

2/27/11 Sermon

"Fountainhead"

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As a pluralistic faith, we find wisdom from all cultures and belief systems.

The fountainhead of our religion, our First Source, flows from our direct experience of transcendent mystery and wonder.

Our calling is to open ourselves and others to the forces that create and uphold life – to give meaning in Forrest Church's words, "to the dual reality of having to live in the face of death."

We feel wonder, awe and compassion when we observe the majesty of the human condition. In a larger sense, this is part of an experience of the holy that looms within and beyond us. It is through touching the sacred that you come to understand what God, Spirit, nature, the creative power of evolution in the universe really is. Call it what you will.

When you feel its presence, the common effect is to open you to transcending the mundane so that you can reach for the stuff of stars from which you come and will return. When you touch the heavens, the light of life shines on you and within you. It is there that you will find your purpose – to know wonder and bring your creative energy to uphold life. That is pure joy.

God is, as Paul Rasor tells us, "that vision of the highest values of truth, justice, love and goodness towards which we strive. It reminds us of the relativity and limitations of our own ideas."

While there is no definitive answer to the question, "Why or what does life mean?", there is also no cause for despair. Rather, in Forrest Church's words, "if we remain open to the unknown, we enter further into it" and it prods us to learn to grow in knowledge; to reason, to appreciate and find wonder in what it means to be human and finally find contentment with the knowledge that we come from and will return to mystery.

This is the way we learn to cope with life, bear witness to the sacred and finally "awaken" to the consecration of our life, in Church's words, "through the sacraments of pain and loss you do not understand and promises of joy you will never fully call your own."

These polar opposites are, in Thoreau words, "our theological tutors."

We come to know, if we listen to the silence, that the answers for loss are beyond our knowing, just out of reach of our outstretched hands, and something larger than we can contain in our minds as individuals. Paradoxically, it is often through the specter of loss that we get a glimpse of the answer to life. Death does that, and then brings us back full circle to our four score and ten. The presence of our looming end has the effect of bringing meaning to our journey. The UU suffragette, Margaret Fuller, says, "Mystery is hope in the face of death."

We all struggle openly and in the secret recesses of our heart to find meaning for our existence. If you think, or say you don't search for the unknowable, why not take the journey anyway and see where it leads you? Perhaps you may find your place in the universe or find your way home to yourself. How you describe what you find, that place/entity from where you draw your strength and courage matters not. "God or Not God" is still mystery, beyond knowing and naming, its source forever veiled. The God of the Old Testament has no name save, "I am what I am."

This is mystery beyond human comprehension; it is the burning bush. It's a beginning and an end, the alpha and omega. It need not be supernatural, out there somewhere. We find it within.

Humanists – such as me – trust their instincts and experience. We are no puppet on God's stick. We have free will and take responsible for how we come to understand mystery.

You all have experienced loss and the mystery of death that seemed sometimes welcome but more often meaningless, unfair and certainly tragic. If you ever experienced a suicide, you know the pit of despair. After my cousin Amy killed herself forty years ago, I pleaded with God or whomever to tell me why someone so pure, so spiritually beautiful, had to die, alone and on a deserted beach. Our minds cannot contain such events. Our hearts are assaulted, our defenses breached and our vulnerability and fear exposed.

That was my experience and it took me ten long agonizing years before I accepted there was no mystical answer, only the reality and result of the act. That struggle with unknowable death and the searing pain of loss helped propel me to answer my call to ministry – to learn for myself how to cope with the struggle of living in the face of existential loss.

Perhaps as I did, you have had your own "Aha!" experience, a defining moment that changed your life forever. Think of what it was. My desire to cope with my own loss led me to want to help you and others deal with the

unknowable. The blessing I found in loss is to find hope where there seems to be none.

Jesus found renewed faith through the cross and in so doing gave hope for eternal life to a people sorely oppressed. The Buddha found hope and comfort in the power and presence of paradox, non attachment and existence/non-existence. Our pagan members find hope in the feminine embodied in nature. And so it goes.

These universal cross-cultural human experiences are transformative when they connect the mundane to the holy. We are blessed when we open to life's many lessons. Only through the depth of loss can we really know the heights of joy. Through death, Emerson tells us, "we come face to face with the only mystery there is, life itself."

To wonder is a gift and a choice. Such reverent transformative "*Aha!*" moments of ecstasy and agony demand expression and yield a novel spontaneous response from within. We are alive and connected to all that is, was, or ever will be. That connection draws out of us a feeling of deep respect and sense of wonder, fear and love for all of creation. And, we shout, "I am not alone. I am not alone. We are the family of man."

We get to share that epiphany every time we worship together but only if you open yourself to the gift of joy, that embracing peace, tempered by loss and remorse and with a resolve to do better next time. This is the holy, the ordinary held up to the light and profoundly seen. I believe if there are a hundred people here you have had five hundred experiences of the holy you may not even recognize; the brilliant color of a flower in a field; a rainbow on a cloudy, somber day.

I experienced it once watching my four-year-old son David eating a hamburger in McDonalds. Yes, McDonalds. He had ketchup all over his face, was as happy as a clam and swinging his feet back and forth. In a flash, I saw him as an adult and burst into tears and I knew wonder. I had a similar experience with my son Peter, about 5 in Chatham Cape Cod, fishing on a bridge with a tree branch, a string and a safety pin. When he caught a giant fish – all 1½ inches of it – he jumped up and down in joy and I again knew wonder and tears filled my eyes with our connection to the holy.

Do you remember your tear-filled rainbow?

Our humanity is illuminated for us by our fellow beings, each of whom offers the authentic presence of the divine. Kathy Huff tells us "that the beauty

and excitement of being human is that we have infinite opportunities to make our own meaning.”

People in all cultures over the eons have stuttered to find meaningful words to adequately describe mystery, and they have stumbled in the presence of the holy. God is the wholly other and yet as close as our own breath. It is here that we go in one form or another with our questions of ultimacy. When you open to the call stirring deep within, the call of life itself, you begin to follow a path of growth and change, learning and doing even in the face of our ultimate death.

You see it is the path that matters, our human hope to transcend the mundane and touch the holy. Within the heart of such mystery you are redeemed, made whole and there you will find peace – and reason enough for the journey.

As before, there is no answer to mystery and wonder, but the journey has taught us much. Have you bothered to learn what you needed to know? If not, why not? If yes is the answer, what will you do with it?

Each encounter with wonder, the beauty and majesty of life has the capacity to change, enrich and transform us. Such is the gift of life. It may come many times or only once. To search for meaning is awe inspiring for it opens you to the vastness of an atom and the breath of a galaxy. When you see that connection, you are compelled to dedicate yourself to creating and upholding life.

This is your religious challenge – to renew your spirit through redemptive action/service to something greater than yourselves. God is, the Holy is, in Elizabeth Ellis words, the “nitty gritty work of loving one another in the social, economic, political and material world.”

This is your ultimate calling – your gift ... your joy ... your reason for being.

And finally, as Forrest Church tells us, “we must live in such a way that our life will prove worth dying for.”

May it be so!