

READINGS FOR PUUC – February 8, 2015

From “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten” by Robert Fulghum

Lawyer friend made his annual summer visit last week, up from California. Traveling with two eighteen-year-old girls and a small boa constrictor. In an anemic VW van with PEACE, LOVE, LIGHT written on the side. The inside of the bus was decorated like the set for Alice in Wonderland. He’s forty-seven. Wife, four kids, house in Berkley Hills, job in the city with a big firm...the whole catastrophe.

I keep up with him because he’s always a little ahead of the times. He’s taken all the trips – and I do mean ALL the trips. A walking sociological experiment of the sixties and seventies in American culture. Civil rights, Vietnam, Hip, TA, TM, vegetarian, Zen, massage, LSD, palmistry, ten brands of yoga, macramé, psychoanalysis, backpacking, hot tubs, nudism, crystals, more religious movements than you can name, and vitamins. He’s got all the equipment – blenders and pipes and grinders and bikes and jogging outfits and oils and unguents and grow lights – the works.

This year he’s into simple ignorance. “It’s all crap,” says he. “All lies. Your senses lie to you, the president lies to you, the more you search the less you find, the more you try the worse it gets. Ignorance is bliss. Just BE, man. Don’t think or do – just BE. The WORLD is coming to an END!”

The day before he left, he jumped off a lakeside dock with his clothes on to help a kid who appeared to be in danger of drowning in the deep water. And he confessed to being in town for the National Lawyers Guild convention, since he’s a member of its social justice committee.

“So, if it’s all lies and crap – and ignorance is the ultimate trip – than how come...?” I say.

“Well,” says he, “I might be wrong.”

Pieces of sanity are found washed ashore on all kinds of beaches these days. And skepticism and realism are not the same as cynicism and pessimism. I mention it because it seems like a good bumper sticker for the eighties: “I may be wrong.”

From “Uh-Oh” by Robert Fulghum

In my childhood I was told that God was all powerful and lived far, far away. And that I could not see Him until after I died. When I asked why, if God was so powerful, there were children starving in Mexico, I was told it was the will of God and that I should not worry about it. Instead, I should be concerned about making sure I didn’t attend the upcoming high school prom, because dancing was a sin and I should try not to sin.

Now I am older. And I know that God is everywhere and in all things. There is nowhere that God is not, even in me. I also know that starving comes from not having enough food, and that is a human problem about which something can be done.

I know that dancing comes from having much joy.

*And when everyone has enough to eat, everyone will dance...
It took me fifty years to figure that out. Pass it on. Come to the dance.*

What If I'm Wrong?
A Sermon Offered to the Peterborough Unitarian Universalist Church
February 8, 2015
Rev. Shayna Appel

It has been said that if you ask philosopher, minister and author Robert Fulghum for his business card, you will find that it says, simply, "Fulghum". Perhaps the business card is intended to reflect, in a Unitarian Universalist sort of way, an open-ended notion of what his occupation might be. In real life, Fulghum has been a working cowboy, IBM salesman, professional artist, folksinger, parish minister, bartender, teacher of drawing and painting, writer and self-professed "amateur" philosopher. When he last published, he was still working out what he wanted to be when he grew up.

I remember discovering the works of Robert Fulghum right about the same time I first discovered Unitarian Universalism. That he was, and is, a Unitarian Universalist minister was interesting to me at the time. But what really struck me about his writing was how well Fulghum captured the sacred in the ordinary, and how well he could convey it.

Take Rev. Fulghum's story about his lawyer friend – the one that we just read - and think about it in this light. When people ask us what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist, what if we simply recounted a version of that story? We could say something like:

To be a UU means being a little ahead of the times, and to have taken most, if not all of the trips! Most UU's have dabbled in this or that sociological experiment and have engaged in and with more religious movements than most folks can name. Some of us reach pre-mature endings to our theological and / or philosophical journeys and conclude that it's all crap and lies. But, more often than not, those who practice their Unitarian Universalism over the long haul come to know intimately that skepticism and realism are not the same as cynicism and pessimism. And, most importantly, a well-seasoned Unitarian Universalist appreciates the very real and ever-present possibility that, whatever it is we think we believe, we might be wrong!

In his discovery of the sacred amidst the ordinary Fulghum shines a light on a very real, if not often talked about, Unitarian Universalist spiritual practice. Conceding that, in matters of faith, we may from time to time arrive at conclusions which later prove themselves to be untrue. Knowing this – knowing that we might be wrong, that a piece of what we think still needs to be worked out, and/or that life is still revealing itself – keeps the doors of our hearts and minds open and allows our theological and philosophical journeys to continue to develop over a lifetime. So, wherever it is that we are today may look very different tomorrow. What we believe to be so today may, with continued experienced revelation, no longer be so for us tomorrow. We may, in fact, be wrong.

Turning from this idea for a moment and to our second reading for today, we recall that we were treated to a snippet of a journey that may be familiar to many of us. In this second reading, Fulghum talks about the God of his childhood and how, over the course of fifty years, that notion of The Divine has changed. As a child he was *told that God was all-powerful and lived far, far away*. Soon though, Fulghum stumbled upon a theological conundrum associated with an all powerful, or *omnipotent* Deity. For him, it concerned starving children in Mexico. If God was *omnipotent*, all-powerful, than how come children to starve in Mexico, or anywhere for that matter? Fulghum was told, simply, that *it was the will of God and that [he] shouldn't worry about it*. Fortunately, this encounter with bad theology didn't sour him on the game of seeking The Divine altogether. He realized these folks might be wrong and Fulghum continued to seek The Sacred in the ordinary until he became able to see The Sacred everywhere and in everyone.

But, what if he hadn't? What if Fulghum had never simply conceded that these folks might be wrong, and continued to play the game of seeking God anyhow? It happens. Often. We are told things about The Great Mystery as children that don't make sense to us as adults and rather than guessing that our teachers might be wrong about the nature of The Great Mystery, we simply jump to the conclusion that, because they were wrong about The Mystery's nature, they must also be wrong about The Mystery's very existence! Or perhaps, as adults, we hear things said about The Divine Source by other adults that we find just so distasteful, we write The Divine Source off all together rather than trying to figure out for ourselves how This Radiant Mystery is occurring to us. Maybe after 9-11, hurricane Katrina or the school shooting in Sandy Hook, you heard people of faith claim, "God must have needed some angels" or perhaps you've heard it said about someone who came into some misfortune, "God must want them to learn something from this." People of faith can say some poorly thought out things about God. Things that make us want to scream, "What is wrong with you and how can you worship a god like that?"

Don't get me wrong here. In times of crises people have to lean on what they have, and if what they have is an omnipotent or omniscient god, then this is where they are. I may not like their theology – O.K., I don't like their theology! – but I must, relying on our first Unitarian Universalist principle, still regard them with worth and dignity. With practice, I've gotten very good at hating the faith while still managing to love the faithful!

Here's the thing though. I think an omnipotent Deity is kinda puny. I think an omnipotent Deity, who can control everything we do, reduces us to nothing more than puppets on a string and if that's the case, this Almighty Creator is nothing more than a divine puppeteer who lives far, far away and who manipulates us all, for better AND for worse. The difficulty of bad things happening to good and innocent people aside for a moment, the notion of an omnipotent God seems to run at odds with the notion of us having free will. And without free will, how can we be responsible for our actions, or the impact of those actions on others and all

creation? (And there goes our seventh principle of interdependence right out the window.) If we cannot be responsible for our actions, and if there is no “higher calling” for us, than what’s the point of religion anyway? For me, an omnipotent God, a Supreme Deity that is all-powerful, makes no sense...but hey, I could be wrong.

Omniscience is another characteristic that often get’s put on The Great Spirit. If you believe this than you believe Wakan Tanka is all knowing. You likely believe in predestination – the Great Spirit of Life ordains and blesses everything that is to be. If this is your theology than I guess it makes sense to get into the Great Spirits good graces so that good things will happen to you. If not, you could wind up living as a starving child in Mexico, or worse.

Here’s the problem I have with an omniscient Mystery. If this Mystery is omniscient, then The Mystery knows everything that is to be, and that’s not very mysterious! But this aside, if everything that is going to happen has already been decided, then it must already have been set into motion someplace – everything that is to be must already be scribed into some future oriented Book of Life. Given that scenario, what’s the point of our trying to live worthy lives? Everything that is going to be has already been decided. There’s nothing we can do to change it and the Mysteries’ function within this system is as little more than co-pilot! God just wakes up every morning, heads to the office to make sure everything is on track, then...who knows? Maybe God goes and plays golf, mops the floor, or maybe this God then gets busy unleashing mayhem on all of creation.

An omnipotent and/or omniscient god is a god who must indeed live far, far away. It is certainly not a God whose imminence, whose very real presence, has inspired folks throughout the ages to attempt to give it shape and form – to articulate what it was they sensed or sought – in the books of the Hebrew & Christian Scriptures, the Koran, or the Bhagavad-Gita, to name just a few sacred texts. An omnipotent and/ or omniscient god lacks the very real presence felt by all those who have ever been so moved by what they felt – what they sensed – that they were compelled to try to articulate what it was they experienced so that they could, in the words of Carter Heyward, *point to and lift up the presence of God here and now... in order to live and speak **in** God, **through** God, and **by** God rather than simply **about** God*. No, in my studied opinion, and by my lived experience, an omnipotent and/or omniscient god is a puny and uncaring tyrant whose judgment and distance is unworthy of my worship.

So, what happens when we let go of omnipotence and omniscience as fundamental constructs of The Divine Presence? Well, for starters, become free to encounter this Presence like the children in our story earlier this morning, in growing grass, in the peace of darkness, in love and sharing, in one another. We meet a mysterious life force that is at once just beyond our imaginations while simultaneously being vividly clear. We begin to move in a rhythm that connects us to every living thing, and that same rhythm holds our place within the vastness that is creation. Freeing

The Great I Am from the confines of omnipotence and omniscience we are able to encounter our Partner in creation, which didn't just happen once and for all some 13 billion years ago, but is happening all the time, all around us. We become free to encounter The Mystical Force, in the words of Rev. Kathleen McTigue, *at the forming edge of our lives*. And this is no controlling or auto-pilot Deity. This is a Partner Creator with a preferential option for all that lives beneath the skies – and that preference is that is that we might live in peace and harmony. But it is up to us to discover this Partner Creator, and in so doing, figure out how to live the best lives we can. In the long nights of our souls when our hearts have been shattered into a thousand pieces, The Tender Mother/Father is there, weeping with us and binding us to the constancy that enables us to endure. The Inbreaking Wisdom I speak of is not a grand manipulator who says, “Be good, do right, and nothing bad will happen to you...you will never hurt.” This IS the Ever Present Spirit who promises we will never hurt alone.

At the end of our children's story, “Hide and Seek With God”, God says to all the children, “I had so much fun! Weren't those good hiding places? Some of you found me, others weren't sure, and others are still looking. That's O.K. because the most important thing is just to play the game.” I'm inclined to believe that. It IS important to play the game...to seek something that helps us merge our individual claims with those of the universe and all that is contained in it. To give our assent, our consent, to something bigger than us so that we might maintain our *skepticism and realism* without drowning in an abyss of *cynicism and pessimism*. To entertain the very real possibility that all those people who have attempted to articulate a very real experience of what they, and I, call God throughout all times and in our own weren't entirely misguided.

I think it's important to play the game. To seek The Spirit of Life, with all our hearts and minds and souls and whole selves. But, you know, there's even more than one way to play that game, hide-and-seek? In another version, called ‘Sardines’, the person who's it goes and hides and everyone tries to find them. When you find the one who is “it” you crawl into the place with them. Pretty soon everyone's hiding together, all packed into some small space like a bunch of sardines, and pretty soon someone always starts to giggle, and eventually everyone starts to laugh and in the end, everyone gets found.

Robert Fulghum notes that *Medieval theologians... described God in hide-and-seek terms, calling him Deus Absconditus* [meaning “hidden God, or God unknowable to the human mind”]. *But me, I think Old God is a sardine player and will be found the way everyone is found in Sardines – by the laughter of those heaped together at the end.*

But hey...I could be wrong!

In peace, in kinship, and with great love, I thank you for entertaining my thoughts this morning and lift unto you this sacred call...ollie, ollie oxen free! Anyone who is still hiding can come on out now without fear of losing the game.

Won't you pray with me?

Holy God, Blessed Spirit, You Whom some call Yahweh, and others Allah, You Whom some call Jesus and others Christ, You whom some know as breath or force or *Ruach* or *Adonai*, You beyond any human name or cage, You who transcend the cages we place You in, thank You for blessing this time and place. Thank You for holding this space for us as a cosmic canopy and thank You for the invitation to shiver with the grace of Your presence. Today we express our hearts desires that the doors on all cages everywhere would be opened and Your people might breathe free, just as You intended. May this gathering strengthen the partnership of this gathered community and may all here renew and be new. May we never allow the narrowness of our own vision eclipse the vision You have for us. Make us hungry for an end to any kind of smallness and any kind of poverty. Thank You for this ingathering. Thank You, gracious God, for gathering us in. Amen.