

Stumbling Across The Spirit

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The Adult Religious Education Committee of the church has planned a retreat for the last weekend of April, a retreat which will encourage the participants to reflect on their own spiritual paths, using autobiography to explore the religious and spiritual dimensions of life. It sounds like a rich opportunity to examine aspects of existence which we often take for granted, or fail to explore. I, of course, will be otherwise engaged that weekend and will not be able to attend the retreat. However, in some ways, the retreat has already had the desired effect upon me. Of late, I have found myself reflecting on moments in my own life, moments when my existence has been invaded by the holy, when a spiritual dimension became manifest in my consciousness. Without inflicting upon you a comprehensive autobiography, I would like to share some recent experiences with you this morning, in the hope that whether or not you are able to participate in the April retreat, you may find yourself encouraged to explore the spiritual qualities of your own lives.

Let me begin by confessing to you that all too often my life is lived spasmodically, rushing from one obligation to another, juggling competing demands, and feeling that nothing is ever quite done. The consequence of this kind of life is that too many times I find myself responding to the urgent rather than the important, dealing with surface realities while ignoring the depths. In this regard, I suppose I am not unlike many people in these times. But every now and then, as I rush along in my busyness, I stumble unexpectedly across another dimension, a spiritual quality, a sacred intrusion which forces me to stop for a moment and recognize that life is more than just one damn thing after another, that there is a continuity and a direction flowing through my existence which cannot be accounted for fully by the will I call my own. Every now and then, as I rush along, I stumble across the spirit. It happens at the strangest times and in the most unexpected places. It is some of this experience I would like to share with you.

"All architecture," said Walt Whitman, "is what you do to it when you look upon it...." Most of the time, when I walk into this building, I am impressed with the ability of the architect who designed it to take aspects of a number of distinct styles and blend them together into a pleasing and unified place of worship. Sometimes, if I am disgruntled or fatigued, my attention becomes riveted on the failings of the building--that it has no handicapped access, that the sight lines are difficult, that there are cracks here and there in the plaster, that there are no restroom facilities. But much of the time what I experience is the gift of the architect who was able to envision this place in his own mind, and draw it on paper and through the efforts of workers who could understand his dream and read his drawings, bring into being a structure wherein generations could laugh and weep and hear great music and ponder the meaning of life. And most of the time, I am quietly

grateful for his vision, and for the generation which made it possible for this place to come into being.

But there are other moments, when I enter this building and sense an older obligation, when somewhere in the back of my mind I hear whispers from a past so distant I cannot conceive it. Sometimes I stand under the low ceiling at the door back there, when the room is empty of people, and look into this place--at the columns rising from the floor, and the groined ceiling reaching down to the pillars, at the galleries under the balcony and the high-roofed, open space in the center of the room, at the recess which is the chancel and on those occasions, sometimes a shiver runs up my spine and I am suddenly aware of the vast antiquity of this kind of space and the eons of human experience which informed the architects dream. What I see, on those occasions is a cave deep in the earth, a cave which, is entered through a low-roofed passage, a cave opening out into a high-roofed hall with stalactites and stalagmites creating columns, a space with a recess at the end. To be sure, we have punched windows into the space to let in the sun, but this space, disguised though it is by centuries of architectural traditions and conceits, is still the ancient holy space of neolithic peoples--the cave where, enclosed in the womb of the earth, our forebears gathered, time out of mind, to celebrate their own existence, to share their hopes and their fears, to weep over their dead, to seek an understanding of their sojourn on this planet.

And it is then, in such a moment, that I am overwhelmed by the vast continuity in which our lives are enfolded. We are not fundamentally different from those ancient ancestors who decorated caves with pictures of the great beasts with whom they shared this planet, who drew upon the walls of those caves the outlines of their own hands, and who enriched the entrances of those caves with the engraved images of the Great Goddess who was the source of all life.

What I hear, on such occasions, are hushed voices out of a dim and distant past. In our reading together in unison and responsively, I hear the ritual chants of ancient voices speaking tongues long vanished from the earth. In our music, our singing and our listening, I hear the strange and distant echoes of music older than living memory. In our coming together to share insights and concerns, to share hopes and fears, I hear the voices of ancient shamans recounting their mystic journeys into the dream time and into the spirit world. And it is in such moments that I am overcome by the realization that living deep in each of us, every moment of our lives, are the urgent dreams and hopes of generations who once walked this green earth, who rejoiced in the warming sun, who counted the phases of the moon, and who sought to comprehend the meaning of the passage from life to death, unnumbered generations, who are now one with the good earth, but whose blood still courses through our veins, whose living seed we are.

"All architecture," said Whitman, "is what you do to it when you look upon it...." He was only partly right. All architecture is what happens when you bring yourself fully to the space and are open to the message it contains, when all you have been and all you have learned combines with what the place has to teach. This building whispers to me of long eons of human efforts to understand the meaning of our sojourn beneath the sun. And

when I am able to hear those whispers, I am reminded of who, in truth, I am--the heir of all those long ages of human effort, the confluence of unnumbered lives seeking once more, in this time and place to understand what it means to be human. When I am able to understand the message conveyed by this place, I am lifted out of my little local self, my biography is extended and I am invited to live an amplified existence. And I am overwhelmed with gratitude for all that has been and all that comes to focus in this moment, and for all that may emerge from our effort and our dreams.

Walt Whitman urged reverence before "the wonder everyone sees in everyone else they see...." Here, too, I sometimes stumble across the spirit. Most of the time, I live on the surface of my life and interact with people in a superficial way. I am not certain any of us has the energy to do otherwise most of the time. We live in a world dense with people, and for us people quickly become identified with function. People are what they do, and they are important to us because they fill roles in our lives that need to be filled. And increasingly, as we regard other people in terms of the function they perform, we come to think of ourselves in the same way. Asked to describe ourselves, most of us respond with a job description. We are what we do. And other people are what they do. And the wonder and marvel of our common humanity slips away. But there are moments when the sacred breaks through and I stumble across the spirit and know that people are more than their function.

Last Sunday morning, was a hectic time for me. I arrived early because of the New Member Breakfast. I wanted to get things set up for the service and have time to greet the new members informally. When I entered the church, I knew immediately that something was wrong. I should not be able to see my breath inside the building. Bao Le, our custodian, and Bill Breining, upon whom we always call in any emergency, were here to explain that despite their best efforts, there would be no heat for the first service. So, we quickly moved the service to Unitarian House. Then we moved back down here for coffee hour and the second service. Everyone took the upset in good spirits, but by the end of the morning, I was feeling more than a little harried. I tried to be cordial and attentive to people, but often I was only half hearing what people were saying to me.

In coffee hour, I found myself chatting in a superficial way with a couple whose wedding I had performed some time ago. They were here with their baby daughter. Suddenly, in the midst of our talking about this and that, the little one turned and looked straight into my eyes. There were no words but something stirred between us. And then, with a solemnity no words could have conveyed, she leaned out of her father's arms and reached for me. I juggled the papers I was carrying and took her in my arms. She sat there, nestled against me, looking steadily into my eyes. And something stirred deep in my mind. My own words came back to me: "there is a unity which makes us one, in spite of time and death and the space between the stars." I felt the warm weight of the child's body against mine and I was drawn to reverence before the wonder of this small human being. Here was the past incarnated; here was the future waiting; here was what we had been and what we will be, propped against my arm, looking into my eyes with trust and quiet serenity. And I found myself thinking, we are more than what we do. We are what we are and what we are is earth's dream moving through time.

With reluctance, I handed the child back to her father, and made my way to my next appointment. But in my office, waiting for the appointment to begin, I found myself remembering a very different occasion. I was sitting by the bedside of a friend. We both knew that he was dying. His conversation, often rational, sometimes wandered off into concerns which I could not understand, as his attention was deflected from the world we shared to a world which was his alone. I sat there a long time, responding when it seemed appropriate; silent when silence seemed called for. Then it was time for me to leave. I stirred in my chair, preparing to rise, when he turned and looked at me. It was the same solemn stare I had just seen in the eyes of the baby. My old friend looked into my eyes and with that gaze seemed to communicate what we both knew--that we would never see each other again. I took his hand. He continued to look into my eyes. And then he said, "I love you." He turned his head away; I squeezed his hand and took my leave. Here, at the other end of life, when all the doing was done, it was transparently clear that we are more than what we do; we are what we are; we are creatures who live and laugh and love, knowing all the while that we shall die; creatures who understand, at some deep level, that it is our love, not our deeds which defines us; we are the earth's dream, moving through time. In the eyes of a child, and in the eyes of a dying friend, I stumble across the spirit, the deeper meaning of our sojourn beneath the sun and I am drawn out of my little local self, and my biography is amplified and I am called to deliberate living.

In many ways, the task of religion in our time centers around the need to recall people to a recognition of who, in the larger sense, they are and how they relate to the larger processes of life. Nor is this simply a private and personal quest. Many of the great social issues of our time are so resistant to solution precisely because we do not understand the spiritual nature of our existence. What might it mean for the planet if we were to understand that we and the earth are one interactive process, that we are earth's dream moving through time? What might it mean for our political and economic and social processes if we truly believed that all of us come from the same source, that each of us is a precious link between what once was and what may be, that every human being is the incarnation of the dreams and hopes of all those who have preceded us in this venture? What might it mean to our own personal lives, if we could learn to read the messages in the eyes of others, if we could learn to hear the echo of ancient voices speaking to us in this world, if we could truly believe that we are defined by what we love, not what we do? Part of the job of religion is to sensitize us to the spiritual nature of our own existence, so that we may recognize the deeper truth of our existence when we stumble across it.

Walt Whitman said, "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." Emerson said, "Within us is the soul of the whole...." There is the center and heart of the spiritual vision which informs our tradition. Religion is not a matter of right belief, delivered once to the saints and guarded by the faithful through the generations. Religion is a matter of listening to "the soul of the whole" within us, of recognizing the spiritual nature of our existence when we stumble across it, of living out of the depths of our being rather than on the surface of life. Our tradition teaches that the meaning of life is revealed when we listen reverently to the

voice which is deep within us, when we bring our selves--all we have learned and all we have experienced--fully into communion with those around us, when we open ourselves to world and learn what it has to teach us.

"The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are....," said Walt Whitman. What a radical thought! What a world it would be if we took seriously the notion that we and all people are to be treated as not worthy of reverence, but the source of reverence, the vehicle by which self understanding and meaning and direction are mediated. What a world it would be if we understood that the spirit resides "in the nearest, the commonest, the readiest," in the common dust and the ordinary moment, if we learn to see them for what they are and cherish them for what they have to teach us. And the amazing truth is that the holy, the sacred, the spirit is ever present to us, waiting to break open for us the deeper meaning of the lives we live and the relationships out of which we emerge. The hard thing, in all our busy lives is to stop, to listen, to remember whence we have come. In our own biographies insights, powerful insights wait to draw us out of our little local selves and remind of who we are: the earth's dream moving through time.