

“Singing and Meditating and Protesting and Dancing to the Other Side”

Rev. Maj-Britt Johnson

June 12, 2005

You’ve all heard the joke about the dead Unitarians? There were a whole bunch of them and that crossed over to the *other side* and they were trudging along and they came upon a road that diverged in a wood. And there was a sign there. And it had two arrows pointing in different directions. One pointer said: to heaven. The other pointer said: To a discussion about heaven. The Unitarians chose the discussion about heaven. (They, they chose the one *most* traveled on, and that has made all the difference).

Okay what we get from that (somewhat revised, apologies to the poet Frost) joke is obvious. We UU’s like to talk, to discuss, ad nauseum perhaps. Then again, sometimes we get tired of all the discussing and say, let’s just DO something. I’ve felt that energy here a lot this past five and a half months. I’ve heard people say: “it’s the same thing over and over, let’s just get going” Or, “let’s just move on”.

We get impatient with ourselves. I think we get a little embarrassed by ourselves too. That impatience, in me anyway, comes up when I realize how *serious* we can get about stuff that we can’t really solve, we can be like dogs circling their tails. Today I really don’t want to be too serious. I mean especially after last week’s service with the kids, and the poetry and the sacred silliness.

You know there’s another way of looking at that Unitarian joke. It’s about what we’re *missing* by choosing to do all that serious talking. And that’s Heaven itself. Let’s see ...discussion of heaven, or... heaven.

You know what I think heaven is? I think it's the place where we go and all sit around together on a cloud and look down at where we've been and laugh our as---s off at all the funny characters we played in this weird drama called human life.

"Oh God," I might say looking down at myself cheerfully, "I seem to have played a minister, who was always talking about spiritual practice, and about listening to each other, and acceptance of one another, and worrying incessantly about how she's going to mix spirituality with social action."

Except, because I am in heaven, I would not be judging myself for that.

And, there we all are on our clouds looking down and *each* of us is saying: can you believe I kept saying *that* line over and over? Whatever, that line might be in each case.

Except, because we are in heaven and therefore we have divine perspective, we don't beat up on ourselves, or anyone else, for doing it, we think it's the funniest thing we've ever heard, as if we were watching an episode of our favorite comedy.

I think we'll also be up there saying: who wrote that script for me? Did I really write those lines myself? And maybe we'll see which parts of our lives we really authored and how much we didn't.

Maybe we'll see really clearly, as we now think we see, but actually only see dimly, how much of our lives were lived in reaction to fear, or to our parents, or as a result of a long succession of ancestors we didn't even know, who passed their burdens on to us through blood, and memory, and unfortunate child rearing practices.

In fact maybe we'll be able to see all the way back, *so* far back that the Unitarians sitting on their puffy pink clouds will say: I do believe in Original Sin after all. We were wrong!

And, because we are in heaven, the fact that we were wrong will seem very funny indeed. And we won't even think about regretting a single moment of our lives, or say why didn't I...? Because it will all make a pattern that is quite beautiful.

And because we are in heaven we will only have compassion for ourselves. And again we will laugh, because will be able to see the big picture, and how we had to do everything we did, and how it all fit into the story; and how the story ultimately didn't belong to us alone. We will finally see that.

Even the most tragic episodes of our lives, might, just might from heaven look pretty funny; though I have to take that on faith since I do not have the divine perspective, only, like you, in brief snatches here and there.

So all this might sound like pie in the sky, but I do think we create a little bit of heaven here on earth when we are able to get that distant and humorous perspective. I sense that perspective is hovering there in the air, just a short distance away from us, when we say, "Let's just get going, let's just DO something". It's as if we can *almost* see how very bizarre we are when we sit around trying to make *words alone* fix our spiritual dis-ease.

But not quite. We don't quite have the perspective when we say *let's just get a move on*. Because there is still impatience, and embarrassment, and some other unhappy and hellish ingredients mixed in. And in heaven we are not impatient or embarrassed

with ourselves. We are so totally accepting of ourselves and each other, that all we can see is the great tragi-comedy that is our lives.

So how do we get to heaven? Or how do we, as Tuck and Patti sing in their song, Bring Heaven Down Here?

There's no way around it. Sometimes we have to pass through hell. They didn't tell us that in the joke about heaven. They didn't say: a bunch of dead Unitarians *after passing through hell* came upon a road that diverged...and so on.

Okay now we're back at the crossroads and this time we want to take the road *less* traveled, by anyone of any religion, the road to heaven. Again, how do we get there? How do we get to that place of perspective, of radical acceptance of ourselves and one another?

We had a discussion about this last Saturday.

And you know what, peering down, or back at that discussion. I'm wondering if we could have just done the first part and left it at that. The worship. For those of you who were not present at last Saturday's retreat: each person brought an object and talked about what it represented on their spiritual journey. Each person laid the object down in the center and together we created a sacred altar out of the symbols of our individual lives.

Would that have been heavenly to just leave it there? Because what we had was just a bunch of characters each relating their story, some of it funny, some of it serious. But that's really not the view from heaven at all if you think about it. If we'd just left it with the worship, with the separate sharing of our stories, we wouldn't have had a chance to look at our shared story. So we had to go through a little patch of hell afterwards (and I

do mean that humorously for those who were not there--You didn't miss a great drama, just a few little ones).

The thing is, the story we see from heaven, is all about criss-crossed lines: Plot, and conflict, and turning points, and climaxes and crises, and humor and pathos, and scenery, and settings, all that other good stuff of drama and literature and art.

It is safer to stay in our own zones, holding our separate precious objects, but it doth not real life make. And it doth not heaven make either. Life is potluck. So we started with that worship which recognizes our individual worth, and individual spiritual paths, and then we ventured into deeper territory as we talked about acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregation. And we talked about how congregational systems of energy can be like family systems of energy; how all the parts interlock, and affect each other.

Some of it was helpful, and some of it probably felt difficult, and there were different understandings of the same things. So by being there and trying to *unravel* some congregational knots, and yes I think we were trying to do that, by trying to *unravel*, we added a little bit more *ravel*. And life is like that. And that's fine. It's still the road to heaven in my opinion.

The thing I want to say, well one of them, is if you know it's all on the road to heaven you start enjoying it, even the supposedly tough stuff. The thing is we're not dead yet and we don't have the perspective of God so we can't just rise above it all.

We do get to make choices though. We may not have been the sole author in writing our own life scripts but we can get conscious of what we contribute. There are

ghost writers, unnamed, who wrote our stories with us and we can separate their voices out from our own.

When it comes to the congregation, we didn't write this congregational script all by ourselves either. We contributed, but so did our multitude of ghosts. We each bring a little piece of that original sin to our collective story, you might say. So that's why getting conscious of who we are is so important to me. You can go ahead and laugh at me whenever I say that word, you'll probably hear it ad nauseum. I would even say that we can't really DO, we can't really take action, we can't really change much of anything, until we have enough awareness, and enough acceptance.

The three A's. Some of you will be familiar with the three A's. There are a number of settings where one hears about them. In 12 step recovery programs, in engaged Buddhism, in other spiritual practices no doubt.

Awareness, then acceptance, then, and only then, action.

What the three A's tell us is that just because we have an awareness, especially of a problem, doesn't mean we can know what the best action is, or that we should act right away. There is a step in-between. It is the most difficult step of all: Acceptance.

I'm going to give you an example out of my own life. It's a story which I hope spans the personal and the political, the spiritual and the social justice realms. If not I will be ending the year disappointing myself, and that is a hellish place to be. So here goes.

At the risk of sounding self congratulatory I want to tell you a story about a small change I feel I was able to make in the world when I was about twenty years old. I was a college student in N.C. working as a waitress one summer at a local Holiday Inn. A fellow student from the college, named Laurie, came up to me one day and asked me

about jobs there and I told her where to apply and who to apply to. She wanted to be a desk clerk and I told her I knew there was an opening. She applied.

A couple weeks later I saw her on the campus where I was renting a room for the summer and she said “I applied for that job, but when I called, and went by again, they told me the job was filled”. She looked at me with a question in her eyes, and a knowing. My brain went between stations for a second. Laurie was Black. We both knew something was wrong with this picture.

It was Friday; I wasn't going back to work until Monday. I didn't know what to do. Sometimes that feeling overwhelms me and I do nothing especially if the problem feels too big. This time that didn't happen.

I became aware of a struggle going on inside and I let it happen. I felt first a slow dawning awareness. I have to do something. This is not right. Then that sense of urgency: I have to do something right away. It felt almost like if I didn't DO something right away I might “fall asleep” to it, and do nothing.

If I was working that night I probably would have gone in and ranted and raved at someone. I don't like feeling uncomfortable I want solutions. They probably would have gotten defensive. And then lied, again. Or maybe I would have made a decision to get some friends to stage a protest at the Holiday Inn, we were always protesting about something back then. But most of them were gone for the summer. In any case I had two days to get through before I could do anything, so I kept on struggling. I guess I was probably struggling with anger, powerlessness, most of all confusion and even guilt. At some point along the way, another awareness dawned on me.

*I got my humble little waitress job because I am white. **Because I am white. Only because I am white.** That is one of the things the manager registered when I walked in the door. Qualifications for a waitress at this Holiday Inn: She can walk, she can carry a plate, she can talk, and she's white.*

It was clear. The only Black employees were in housekeeping and maintenance. As a matter of fact I don't think I'd ever seen, at that time, 1976, a Black face behind a hotel desk in N.C... I didn't know what to *do*.

I struggled some more. Finally something in me, just let go. I said to myself, I don't know what I'm going to do but I trust that by Monday I will know. On Monday when I woke up I knew. I went into the office of the boss at the Holiday Inn, a woman, whose father owned the hotel and I said very slowly and very carefully: "Does the Holiday Inn discriminate in employment based on race?"

"Why no", she sputtered, and looked truly aghast.

"Well that's funny", I said. "Because a girl I know from college applied for the front desk job and I know you've been having trouble finding someone. Is that right?"

She nodded.

"And she's been by again, and called, and she's smart, and a college student like me, and she's very pretty and wears really nice clothes so she's great front desk material. So I can't imagine why, when she came in, someone at the front desk told her the job was filled. Except that she's Black."

The boss looked sick to her stomach. She didn't tell me what she would do. I left, feeling I'd done what I could. A couple of days later when I walked into work Laurie was at the front desk being trained.

So all I had done was get an acquaintance a job, just as friends had gotten me jobs, just as most people in this country get jobs, by word of mouth and who they know. There was just that little extra mountain in the way, racism.

I think there are many opportunities like the one with Laurie, which pass us by every day. Little, or not so little, opportunities to say I refuse to be overwhelmed just because I don't know what to do. I will sit with this until I know the first right thing to do.

Awareness, acceptance, action. To turn around a phrase: "Don't just do something, sit there".

I guess this is my agenda with you; I'll put it out there. I'd like our spiritual community to look at spirituality and social action as "Engaged Buddhism" does. As the name suggests, engaged Buddhists recognize that Buddhism can't in this day and age remain in a monastery. A practitioner can't only stay in a room and meditate if the word compassion, which is central to Buddhism, is to really mean anything. But it also powerfully recognizes that the practitioner needs his or her practice, his meditation *before* going out into the world. S/he needs in fact to practice it in the every day.

A Zen Buddhist site on the web called Creative Resistance had some interesting words to say on all this. The author writes:

"As awareness deepens it may bring not only frustration but total despair as we are exposed to more truth than we can sustain, coming up against the powerlessness of the small, alienated self."

I think any concerned person is overwhelmed with truth in this day and age. And if we are overwhelmed we are going to shut down our natural ability to receive new

awareness. But when we learn to sit with awareness, and more awareness, and then acceptance of all that comes along with the awareness: fear, embarrassment, and so on, it becomes right sized.

It is not the whole world we have to save, just whatever we are being called to see at that moment. It may arrive through a person, like my classmate Laurie, or a nagging recurrent thought, whatever. If we sit with it, and if we accept all that arrives along with it, and ride that out too, when we come out the other side we will always know what the next right thing is we must do. And that's all we need to know in that moment.

We become right-sized, neither too small for the task, nor too grandiose. And the task becomes right sized, not too overwhelming, nor ever too small and unimportant.

I believe a congregation can be a place, like a monastery which supports spiritual practice, and that kind of discernment. I don't know if there will ever be any one task we'll all want to engage in, neither one spiritual practice, nor one social project. What we can do unite to create the container in which we nurture the sparks.

So, I want to end with an image I have been haunted by for a few months. It speaks to creating that container. I don't remember where I read this. Probably in the UU World magazine.

A UU Congregation in WA. state went on retreat. The retreat was long planned and was a chance for congregants to rejuvenate and get to know each better, do some spiritual exploration, and so on. It was in a beautiful lodge and everyone was looking forward to it and nearly everyone in the congregation showed up.

But on the second day they learned of an important huge social action happening the next day somewhere nearby, a protest that fit right into their mission. I think it

concerned both ecology and the military, I can't remember exactly what. And the congregation became divided on whether to go or to stay with their original retreat plans. There was some contentiousness and old irritations about social justice versus spirituality in the air, and all the feelings that go along with that. The aroma of crisis.

Fairly quickly they had to come to a decision so they did. Those who wanted to go would go and those who wanted to remain behind would. No one thought it was the best solution in the world, but it was workable.

Sound good right? I've heard some of us saying that here, including me. There's a solution to the so called social action/spirituality split. Let those who are called to go forth go forth and those whose calling is to do other things, do them. That's acceptance, isn't it?

So anyway, about half the group went off together in the morning on a rainy Pacific Northwest day to protest and returned that night, cold, and wet but full of excitement and feelings about what the others had missed. When they went back into the lodge, they were greeted by the group who had stayed behind. They had created a warm welcome-back. There was a roaring fire in the fireplace, and when they walked in their fellow congregants wrapped blankets around their shoulders, served up hot food and quiet music and invited them to tell their stories.

Ponder that image for a moment. Actually ponder it for the summer if you will, and I'll catch you on the other side. The other side of summer that is.