

Visions and Portents

Rev. David E. Bumbaugh

[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)

May 31, 1992

We live in a world filled with great wonders, a world constantly offering us marvelous insights, providing us astounding information. The sad thing is that often we miss some most powerful communications because we are not paying attention, or because they come to us disguised--as common and ordinary and quite unexceptional events--and we do not take the time to look beneath the ordinary to discover the extraordinary. There are times, however, in the midst of everyday happenings, when meaning breaks through the mundane, the conventional reality dissolves, and our experience is reoriented and we come to understand ourselves and our world differently. This morning, I would like to share several such experiences, several small visions, and paltry portents, which have returned in quiet moments to haunt my reverie. I share them as an invitation to you to listen more intently to the messages the world sends your way at every moment of every day.

* * * * *

Atlantic City is not the place it used to be. When I was a child, we frequently went to Atlantic City for our brief summer vacations--a night or two in one small, airless room, in a tired hotel blocks from the boardwalk. In those days, Atlantic City was a slightly seedy town dedicated to a single purpose--to separate tourists gently, but firmly from their money. I remember vendors along the Boardwalk hawking cutters and slicers, and a host of handy-dandy kitchen wonders. I remember shops filled with cheap, imported items for sale to the unwary. On my desk there is still a crudely carved water-buffalo I acquired one summer, and I still use a carved ivory book mark which was the prize acquisition on another summer visit. I remember the Steel Pier and the fabulous diving horse--a horse which most reluctantly jumped or slid from a high tower into the sea to delight spectators several times every day. I remember learning to swim in the surf off the beach, and building sand castles, and being painfully burned by the sun until my back hung in great blisters. I remember salt-water taffy and frozen custard and hot dogs and french fries. It is a wonder I survived those child-hood vacations. I remember, too, that it was in Atlantic City that I gave Beverly her engagement ring, nearly thirty seven years ago. It was always one of those magical places for me.

A few years ago, we returned to Atlantic City. It is now a place of gambling casinos. The beach, on that occasion, was virtually deserted. The boardwalk was jammed with people moving from one casino to another. For the first and only time in my life I visited a casino. Inside the vast, cavernous, windowless hall I found the people who in an earlier time might have crowded the

beach. The room was decorated in satanic red, with gold and crystal chandeliers. The hall was completely devoted to slot machines and roulette wheels and tables where various games of chance were being played. And the hall was jammed with people, none of whom seemed to be interacting with any one else. Hundreds of people stood before slot machines, mechanically inserting coins, pulling handles, waiting a moment for the dials to stop spinning, inserting coins, pulling handles-- over and over again the same process. And the faces of the people betrayed neither hope nor despair--simply a unanimous blankness. Even when, with a metallic clatter, one of the machines spit back coins, there was no joy, no elation-- only a mechanical scooping of the coins into a cardboard cup, and resumption of the process of feeding the machine and waiting for the consequence. One woman stood before two machines, ignoring the line of people behind her waiting for a turn at a machine. Rhythmically she fed first one machine, and while its disks were still spinning, inserted a coin into the other machine. After a while it was hard to see her as other than a part of the machines she tended so assiduously.

I found I could not bring myself to play one of those machines, despite my pocketful of quarters. I stood watching, without comprehending, but filled with thoughts of the poverty and human need which could be encountered only a few blocks from this pleasure palace which curiously seemed to provide its devotees so little pleasure. In the midst of my puritanical disapproval, I heard a voice fall on my inner ear: "And you have dared to preach that there is no hell! Could anything Dante wrote more accurately reflect hell than this place where people stand in isolation, cut off from each other and the world, numbly devoting themselves to the service of machines which offer neither satisfaction nor pleasure? Like Tantallus of old, they can never be satisfied; no winning will ever be enough; it is the endless game that has become important, and they have given themselves over to it. There is a hell; it consists in isolation, in lost relationships, in a world without extremes of hope or grief." And then, one message more: "There is a hell, and lest you become too smug and self-congratulatory, remember that there may be a special corner reserved for you where, for all eternity, or as much of it as you shall know, you may stand wrapped in your loneliness, judging, but failing to enter in, failing to gamble, to risk yourself in relationship."

* * * * *

Some years ago, my aunt gave me an antique clock. It was in pretty bad condition. Somewhere over the years, it had lost its pendulum. The gong had disappeared. The weights were missing. The brass works were still in good condition, though an occasional tooth was badly worn on one or two of the cogs. I spend some time scavenging and soon found an acceptable replacement for the pendulum, some old weights, even a metal spiraled spring to replace the missing gong. After some fiddling with it, I had the old clock functioning again. It was not particularly accurate, but the sound of its tick-tock in my study was strangely comforting. The old clock was a tie to something and therefore, profoundly reassuring.

One morning, as I was winding the clock, I heard a strange noise; the weights plummeted to the bottom of the case, and several small pieces fell from the works. I immediately took off the face plate and attempted repairs. After an hour or so, I had the small pieces back where I thought they belonged; everything seemed fine--except that the clock would not run more than five minutes at time. Having done all I knew to do, I closed the case and the clock sat silently on the shelf in the study for a long time. Then we moved and after the books were unpacked, I turned my attention to the clock once more. I oiled it thoroughly; I experimented with various ways of replacing the pieces which had fallen off; I tried a different pendulum. Then, replacing the face plate, I gave the pendulum a swing. The clock began to tick. Ten minutes later it was still ticking. Three hours later, it was still ticking. The next morning I noticed that not only was it still ticking, but it was keeping time as accurately as my wrist watch. For several years, the old clock ticked away on a shelf.

In a curious way, of all the things I have accomplished over the years, perhaps the most completely satisfying was to have repaired that clock. It was the one thing I could feel unequivocally good about. It was not important in any cosmic sense. I never even knew what the old clock was measuring--whether time has any reality apart from those of us who measure it. Hundreds of clocks just like the one I owned were manufactured in the last century, and most of them ended up on trash heaps. But the ticking of that old clock stitched my life back to a past I could not remember, and it brought me a curious, healing satisfaction. Listening to the ticking of that clock, I sometimes heard a quiet voice whispering in my inner ear: "Grace is to be found in little things; in small accomplishments, in unremarkable circumstances. Be faithful in little things and cherish the blessings of simplicity. They may be the only gifts of grace you will ever receive, but they are sufficient."

We moved again. I carefully packed the clock, wrapping the weights and the pendulum and the key separately. When we unpacked in our new home, the clock was there, but the weights and the pendulum and the key with which to wind it were gone. The clock now sits silently on my work-bench in the basement, waiting for the reappearance of the weights and the pendulum and the key. And whenever I see it, a voice whispers in my ear another message: "Nothing is forever; take satisfaction where you find it, and store up memories against the day when the key is lost and everything falls silent."

* * * * *

One August evening
we gathered for a picnic
along the banks of a mountain stream
in western Maryland.
At that point in its course
the stream poured itself over a waterfall
and bubbled along rocks and boulders
chuckling merrily all the while.
Along its banks

wild flowers grew in great variety and profusion
and trees shaded the water
from the late summer sun.

Some of us arrived early--
to lay the fire,
prepare the food,
set the table.
As we worked quietly
we noticed two ducks
swimming silently upstream
against the current.
The ducks saw us
and prudently moved
to the center of the stream.
We went back to our tasks
and were surprised to discover
that the ducks had left the stream
and were now standing three feet from us
watching our every move
with grave intensity.
They displayed no fear
no apprehension,
only a mild curiosity.
We greeting them courteously
and went on about our business.
Other people arrived
and soon we fell to chatting
about the weather,
and our jobs
and how the children had grown
and a dozen similar topics,
all the while setting the table,
preparing the meal.
Soon all was in readiness.

At this point I looked around.
Where there had been two ducks
now there was a dozen
standing solemnly near the end of the table,
murmuring to each other,
probably discussing
the weather
and jobs
and how the children had grown
and this gaggle of human beings.

It was obvious
they had no fear of us.
As we walked toward them
they simply shuffled their flat feet
and watched us carefully,
but none moved to flee.
As we sat down to eat,
the ducks became more bold.
They moved up to the table,
and waddled along the benches behind us,
occasionally nipping at the button
on someone's trouser pocket,
or tapping an occasional bottom with a beak.
Some of them disappeared under the table
where they nipped
at shoe laces,
sandal straps,
and the occasional bare toe.
We tried to shoo them away.
Like trees planted by the waters,
they would not be moved.
They regarded all our efforts
with a sardonic detachment,
shuffling their webbed feet
but refusing to be intimidated.

Someone in our group,
responding to the nip of a beak,
wondered who had invited
the Mallard family
to our private picnic.
Then, in a flash,
the message of this strange interaction
struck me with great force.
No matter what the documents may say,
filed away in courthouse records,
no matter how many signs
proclaim this a public picnic area,
all our rules about property and ownership and use of land
are fundamentally irrelevant.
We do not own the planet,
or any portion of it.
At best, we simply share it
with myriad living forms.
To us this shady stream bank
was a convenient picnic site.

It was also a home
for ducks and spiders,
moles and rabbits,
locusts and sweat bees
butterflies and god knows how many other living things.
The ducks belonged here
as much as we, perhaps more so,
and they knew it.
We were having our picnic
on their front lawn.

The message of the ducks was clear:
we can enjoy the earth
but only if we are willing to share it.
Notions about ownership,
and boundary lines
simply do not apply
outside the narrow conventions
of the human family.
We receive the earth as a trust
from past generations,
we share it with the current generation of living things,
we pass it on to future generations.
In the larger view of things
we own nothing;
we share everything.

* * * * *

Traveling south,
on route eighty-one
from New York State
we ran into rain
at Binghamton.
By the time we crossed the border
thunder was rolling
through the Pennsylvania mountains;
rain was hitting our windshield
so hard and fast
the wipers could no longer clear it.
Traffic slowed to a crawl
as we snaked our way south.
Near Scranton,
though the thunder boomed
as ominously as ever,
the rain began to slacken.
Suddenly,

light found an opening in the clouds
and poured itself through,
flooding the valley
west to east
with the golden rays
of a declining sun.
Glancing off to the east,
I saw the city of Scranton
nestled under black and ominous clouds,
with wisps of whiter clouds
near the summits of the higher hills.
Despite the sunlight
slanting in from the west,
rain continued to fall on us.
Then I saw it--
or almost saw it--
beginning to take shape
in the dark sky
over the city of Scranton.

Like a whisper you almost hear,
a rainbow began to form.
Each end of the bow
was firmly anchored
in wisps of white cloud
while the arc formed over the city.
It was the most complete,
most vivid rainbow
I had ever seen.
Then, as I watched,
a second rainbow,
fainter, less distinct,
began to form,
encompassing the first rainbow.

I was entranced.
Outside the double rainbow,
the world seemed dark
and threatening
and quite ordinary.
Inside the rainbow
everything was touched
with a special glory.
The grimy old city
glistened and gleamed
like something out of a fantasy.

For a while,
the sky inside the double rainbow
was a rich, golden color.
As I watched
and as the sun sank lower on the horizon,
the colored changed
to vivid rose
and then a deep purple.
The space within the rainbows' arc
was enchanted.
Even Scranton, Pennsylvania,
was a place of wonder.

As I watched that double rainbow,
a memory from long ago
took shape in my mind:
I was young;
I was watching a rainbow;
someone,
I don't remember who,
spoke to me:
"You know," he said,
"a rainbow isn't a thing in itself.
A rainbow is a matter of relationship.
In order for the rainbow to exist,
three separate things
must be in the right relationship.
There must be raindrops in the air;
the sun must send its rays
through the raindrops at the proper angle
so they break the light
into its constituent colors;
and there must be a receptor,
an eye placed so it can see
the refracted light
projected against the heavens.
Move any of these elements significantly,
and the rainbow ceases to exist."

"Isn't the rainbow real?" I asked.

"Oh it's real enough," came the answer,
"but like many real things--
beauty,
truth,

good--
it only exists in relationship,
because we and the world
interact in such a way
that we can see
the complexity
hidden in the ordinary."

I don't think I understood at the time,
but I remembered the words,
and they came back to me,
driving down route eighty-one
one summer evening,
watching Scranton, Pennsylvania
ensorcelled by a double rainbow.

I come away from that encounter
with several truths:
First,
that nature,
this world that is our home,
is more marvelous than we know.
Hidden in the light of an ordinary day
are colors and hues and tints
to beggar the imagination--
a beauty we can only see
when we and the world
are in the right relationship.

Second,
that grace,
by its very nature,
is unpredictable.
If nature can choose to manifest its glory
in Scranton, Pennsylvania,
there is no corner of the globe
where miracles are impossible.
The visions are all around us,
waiting to disclose themselves
to a receptive eye,
but they are impotent and hidden
until we are ready to see.

Third,
that all important insights
depend upon right relationship.

Truth and beauty and love,
mercy and justice and hope
exist in this world
because in our relation
to each other,
to the world
we call them out of ourselves
and sustain them in being.
Apart from our efforts
to invoke beauty,
to incarnate truth,
to live the right
they fade and disappear.

That, I suppose,
is what religion,
at its core,
is all about:
Establishing the necessary relationship
of love
of openness
and concern
that we may call into being
a world of hope and promise and beauty.

And finally,
the most challenging of all insights:
The world we would create
must begin with us,
where we are.
That we are few
and removed from the center of things
is no excuse.
If sunlight,
passing through raindrops
can transform Scranton, Pennsylvania,
then we are challenged
to transform the world,
right where we touch it
in this place,
in our lives together.