

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage
Unitarian Universalist
Theology and Spirituality

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The Experience of Being

Michael Brown once remarked, "You can see it sometimes in peoples eyes: They are totally blown away by the very experience of being, and they look out wondering, 'Doesn't anyone else feel it? They all seem to take it so matter-of-factly. Am I the only one to feel this way?' And so they are afraid to say anything. But you can see it, sometimes, in their eyes."

Speaking of Life

We talk about life stories, but if life is a story, stories are edited. Elements are included that contribute to the theme - the characterization or plot; elements are excluded that are irrelevant. These excluded elements from out personal stories are what Jungians call the Shadow.

Those elements that we commonly exclude from our stories nevertheless appear in jokes and myths and legends: there is a gallows humor in talking about life.

There was an American ground soldier in Europe in World War II who said what kept him going was repeating to himself, "There are only two

good things about life: It's not permanent, and it's not compulsory."

Life is best, perhaps can only be, talked about metaphorically. There were two women at a resort in the Catskills. One of them said, "The food here is just awful. It makes you sick it's so bad."

"Yes," said the other one, "and the portions are so small."

How's Life?

"How's life?" we ask each other.

"Fine," we say, or give a few details of our week.

It is not a question that we take literally or deeply. Perhaps we can't. How is Life itself? Can we even speak meaningfully of Life? The Zen koan expresses the problem:

"What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

Why, it makes no sound. What is there for it to strike against?

"So, how's life?"

Well, compared to what? What is there to compare life to? To non-being? We cannot compare being to non-being. We can only compare being to what we beings imagine non-being to be.

The Diagnosis

The Buddha approached our human condition as a physician of his era approached disease. A physician was expected to answer four questions:

What is the disease? What is its cause? Does it have a cure? And if so, what is the cure?

The Buddha's diagnosis is as follows:

Life is dukkha. We translate dukkha as "suffering," but the word was also used in the Pali texts to describe a wheel with its hub off-center, and a bone pulled from its joint. So, life is out-of-kilter; it is disjointed; it hurts.

The cause of dukkha is tanha, which we translate "desire." It is an attempt to cling to parts of life, to reject other parts, to hold ourselves separate, to resist the flow. Buddhists see reality as continuing changes, as shapes always being formed, lasting a while, and then falling apart. Tanha is the desire to hold these shifting

shapes fixed and permanent.

Dukkha can be cured.

The cure is the eight-fold path, which involves moderate living and meditation on the impermanence of all aspects of life. The meditation calms the Buddhist, allowing him or her to



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The Universe As Play

If you observe the experts on play, children, you will observe a frolicking, self-involvement which gives no thought to the convenience of others, and if you observe how little the Universe seems to care, you may be seeing the same thing.

When Krishna was a child living among the cow herders of Vrndavana, he was always getting into mischief. He would untie the cows. He would wake sleeping babies. He would break open jars to eat the butter inside. He would relieve himself on freshly cleaned floors.

You can love a child even if occasionally you want to shake him until his teeth rattle. As with a child, so it is with life.

Perfectibility

Can we solve all human problems by changing "the system?" The argument in favor of this idea is that people are products of their social and economic systems, so changing the system will change people.

There are several arguments against it, however.

First, the assumption that people are determined by their environments is based on scientific and social thought two centuries old. Since the development of quantum mechanics and chaos theory, determinism is dead in science.

Second, even given the proposition that people are determined by their system, how can we then turn around and say we can change the system? Do we have free will to change the system, while we are completely determined in all other respects?

Third, people seem to be pretty clever, and they seem to find ways to make the system, whatever it is, work for them. As one University of Chicago Business School graduate put it,

"Capitalism? Socialism? What do I care as long as I'm calling the shots?"

Finally, come the revolution, will nobody die any more? Will nobody get ill or injured? Will nobody get bored or lonely or frustrated?

A little modesty in goals is called for. When we improve human conditions, we only change problems people have. But that does make a difference; some problems are a lot more comfortable than others.

No Regrets

Childhood is blunder;
Adulthood, struggle;
And old age, regret.
Have a nice day.

(An Arab plus a California saying)

Assuming you agree with the characterization of life, can anything be done?

There is not much that can be done about the blunders of childhood. It is by the blunders that we learn, and those who think humanity is perfectible are ignoring the always large fraction who are young and



learning.

Must adulthood be struggle? For many adults, struggle is their given lot. But those of us who do not have to struggle do so as well. Perhaps it is due to the Protestant Ethic. Or perhaps we are conducting our immortality projects.

Must old age be regret? A hospital chaplain said that he had talked with people who were dying, and many of them expressed regret, but they did not regret what they had done in life; only what they had not done.

Several years ago on public tele-

vision Bill Moyers interviewed Joseph Campbell. In one session, Campbell said, "Follow your bliss," and within a week people were quitting their jobs and changing careers (including, as I recall, Michael Brown, who entered seminary and is now minister of the Peoria UU Church). There must be some of them who now say, "It was a

Shiva and the Demons

It is told that once a demon attacked the gods and defeated them in battle. As they fell back, the gods called upon Shiva to defend them.

Shiva looked with his third eye, and where he looked there appeared a second demon, with a huge mouth and a huge belly.

The first demon realized the second demon had been created to eat it, so it appealed to Shiva for mercy. Since there are obligations to these things, Shiva gave his protection.

"But then," said the second demon, "what am I to eat?"

"Well," said Shiva, "why don't you eat yourself?"

So the second demon did, starting at his feet and working his way up until there was nothing left of him but his head.

Shiva clapped his hands with delight. What a great metaphor for life!

So Shiva placed the head of the demon on the entrance to each of his temples, and from that day to this, no one can come to worship Shiva who does not first see life as a self-devouring demon.

For Reflection

Reflect on your life story. Is it a story of plot or of characterization? (Or for that matter, of ideas or milieu?) What do you include in your life story?