called a "PK" ... a Preacher's Kid ... she was familiar, very familiar with the language of churchland. The story goes that she overheard her parents deciding whom to invite to next Sunday's dinner, a special event for special folks, but also a regular event that included Merry too. When it seemed that her Mom and Dad had come up with the guest list, Merry wanted to make a correction. Hands on hips, she announced, "Remember Now. You have to ask the Holy Ghost to come too."

Fast forward some sixty plus years and find Meredith, formerly Merry, wishing I still had that certainty and ease with that oddly named part of the Trinity ... in order to speak about the holy anything to a *Unitarian* fellowship.

In fact, I need to begin with the sense of **UN**ease and **UN**certainty that have been a part of the last few weeks. Mine and others'. For you see, this word "Holy" is a tough assignment, for lots of reasons. It is, at one and the same time, a terribly loaded word AND a word that defies language. Coming out of a very traditional Christian background, I sang "Holy Holy Holy" with the best of them; moving outside of my tradition... as clearly I'm doing as I explore the UU world ... I'm willing to accept the invitation and task to explore "the holy". AND YET I have also been challenged to listen and to hear... as the loadedness, the baggage of the word has surfaced.

Congregations hold a breadth of histories, traditions, perspectives and points of view but I'm learning how that is particularly true of a UU gathering. The word "holy" can trigger a lot. Some of it painful. Some of it disdainful. Often, it seems that the word is so firmly written with an upper case H that it can only be an overly-used adjective tacked onto practices and trappings like Holy Communion and Holy Baptism or Holy Bible and Holy Cross. And the journeys away from those rituals and artifacts has left the word back there. For others, who expressed some gratitude for being **un**churched, "holy" isn't so much painful as just simply "not my language".

Throughout the December exploration of the word "communion", whenever the word "holy" surfaced, it did so in lovely passages by writers who repeatedly said there are no words, a valid observation because we are in the realm of the "unsayable". In which case we're in a wholly different dilemma. A dilemma, which did not, however, deter this congregation's search for words. I've had a long evening phone call with someone who had an idea and a whole book for me to read; The holy was the focus of the Journey's gathering. It came up for conversation at book club and at meditation group. And I had an invitation to come for morning coffee so we could talk more than can be managed at coffee-hour. All of which suggest to me that theme based ministry is a heck of a good idea. It offers a community a chance to hold and consider a notion ... together, over a period of time, to share stories and perspectives and open up in ways that are unlikely to happen with a one-off sermon. This month, with this theme, I've actually watched as the Spirit of Life unites us in exploration.... Interesting, isn't it, that a theme-focus can take us to a line of our Covenant, our expression of who we are. Similarly, this particular theme takes us to something we openly affirm, the Unitarian Universalist Sources of our Living Tradition. We say that as individuals and as a community we are grounded in (quote) "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life." (end-quote) Perhaps a word for those forces is the holy.

Some of you know that this fall my partner and I had a very different kind of assignment ... taking care of an alpaca farm on Vancouver island. You might imagine where I'm going with this. Old growth forests and tidal currents are forces of life on a heady scale of grandeur ... as my photo album attests. Cathedral Grove near Nanaimo is aptly named. But funnily enough my most potent memory of that whole special time is a fleeting moment ... in the hen-house ... gathering eggs ... wrapping my fingers gently around the shell ... and sensing the clear warmth of life. At the time, and in the remembering, is that spark of the holy, with a potency I can revisit because it seems like a crystal of grace, flash frozen in my heart and soul.

Yet it was such an ordinary task, admittedly not for a city gal, but it had become a regular daily chore until that moment relit it for me. I love that the ordinary can become so infused with the extraordinary. It's happened again, twice, recently, reading novels for book club in which characters experience an epiphany and the author's words are so full of beauty and power that I am transported into that same sense of the holy.

An epiphany ... the experience of being shown something, a moment of revelation. Now if I were preaching in January to a Christian congregation, I'd be looking at the biblical texts that are set for the five weeks of Epiphany, with a capital E. We're familiar with the mythic journey that begins this season of the Church Year, the one with three sages and an odd star. Surely for astrologer-sages of that era, looking at the night sky was an ordinary experience. A moving star, not so much. But we're in the realm of archetype here, not historicity. And what do they find ... a child with his mother in a house. Don't blend Matthew's story with Luke's shepherds and manger. The wise men story alone has more than enough strands. And in most of the capital E texts for January that story line is repeated --- a revelation and an exploration of it, a recognition of gifts from within and without that will bring some new awareness and new direction. The child Samuel hears a divine summons, which Eli the priest requires three repetitions to figure out. Jonah is troubled by a dream that gave him a summons he didn't like at all. Two Galileans, Nathanael and Philip, heard "Follow me" and wondered aloud if anything good really could come out of Nazareth. The stories echo one another An experience of being addressed, called if you will, sometimes some hesitation, always movement into something new. And so often grounded in the ordinary ... a night's sleep, an everyday activity.

When I agreed to speak today ... on the topic of "the Holy" ... I'd said to myself "Well, I'll just tell them of the time I changed Elliott's diaper. Talk about being grounded in the ordinary. But not quite. Those of you who know the privilege of grand-parenthood know the revival of delight and wonderment that another newborn brings. Elliott is our most recent grandchild ... after a gap of six years ... so his arrival was longed for, all 'round. When his newly-minted parents were confident that a pair of grandmas might manage, we had our first Elliott babysitting- visit. On other occasions at his own house, we'd seen how this little one actually loved being changed. Fussing and scrunched up faces just evaporated as his sleeper was removed and his legs and torso freed to the air. On the day he was with us, I'd taken him to our bed as a changing depot. Little wee guy on a big expanse ... no danger of rolling off. I have two sons, so I made sure I had a spare diaper and was prepared for the other danger. And again, as his silky skin felt the air, it was clear he also felt freedom. He looked straight into my eyes. His body language shifted to a placid, languid, open, receptive way of being. And I was moved (and I use the word advisedly) to bend gently over him and nuzzle his tummy --- a simple moment of grandmotherly tenderness. Or so I thought until the moment expanded --- into a sense of awe, of wonder, of lightness and fullness and connection and union and mystical presence. And none of the words can capture it. He and I were of God, with God, within God's love and universe and I could almost not breathe and breathe more deeply than ever before both at the same time. We looked again at each other and I said "Holy child. We've been in the arms of the Holy One'.

Then he did a little baby wiggle and I was back at the task at hand ... right change the baby's bottom. I don't know if I'll ever have the opportunity to talk to a more grown-up Elliott about my day of babyhood and transcendence. Probably not ... it might only embarrass him. It is enough that I revisit that day, share it, savour it, see its facets and elements, plumb its meanings.

I take much comfort in the fact that many finer minds and souls have done this kind of revisiting many times before me. Gurus of the East, mystics of the Middle Ages, Transcendentalists of 19th Century America ... volumes of introspection exists because, in fact, human beings do appear to have an innate apprehension of mystery, of the Wholly Other. An early 20th Century German theologian and scholar of comparative religions, Rudolf Otto, wrote a book ... The Idea of the Holy. I'm grateful to Otto for a word he coined and uses to name the mystery behind religion and the religious experience. The basic element in all religions, he calls the numinous, the essence of the holy, that which is being perceived and that which is experienced in the perceiving. Otto focuses primarily on the feeling response to the presence of the holy. The numinous grips or stirs the mind powerfully and we respond with "mysterium tremendum", that sense of awe at the power, urgency and energy of the numinous. In the presence of the Wholly Other, the soul trembles in astonishment and wonder at what it beholds and at the same time has a sense of both its own creatureliness and finitude ... and its own numinosity. That which enables the soul to relate to the numen itself is the power of fascination. The numinous has an alluring quality which Otto calls "Mysterium fascinosum" --- that which draws us to it with an almost irresistible force towards a mystical moment of union with the divine. Almost at one and the same moment, the recognition of the presence of the numinous means the cleansing recognition of the holiness within our own soul. Within that moment of union, numinous soul enveloped in numinous other, is a further movement towards willful action, where human will and the will of God converge and the soul answers "yes".

As we entered singing at the start of today's service, we sang "Bring O Morn Thy Music". I asked to include that hymn in our service today for three reasons. First, it is in the section of the hymn book called Transcending Mystery and Wonder which is surely a good fit with Otto's "numinous" category. Secondly it has some wonderful words about our moving homeward, our yearning and the Spirit's yearning. And thirdly, I'm probably not alone in growing up singing that tune with its opening words "Holy, holy, holy". I guess I thought the three holies were put together to fit with the music but I've learned from the book of the prophet Isaiah that this is the greeting of a host of angels singing in the presence of the divine. I love it that liturgically, as we gather in a space made sacred by so many holy encounters over the years, our worship responds to the presence of the numinous with an echo of those angels' words of awe and wonder.

We won't hear familiar muzac carols for another ten months, for which much thanks. But some of the very lovely ones still slide around in my head --- "I Wonder as I Wander", which I see as a pretty good mantra... and "In the Bleak Mid-Winter" (which still feels rather apt), the one with the "What shall I give?" Question ... "I give my heart". Remember? And specifically, as pertains to my words this morning, I've been humming "Silent Night". Sadly I don't know German. But even I know "Stille nacht, Heilige nacht" ... silent night, holy night, right? So I was delighted to see that etymologically, "holy" is derived from old Norse, old English, old German "heilig" meaning "whole, entire, fully complete".

So I find myself returning to Ottos' "Das Heilige" ... and playing with notions of holy and wholly. I can hear those angels' words of awe in the presence of the **wholly** other. And I'm convinced that the **holy** experience of being in that presence makes us **wholly** human. As our yearning is met by the yearning of the divine, we are transformed by our "yes" to life. A second century saint, Irenaeus has

said "The glory of God is humanity fully alive ... wholly alive" . The medieval mystic Julian of Norwich sings "Behold I am the Ground of thy Beseeching". And in the poetic language of John O'Donahue "To be holy is to be home, to be able to rest in the house of belonging that we call the soul." *See?* Whichever way I hold these, whichever way you see them, they belong together, the one is inherent in the other, they interpenetrate and transform themselves and us. Whether it is on a farm or changing a baby, or paddling on Stoney Lake, driving to Sault Ste. Marie, standing for the Hallelulia Chorus or sitting on a log in Cathedral Grove, to perceive the holy is to become more wholly human, open to the divine yes and all that it can bring to birth.

May it be so. Amen.