

New Year's Evolutions

Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona

12/28/03

Rod Richards

Readings

The Journey of the Magi

by T.S. Eliot

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;

With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

Some of you, who were at the service on the 14th, may be wondering why the Wise Men have reappeared in the reading today. "So is Rod going to talk about the Magi at every service now?"

Well, traditionally, the Magi have not arrived yet, right? Twelve days *after* Christmas, they find their way to Jesus. So it is that we have a song about the twelve days of Christmas, and on January 6th many Christians celebrate the Epiphany. But more importantly, in terms of what I want to talk about today, the T.S. Eliot poem addresses something that I think rarely gets talked about: What happens *afterward*?

The wise men have recognized the star as a special sign, they have journeyed long in search of the new king of the Jews, they have given their gifts and are heading for home, detouring around the evil Herod, and...if it were a Hollywood movie (and the whole story of the three kings didn't end up on the cutting room floor, as Will suggested it might at the last service), if it were a Hollywood movie, we might see, at the end of this scene, the Magi riding their camels off into the sunset, and a slow fade to black. And my question is (as it is at the ending of many Hollywood movies): now what? After the great happening, the revelation, the swelling music, the wondrous event: now what? After you Magi get home, put the camels to bed, take off your shoes by the fire...what changes?

Now what? If the week between Christmas and New Years were recognized as a holiday, that might be a fitting title: The celebration of Nowwhat. (Nowwhatadan? Nowwhatus? Nowwhataday? or

Nowwhataweek?)

Because it is customary for some of us in this society to think about changes we would like to make in our lives at this time of year. The holiday buzz is quieting a bit, and we can hear our own thoughts again. We may be regretting the excesses of the season, thus vowing to change our habits in the future, or we may be reflecting on the warmth of the season as we have once again felt (and wish to keep feeling) the priorities of family and friends and love and laughter taking precedence over the less-profound concerns that loom so large the rest of the year. And there is, of course, the fresh start of a new year waiting for us this week. Though we may resolve to make changes in our lives throughout the year, and as arbitrary as our system of marking time might be, a new calendar can be a powerful symbol of a new chance.

But new chances often come to naught. I have a series of journal entries that begin on January 1st of various years and end, on average, somewhere around January 8th of that same year. It always struck me as such a good idea to keep a journal, but I somehow run out of steam in the second week of the year. And I tell myself, as I miss a day, that there's no law that says a journal has to have an entry *every single day*, and I kid myself that I will get back to it the next day or the next...and after a week or two or three, it joins the ranks of well-intentioned, but failed, attempts at self-improvement, along with morning Yoga, daily exercise, regular letters to family and friends, etc. Sometimes I picture an alternate universe where there's a Rod who actually kept all of his New Years resolutions...but then I think, geez, what would he think of me? And I let it go...

The one thing that experiencing all of these failed resolutions has left me with is an interest in how *real* change happens. Once I began investigating this, I had to admit that most of the change that has happened in my life has come about at the point that I *couldn't not* change. Circumstances occur simultaneously with a growing understanding of myself to combine such that I can no longer continue life in the same way. It is very rarely, (if at all), a matter of "Gee, it would be nice if I could be such and such..." It is my realization, out of an overpowering discontent, that *this* (whatever *this* might be) can't go on.

Sadly, as it is in the nature of this society to commodify everything, it is hardly surprising that advertisers have picked up on our genuine restlessness evoked by seasonal influences and, in a brilliant stroke of post-Christmas marketing, sought to assure us all that their products speak to our need for change, will quell our restlessness with powerful new possibilities for contentment, and will satisfy us on even the deepest spiritual levels. (I can imagine the Magus of Eliot's poem, in the midst of his existential unease, saying, "You know, maybe a new camel. I've had old—I don't know, what would you name a camel?—I've had old Kevin for years now, time to trade him in...*then* I'll be happy again, stop all this nonsense about newborn kings...")

In all fairness to the product advertisers, religion, too, has often been marketed as the cure for our discontent, the answer to our questions, the safe, resting place when we are feeling insecure and restless. "Ask, and it will be given you;" we hear Jesus saying in the book of Matthew, "search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." Seek and ye shall find. With a subtext promoted by those

religious marketers that says, and then things will be hunky dory, you will be fulfilled, satisfied, assured of your salvation, secure in your faith.

But while a credible charge has been leveled at advertisers of every stripe, both commercial and religious, that they are actually *creating* the need that they then seek to fill, I am more concerned today with that restlessness that has a much more genuine origin. If our efforts to satisfy this restlessness are often facile or misguided or rushed, that does not necessarily taint the source of our discontent. It may arise from a growing knowledge of our selves and the world around us. Something has changed in our understanding that leaves us irretrievably dissatisfied with things as they are. As with the Magi in Eliot's poem, this displaced feeling may follow an Epiphany.

An epiphany, in common usage, can be described as one of those "aha" moments. We have come to a realization about ourselves, experienced some sort of enlightenment or inspiration, pieced something together that would not previously fit, or carefully untangled some confused thoughts, and we have arrived at something breathtakingly new. While this description of an epiphany sounds instantaneous, it is my contention that it can also be gradual, taking days, weeks, months, even years to come to fruition.

The professor who taught me about Zen Buddhism in seminary, when asked if enlightenment came all at once or if it was gradual, said, "When you wake up in the morning, do you wake up all at once, or do you wake up gradually?" The desired answer was, of course: both. And that made sense to me. Barring the offensive intrusion of alarm clocks, when I wake up in the morning, there is an immediate element (I was asleep, and now, suddenly, am awake) and a gradual element (I slowly wake up to full consciousness). Epiphany is like that.

While an epiphany may have seemingly come from out of the blue, as unplanned-for as a lightning-bolt, I believe that we prepare for it, wittingly or unwittingly, by an openness we practice. One of my favorite quotes, (and one that those of you who get email from me are probably sick of, because it's been on my signature for a long time now) is from Abu Yazid al-Bistami, a Sufi mystic. He said, "This thing we tell of can never be found by seeking, yet only seekers find it." We can't schedule an epiphany, but we can certainly get the house ready for a visit.

At its most intense, an epiphany is life changing, or at least *feels* life changing when it happens. But *changing a life* does not often occur without clear intention on our part, a decision, as Thoreau put it, to live deliberately. So we are left wondering sometimes (and often around this time of year, as we assess what we have learned and think about possibilities for the future) how to incorporate the life-changing import of an epiphany into our day-to-day lives, those lives which seem to fall all-too-easily back into well-worn grooves in spite of our desires to the contrary. Or we become confused between the change that will incorporate our epiphany, and the artificial change we seek out to try and avoid the disturbing ramifications of our epiphany. "Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it," writes James Baldwin, "the end of safety."

So before we rush to fill the perceived need for change, I would ask that we just sit with the restlessness

for a while. Before we even begin Thoreau's plan "to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life," (which has been translated into "grab all the gusto you can" on beer commercials), let us just sit with the urge to live deep, because remember he also says, "Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of life?" Before we place any judgment on ourselves, before we put together scenarios of self-improvement, before we decide that our restlessness is only manufactured by this fractured society and chide ourselves for not having already found peace and contentment, before we decide what we ought or ought not to do...just sit...and breathe...and listen to our own restlessness. It may be an epiphany breaking through.

You see, the thing about an epiphany, as exhilarating as it might be in the experiencing, it often leaves us restless, "no longer at ease here," as T.S. Eliot puts it, "in the old dispensation." In the Gospel of Thomas, there is a passage that echoes the passage from Matthew that I read earlier, the one that goes: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." This one goes a little deeper and provides us with another glimpse into what happens *afterward*, *after* you find. "Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find. When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will reign over all."

When they find, they will be disturbed. We are led to believe, traditionally, that the fruits of a religious or ethical quest (enlightenment, conversion, understanding) will bring contentment and comfort, not disturbance.

When they find, they will be disturbed. This is hardly a sales job for seeking. Are we, here, who sometimes define ourselves as a community of seekers, really setting out to be disturbed?

I believe that we are.

I know there are those of you who don't feel that you are intentionally *seeking* anything, but you have nevertheless implicitly committed, by being here, to an openness to the world and a willingness to listen to and be changed by the insights of others. And when we pledge to wrestle together with the profound questions of life, when we vow to keep our ears open to existence, to listen to each other, to be challenged and to compromise and to listen again, harder this time, and each time...we take the definite risk, the holy risk, of being disturbed. This may seem like just a cozy little community enjoying an admittedly somewhat offbeat sort of Sunday service in preparation for coffee and treats afterward, but you must be aware that we have turned this sanctuary into a danger zone. We are risking epiphanies, and it is not because of what I say but rather because of the tradition we have chosen to keep alive in our midst, the commitment we have made to each other and to the world that we will remain open to revelation, to experience, to the persuasion of reason, to the insights of others, and to our own inner voice. We are *risking*, we are *inviting* epiphanies. And while epiphanies don't guarantee that our lives will change, they do guarantee that we won't be able to *see* our old lives in the same way. When a realization is born, an ignorance dies. "I had seen birth and death, But had thought they were different," says the Magus of Eliot's poem, "this Birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death." There is no turning back. We are no longer at ease with the old dispensation.

I remember at an AA meeting I attended, someone asked me if I ever wished I could drink again. After some thought, I said that I sometimes wished I could drink again without knowing what I knew. Of course, I *can* choose to drink again. But I don't have the option of choosing to drink in ignorance, without understanding the toll it has taken on my life and relationships, without being aware of the hurt that I would inflict upon myself and those who love me. Once I have "an epiphany," I can't undo it; I can't *un-realize* a realization; I can't *un-know* what I have learned to be true. I can choose to ignore its implications, but I can never again live at ease in the old dispensation.

Zen Buddhists know that the closer we move to the great questions of life, the more we talk in paradoxes, and as Unitarian Universalists we know that religion is *not* only about answers, but also about uncomfortable questions; is *not* only about security, but also about risk; *not* only about comfort, but also about discontent; *not* only about community, but about our solitary wrestling with our own epiphanies, *not* only about fulfillment, but also about emptiness; *not* only about satisfaction, but also about a profound and holy *dissatisfaction*. When we invite you, in the call to worship, to be "who you are and who you are called to be", that is not only an affirmation of our acceptance of each other, but a challenge, to each of us, to find out who we are called to be and to live it out. We are engaging a search for our truest selves and committing to sharing our selves in this community. We will seek until we find, and when we find, often, we will be disturbed.

Jesus goes on to say, "And when they are disturbed, they will marvel." What could that possibly mean? Except that somehow, I believe, from our understanding of that disturbance comes the possibility of real change. It is from that disturbance that the prophets spoke against poverty and injustice, rejecting the god of commerce. It is from that disturbance that, while their leaders engage in the dangerous bluster of battle, citizens of opposing nations find a way to work together, rejecting the god of nationalism. It is from that disturbance that people find ways to reach out in their communities to the hidden and forgotten people in need, rejecting the god of economics. It is from that disturbance that people stand up for the preservation and protection of the natural world, rejecting the god of progress. It is from that disturbance that we build hope for a better future, rejecting the god of things as they are.

And so we unite in risk, though we long for safety. We commit to the perilous winter journey, though we regret the summer palaces. We leave ourselves open to epiphany, though it promises disturbance in its wake. And we marvel at the awesome possibilities for change that we hold in our midst.