

The Real Thing

Rod Richards

Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona

07/11/04

Readings

Selection from *The Spiral Staircase* by Karen Armstrong

In the course of my studies, I have discovered that the religious quest is not about discovering "the truth" or "the meaning of life" but about living as intensely as possible here and now. The idea is not to latch on to some superhuman personality or to "get to heaven" but to discover how to be fully human—hence the images of the perfect or enlightened [person], or the deified human being. Archetypal figures such as Muhammad, the Buddha, and Jesus become icons of fulfilled humanity. God or Nirvana is not an optional extra, tacked on to our human nature. Men and women have a potential for the divine, and are not complete unless they realize it within themselves.

A passing Brahmin priest once asked the Buddha whether he was a god, a spirit, or an angel. None of these, the Buddha replied; "I am awake!" By activating a capacity that lay dormant in undeveloped men and women, he seemed to belong to a new species. In the past, my own practice of religion had diminished me, whereas true faith, I now believe, should make you *more human than before* (my italics). (pg. 271)

Selection from *The Doors of Perception* by Aldous Huxley

Systematic reasoning is something we could not, as a species or as individuals, possibly do without. But neither, if we are to remain sane, can we possibly do without direct perception, the more unsystematic the better, of the inner and outer worlds into which we have been born. This given reality is an infinite which passes all understanding and yet admits of being directly and in some sort totally apprehended. It is a transcendence belonging to another order than the human, and yet it may be present to us as a felt immanence, an experienced participation. To be enlightened is to be aware, always, of total reality in its immanent otherness—to be aware of it and yet to remain in a condition to survive as an animal, to think and feel as a human being, to resort whenever expedient to systematic reasoning. Our goal is to discover

that we have always been where we ought to be. Unhappily, we make the task exceedingly difficult for ourselves. Meanwhile, however, there are gratuitous graces in the form of partial and fleeting realizations. (pg. 78)

I have a confession to make. I am not very good at remembering things. Especially long-ago things. I was probably one of the few people in the world who was not reassured by the title of Robert Fulgum's book, *Everything I Really Needed to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten*. If that's the case, I thought to myself, I'm going to need to enroll in kindergarten again, because my memories of that time are foggy to say the least.

But my memory does hold onto some things from that time. Fleeting images of where we lived, seemingly unimportant incidents in my day to day life, and song lyrics, lots of song lyrics.

Like "Mares eat oats and does eat oats and little lambs eat ivy." Remember that, anyone? "A kid'll eat ivy too, wouldn't you?" My mother used to sing that and it has stuck with me...never mind that I was 37 when I finally figured out the actual words to that song...

Sometimes, it's a jingle from a commercial that I *wish* I could forget: "I wish I were an Oscar Meyer weiner." Who on earth would actually wish such a thing?! And yet I find myself singing that, to my family's dismay, or, if I catch myself in time, thinking it without verbalizing the embarrassing fact that *this* is what is going through my head when I should be writing a sermon.

Other times I remember phrases that carry a little more weight than the previous examples. I remember a song from Sunday School that asked in the chorus "How do I know? The Bible tells me so."

Faith, hope and charity;

that's the way to live successfully.

How do I know?

The Bible tells me so.

Now, it is not my intention to talk about what the Bible tells or does not tell today. I am more interested in the question of that song, a question that gets raised often in our religious, spiritual, and ethical journeys: "How do I know?" How do I know what I know, or how do I know what I think I know? How do we know?

As we move from the facts of life to the *meaning* of life—how do we know? As we seek to glean wisdom in the present out of stories from the past—how do we know? As we strive to understand each

other's journeys, listening intently to the words, the inflections, the emotions, deciphering and translating and filtering it all through our own experience—how do we know?

For some, the answer lies within that old song. Truth is measured against the words of the Bible, or the Koran, or some other Scripture. But when you look at all of the various interpretations of these Scriptures and others, and it comes down to deciding for yourself, the question returns: how do I know?

For some, the answer lies in authority, the authority of the church or a teacher or a community. There is much to be said for heeding the guidance of those who strike us as wiser, more compassionate, more enlightened...and yet, don't we need to weigh their words, their actions, carefully? Isn't there some process by which *their* truths become our own...*or not*? And, again, how do we know?

Unitarian Universalists, in an attempt to articulate the sources of what we call "our living tradition," have come up with six sources from which we derive inspiration, instruction and guidance, that help us to answer the question of how we know what we know. The first of these sources is *direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.*

I think this *is* something that finds expression within a variety of cultures, religions, and philosophies. It is a hallmark of what Aldous Huxley termed "the Perennial Philosophy," a philosophy that has proponents in a number of different cultures, all attempting to describe what Huxley calls "a divine Reality" that may be apprehended directly by those who are prepared for the experience. Mystics affirm it, humanitarians proclaim it, and even scientists, gasping at the enormity of all we don't know and the wonder of what we do, share in its language. Some have even irritably demanded it. Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, prompting people to speak from direct experience, said, "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know." (The irony, of course, is that I love to quote him on that).

But here is this notion, widespread and occurring not only in every religion but in schools of thought that do not wear the title of "religion," this notion that, we do not just *believe* in some sort of state of transcendence above the mundane day-to-day realities of life, we do not just long for it in the sweet by and by, but we can *experience* that transcending mystery in the here and now. We have moments when we are granted—what—perspective? Insight? Wonder? Grace? Nirvana? It goes by many names and descriptions. It may wear the clothing of our particular cultures, but its essence is universal, it seems.

Most of us can identify those moments when we are caught up in a substantially different awareness than that to which we are accustomed in the everyday. It is a widening—an opening up. It is a view across a landscape that we did not truly believe existed. It is as if, walking alone at night, through a torrential rainstorm, huddled against the wind, blinking and squinting against the water that runs down our faces, we can barely see the next step, when—all of a sudden—lightning flashes across the sky and illuminates, for an instant, the mountains in the distance; the road that we travel lies for a moment bright before us; the magnificent motion of the storm clouds frighten and comfort us at the same time, allowing us to forget our next step to reflect for just an instant on something far, far bigger than ourselves. And

our next steps, (and we must take the next steps, nevertheless), our next steps, (though we are once again in darkness and the brilliant landscape we had glimpsed is but a memory), our next steps will be taken with greater humility and larger purpose as we have gained a new and transforming perspective on the world we tread. It was easy to imagine in the darkness that we were seeing all there was to see, but the lightning flashed...and we experienced one of those gratuitous graces that Aldous Huxley speaks of, those fleeting and partial realizations of...

Of what?

That's a little hard to say, isn't it? This is the place where we fumble for words, because, while we may want to share what we have seen, felt, tasted and touched, we often do not know where to begin. We start telling stories. "I was just looking at the ocean and the sky turned a color I'd never seen and I felt this..." "I was playing with my grandkids and sort of forgot about everything else and it was as if..." "I was just walking around and watching people and suddenly I felt this connection, this understanding..." The stories stall somewhere, as we look for the words that will go beyond words.

For example, Zen has been described as:

A special transmission outside the sutras;

No reliance upon words and letters;

Direct pointing to the very mind;

Seeing into one's own nature.

Like this passage, the best we can do, often, the best anyone or anything can do, is *point toward* the experience. We should not forget that most of our scriptures, philosophical tracts, teachings, sermons, lessons, are simply *pointing* to something that can only be experienced. In Buddhism, there is the notion that teachings are simply a finger pointing toward the moon; it would be foolish to fixate on the finger; far better to follow where it is pointing and see for ourselves the wonder of the moon. Ah, yes, the moon...

But, you know, the first time I ran across this Buddhist tale, I remember thinking, "The moon? Big deal!" I mean, really, you can see the moon nearly any night...and it's not like someone has to point it out to me. I know it's there...

Or do I? Do I live with a real awareness of the moon? One of the difficulties, I believe, in describing these "transcendent" experiences is that we are finally only describing the world in which we live everyday. The experiences are "transcendent" only in that we transcend the more ordinary awareness of the world around us. But what we are made *aware of* is the very same world that we live in day in and day out.

Aldous Huxley says, "Our goal is to discover that we have always been where we ought to be." "The Kingdom of God is among you," said Jesus. "Wherever you turn is God's face," said Muhammad. These are hard words for us to fathom. We are waiting for salvation; we are looking for a sign; we are hoping for peace and harmony to drop down upon us; we are searching for enlightenment, we are praying for grace. "When you pray for grace," says Ramana Maharshi, "you are like someone standing neck-deep in water and yet crying for water. It is like saying that someone neck-deep in fresh water feels thirsty, or that a fish in water feels thirsty, or that water feels thirsty." We are waiting for miracles or scoffing at those who believe in miracles, and Albert Einstein speaks to both sides when he said, "There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." I have little doubt as to which way he chose.

Everything is a miracle. *Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder* translates, for me, into the realization that everything *is* a miracle; that I don't need to seek anything more holy than what *is*. "I have discovered that the religious quest is not about discovering "the truth" or "the meaning of life" but about living as intensely as possible here and now," Karen Armstrong writes, "The idea is not to latch on to some superhuman personality or to "get to heaven" but to discover how to be fully human... true faith, I now believe, should make you *more human than before*."

We may feel, during these fleeting realizations, that we are going outside of ourselves and feel concurrently that we are more fully *in* ourselves than ever before. Not *focused* inward; not self-absorbed; but self-aware, put in context with at least a glimmer of the vastness of the universe and the undeniable connectedness of all living things, no longer just observers of a disconnected world but *part of* an undreamt-of vastness. The interdependent web of life, for a moment, is not an abstract concept that we have to strain to imagine, but a matter-of-fact description of the way things are, a realization that carries an awesome responsibility for self-aware creatures such as ourselves.

It is a new world...but really not new at all. The moon has never looked like this before...yet it is the same moon that I have walked under thousands of night, unaware, content to treat it like a faulty, dim street light, if noticing it at all. You are the same person I spoke with only a little while ago, and yet I see you anew, not just as a supporting actor in the story of my life, but decidedly separate from me with your own story and your own dreams, separate and wondrously connected to me nonetheless as we all are connected.

Though our understanding is, of course, partial at best, we can feel at these moments that, as the Zen poet wrote:

Nothing whatever is hidden;

From of old, all is clear as daylight.

But, alas, these are only moments...at least in my experience. "To be enlightened is to be aware, always,

of total reality in its immanent otherness," writes Huxley, but I do not live in this awareness. I live in a world where, all too often, you *are* seen as a supporting actor in my story, where our connectedness is more of an abstract concept than an inescapable reality, where miracles are ignored and the past or the future crowd out the present, where the moon is just another streetlamp, truth is hidden, and almost nothing is clear as daylight.

But I live in faith. "True faith, I now believe, should make you *more human than before*," writes Karen Armstrong, and I have faith that the "gratuitous graces" I've been given "in the form of partial and fleeting realizations" are, indeed, glimpses of what is real. I return from these realizations, as you probably do, with no special insights into life, no secret teachings, and yet *something* has changed.

Aldous Huxley writes, using "the door in the wall" as his metaphor for the passage to these moments of heightened awareness:

[Those] who [come] back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as [those] who went out. [They] will be wiser but less cocksure, happier but less self-satisfied, humbler in acknowledging [their] ignorance yet better equipped to understand the relationship of words to things, of systematic reasoning to the unfathomable Mystery which it tries...to comprehend. (*The Doors of Perception*, pg. 79)

Martin Buber, Jewish theologian, writes:

That before which, in which, out of which, and into which we live, even the mystery, has remained what it was...we have "known" it, but we acquire no knowledge from it which might lessen or moderate its mysteriousness... We have felt release, but not discovered a "solution." We cannot approach others with what we have received, and say "You must know this, you must do this." We can only go, and confirm its truth. And this, too, is no "ought," but we can, we *must*. (*I and Thou*, pg. 111)

How do I know? "We have known it," writes Buber, "but we acquire no knowledge from it which might lessen or moderate its mysteriousness."

Everything I ever really needed to know, I learned in kindergarten? Well, kindergarten, as I said, is something of a blur. But I do remember other things. I remember one evening after a huge storm listening, I don't know how long, to the rhythm of the rain falling from the eaves onto the garbage cans below...And there was this moment with my dad, we were just cleaning out the garage together, no big deal, but suddenly it felt like we were moving in harmony...And I do remember once, looking at the moon, seeing the face in the moon, but even more amazingly realizing for the first time how big the moon really was, imagining the surface, the landscape, as somewhere a person could walk, and imagining what Earth, where we walk so often with our heads lowered, plotting the next step, what this globe might look like from there....

It's a little hard to put into words...but you know what I mean, right?