

Spirit of Life

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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A legend tells how, at the beginning of time, God resolved to hide himself within his own creation.

“I need to find a place that is not too easily discovered, for it is in their search for me that my creatures will grow in spirit and in understanding.

“Why don’t you hide yourself deep in their earth?” an angel suggested.

God pondered for a while, then replied, “No. It will not be long before they learn how to mine the earth and discover all the treasures it contains. They will discover me too quickly, and they will not have had enough time to do their growing.”

“Why don’t you hide yourself on their moon?” a second angel suggested.

God thought about this idea for a while, and then replied, “No. It will take a little longer, but before too long they will learn how to fly through space. They will arrive on the moon and explore its secrets, and they will discover me too soon, before they have had enough time to do their growing.”

There was a long silence. “I know,” piped up one angel, finally. “Why don’t you hide yourself within their own hearts? They will never think of looking there!”

And so it is that God hides secretly deep within the heart of every one of god’s creatures, until that creature has grown enough in spirit and in understanding to risk the great journey into the secret core of its own being.

(a retelling of a traditional story by Margaret Self in One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World, p. 32-33)

Part of our spiritual quest, our religious journey, is indeed to look deep within ourselves, as we relentlessly try to discover what makes us who we are. MIHI QUAESTIO FACTUS SUM (I have become a question to myself.) We are our own greatest mystery. “When one has weighed the sun in the balance, and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens star by star, there still remains oneself. Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?” wrote Oscar Wilde.

As in both the legend just told and in our Spirit of Life hymn, are we looking for a spirit, an identity, a uniqueness, that comes from without, or does it emanate from within? Is the spirit of life something that is breathed into life from outside, or something inherent in

all that is, whether alive or inanimate? Is it a spirit just of life, or an energy glowing in all the objects of the Universe? Out of the stars have we come. Are we merely natural products of the evolution from chaos to order, and therefore the same “stuff” as all existence, or is there an extra dollop of spirit given to humans? Maybe the extra we imagine we have is just the awareness to be able to ask the question in the first place? But the need to ask these questions is palpable within us.

Spirit of Life, come unto me. Make yourself known to me. What am I that lives and breathes and loves. Oh, that I might feel the stirrings of my own spirit, the presence of my soul, my passion for life. Banish my apathy, my ambiguities. Stir my compassion, help my hands become helping hands, hands that serve, hands that keep justice in the balance. Keep *me* balanced also, between my desire to hold close to roots, safe, held - and my curiosity to know, my hunger to help, the urge to risk all to protect what is important. Spirit of Life, come unto me. These are the yearnings of my human heart.

When I was sixteen and joined the First Unitarian Church in Cleveland. I was given a Chalice necklace, which I wore, always, as a symbol of my burning soul. That’s what I thought of it as, my burning soul. I knew it was there – that I just had to direct its light, its warmth, its fire. The spirit of life was, and is still, very real to me.

For me, my spirit, my soul, does not come from someplace outside of me, as a gift. Oh, I am thankful that I am aware of it, can feel so deeply of what makes me a person and a real human being, but I believe it is inherent to the creature that I am – the creatures we all are. When I sing “Spirit of Life, come unto me,” I am asking not for something that was not previously within me, but for more recognition of that which I already possess, and occasionally forget to treat as the honor it is (I am alive.), and the responsibility it is (I am alive in the interdependent web of all existence.). Let me ever be reminded of you, Spirit of Life, with great humility and gratitude, and may I find ever more ways to be of use to others and the world.

So to me, flaming chalices and the Spirit of Life are all wrapped up in one package. “Each morning I must hold out the chalice of my being to receive, to recognize, to carry, and give back.” (adapted from Dag Hammarskjold, #455, [Singing the Living Tradition](#)) I am a cup of burning soul. Drink of me, as we replenish each other.

Are you wondering if I still have that first Chalice necklace I used to wear and never take off? Unfortunately I gave it to a boy in College (I gave my burning soul away???) and he went and lost it. One should be careful with such things.

Hildegard of Bingen, who wrote this morning’s choral introit, was a Christian mystic whose sentiments actually sound a lot like mine. “I am in all, the spirit’s breath, the thundered word, for I am Life. . . . I am that great and fiery force, sparkling in everything that lives,” whereupon she next lists the shining river, the burning sun, moon and stars, as well as the unseen wind as containing the same great and fiery force. I continually marvel at the insight of so many great thinkers from so long ago who somehow intuited what we assume is just now being revealed by science and quantum physics. There is

only one energy, everywhere, said Hildegard in the 12th Century. The great and fiery force, the Spirit of Life, needs neither to be asked for nor searched for. It is within us for the recognizing.

I see a connection, too, between Hildegard's "spirit's breath" and the Jewish concept of Ruah, or "breath of life," although for Jews this blessing of life is something that is bestowed upon the body and breathes life into the soul. God's life-giving breath. An infant's first breath and cry.

When Hildegard says "And where I breathe there is no death," I used to imagine that she was talking about this same idea of Ruah, that where there is breathing, a body is still alive. Lately, as I better understand her mystical, all is one, perspective, I imagine she is saying "where breathes the great and fiery force there can be no death, because this force can never be destroyed." The energy of the universe, the spirit of life and existence, if you will, can neither be created nor destroyed, only changed in its form.

Rabbi Authur Waskow, in the name of Jewish renewal, gives a new interpretation to the classical Jewish blessing of candles and wine on the Sabbath and at Festival times. His translation would have one say "Baruch attah Yah, eloheynu ruach ha'olam," "Blessed are You, Breath of Life, Spirit of the Universe," rather than the traditional "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe." I think it's a lovely reinterpretation and I admire liberal Judaism for believing so strongly in the need for new thinking on ancient concepts.

As Unitarian Universalists we should note that there are connections we can be making here to other religious traditions that illustrate our similarities and not our differences. Making these connections also helps me to realize that our Unitarian Universalist language is in many ways just as full of reverence (as our President, Bill Sinkford, would have us strive for) as other religious languages. Spirit of Life is no light-weight, diluted substitute for an expression of what is the most awesome fact of our existence – that we exist at all! What is a spirited person but one who is full of life! The spirit moved in me, we sometimes say.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay on "Self Reliance," wrote "The sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them and proceedeth obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceedeth."

There is an organization to which I have belonged called Metanexus Institute, dedicated to "promoting the constructive engagement of science, religion and the humanities in the communal pursuit of wisdom in order to address humanity's most profound questions and challenges." (www.metanexus.net) Next summer the Metanexus international conference is on the topic of "Self and Soul: Transdisciplinary Approaches to Personhood," and will ask such questions as "What accounts for the first-person nature of consciousness?" "Is there a soul?" "To what degree are we relational beings?" "What are

the limits of person and personhood?" These are just a few among many other fascinating topics. Anyone want to go to Madrid with me in July?

I have mentioned these Metanexus topics because a lot of the studies they encourage are about things just like Spirit of Life and my topic for next week, Religion and the Brain. The human brain manifests a massive complexity, comprising about 100 billion neurons and 100 trillion (10^{14}) synapses. But are we merely our brains? Or is there something we are that is irreducible to brain states? Is there a soul, a spirit, of which we have spoken today?

I offer you the opportunity to ponder these things for the next seven days, till we meet again. And in the meantime, may the Spirit of Life, that great and fiery force, the roots and the wings, be yours to know and fall in love with all over again.