

THE GREAT SURMISE
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
February 16, 2014

OPENING WORDS

~ *John Millspaugh*

All too often, we pace the geometries of our walled gardens, believing we are traversing the whole of creation.

With spirits of discovery, let us uncover the mysteries nested in our routines, and with the eagerness of children, let us seek out the secrets unfolding in our peripheral vision. Let us behold each fellow creature with reverence; Let us greet each day with praise and thanksgiving.

For life is a gift of incomprehensible magnitude; Our lives are voyages with unknowable destinations.

Along the way, let us meet, kiss, challenge, and support one another; Let us fashion a network of mutuality and extend it into the larger world.

In these ways, we forge lives of goodness and beauty; In these ways, we know the life of [service and spirit].

Come, let us worship together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

On the Day You Were Born ~ *Debra Frasier*

GUIDED MEDITATION

*Goodness of Yourself and Others (adapted)*¹ ~ *Ven. Ayya Khema*

I invite you now, as the energy in the room shifts and settles, to enter into a time of meditation. Put your attention on your breath for just a few moments. (*pause*)

Think of all the nice things you have ever done in your life, such as helping another person, being concerned about another's welfare, being loving and kind to another one, giving a present...a good thought or deed.

Remember those things now. And then allow yourself to feel warm and loving towards yourself. Recognize all the goodness that's in you.

Think of the people who are close to you, and all the people you know. Think of all the good deeds that they have ever done...the deeds that you know of and those that you can only surmise. Appreciate them and love them....because of all that goodness that you can feel in them. Feel your heart going out to them. Appreciating... loving... respecting... the goodness in them.

Think of those people who are part of your life but towards whom you feel quite indifferent. Those you meet here and there, who you don't have any real connection to. Think of all the good things they have done...possibly for you. Appreciate and love them and respect them. Make your heart reach out to them.

Now think of anyone who you don't like or who is bothering you in some way and then think of all the good things that person has ever thought, said, or done....whether you

¹ <http://www.leighb.com/goodness.htm>

where actually present or not. Appreciate and respect that person for his or her goodness. Let your heart go out to him or her....Feel the goodness that resides in us all.

Now think of people everywhere. In our town. In the cities, and villages, on the land, all around the world. All of them looking for happiness. All of them having goodness in their hearts. Connect with that goodness, connect with their hearts. Let your appreciation, your warmth and respect, for all these beings, flow out of your heart, and help to lift the consciousness that is present in humanity.

Now put your attention back onto yourself. And feel the ease that comes when consciousness goes to goodness and lovingness. Feel how the mind feels lighter, pleased, carefree, and the heart feels loving. Connect with the goodness in yourself. See it clearly. Anchor that recognition within your heart, so you can retain it. And feel the appreciation and warmth welling up within you, connected to that goodness.

May beings everywhere appreciate and respect each other.

MESSAGE

I suppose that it's not the most persuasive stance...and certainly can instill no confidence...to announce at the beginning of a sermon that I have arrived at no personal conclusions which I can state with conviction. Yet that is the truth. I have no answer. At least not on the question of the day...which is inspired something asserted 20 years ago by the Rev. Carl Scovel, minister emeritus of King's Chapel in Boston. In his *Berry Street Essay*, delivered in 1994,² he said:

"The Great Surmise says simply this: At the heart of all creation lies a good intent, a purposeful goodness, from which we come, by which we live our fullest, to which we shall at last return. And this is the supreme reality of our lives.

This goodness is ultimate – not fate nor freedom, not mystery, energy, order nor finitude, but this good intent in creation is our source, our center, and our destiny. And with everything else we know in life, the strategies and schedules, the technology and tasks, with all we must know of freedom, fate and finitude, of energy and order and mystery, we must know this, first of all, the love from which we were born, which bears us now, and which will receive us at the end. Our work on earth is to explore, enjoy, and share this goodness, to know it without reserve or hesitation. "Too much of a good thing," said Mae West "is wonderful." Sound doctrine.

Do you see how the Great Surmise stands all our logic and morality on its ear? Neither duty nor suffering nor progress nor conflict – not even survival – is the aim of life, but joy. Deep, abiding, uncompromised joy."

I love this Great Surmise (which, by the way, Scovel capitalizes...the Great, capital G, Surmise, capital S.) When I first encountered this, because of the capital letters, I assumed he was referring to some capital G great piece of universal wisdom that has been accepted and expounded down through the ages. But, I could find no evidence of such a thing. Apparently, this is simply, and profoundly, Scovel's capital G great, capital S surmise.

² <http://uuchristian.org/Sermons/BeyondSpirituality.html>

At the heart of creation lies a good intent, a purposeful goodness, from which we come. This is the supreme reality of our lives. Further, this surmise, this grand assumption, proves that the aim of life is joy. Deep, abiding, uncompromised joy.

I do love Scovel's Great Surmise, but I have to admit that I find it to be quite a grand assumption, and if I listen to my most skeptical voice, perhaps even a grand folly. Still I love it. I feel called to it. Some deep part of me yearns to believe it...that at the heart of all creation lies a good intent.

Does goodness reside at the centre of all things? If so, where's the evidence to support that belief...assuming such evidence is necessary?

I am reminded of the work of Rev. Jeremy Taylor, who has dedicated his ministry to working with dreams as a tool for helping people toward greater awareness. I took a class from him in seminary; his constant mantra is that dreams always come in the service of good, in the service of the dreamer. Now, I am someone who has always dreamed vividly, to the point that some days I cannot shake the feeling that I'm continuing to live the dream. Over the years, I've intentionally worked with my dreams, and was fascinated by Taylor's work. Given the powerful and sometimes frightening images that often inhabit my dreams, given the way that they can invade my waking hours, how could he know that they always come in service of the good?

Here's another reference point. We, Kate Huband and I, decided that the children's story listed in your order of service might be too difficult for some of our children, especially given that there is little time for conversation or questions. That book, "On the Day" was written by a school teacher after the events of 9/11, in an attempt to give hope to the children of that time and place. When terrible things happen, she wrote, "only a small piece of the world breaks, not the whole world. Goodness is in the world, and it's stronger than badness. There will always be good things in the world." How does she know that goodness is stronger than badness?

Where's the evidence?

Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield has said that "the mind is luminous by nature and inherently pure...aggression, hatred and greed are based in delusion and [cover] over our innate goodness...When we reawaken to our original nature, [aggression, hatred and greed] fall away." Many recent discoveries in neuroscience complement these teachings. For example, mirror neurons have been shown to make us 'naturally' caring and compassionate - 'proving' that we are hard-wired for empathy.³

But scientists have also found that "the evolutionary primacy of the brain's fear circuitry makes it more powerful than the brain's reasoning faculties. [More circuitry runs from our survival-mode amygdala to our logical, thoughtful neo-cortex than the other way around.] So although it is sometimes possible to think yourself out of fear...it takes great effort and

³ <http://imcw.org/Resources/ArticleDetail/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/111/The-Question-of-Essential-Human-Goodness.aspx>

persistence. Instead, fear tends to overrule reason, as the amygdale hobbles our logic and reasoning circuits. That makes fear more powerful than reason.”⁴

Which will you choose as primary...a luminous mind which sees that our original nature is pure and good...or a position of fear that leads us to aggression, hatred and greed? Is it yours to choose? Can you overcome your brain’s circuitry? Do we, each and every one of us, originate and reside in goodness, without question?

How can you know? Unitarian Universalism places great emphasis on knowing through personal experience. Our sources, to which we turn for insight and wisdom, list personal experience first. We trust our own experience to give us tools and pathways by which to create meaning. Of course, experience happens on many levels, ranging from what we collect with our physical senses of touch and sight and hearing, to our experience of relationships and how we have been treated and encountered by others, to our experience of thought and cognition, to our experience of transcending mystery...that experience that happens only on the inside, and cannot be exactly replicated in another person.

And, it is conjectured, all of this experience forms our beliefs...our understanding of the world we live in...what we know to be true...what we surmise about people and about how things work, and what we know about the transcendent. And for this and many other reasons, we use the word ‘belief’ in many different ways....what we know, what we trust, what we surmise.

So our first source is personal experience and our first principle is an affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of each person. Clearly, individual freedom and expression is held in high esteem within our tradition. Perhaps the individual can even be said to occupy too much space in our thoughts and attitudes. However, through our history, choices and paths have been intentionally chosen that have brought us to where we are today. Unitarians began with a cry for religious freedom, insisting that having a different perspective did not make theirs a wrong perspective. They came, over the centuries, to affirm the rights of the person and the potential within each person to grow, to reason and to act accordingly. Universalists began with a cry for the love and kindness of God, choosing to give up a God who was harsh and punishing. In the process of creating themselves in the image of that loving god, they strove to develop in themselves that same love for every person...they were humanitarians in the broadest sense. What is now our first principle grew out of the 1935 Universalist Statement of Faith which avowed faith in “the supreme worth of every human personality.” You see, it is relatively easy to trace how we’ve come to where we are today.

Can we make a connection between an insistence that there is inherent worth in each person and a belief that there is goodness at the centre of all creation? I do not know... except to say that, in my experience, we exist within the universe as some kind of cosmic nesting dolls...where what we experience in ourselves, we project outward onto all that is, and what we experience in all that is, we stamp onto our own being as our personal truth. Perhaps if we believe that we are good to the core, or at least come into the world pure and without sin, then

⁴ Sharon Begley. “The Roots of Fear,” *Newsweek* (24 December 2007), as quoted in <http://imcw.org/Resources/ArticleDetail/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/111/The-Question-of-Essential-Human-Goodness.aspx>

we must also believe that that goodness comes from some 'pool', some ground of goodness...which I suppose is the point I tried to make last fall when preaching on what it means to be grounded in love. It is to believe that there is a foundational, ever-present well from which we can draw in order to know and live love and goodness in the world.

But today there's a further question. Is goodness at the capital C center? Is goodness where we have originated? When we truly bite into life, as into a chocolate, or an apple, do we find goodness there? Or, is it rather something we are lured toward as an alternative to another choice? Might we as easily bite into cruelty and hatred? We had a fascinating discussion at the last covenant facilitators gathering where we discussed 'evil'...which will be our theme next month. Does evil exist the way that goodness exists? Is it a well humanity can draw from as readily as from love's well? You'll have to stay tuned for this conversation; as I say, evil is for next month.

As for goodness being alone at the heart of creation, I'm still skeptical. My lived experience would have me believe otherwise, and I admit to being conditioned in childhood about evil and the devil and how 'they' work in the world. I've not completely shaken those notions.

But I'd like to. I'd very much like to. To believe in goodness at the centre of all is quite compelling, isn't it? It's beautiful. It's hopeful. To believe such would seem to make the creation of heaven on earth a more manageable task.

In that same Berry Street Address, Rev. Scovel said: "By 'belief' I mean that which is assumed and practiced as real, an assumption to which one entrusts oneself and one's life. That is belief, as I understand it..."⁵ He goes on to share two further assumptions that inform his Great Surmise...first that belief shapes experience (and not the other way around) and that community shapes belief.

Do you agree with him? That belief shapes experience? Although we have a reading in our hymnal which says that it matters what we believe⁶, we are much more inclined, it seems, to say that experience shapes belief...that what we have encountered in body and mind and relationship and spirit is what brings us to formulate beliefs that compose our worldviews. It could be that Scovel is from not-Missouri...that mythical place where people say 'I'll see it when I believe it.' He says that what we perceive and how we respond depends on what we assume...that is, what we believe before we even have experience.

If this is true...and certainly it must be at least half true...then it capital M matters to hold a belief that says that goodness lies at the centre of all that is, and that goodness is the 'stuff' out of which we are made. If I believe that, if you can believe that, then how we see ourselves and one another, what we give our lives to, and how we act in the world is changed. It's a paradigm shift of cosmic proportions. We're transformed.

Yet, this is a HUGE challenge for those of us, myself included, who insist that we will believe it when we see it...who want proof and evidence. Scovel recognizes this. He says that in order to believe the Great Surmise, we have to do two things. First, we need to commit ourselves to practices and disciplines that empty us (see, finally I mention this month's theme, emptiness)

⁵ <http://uuchristian.org/Sermons/BeyondSpirituality.html>

⁶ Sophia Lyons Fahs, #657

...we need to empty ourselves enough to be places where that goodness, or divinity, can reside. Second, he says, we need to participate in a community that believes in that core goodness and celebrates it. Remember, Scovel's other assumption, beyond experience being formed by belief, is that belief is formed by community. We need, if we are to accept and integrate his Great Surmise, to share in the life and faith of a community that shares that belief with us.

What do YOU think? What do you believe? (That's a not very subtle reminder to sign up for our Building Your Own Theology class. There's a clipboard on Florence's Table.)

Here's what I think. I DO think, in fact I believe, that it matters what we believe. I know that believing that dreams come in the service of good enables me to find interpretations that are meaningful and life-giving. I know, I believe, that when bad things happen, when terrible events take place, when people do incredibly cruel and vicious things, that there still remains, always, goodness...goodness that sometimes is even drawn out by those terrible things. And I know that it is life-giving to choose to see that goodness and to lift up its presence in the world.

I DO believe that we have some not-insignificant agency in making choices that respond to the lure of the good, that move us in the direction of more love, that turn us toward the light. I do believe, along with Dr. King, that "there is within human nature an amazing potential for goodness...something that can respond to goodness." So, even without evidence, I believe that the Ultimate Reality is love, and choose to 'assume and practice it as real'... to 'entrust myself and my life to it', in order to more fully see its presence in you and in my life. Out of my inherent worthiness and potential, I choose capital L love. I choose capital G goodness. And I believe that my choice, your choice, matters.

So be it.

READING

Testimony

~ Rebecca Baggett⁷

I want to tell you that the world
is still beautiful.

I tell you that despite
children raped on city streets,
shot down in school rooms,
despite the slow poisons seeping
from old and hidden sins
into our air, soil, water,
despite the thinning film
that encloses our aching world.
Despite my own terror and despair.

I want you to know that spring
is no small thing, that
the tender grasses curling
like a baby's fine hairs around
your fingers are a recurring

⁷ From "Women's Uncommon Prayers", written for her daughters

miracle. I want to tell you
that the river rocks shine
like God, that the crisp
voices of the orange and gold
October leaves are laughing at death,

I want to remind you to look
beneath the grass, to note
the fragile hieroglyphs
of ant, snail, beetle. I want
you to understand that you
are no more and no less necessary
than the brown recluse, the ruby-
throated hummingbird, the humpback
whale, the profligate mimosa.
I want to say, like Neruda,
that I am waiting for
"a great and common tenderness",
that I still believe
we are capable of attention,
that anyone who notices the world
must want to save it.

CLOSING WORDS

~ Andy Pakula

Deep within you
There is a place of peace
A place of wisdom,
A place of love.
May this sacred centre be your guide
May it be you strength for the journey
May it fill you with hope when all seems hopeless
And may it lead you to know the sacredness in all.
Go in peace. Live in love. Amen.