

The Unitarian Church  
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## UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS WITH THE SACRED

Human beings, in many different cultures, in different places and times, have told strange stories about the sudden and unexpected visitation of the holy, the sacred in the midst of mundane and everyday interactions. Many of those stories from all over the globe are about the wise and sophisticated of the world who looked into the face of the holy and did not recognize the encounter for what it was, and about how the young and the naive and simple often were the only ones to see through the thin screen of the ordinary to the luminous face of reality.

In my own world, I have often found myself face to face with the sacred, the holy. But as the ancient stories warn, most of the time I have not know what I was seeing until long after the moment of visitation. Looking back over the years, I find moments when the world of my quotidien existence has suddenly been invaded by a deeper truth, a wider understanding, a transforming reality which has worked it subtle power in my life in the guise of the common and the ordinary.

Most of the time, these minor theophanies, these moments of transformation have come to me as gifts from men and women whose paths have crossed mine, men and women with whom I have shared a brief moment, men and women who, on the surface seem quite ordinary and unremarkable, but men and women who for a moment incarnated the sacred and touched my life and left me forever changed.

Among the people who have blessed my life in ways they did not know at the time, and I would not understand until years later, are a high school guidance counselor, a social studies teacher in middle school, a college professor who became a friend, and a host of other people. But this morning in early May, this month much given to celebrating those who have touched and changed our lives, this season that includes mothers' day and memorial day, we find ourselves thinking especially of three people we encountered in one year, late in the 1950's, people who touched us and changed us in profound ways. This

morning, we would like to share those memories with you, partly to honor the memory of those three individuals, and partly to invite you to take a moment to visit your own private pantheon of people who have mediated the sacred in your own lives.

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Mary was a third grade teacher. She looked like a third grade teacher. She was solidly built, neatly dressed, her hair precisely combed. There was something about the way she walked into a room, or stood in a group which told you immediately this woman would brook no nonsense; you had better have your homework done, and behave quietly and respectfully in her presence.

Mary was also a member of the tiny first congregation I served. She was a ready and willing participant in the work of that ailing parish. Somehow she managed to remain aloof from the petty squabbles and quarrels that characterized the life of that congregation as it groped its way to its ultimate demise. I can still see her working in the church kitchen, and participating in meetings, bringing competence, skill and calm, reasoned judgment to every situation.

Mary was personally responsible for our little church school. That is, she supplied the student body. They were not her children, but they were two youngsters she knew from school, youngsters for whom she had a special affinity. She invited them to church, and they came, week after week, two little girls who, at the beginning, were our entire church school.

We were never sure whether Mary was unmarried, widowed or divorced. The children called her Mrs. Shank. But in those days, all older women who taught school were given the title "Mrs." We did know that she lived alone, in a large house at the edge of town--out where the farmers' fields abutted the line of settlement.

One day, Mary called and asked us to drive out to her house for a visit. She cautioned us, however, that her driveway was blocked and we should park on the side of the road near her home. As we approached her house, I noticed that her own car was also parked on the side of the road, and her driveway

was blocked by a make-shift barricade of old kitchen chairs and a broom stick. We knocked on the door, and Mary ushered us into her well-kept parlor. After a bit of small talk, she called us over to a window, pulled aside the curtain, and said, "This is what I wanted you to see," and pointed toward the driveway.

It looked like a driveway to me; an unpaved driveway of dusty dirt and stones. Seeing the puzzled look on my face, she pointed again. I stared, and eventually thought I saw something moving. Looking more intently, I saw a small, neat bird, sitting among the stones of the driveway.

"It's a killdeer," said Mary. "They make their nests in open places. This one has decided to make her nest in my driveway. When I get too close to her, she drops one wing and limps off, as if she were injured, in an effort to lure me away from the nest. That's how the killdeer protects its eggs. I just wanted you to see my tenant."

We watched the bird for a while, talked a little and then left. It was a small moment, quite unremarkable. Except. Except that this experience was unique in my life to that point. I had grown up in a third floor apartment, in a small industrial city in Maryland. For the most part, in our household non-human life was an enemy to be overcome. My aunt spent a great deal of energy trying to kill mice and rats and cockroaches and other vermin. In her mind, birds were a nuisance, always threatening the clean clothes she had just hung out to dry. While we had a dog, he quickly learned that his well-being depended upon staying out of her way. Even when we moved out of the apartment and into the country-side, animals were valued for what they could provide. Any bird improvident enough to build a nest in our driveway would have paid dearly for such a rash decision.

Here, on the other hand was Mary, a woman whose judgment and insight I respected, who was prepared to inconvenience herself for several weeks while a killdeer incubated the future in the middle of her driveway. I was astounded. For the first time in my life I began to glimpse the possibility that human beings have an opportunity for relationships beyond domination, that other living things may have rights that we have a moral obligation to respect, that we share this beautiful planet with life forms which, though dif-

ferent from us, are related to us.

I had joined bird-watching hikes in the early mornings during my freshman year in college--traipsing along with a few other students and the professor who was a favorite of mine, stopping to focus the field glasses, trying to identify the varieties of birds stirring in the treetops of a woodland area near the college. But this was different--we were now in the real world. I doubt that Mary ever knew what a precious gift she offered that summer afternoon, when she called and invited us to her home. Even we did not know, until long after we had moved from that town, how rich a world she opened for us.

I never had an opportunity to thank her. But I do so now. One summer afternoon, she opened my eyes, helped me to see a killdeer amid the stones in her driveway, helped me see myself as part of an interdependent and inter-related world and I have never been the same again. One summer afternoon, she touched my life with a touch as gentle as a butterfly's wing, and I have never been the same since.

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The second person we remember from that same town and those same years, was a crusty old curmudgeon named Jim. As a young man he had contracted polio, which left him crippled: although he was able to get around with the aid of two sturdy canes which he had fashioned for himself. By the time we met him he had also developed a tremor in his hands. But these misfortunes had not made him bitter. Rather, over the years, he had developed a wicked, delicious sense of humor. He had a reputation in town for playing practical jokes on his neighbors--nothing really hurtful; just funny. For example, one day, noticing two of his neighbors chatting outside their homes, he moved the speakers of his new hi-fi system to the window, and put on a recording of some Sousa marches. He played them softly at first, then slowly increased the volume, all the while laughing to himself as the neighbors gathered up their children and headed up the street to watch the parade.

We met Jim when he decided, at age sixty-seven, that it was time to learn to play the piano that was sitting in his living room. I had been introducing the two little girls in the Sunday school to the joys of piano and he had heard about it--it was a small town, after all-- so he called me and asked if I would give him lessons. It was a real challenge with crippled legs and the tremor in his hands, but he was determined to give it a try. So I agreed to give him regular lessons. David went along, and soon we three became great friends. His commentary on the world--so wry and humorous and appropriate--was a breath of fresh air in a small, insular, ingrown community. He also taught us to play a mean game of pinochle. He shared stories of his adventures in the world: he had been in the Navy before the polio, then he had rigged the photo sequencing for the A bomb explosions at Enewetok just before he retired. He also introduced us to a small group of young people whom he befriended and was helping through the difficulties of growing into responsible adults.

Jim was a man of many parts. He made a small grandfather's clock cabinet from maple, installed a set of works he had assembled from various sources, and gave it to us. After we moved from town, he visited us on a regular basis for some years--I can still see him swinging through the airport on his canes, and then, at our house, settling down to regulate the clock and get it running again. (It always ran for about two weeks after his visit, then stopped and waited for him to return.) Then, one year, the visits stopped and the letters stopped. And we were left to wonder what had happened to our friend, Jim. A mutual acquaintance finally told us that we had broken a taboo which was stronger than our friendship.

After our second son was born, we adopted a third child. Stephen was a beautiful little boy with large, sad, dark brown eyes, who was truly an African American. His mother had been a Euro-American graduate student; his father, an exchange student from Kenya. We proudly announced his arrival in our family to all our friends. Jim, who had celebrated the arrival of our first two sons, could not accept this breach of the color barrier. We never heard from him directly again. We did not know whether to feel

anger or sorrow or disappointment. In truth, we felt them all.

With the passage of years, I now know that I have learned some vital things from our friend, Jim. Watching him cope with his physical handicaps I learned a great deal about human courage and resilience, and our ability to construct a rich and meaningful life within the limits which fate imposes upon us. Seeing him extend his friendship to the lonely and the hurt and the discouraged, taught me something of the importance of responding to people where they are, as they are. Experiencing his unique sense of humor, I learned not to take myself or the world too seriously. And in the end, I learned that all of us, however rich our lives may be, however empathetic our response to the world, all of us have in ourselves some unexpected handicaps, some hidden limits--barriers not responsive to the suasions of reason or logic.

Jim could fashion canes that allowed him to function in the world despite his physical handicaps. The emotional handicaps resulting from growing up in a racist society were not so easily overcome. And so, I learned from Jim to watch for the limits which time and circumstance have built into my life, those irrational prejudices that lie hidden within me, and that may lead me to foolish and hurtful decisions. Whenever I look at the Grandfather's clock in our apartment (now powered by a battery driven mechanism), I remember him, and I am thankful for all we shared, for all that he taught me, and I am saddened that there came a time when our paths diverged so profoundly that we could no longer walk together.

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The third person who entered our lives that year was a man we never met. Some acquaintances from the Universalist Church in Cincinnati sent me a gift of several long-playing recordings of sermons delivered at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, DC, by Dr. A. Powell Davies. Those sermons came at a crucial time in my life. I was attempting to serve as minister to a small, dying, isolated Universalist Church. I was functioning without the benefit of any seminary training. I had never before heard a Unitarian Universalist preach. My religious experience was rooted in Bible centered, conservative Christian

pietism. The sermons I had heard as a youngster had all been about personal piety, about how to live in this world so as to receive a reward in the world to come. The churches, in my experience, had given up on this world, offered no hope of improving society, and encouraged people to separate themselves from the world and to live a life of acceptance and endurance, hoping for better things in the next life.

I encountered Davies' sermons at a time when I was attempting to find some path out of that thicket of religious assumptions. And Powell Davies was a light in the darkness. I listened to his rich voice on those records and discovered there sermons which were erudite and literate and reasonable, not Bible centered or specifically Christian. What is more, those sermons combined a strong moral imperative, a clear religious vision and a profound concern for the social condition in a way that suggested that the world, for all its sorrow and pain, is not beyond redemption, that the task of religion is not to draw us away from the world but to engage us with the world, to dream dreams and to make those dreams into reality. I listened to those sermons, and a new understanding of the church, of the ministry, of religious possibilities began to form in my mind. For the first time I knew that truth was not dependent upon Biblical sources, that Christianity was not to be accepted as normative, and that my growing concern for the world was religious at its root.

A. Powell Davies was not responsible for my decision to become a minister; nor was he responsible for my choice of Unitarian Universalism as a religious home, but in some ways he may have made it possible for me to hold to my vocation, for he opened my eyes to a broader understanding of church, of faith, of ministry. Though I never met Dr. Davies--he died the year I began my work in the ministry--I remain eternally grateful for his gift to my life. It is one of the real satisfactions of my career to know that during the years I served as minister of the Unitarian Church in Summit, I occupied the pulpit which Powell Davies occupied from 1933 to 1944. It is also a source of satisfaction that some years ago, when his young granddaughter died, Dr. Davies' widow, Muriel, asked me to conduct the memorial service. I felt then that, in some way, I was making a small repayment of the gift I received from A. Powell Davies, all those long years ago.

From time to time, as I now teach the art of preaching to students at Meadville/Lombard Theological School I hear in my head the rich cadences of

his voice, the stirring and powerful quality of his thought, and I am reminded again and again of how much my ministry, my preaching, my life owes to this man whom I never met and how, through me, he may yet influence a generation of ministers who never heard his voice.

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**As we said at the outset, we share these memories with you as a way of expressing gratitude for three people who touched our lives and changed us and enriched us beyond anything they could have known or intended.**

We share these memories with you as a way of challenging you to find some quiet moment to visit your personal pantheon of heroes and heroines and give thanks for those who have touched and changed and enriched your life. But there is one other motive as well. We share these memories as a reminder to all of us that our lives are woven into the larger human community.

**We touch the lives of others, often without knowing it, and in that touching, we change the lives of others and the world we share in common; in that touching we have the opportunity to enrich the lives of others and the world in ways past knowing.**

We share these memories with you, as a challenge to remember, that in your living, you mediate to another generation the gifts which have come to you from the past,

**that the ripples from your lives will lap shorelines you cannot see and affect a future you can never visit**

and that therefore, it behooves us all to live gently with each other and to walk with care through this beautiful, fragile, fleeting existence.

--Revs. Beverly and David Bumbaugh