

DECEMBER'S THEME: A COMMUNITY OF INCARNATION

Who, if Anyone, is Divine?

THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH

REV. JULIE STONEBERG

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OPENING WORDS *Is this not Divine?* ~ *Connie Barlow*

Consider [this]: the very atoms in our bodies were forged inside the fiery bellies of ancestral stars who lived and died before our sun was born. Equipped with such awareness, we can gaze up at the night sky and remember who we are: stardust contemplating the stars!

We can scan the heavens for kin who bear a reddish hue – like Betelgeuse (BAY-TEL G-ICE), at the right shoulder of Orion the Hunter.

With each breath, we inhale atoms, every one of which was birthed inside a star that looked very much like Betelgeuse.

And we can know that today, tomorrow, or sometime within the next hundred thousand years, Betelgeuse will expire, explosively recycling its body back into the cosmos where its gifts might one day congeal into new planets and perhaps be breathed by new forms of life. [...]

Is this not divine?

We are stardust incarnate. Come, let us wonder at this together.

STORY FOR ALL *All I See Is Part of Me* ~ *Chara M. Curtis*

(In this book, a child learns, by talking to the sun and the stars, that they are a part of all that is, and everything that is is also inside of them.)

READING *Kabbalistic Creation Story (abridged)* ~ *Naomi Newman*

In the beginning,
before there were any beginnings or endings,
there was no place that was not already God.
We call this unimaginable openness Ein Sof,
Being without end, world without end,
Ein Sof.

Then came the urge to give life to our world and us.
But there was no place that was not already God.
So Ein Sof breathed in to make room
like a father steps back so his child will walk to him....

Into the emptiness Ein Sof set vessels
and began to fill them with divine light,
like a mother places bowls
in which to pour her delicious soup...

As the light poured forth,
a perfect world was being created.

Think of it, a world without greed
and cruelty and violence.

But then something happened.

The [vessels] shattered.

No one knows why.

Perhaps the bowls were too frail,
perhaps the light too intense,
perhaps Ein Sof was learning...

With the shattering of the bowls
the divine sparks flew everywhere...

some falling, falling,
trapped in the broken shards,
to become our world and us.

Though this is hard to believe,
the perfect world is all around us,
but broken into jagged pieces,
like a puzzle thrown to the floor...

We are that someone.

There is no one else.

We are the ones who can find the broken pieces,
remember how they fit together
and rejoin them...

We are all holy sparks dulled by separation.

But when we meet and talk
and eat and make love,
when we work and play and disagree
with holiness in our eyes,
Seeing Ein Sof everywhere,
Then our brokenness will end

Then our bowls will be strong enough to hold the light,
and our light gentle enough to fill the bowls.

As we repair the world together,
we will learn that there is no place
No person, no land, sea or air being,
That is not
God.

MESSAGE *Who, If Anyone, is Divine?* ~ Rev. Stoneberg

Is this not divine? Take a look around you. Is this not divine...this opportunity to be together in freedom and community? Are you not surrounded by beings that are filled with light and possibility?

Take a look at our chalice flame. Is it not divine?

This past week, the National Voice Team of the Canadian Unitarian Council posted a letter of support to our “siblings in Spirit” in the US. In it, they spoke of how the cup of our chalice symbolizes the ‘partnership way’ of being in community...” And of how the flame symbolizes such things as witness, sacrifice, and courage. In this time when racism, bigotry and hate speech are becoming acceptable, they write, it is once again time for our chalice light to serve as a rallying beacon for values of love and justice. The letter assures those in the US that they are not alone – that we, as Canadian Unitarians are with them, saying, “Together we can answer the call of love shoulder to shoulder – arm in arm – with a desire for justice, equity and compassion.”

Is this expression of solidarity not divine? (and you can find the full statement on our website.)

And on this Sunday that lies directly between World Aids Day and the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women, we remember those people who have died of AIDS, who are living with AIDS or HIV, who work with those affected, who have stood up for justice for LGBTQ2 folks, who have suffered abuse and bullying and hate crimes... And we remember each of those young women who were murdered in 1989 at l'École Polytechnique de Montréal, and for all who have struggled for gender equality throughout history, and...and...

Is not the memory of these courageous people, their presence and work in the world, divine?

Earlier, I placed a pebble in the water for the people and ministers who have responded to the call from Chief Arvol Looking Horse who asked clergy of all faiths to come to stand side by side with them in prayer. Today, December 4th, at Standing Rock.

Three of the ministers who responded are Unitarians from Toronto First...Rev. Shawn Newton, Rev. Lynn Harrison, and Danielle Webber. In a letter to that congregation, Rev. Newton wrote this:

“For the past few weeks, I’ve been wrestling with whether to go to Standing Rock... [The proposed] pipe line would desecrate the burial grounds of the native peoples of the region, endanger their water supply, and continue a 500-year old story of injustice against the sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples.... While I’m not optimistic about the ability of these protests to stop or reroute the pipeline, I believe the presence of a multi-faith coalition will signal to those who would act violently against unarmed protestors that they are being watched. My prayer is that this will be a deterrent to further violence....I join many others who feel Standing Rock is emerging as a defining event for the rights of Indigenous Peoples everywhere.”

When Rev. Newton shared his sense of call to Standing Rock with Toronto First’s other ministers, he learned that they, too, felt a deep call to go to take part in this Interfaith Day of Prayer. The three of them received the blessing of their Board of Trustees, recognizing that there is some degree of risk in putting themselves in a conflict where there has been recent violence. They have asked for our prayers and good wishes as they represent their congregation, and Canadian Unitarians, in standing with the people of Standing Rock. We pray for them and all gathered there.

Is their action, this decision, not divine? I surely see the divine present in my dear colleagues. And is not every person showing up day after day, week after week, to protest that pipeline divine?

But what of those who are ordering teargas and high-pressure water hoses, and carrying out those orders? And what of the gunman who chanted "I hate feminists" before killed 14 young women? And what of President-elect Trump and his supporters and all who spew racist, misogynist, vitriol of hate and exclusion. Are we able to say that they also contain some spark of the divine?

It is here that we begin today's conversation about incarnation. Understanding incarnation at its best to be the embodiment of our innate holiness, the embrace of the sacred spirit of life that resides in us, let's consider if we can draw lines between who contains such divinity, and who does not. Because, if we all contain divinity...inherent worth and goodness...why do we continue to experience such painful separation as is manifest in hatred, acts of violence, sin (if you can abide that language)...or, put more simply, why do people of inherent worth do bad things?

Right up front, let me say that I don't have any answers to this most difficult of questions. My research for today took me deep into the bowels of my post-graduate seminary studies in process theology, where I re-read my final paper entitled "Sin: Exploring Causation in Process Thought." In it, I tried to discover why we do 'bad' things, especially within the process theology framework which claims we are each being lured toward beauty and goodness.

I re-read my professor's notes on that paper, and I had to laugh. He wrote, "The paper has a hint of aimlessness about it...The aura of inconclusiveness is perhaps intrinsic to the topic. Both Paul Ricoeur and Hannah Arendt have argued, though in quite different ways, that human evil is finally irrational, that it has no 'cause' either outside or inside the human psyche...Sin is the ultimate irrationality."

So, I guess I'm in good company in not having the answers. But I do wonder if you're about to crawl out of your skin, or at least the pew. You came expecting a talk about the divine, and here I am, talking about its opposite.

You see, I believe that we can't really talk about one without talking about the other...because one reason it is difficult to believe that there is divinity in each of us, is because many of us have been told, and have ingested, that to be human is to have a base quality...earthly, dirty, imperfect, sinful...and therefore not divine.

Consider this:

In Elie Wiesel's (*Ellie Vee-Zell's*) book, "Night," in which he tells of his experiences in the concentration camps, he describes the death by hanging of a young boy. The boy was too light for the rope to do its usual job, so rather than dying quickly, he hung for what seemed like hours, lingering between life and death, gasping for breath. The other prisoners were required to watch this horror, and one of them asked, facetiously and rhetorically, "Where is god now?"

And Wiesel answers, “Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows.”¹

It is really really hard to imagine that we are divine, that we are one with all that is sacred, when we are in deep anguish and pain, when we see so many atrocities in the world around us, when we experience the shadows that exist within our own hearts...shadows that sometimes are played out by our own hands. How can we reconcile suffering, and what we know as evil incarnate, with what we imagine to be the divine incarnate? Is it even plausible that we...you and me...are divine?

.....

I know this to be true: we are interconnected with all that is. This is a principle tenet of our faith. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr is famously quoted as saying that injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere. Interconnected. Perhaps it follows that evil anywhere is evil everywhere, and that the divine incarnate anywhere is the divine incarnate everywhere. I am reminded of Fra Giovanni Angelica’s words from almost 500 year ago: “Earth but cloaks our heaven,” which is to say, the holy glimmers everywhere.² Around us, among us, within us.

So which is it? Are we divine or something other than divine? Well, I am coming more and more to see that one of the current promises of our faith is its growing insistence that we need to break down all binaries of either/or and to move more and more into a world of both/and. I am supported in this growing awareness, particularly as it applies to the inner life of the spirit, through my continuing study of the work of Parker Palmer, the Quaker wise man.

Palmer says that when we are able to say, “I am my shadow as well as my light,” then shadow’s power is put in service of the good.³ Which is to say, we ignore the shadow at our peril; and, when we name and claim our shadows experiencing wholeness becomes possible. That sense of wholeness...a wholeness that includes the divine and the human, the light and the shadow, the good and the evil, both/and, all of the above...is, in my limited experience, the place where we truly know that we are divine. Wholeness must include our brokenness, because denying our brokenness leaves us incomplete, and leads us to increasing separation, from our true selves, and from each other.

In process thought, as human beings we are deeply, undeniably interconnected with all that is, our ongoing evolution has every possibility, even probability, of being drawn toward more beauty, more light, more goodness. Way back in 1838, William Ellery Channing gave a sermon called *Likeness to God* in which he said “I affirm, and would maintain, that true religion consists in proposing, as our great end, a growing likeness to the Supreme Being. Its noblest influence consists in making us more and more partakers of the Divinity.”⁴

While I wouldn’t use Channing’s exact words today, this is our task...as individuals, and as part of this spiritual community...to pay attention to that divine lure...to critically examine our lives and to align ourselves with those qualities we most want to incarnate in the

¹ <http://www.oocities.org/uofor/kitsap.html>

² http://www.unityunitarian.org/uploads/6/1/0/3/6103699/faithful_words_meditation_incarnation.pdf

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaOFkumhcCU>

⁴ <http://www.john-uebersax.com/plato/Channing%20on%20Likeness%20to%20God.pdf>

world...all the while embracing and learning from those parts of ourselves that we might name as broken, or bad, or afraid and hurting. I recently read of an interview with cellist Vedran Smailovic (*VIDric SMAIL-ovic*) who lived, and played through, bombings in Sarajevo. He said, "I worry. I am afraid. Are you?...It is necessary that we take urgent, healthy action to return ourselves to the beauty of a life without fear."⁵

Deep within this theme of incarnation, I found a challenge for our times and for this faith. That challenge? To do everything that we can to ensure that our children can have a life of beauty without fear by making sure they clearly hear the message of their inherent worth and divinity. The more this message is spread, the more beings who will truly know themselves to be part of a totality that is infused with what is sacred, and the more our world will turn toward peace and justice and love.

Do you know that story told in the Christian Testament about the Annunciation? It tells of the moment when Mary is visited by an angel and told that she has "found favor with God" and will have holy child who would be king. Rev. Meg Riley⁶ wrote a reflection on this story noting that right from the beginning, Mary believed that angel... both in regards to the child's holiness, but also in regards to her own worthiness. She heard, and internalized the angel's message...your child is holy...and YOU are holy. You.

So, this is the challenge...a challenge for each of us. Let us each be that angel... and whisper into the ear of our children, and our partners, and our friends, and yes, even our enemies... you are holy. You contain a spark of divinity. In you lies all shimmering possibility.

For it is in recognition of that possibility that a healing wholeness can be known by all, a wholeness that embraces the fullness of our humanity, a wholeness that insists that each of us is part of the sacredness of all that is. Each of us is an embodiment of the holy. Each of us is divine.

May that truth be whispered into your ear without ceasing. May you lean into it, trusting it to be true. And may you pass it on to all your relations. You are holy.

So be it.

RESPONSIVE READING *For You* #659 ~ Walt Whitman

The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are;
__Those who govern are there for you, it is not you who are there for them;
All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it;
__All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments;
The sun and stars that float in the open air; the apple-shaped earth and we upon it;
__The endless pride and outstretching of people; unspeakable joys and sorrows;
The wonder everyone sees in everyone else they see, and the wonders that fill each minute of time forever;
__It is for you whoever you are -- it is no farther from you than your hearing and sight

⁵ <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/14336.shtml>

⁶ <http://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/from-your-minister-december-2014/>

are from you; it is hinted by nearest, commonest, readiest.

We consider bibles and religions divine -- I do not say they are not divine; I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still;

__It is not they who give the life -- it is you who give the life.

Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at last, in things best known to you, finding the best, or as good as the best --

__Happiness, knowledge, not in another place, but this place -- not for another hour, but this hour.

***CLOSING WORDS**

~ Walt Whitman, reprise

The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are;

The wonder everyone sees in everyone else they see, and the wonders that fill each minute of time forever;

It is for you whoever you are -- it is no farther from you than your hearing and sight are from you;

The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are;

Go forth and find your wholeness. Blessed be.