

**Heartland District Annual Meeting  
Opening Worship – Grand Rapids, Michigan  
March 30, 2007**

***My House Shall Be Called A House of Prayer for All People***

READING: *Amos 3: 3, 4a, 5a*

*Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*

*Will a lion roar in the forest, when he hath no prey?*

*Can a bird fall in a snare upon the earth, where no trap is set for him?*

The litany of questions from the Book of Amos was meant to elicit from readers a knowing response. Modern versions could include:

Do children ever go on vacations without asking ‘How many more miles’?

Do men ever make a list of needed items and go to the store before they begin to tear apart the bathroom plumbing trying to fix it?

Do Unitarian Universalists ever accept a proposal unanimously?

We can't understand the answer to a question that was common knowledge in Amos' time millennia ago, anymore than he could understand one in ours. But both eras and cultures could answer a question that knows no time or culture, and is therefore the spiritual question inside this ancient reading:

*Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*

**SERMON: “*Striding Towards Spiritual Freedom*”**

-Dr. Brent A. Smith, Minister

**All Souls Community Church, Grand Rapids**

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On behalf of All Souls Community Church, the church that brought Unitarian Universalism back to Grand Rapids after an absence of over 60 years, I want to welcome you to this gathering by the Grand River. All of us here have our spiritual lives formed in relationship to a particular congregation whose identity is formed by our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition. But, frankly speaking, when we gather in groups larger than our own local ones the ever-present questions exist: “What links us together? What identity do we have and share? What forms us into a people with a spiritual view of existence distinct from our brothers and sisters down the street in other congregations of other faiths?”

I try to be a conscientious preacher and chose the Amos reading over a month ago. This past Monday the man who blacktops my driveway appeared at my front door and asked me if I would pray with him. His wife and he were re-evaluating their relationship, and through his confusion and bewilderment and tears, asked me to pray on my knees with him for the marriage. Immediately the words of Unitarian minister Napoleon Lovely came to mind, "*The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom,*" and I responded that the liberty of love, its gift to transform us comes through our relationships consented to, and he echoed, "*Can two walk together lest they be agreed? Will you walk with me preacher on your knees for my marriage?*" He knew the meaning of the King's English. We "agreed" not by conformity but consent, to search a Spirit deeper than difference. Religion means, etymologically, "*to bind again and again.*"

I think that is a clue to our theological and spiritual identity, and how it is that any number of persons here would've prayed with this man who confessed he needed the gates of freedom opened by the bonds of love. The clue is in a spiritual reading of the prophet's question:

*Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*

It can be read politically, fashionable in our age: *Two walk together as long as they adhere to the litmus test of the policies of a particular party.* It can be understood psychologically, fashionable in our age: *When the most conflicted regions of the id come together under the order of the superego, the individual's multiple aspects are synthesized into the unified self at one with the collective unconscious.* It can be addressed philosophically, fashionable in our churches and fellowships. *What do you mean by agreement? Define walking together? Will it be achieved by consensus or vote, and does it need to be unanimous?* All are important and necessary questions.

But how do you read it spiritually? That's what the man wanted to do. Without the capacity to reflect upon and talk about "*agreeing to walk together*" as a spiritual act, nothing useful was possible. You could pray with the man, but only in silence and ignorance, which he admitted he already had. Without spiritual language and literacy no persons of any faith tradition could offer healing to a wounded world, or be a beacon of hope to a beleaguered one.

The modern age is marked by the struggle for spiritual identity. Worldwide in Islam, the struggle is a source of violence. The Jew and Palestinian fight over whose identity bequeaths them land. Here cultural discord originates in the inability to distinguish a religious identity from a political one. Our own Unitarian Universalist leadership insightfully analyzes our condition as lacking a language of reverence, being theologically illiterate. We search for an identity we think we lack.

But every faith tradition has central questions that define its identity and make it into a "people." The Buddhist asks, "Is there suffering?" and his spiritual life is the answer. The Jew asks, "What does it mean to be a Jew?" and her spiritual life is the answer. Creedal and orthodox Christians ask, "What is right belief concerning

humanity's salvation?" and their spiritual life is the answer. And Unitarian Universalists ask Amos' question, "Can two walk together lest they be agreed?" and our spiritual life is our answer.

James Luther Adams, a Unitarian Universalist and one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's great theologians, pulled the brush aside on the path to our identity, explaining how some concepts "become" religious concepts, words "become" symbols of something sacred:

*"Human social existence requires the achievement of a means of communicating about social existence, a characteristic feature of which is the invention of concepts. Concepts do not come down from heaven; they have to be invented... [Theological] discourse... picks up a concept from ordinary experience and gives it a new and expanded meaning. A concept that originally applies to one aspect of existence is reinterpreted to explain the whole of existence. We call this process the radicalizing of a concept."* -*The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern*, James Luther Adams

Members of All Souls Community Church here in Grand Rapids, Michigan, talk about "walking together" to describe the community's spiritual life, so the two words become invested with new meanings that bear upon the whole of existence and expand the possible experiences of God such that a stroll on a downtown street just isn't the same again! Our spiritual forbear John Winthrop held that relationships forming spiritual community are as a "city upon the hill," and thereafter can your home congregation and hometown not be seen differently? Jesus likened the "kingdom of God" to a landowner hiring laborers for his vineyard, and invests ultimate meanings in "laborers" and in "vineyards."

Any ordinary thing in this world can be a symbol for the transformative capacities inherent in existence. That's part of the history of our spiritual identity. Any ordinary thing can be a signpost for the liberating presence of love. But our view is distinctive and enduring. The ancient Hebrews took the concept of a treaty between political entities and radicalized it into the concept of "covenant" to describe the relationship between God and the Hebrew people, the whole of existence to them. It is part of the yield of the Passover story. And our spiritual ancestors used a covenant to gather a new community from a new relatedness proffering a new being, over against authoritarian structures of understanding and fellowship. It is part of the yield of the Pilgrim story. Again Adams explained:

*"We of the Free Church tradition should never forget, or permit our contemporaries to forget, that the decisive resistance to authoritarianism in both church and state, and the beginning of modern democracy, appeared first in the church and not in the political order."* -*Our Responsibility in Society*, James Luther Adams

The man asked me if I would walk with him on our knees. He did not request, nor did he long that I stand over him.

Our forbears made the first step in the exodus from authoritarianism by creating a bond of fellowship and affection amongst persons to be seen and understood as the spiritual and divine product it is. The consequence of that covenant was the possibility of freedom and the fulfillment of creation it can bring. The Catholic priest can serve mass alone. The Muslim can practice Salat by herself. The individual Jew is a Jew. But a Unitarian Universalist needs a congregation, a covenant, so much so that when she lives in Michigan's Upper Peninsula hours away from any visible congregation, the Church of the Larger Fellowship convenes regularly for worship in her mailbox!

*The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.*

Covenant is a concept taken from the various agreements we make everyday, from the willingness to kneel with someone we don't know all that well, to the life partner we've chosen for better or worse, to the teacher to whom we entrust our child, to the boss or co-worker or employee we supervise. Agreements are ordinary things. But to us, certain kinds of agreements unlock sacred and holy dimensions to this life when their roots are in the expanse of human affection and their branches bud into the virtues of freedom.

We take the ordinary qualities inherent to certain agreements, to covenants, and we radicalize them. Equality and fairness make relationships spiritual, while inequality and disparity, the yield of authoritarian relationships, makes them profane. Mutuality, promises, roles and responsibilities, lines of authority, distribution of power - these qualities simultaneously contain an ordinary relevance and an ultimate meaning. Covenantal relationships prize persuasive discourse over coercive submission, the separation and balance of power, dissent and critique, and distinct individuality as necessary to and the aim of a relationship. The creation of holy bonds cherishes spoken discourse as a spiritual practice and "walking together" as a spiritual discipline. They involve God and human being together, a coarchy in the promise of creation's future fulfillment in the liberation of all souls. A covenant of Being. A theology of covenant is our gift to the world. The spiritual life expressing that covenant is our gift to the world.

*The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.*

But of all these qualities, derived from relationships seen through the possibility of their sacredness, through covenant, it is individual consent that is the reflection in human nature of God's creative intent and the arc of the moral universe. The man asked for my consent: "Will you join me in prayer for my marriage?"

Individual consent is also what is most misunderstood and distorted by us. It is not to be belittled into personal preference, the self's desires or needs or wants, the kind of "what-I-like-becomes-absolute-truth" disregard for covenant that claims a spiritual community is simply the largest number of private preferences fulfilled. Individual consent is not selfoatry writ large. The devotion to self-interest that yields spiritual license is not the bonds of affection that give birth to freedom. Individual consent is involved in sacrifice, but not the sacrifice that gives up consent and individuality; rather,

the sacrifice which, by giving consent to something larger than self, makes us into the New Being through the New Relationships that are possible. Individual consent - that human nature contains the capacity to give consent to enter loving relationships that are the foundation of freedom and human identity - most fully expresses our divine likeness. Consent is the evidence in human nature that we emulate the Creator by our own creativity. To live inside of relationships born of that creative affection is a special, powerful gift that transcends narrow allegiances that end with self; to walk with others in this way is to live in the closest proximity to what animates all of life. Spiritual community then becomes what it is suppose to become: the Free Church! God appears in the eyes of others who all have been made in that divine image, too! So the invitation to love God and your neighbor as yourself, becomes two different ways to walk in a common direction!

*The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.*

It's not a personal quest but a public pursuit, this becoming the Free Church. It's not a material, metaphysical, political, or psychological question for the singular self, but a spiritual and pragmatic one for the human community: Could a Palestinian and an Israeli walk together, lest they be agreed? Could Jerry Falwell and Rosie O'Donnell walk together lest they be agreed? Could an American President and an Al Quida leader walk together lest they be agreed? And every individual in the world begs some "people" to stand up and declare the qualities necessary in human relatedness such that the ordinary is transformed into the holy extraordinary, and hope is made real again. For some part of the human community to become the Free Church, so that what could be, can be.

And the people who are best equipped to show these ordinary qualities to contain the sacred ones they do and become the Free Church, are in this room and in gatherings like this all around the country and the world. It is as difficult a time in human history as any before to become the Free Church, to create the bonds of affection that liberate mind and heart. It's hard to learn such a way to speak as it is to stand up and speak, and it's hard to learn to read the world in this spiritual way as it is to live it. Authoritarian structures and oppressive ways have brought the whole world to its knees. And so to meet the world where it is and look it straight in the eye, we, too, must get down on our knees; in order to lift it up. Yet, whether through a multitude of hosts or a small company, hope is declared by lives imbued with the spiritual literacy to see and understand, to shout the good news that is at hand. As surely as there are various paths to God there is a Promised Land of Life, Liberty, and Love, and you are standing at the edge of it and the world is waiting to be led along this path by your living a truth:

*The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.*

Of course, I bent down on my knees, side by side with my brother, put my hand on his shoulder, his on mine. I was encompassed about with a mighty cloud of our witnesses, souls alive and souls who no longer walk this path with us, saints and prophets, aged and wise men, gracious and heroic women, and little children most dear,

who, even when their names are forgotten, have been, are and will be a faithful source of inspiration and power. A covenant of Being. And we consented to enter a covenant for a certain part of the day, walking together on our knees to these lyrics:

*O, God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom, and who has given us this day to live; give us also eyes to see thy loving ways, ears to hear thy liberating call, lips to speak the truth of thy various ways and the clarity of thy melodious call; a mind open to revelation, a heart open to love; the will to extend that love to others; and the courage to risk all that we have and all that we are that we might stride towards freedom.*

AMEN.

*A Community of Strangers*  
All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan  
January 13, 2008  
The Reverend Doctor Brent A. Smith  
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*Readings*

love's function is to fabricate unknownness

(known being wishless; but love, all of wishing)  
though life's lived wrongsideout, sameness chokes oneness  
truth is confused with fact, fish boast of fishing

and men are caught by worms (love may not care  
if time totters, light droops, all measures bend  
nor marvel if a thought should weigh a star  
—dreads dying least; and less, that death should end)

how lucky lovers are) whose selves abide  
under whatever shall discovered be)  
whose ignorant each breathing dares to hide  
more than most fabulous wisdom fears to see

(who laugh and cry) who dream, create and kill  
while the world moves; and every part stands still:

-e.e. cummings

*Lincoln and Davis: Imagining America*, Brian Dirck

Lincoln's imagined America was a nation of strangers, diverse men and women who were unable to know what was truly in one another's hearts. Lawyer Lincoln learned about the fragility of assumptions concerning the inner motives of one's neighbors and the dangers of placing excessive confidence in sentimental attachments... [T]he center of gravity of his nationalism remained rooted in his lawyer's need for distance and circumspection. He could appeal to God for help but without presuming to know the will of God. He could speak of the war's broader national meaning, but he preferred to keep the war at arm's length... The result was... a national identity with limitations, uncertainties, and blind spots. Indeed, uncertainty was the hallmark of Lincoln's imagined American...

Certainty was the key in Jefferson Davis's nationalist imagination, born of his personality, his training as a West Point and regular army officer, and the needs and fears of the white South in which he was raised. He believed that good white gentlemen, particularly those with military pedigrees, needed to surround themselves with people

whose honor, motives, and comradeship (or, in the case of women and slaves, whose deference) was beyond question ...

As the new Confederacy's president, Davis continued to see national bonding as a matter of sentiment. He made overt appeals to his fellow white Southerners' hearts, painting an emotional mosaic of Confederate virtue... He also continued to embrace that need for certainty, which was so important to his antebellum worldview. He needed to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God was on the Confederacy's side and that victory was certain...

[Lincoln's] nationalist imagination construed America as a nation of aliens who could nevertheless function quite well without knowing one another's motives and innermost thoughts. [In Davis one finds] a sentimental nationalist who placed emotion at the foundation of his nationalist imagination and who needed to know what was in his fellow Americans' hearts in order to function properly in the American public square...

Lincoln could live with the fact that he did not know the hearts and minds of everyone in the American community; [Jefferson] Davis could not.

*Prayer [adaptation of Psalm 121]*

When I lift my eyes towards the hills and then the lake I search for the location of help, and realize help comes from Love. It is in affection that the heaven and the earth was made, a gift given to us each and every day of our breathing. It is our gratitude that sees this Affection, and it is the realization that it envelops us everywhere, that is the source of human awe and wonder. Love is my keeper. Affection and forgiveness is the shade under which I sit, and it is like the snow that falls softly upon my cheek. Love preserves us from all evils for it is love alone that is stronger than evil and death. It shall persevere when our bodies give out even as it emerges when our bodies first come alive, in this day as it has in all days previous, and it will in all days to come. AMEN.

*Sermon*

This past week I met a guy on the airplane between Tampa, Florida, and Detroit. We couldn't be more different. He is my daughter's generation, born in Ethiopia, raised in Nigeria, of Indian descent, grew up in a hut with no electricity and no television, and, as he pointed out, when he went to the village school was ridiculed by his schoolmates for not knowing who Michael Jackson was. He speaks three languages. I speak one, am his father's generation, was born and raised in the same home in Indiana, Michael Jackson's home state, with a television on every hour of the day it seemed. He is a Catholic engineer and I am a Unitarian Universalist minister. The three hour flight flew by with animated conversation.

He showed me pictures of his three small children, his Nigerian wife, her parents, and his parents who live in southern India. We talked about religion, culture, politics, and much about freedom. He asked me what I thought was the foundation of a political

democracy, as he had lived through the corrupt Nigerian “elections” and was curious what a someone would think who had lived here all his life. I said that while elections are a characteristic of a democracy, not all countries with elections are democratic. And freedom is a characteristic of democracy, but not all counties with freedoms are democracies, as the beginning of the United States itself proves. We had elections and freedoms early on in our country, but only for some; not women or people of color.

The foundation of a democratic political system is the recognition of basic, universal human rights whose origin is not in anything humanly created, like governments. Governments which function so as to grant rights can also take them away. Democracy is rooted in the idea that rights have their origin in a transcendence of humanly created institutions and cultures. Religion often argues over what the nature of this “transcendence” is, and has an unholy appetite for violently condemning opposing views of this “transcendence,” which no one really knows a whole lot about. But, this is why in our faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism we talk about spiritual freedom. Before freedom is political, it is spiritual, religious, rooted in what this congregation in its founding documents called, “*the transcending mystery of the universe.*”

Then he asked me what I was preaching on this Sunday. Now you’ll have to take my word for it that unlike Sunday worship I did not do most of the talking during the three hours, and that I am only telling you what he asked me to tell him. I was preaching on the origin of spiritual freedom as it appears and moves in reality; that its foundation is relational. Spiritual freedom as a reality thrives through relationships, and best only in certain kinds of relationships; those that maintain, deepen, liberate, cultivate, that is, enlarge, the individuality of the entities involved. To do that a relationship has to be formed by a distinct and peculiar kind of bond, a bond of affection unlike other kinds of bonds of affection.

Last week we talked about spiritual meaning; that it is both relevant to particular times and cultures, AND larger than them all. We talked about how human beings often think that certain beliefs or rituals or traditions satisfy spiritual meaning when in fact all of them change over time and in various cultures. While belief, ritual, and tradition change in the various contexts of culture and history, there is also that Spirit that abides, and transcends all time and place because it is always relevant yesterday, today, and tomorrow, here in this place and there in all other places. We seek to discern and live inside that Spirit every Sunday through worship, that unity and freedom expressed best when we endeavor to love all souls. How can the human connections we have in our everyday lives, from home to work to neighborhood to church, to meeting someone on an airplane, cultivate this Spirit?

Over the holiday break I received an email from an old fraternity brother of mine. I am a frat boy, and this is a distinctive kind of relational bond. The Saturday evening between Christmas and New Years the “brothers” had a party in Indianapolis, the first in over 30 years. I couldn’t go because my life is different now, but they called me on Saturday night and we had a great conversation.

Of course we talked mostly about the past. That's where fraternal bonds have their origin and scope, although we didn't realize it back then when we were forming them. There are certain characteristics of fraternal bonds of affection when they are the glue that holds people together in community. Their aim is in freezing the past wherein those bonds were established and were most deeply felt, to make existence bear an immobile certainty it just doesn't possess. In fraternal bonds of affection some persons are included, while others will not and can never be. Fraternal bonds have the characteristic of the bonds of familial ancestry, and thus it was that I had a fraternity "Big Brother."

My plane companion showed me a picture of his father and mother on their wedding day in part because familial bonds, like fraternal bonds, are rooted in the past. These bonds tell you of your history, and thus tell you in part who you are. But, of course, they will not and cannot tell you or even hint at what you can become. They shape what you become, but never fully or even mostly.

My frat brothers couldn't conceive of how the irreligious and profane, flippant and sacrilegious, foul-mouthed football playing wild man they knew could ever have found his way into this kind of life. They admitted what could not be comprehended. "*You've become somebody we don't know,*" they said over the speaker phone, and that's true. But what is also true, and what fraternal and familial bonds shroud, is that they don't know one another all that much either! In a very real way we are all strangers to one another, a characteristic of existence that our relationships veil until it is revealed, like when we learn something new about a loved one long since deceased.

History tells us that when political freedom was born in this country it was given birth politically but not spiritually. The bond was expressed in a spiritual phrase - "*all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights*" - but the freedom yielded was thoroughly political because it was incomplete. Initially, freedom was the child of a fraternal bond of affection shared by men and not women, and only by some men at that. The irony of this national community eventually exploded in the violence of the Civil War. It was, in part, a violent disagreement over what constitutes the relational bond that forms free community. This civic conversation is still with us today. And we who are heirs of a faith tradition championing spiritual freedom must needs understand as best we can the nature of human relatedness, of the bonds of affection that make spiritual freedom a reality regardless of the political form of a nation.

Jefferson Davis saw that relational bond as a fraternal one. His speeches before and after he became President of the Confederacy evidence it. It "*was the essence of Americanism for Davis: feelings, fraternity, an emotional sense of cohesiveness within the family that was the Union. He often used familial metaphors for the American community in his speeches.*" (*Lincoln and Davis: Imagining America*, Brian Dirck, 87)

His ancestral home in Mississippi, Brierfield, was conceived of fraternally as was his marriage. He "*presumed to know what was in [his wife's] heart,*" (*IBID*, 74) and speaking for her was customary to him. "*He presumed to know what was in the heart of*

his Brierfield slaves,” (IBID, 74) and could not imagine that there existed any kind of oppression under his benevolent rule. To him he had their best interests at heart. “*He has a way of taking for granted that everybody agrees with him when he expresses an opinion,*” (IBID, 68) his wife noted when they first met.

To Jefferson Davis “*a spirit of family and fraternity... lay at the heart of the American community.*” (IBID, 139) His disenchantment was “*born of dashed hopes that the Union was collection of people whose hearts were in the right place. He needed an American based upon his – and what he believed to be true American – sentiments of loyalty and friendship.... He needed a Union that was the same comfortable, friendly community that Mississippi, Brierfield, his ‘people,’ and the South had become... [like unto the] certain duties owed by one family member to another...(IBID, 141-42) For Davis, a people was a homogenous, united, and harmonious polity, and state boundaries were expressions of that harmony.*” (IBID, 156)

“*Lincoln distrusted the viability of the very qualities that Davis required in a vital national community.*” (IBID, 88) To Lincoln, this nation was a community of strangers formed by an agreement forged by free consent. His life as a lawyer “*taught him that he should view friendship in ways that separated the private from the public, placed a higher value on outer forms than inner motives, did not presume an intimate understanding of another individual’s point of view, and proceeded cautiously in matter of proof and absolute truths.*” (IBID, 50-51) He didn’t understand his wife, freely admitted to it, and unlike his contemporaries and historians ever since, “*never tried to solve the riddle that was [Mary Todd Lincoln].*” (IBID, 74) Lincoln lived inside of relationships forming a community of strangers, even in his most intimate relationships.

But the most telling difference between these two leaders was in their understandings of the bonds of affection by which spiritual freedom creates community. In reading the Declaration of Independence Jefferson Davis simply ignored its proclamation about equality and instead saw it as a document enumerating the grievances against England that justified separating from it. To him it validated the reasons why it was right to leave, like a hundred years later when he would similarly note that the inner motives of Northerner and Southerner were not now one and harmonious and certain as they had been in the past, a circle of friends, a fraternity, a family. To Lincoln, we are strangers and a mystery to one another, and it is only a bond of affection rooted in a principle to which we belong by consent and mutuality, whereby we realize our various individualities and are free.

*Lincoln could live with the fact that he did not know the hearts and minds of everyone in the American community; [Jefferson] Davis could not. Love’s function is to fabricate unknownness.*

When I conduct a meeting with two people who want me to officiate at a service whereby they will declare their love for one another, in holy matrimony or holy union, I give this caution. You may love another now because of an affection born by what you know about each other, but your connectedness will grow into freedom to the extent you

hold an affection for what you do not know about the other. *Love's function is to fabricate unknownness.* Bonds change, and thus can deepen over time, in a community of strangers.

Once a parishioner of mine, who understood the way our essential mystery to one another is the source of the covenant between us that deepens our individuality and freedom through uniting us in a bond of affection, said teasingly to me, "*I know everything there is about you. You work an hour a week, are an extreme extravert, and smile and hug everyone twenty-four hours a day!*" He laughed facetiously, like Puck who reveals truth through declaring as fact its very opposite. He knew that *Love's function is to fabricate unknownness.*

When I joined my first church in 1978, the First Unitarian Church of Nashville, Tennessee, the woman receiving me into membership said, "*We're like a family here,*" and I replied, "*I surely hope not. Because my experience with family includes Great Aunt Edith and Great Aunt Alma fighting over their dead sister's fox fur stole in the lobby of the funeral home immediately following the service, while onlookers, family and close friends alike, looked on in gap-mouth horror and one of 'our own' simply excused them, 'Oh, that's just the way they are.' I expect something more than that from my church,*" I concluded. "*I want a community devoted to a transcendent, spiritual freedom that urges us towards change and growth.*" *Love's function is to fabricate unknownness.*

It is the function of the deepest kinds of bonds of affection entered into by an agreement aimed towards spiritual freedom, that you are declaring something deeply true about our perceptions of other human beings and our knowledge of human nature in general. It's a mystery! And when spiritual freedom is the highest aim of humanity's endeavor it is a mystery that is embraced and blessed. The mystery that is us and our tomorrow receives freedom and individuality in love.

It's no wonder my fraternity brothers didn't recognize the person I have become, when our fraternal bonds were erected in the past and depend upon a certainty the past possesses and the future denies. It's no wonder that Jefferson Davis left the union that was this nation and urged others to do likewise when to him unity meant the sameness as it was before and justice meant harmony above justice. The fraternal affection that he was convinced was the ideal community dissolves when others insist that freedom enlarges human connectedness by demanding an equality amongst all men and women. It's no wonder that newlyweds don't understand what I tell them until about the third year of their life together when that certain early morning comes, and they wake before their partner, roll over and gaze at them in a fearful wonder, "*Who is this person?*" And the look upon the face of that women in the first church I joined when I told her I hoped the church was not formed by a bond like a family, but something different and deeper and more, out of and aimed towards spiritual freedom.

*Love's function is to fabricate unknownness.* It is the sentiment that unites our individualities and makes the possibility of freedom a spiritual reality.

We do not know others as God knows them, which is another way to say there is a portion of another we do not know as there are portions of ourselves we do not know. It is a mystery. It is the nature of existence and the source and evidence of its spiritual freedom. We know and understand best what was and has formed us from the past to today, but what we are to become is free and open and liberated unto our own creativity as children of God. When in the past the bonds that formed this church were first established, many may have surmised that they loved one another because they liked one another and knew one another's innermost thoughts and feelings and sentiments. But the formation of the bond that itself formed this church was greater than that. It formed a spiritual community aimed towards spiritual freedom. It will take a lifetime and more for you to know one another if the bond that forms your spiritual community is to become a true affection that yields freedom. And if it is to become true affection aimed towards spiritual freedom it will never be complete, until everywhere men and women and children who are suffering from a spiritual bondage as real as any material chain can be, are liberated.

There are those who are certain they know what lies in the hearts of human beings, and that what lies there is always and everywhere evil, and who inflict their "certainty" upon others. There are those who claim they can look into the minds of others and discern whether their beliefs are held and favored by the Almighty, and whether the Almighty is on their side. There are those who claim nothing is Ultimate enough to be believed in, and that all there is, is what you think and you believe and you prefer. There are those who stumble under the weight of the burdens of this society and this existence, from tyranny to oppression to the afflictions brought on by circumstance of health or situation, and they look for something more than a religion which condemns them as the origin of trial and suffering. They wait for those who love the great mystery that is human nature and existence. They search for those who believe in the human prospect even when they don't or can't or when it appears that only darkness abides. They wait and search for a trusting someone who will walk with them towards a freedom and unity of the Spirit. And they wait in hope for that bond of affection, they search in hope for that community, and they want to trust in that hopeful tomorrow wherein they can unfold unto the glory in which they are created as children of something glorious and something more, and can become free.

AMEN.

***Hand in Hand***  
***An Annual Fund Drive Sermon***

All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan

October 14, 2007

The Reverend Doctor Brent A. Smith

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*Prayer*

.Each moment of each day, O God, we are given opportunities to walk in the beauty and joy of your creation. We are given the face of friends and the voices of companions. We are given fragrances of an autumn day, the delicious nourishment of the field, and the hand of a soul mate to hold in our own and whose warmth keeps us confident of humanity's ability to bring affection into the world. There is so much of this lovely gift that humanity tarnishes with greed and hubris and timid faint-heartedness. The challenges we face and the burdens that we bear may leave the Spirit exhausted and inhibited and restrained. The heart may grow faint at what the head is certain will be. Give us those times and places and events and persons who emancipate us from our fears. Give us those times and places and events and persons who arouse in us a new hope for a justice that will yet be. We seek a liberation that thine Spirit alone can give, towards a just and lasting peace between all persons.

AMEN.

*Sermon*

I think the spiritual life is about cultivating the kinds of liberating experiences Jackie Vines and Jon Waalkes have revealed to you from their own lives. But, these liberating experiences are not about letting loose upon the world the baser human desires of an individual. Liberating doesn't mean license. And these liberating experiences are not about a group repressing the corrupting wickedness that keeps humanity from purity, as one man told me was the manner in which one is "free" in Christ! I can do without that kind of freedom, thank you.

But, I do know this: Whatever a liberating experience is, as mysterious as it might be, cultivating them is the aim of spiritual fellowship and the purpose of a congregation's existence. You become a congregation out of the separate lives you lead when you consciously and intentionally consent *with one another* to have faith and confidence and trust in what human beings can become. You become a congregation in those moments when *you join hand in hand* to cultivate faith, not fear, and give humanity not hell but hope. You become a congregation out of the isolation of individualism when you free consent to join with a community and *add its identity* – its customs and practices and history and faith tradition – to your own in the hope of becoming a "New Being." You become a congregation *in order to transform* the mind through free and creative expression, and the heart through broader and wider generosity.

I think the spiritual life is the lifelong journey to see how it is that our individuality, our uniqueness of self, emerges from our mutuality, the relationships we create and maintain. I think that's been the central revelation in Western religion for thousands of years, obscured as it has become by human greed and hubris and the idolatrous adoring of what actually diminishes human life. It's been obscured by our individual fears and the mania that groups can conjure up. It's been obscured by church and state, religion and nation, cultural narrowness and lowly allegiance. But, I still think it is possible and central to the spiritual life. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, which abounds in this world at this time, human beings can love neighbor as self.

Take a look at your hands, your individualized version of the common human hand. We did not create this feature, but it marks us as a species. Some say our opposable thumbs, like our consciousness, our language skill, and our intelligence, marks us off as the current pinnacle of the evolutionary scheme. Some point to fingerprints as the symbol of how our uniqueness and commonality co-exist to make us human.

Hands are religious symbols. As an individual you can do things with your hand no one else can do, and when you place your hands inside of another's and form a clasp, it is symbolic that two pair of hands can do what one pair cannot. Hands are symbols of our individuality as distinct selves, and our mutuality as connected to all souls. And they can be wielded for woe or weal, or communicate cruelty or compassion. They are symbols of a spiritual truth: Some relationships can liberate individuals to a creative freedom that deepens individuality *and* our regard for other souls. Hands are symbols of what human existence *can* become.

That's a lesson it often takes persons a long time to understand, and some never do. The infant, when born, is utterly dependent upon the parent for food and protection. The infant takes food from another, needs to be cleaned up by another, and sleeps only when its rest is protected and safety insured by another! The infant's hand can latch onto your little finger but it cannot manipulate its movement through the will and intent of the fully formed mind. It has a freedom it is born with, but it is a freedom that is narrowly confined to its own survival. The infant is related to others, but those relationships do not yield the freedom for that is not the infant's aim. Mutuality exists, but no individuality. Thus, there is no such thing yet as Spiritual Freedom to the infant who can flail her arms liberally but not grasp your hand deliberately.

The first protest to this smothering relationship of protection and provision, necessary as it is, comes when the infant grows into what is called the "Terrible Twos." I love the "Terrible Twos," because the infant is growing out of a dependence relationship and towards relationships that will begin to support and uphold individuality. Full individuality and mutuality emerge as a distant possibility only! The infant walks upright, gains a measure of physical liberation, and begins to liberate the self by developing consent. The toddler says, "No!" A human being starts to become an individual through protest; "No," the great refusal, the great negation, the great spiritual declaration that some authority resides with the self and its consent.

Parents are loathe to recognize the emerging authority in the self of their “Terrible Two,” because the child, fascinated by its own potentiality, exerts its own will indiscriminately over against the power of the parent and the world. It’s wonderful to watch when it’s not your kid! And I remember how frustrating it was as a parent when my toddler stood her ground, literally, closed off her eyes from my influence, and with an emphatic pout declared, loud enough for everyone in the huge church lobby in Milwaukee to hear, “No, Daddy.” The spiritual truth is clear: there is an authority in human nature that resides in each soul, which conformity to outside authority threatens. The integrity of your own mind is sacred, said Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson, and that integrity is borne through consent, embarrassed as the parent might be by how this truth is discovered! Consent is the vehicle of human creativity. It is the image of our Divine likeness.

But, the individual may think this liberation, the freedom of protest, of “No,” is itself sufficient. That the natural freedom with which the infant is created is sufficient to the adult. The individual may even come to live an entire life under the illusion that freedom is only possible in breaking us off from others; the illusion that in opposition to others we become our true selves. But, the parent knows better. Sometimes a youngster says “No” to what is necessary for survival, like a young Beaver Cleaver refusing to eat brussel sprouts and dying of hunger at the dinner table!

But, that initial protest gradually subsides as the child grows because the protest somehow gets transformed into emerging individuality. Girls become gangly and boys nerdy, but there is a genuineness in their identity, an un-self-consciousness, a confidence in individuality beginning to emerge from protest. Boys hug and kiss their Dad, and girls make mud pies with Mom, and a mutuality deepens the older child’s sense of self. Affection becomes the foundation of freedom, the liberation of the self towards its created aim. It’s a great time to experience children when they are young boys and young girls. But, they are incomplete as individuals, for there are things they cannot do and thoughts they cannot entertain until they can walk out of immaturity and into adulthood.

Yet, this time doesn’t last, either, for protest emerges in a more complex way. I remember the very day fourteen years ago when a group of older parishioners gathered around me: “We saw your twelve-year old daughter today and she’s got ‘the look.’” “What’s ‘the look’?” I asked, and they laughed and laughed. I found out about “the look” over the next seven years!

Adolescence is called by some, “the second toddler-hood,” because of its affinity with the age of the first “No.” Again, protest, the great refusal, the great negation, the great spiritual declaration of consent emerges, now in a more sophisticated and nuanced form. Again, it is the revelation of the same spiritual truth that emerged in the toddler, now in a more complex and urgent form: Authority resides in the self and its consent. The teenager tests this spiritual truth by walking at least five paces behind Mom or Dad in public. But, it’s no longer simply a freedom from all others as the toddler thinks. Those who see freedom as independence remain spiritual toddlers.

Because adolescents are also some of the most conforming persons even in their declaration of being unique! They are conforming in ways that play deeply upon their psyche, and especially as they deem freedom to be independence. The teen is confused about how individuality and mutuality nurture each other. The teen desperately wants to be unlike everybody else, an independently differentiated self, and yet teens are most susceptible to group-think! A group of teens will gather for hours on end, and agree amongst themselves how nobody understands them because nobody is like them! The confusion about mutuality leads them to love unwisely. The confusion about individuality leads them to cut themselves off from even the best and most nurturing influences. Teens love to read Emerson's "Self Reliance" because they see there what they long for, and high school teachers know teens need to read Orwell's "Animal Farm" as well, though teens won't routinely understand or like it. It's only after they pass through adolescence, if they ever do, that the limitations of Emerson's "Self-Reliance" can be seen, and the breadth of Orwell's "Animal Farm" understood.

Teens are confused by the truth of Spiritual Freedom, and their confusion may last their entire lives. Spiritual Freedom is about mutuality yielding individuality, that the bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom. Teens are confused, and many adults are confused, because the spiritual is about power. Like sex, money, and religion, the spiritual is about power. And the spiritual life is about transforming power into the liberating grace of Love.

A truth can be distorted by us into an idolatry that is its opposite. Or, a truth can become an active force in, and a lived meaning to, our lives. Adolescence is such a turbulent time because the truth about Spiritual Freedom and its competing distortions become apparent. Some respond to this in fear for the rest of their lives, even as some begin to live in faith, towards an affection at the heart of existence and the trust we offer that brings it into reality.

The stakes are so high that many who respond in fear declare they are responding in faith! It's understandable. There is so much at stake, and we human beings sometimes are too clever even for our own good. It's so easy for human beings to be fooled or to fool themselves. The stakes are Ultimate and religious, and humanity is both clever and intelligent. And so many will, through their fear, insist they are embodying faith, and many others will, through their fear, become independent of the relationships of spiritual community.

It is in fear that religions are used to demand a conformity that smothers individuality. Yet, it is in fear, too, irreligion is used to authorize an indulgent self-rule, an obstinate immunity from the influence of others.

All Souls Community Church exists to witness to people that they do not have to live in fear. All Souls exists to show people how to live, trusting life and being confident in what human beings can be and become for one another. All Souls exists to liberate all who dwell within its circumference, from living their lives based in fear.

The existence of All Souls is a declaration that humanity can live in faith, in trust, and in confidence. It is a declaration that to live spiritually is to trust human generosity. And live by it and for it and towards its complete fulfillment.

Have confidence in human broadmindedness. Be of good courage. And live by it and for it and towards its complete fulfillment. Hold fast to that which is good.

Resist the temptations to be fooled by the distortions we are susceptible to, and the terrors humanity can foster upon itself. Shut your eyes to none of our baser instincts, even when we try to clothe them in celestial garments. Yet, resist fear, and cynicism, and belittlement, and prejudice, and all the ways we diminish the human spirit even and especially when we justify those diminishments by claiming God would want them that way. And resist the fear of fleeing away from Spiritual Freedom when the distortions we are capable of flow through religions and nations. Seek instead, how it is that the bonds of affection are the foundation of liberation. Live by and in faith. Give your trust away and endeavor to be trustworthy for others.

Begin with the “No” that is protest, but transform it into the “Yes” that is a deep faith in life. Cultivate not fear or flight, but liberating experiences that show us what wondrous loves humanity is capable of!

I would invite you right now to think upon what your fellow members have said this morning about when they felt liberated. “Liberation” is a high-minded word, but it is about real human experiences. I want you to look at your hands, to think upon when you have felt most free, most free and alive, most free and alive and deeply connected with others. Human beings have these liberating experiences that are joyous. It’s when we are free enough of our fears, to love life in ourselves, in all others, in all creatures, in all of this great and glorious existence. To feel that kind of deep and wide affection is to be liberated from all fear. It is to be free. And that is what All Souls exists to do. To liberate and cultivate the Spirit.

AMEN.

*The Free Pulpit and the Free Pew*  
*A Sermon for the Seeker, the Unchurched, and the Newcomer*  
All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan  
August 26, 2007  
The Reverend Doctor Brent A. Smith  
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*Readings*  
*From Speaking on Faith, an interview with Karen Armstrong*

With sweeping books like *A History of God* and *The Battle for God*, Karen Armstrong is known for her singular insight into religion in our world. But Armstrong herself first discovered an interest in world religions in midlife, and practically by accident.

She was a Roman Catholic nun at a young age, with a narrow view of Christianity and no knowledge at all of other traditions. She spent years after that as a non-religious person.

After my conversation with Karen Armstrong, I felt that her personal trajectory of faith strengthens her personal appeal for modern readers. She is a formidable intellectual, but as a theologian she calls herself an amateur, in the full sense of the Latin root of that word "*amateur*" — "a lover" of her subject.

America today is full of amateur theologians: people who are searching for a fullness of knowledge about their own faith and that of others, and who find this search to be intellectually thrilling and spiritually nourishing. Some conduct their searches outside the realm of religious practice altogether. Others supplement and complement their formal religious lives with further reading, learning, and thinking.

Karen Armstrong's books have helped many people think more deeply about religion in the world in recent years. I'll turn over the rest of this reflection to illuminating words she shares in our interview — and that I will continue to ponder.

*On becoming a student and scholar of religions:*

"Early on I had a great gift. I was reading a very scholarly and wonderful book about Islam in three volumes, and I lit upon a footnote that explained in very dry academic language what a religious historian was supposed to do. He — I think they assumed it would be a he rather than a she — was supposed to practice what was called 'the science of compassion.' Now science is used here in the sense of *scientia*, 'knowledge.' So it was a knowledge acquired by compassion. And compassion, of course, doesn't mean feeling sorry for people, pitying people. Compassion, *com-pas-sion*, means 'to feel with.'

"And in this little footnote, the author said that you must not lead the discussion of a religious idea or a theology or a personality such as Muhammad without being able to find out what lay at the root of this, not to dismiss these ideas out of hand from a superior viewpoint of post-enlightenment, Western rationalism, but to divest yourself of that rationalistic outlook and enter the minds of these mystics and sages and poets and keep on asking, 'But why? But why?' And filling up with scholarly knowledge the background until you come to the point where you can imagine yourself feeling the same, or believing the same as them until basically the intellectual idea learns to reverberate with you personally."

*The Gates of Freedom, Napoleon Lovely*

Though our knowledge is incomplete, our truth partial, and our love imperfect, we believe that new light is ever waiting to break through individual hearts and minds to enlighten the ways of [all]; that there is mutual strength in willing co-operation; and, that the bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.

*Prayer [A. Powell Davies, adapted]*

O God of the morning of the world, by whose bidding the earth is stirred with new life and at the sound of whose voice creation wakes and sings, open our hearts to the gladness of this day and may the freshness of its beauty cleanse our souls. Forgive us, O God, that so dim-sightedly we go our way, in haste and fever and with fretful aims. Lift up our eyes! Let us see the wonder all about us! Thou hast given it creation's glory; Thy miracle of life is wrought anew with every blade of grass.

We thank Thee, O Creation's Lord, for this renewal of life's unfolding, this revelation of Thyself that never grows old. May the joy of it restore our hope, its loveliness enrich our understanding. May the beauty of it breathe itself into our spirits, and its promise mingle with our prayers.

AMEN.

*Sermon*

There are two time honored institutions in Unitarian Universalist churches that are, or should be, guarded by clergy and laity as if they were the Holy Grail. They are the free pulpit and the free pew. The free pulpit means that when a congregation lends its pulpit to a minister by calling that minister as its spiritual leader, the congregation pledges complete and unencumbered freedom of speech to say anything from that pulpit that the preacher believes to be true. But, the preacher has to hold forth what is her faith through her life.

The freedom of the free pulpit is not something the preacher is born with and thereby is naturally entitled to, which is why we "call" certain individuals and not others by consenting to that minister/congregation relationship. Spiritual Freedom originates in a bond of affection, the covenant established between the congregation and the minister.

Thus, the free pulpit is not a debating rostrum, as it is sometimes conceived of today, whereby various views are set alongside one another for the listener to decide from as to which the listener should hold as true. It is also not an “open mike at the Improv,” where anybody can get up there and say anything without the responsibility of a called relationship. The free pulpit has an underlying “faith presumption” about it. When an individual listens to another speak out of the depth of free conviction derived from a deep relationship of “calling,” an “invigorating spirit” comes about whereby the hearer can pursue most deeply what his convictions are. Freedom used by the preacher to discern her own convictions, is the very same freedom that the hearer can use to penetrate through his own denials and refusals to engage life honestly and deeply. Spiritual Freedom can do this.

The free pew means that when a Unitarian Universalist congregation is gathered by a bond of affection, a covenant that makes it into a spiritual community, the most sacred agreement made is that no theological test will be exercised by the community over the mind of an individual member. That freedom is not the freedom an infant is born with, what historically was called “natural freedom.” Spiritual Freedom is in addition to this, a “something more” originating in a bond of affection, symbolically revealed when we christen our newborns. As keepers of this liberating covenant we acknowledge the uniqueness of the life that is each infant, and dedicate ourselves together to their unfolding. It is how spiritual community is created by free consent and maintained by love.

Everything else in any of our churches might be unique to that particular congregation, yet all provide and protect the Free Pulpit and the Free Pew as Unitarian Universalists. *The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.* And this has been the gradual development of our form of spiritual community for over 400 years, up to 2001 when this congregation was gathered, and unto this day. No other church in Grand Rapids bears this legacy or has this responsibility.

In our downtown Philadelphia Unitarian Church, gathered in 1796, there is a plaque commemorating the longtime ministry of Rev. William Henry Furness, father of famous American architect Frank Furness. The elder Furness was called right out of Harvard Divinity School as the church’s minister from 1825 to 1875 and then as Minister Emeritus unto his death. During his ministry in Philadelphia he was famous as an outspoken advocate for the abolition of slavery. This he preached from his pulpit with courage and conviction, and on many occasions church members sat in the pews armed with rifles in order to protect the minister whom they loved so dear and whose message struck an agreeing chord within some hearts. But such was not the case with all members of the church.

In fact, within the congregation there was a Southern plantation owner who was one of the wealthiest members of the congregation. Undoubtedly his money was needed to pay bills. Another, the Chairman of the Church’s Board, was himself pro-slavery and was decidedly against the preaching of his minister, the minister his church had called. But, today in that church’s building, where there is a plaque given by the church

commemorating Rev. Furness' ministry, there is another plaque given by Rev. Furness' architect son commemorating that Board Chairman's staunch support of the freedom of the pulpit; the freedom the congregation gave Rev. Furness to preach the truth as he saw it when they lent him their pulpit as their minister; a freedom that yielded a message the Board Chairman disbelieved. Two plaques reside in the same church representing two people on opposing sides of the single most important social, political, and theological question of their age. Two plaques reside in the same Unitarian Universalist church representing a social, political, and theological question whose resolution bloodied all of our country, and whose divisions are felt unto our own day. It is even inconceivable to many today how our church could allow, let alone contain, these two opposing views.

It is so hard today to imagine anyone supporting the practice of holding another as a slave and earning bread by the sweat of another's brow. But that was the majority view of the whites in our culture at that time. It's a harder thing now to consider a plaque in a church honoring someone who held such a repulsive and unredeemable belief. Such are the vexing contradictions of the human heart and mind, and the way history judges the limited view of all human beings in all times and cultures. We would do well to remember our limited views will be so judged too.

The presence of those two plaques invites deeper questioning: Does it signal a faith tradition that doesn't believe in anything or stand for anything? Does it suggest a church that isn't religious, or, worse, is deeply confused about what it is about so it displays both plaques "to cover its bets"? Or, barely conceivable in our time, does displaying both plaques symbolize a realistic view of human limitation and, beyond that, a deeper, spiritual faith in the human prospect and Creation itself? Does it symbolize a faith tradition that represents freedom as a spiritual thing, as the way God moves in our lives? Is it symbolic of how our human loves are narrow and provincial to time and place, but that, yet, there is an Abiding Affection that history can reveal as it unfolds?

One of my seminary professors, Langdon Gilkey, once said that "*what [you] believe is largely determined by where [you deem] evil... to lie.*" If you think evil lies in the inevitability of human being to be fooled into believing false things you may believe human beings are not worthy of trust. So, God may become the source of a goodness human beings do not, by contrast, contain. If you think evil lies in people believing the wrong things you may believe there is a single, absolute truth, a right statement of true belief somewhere that the church needs guard for the sake of all humanity. So, the church may become the source of all things to be believed in.

But if you determine that freedom is a spiritual thing, and that in freedom, individuals can discern the good and the just and the true, the control spiritual communities wield requiring conformity to beliefs and creeds set down long ago, giving certain individuals religious and sometimes civic power over others to enforce under the threat of bodily or spiritual death, that this is evil, then you may believe in the power and sanctity of human individuality. You may hold to freedom as a spiritual thing, and the purpose of congregating together, to be to expand, deepen, and strengthen freedom in human existence.

*“You have to leave home,”* she told me sixteen years ago when we were talking about spirituality and living a life of faith as a Unitarian Universalist. We were sitting in the library at the church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where I was minister, a library she had largely built and one which was the finest, most extensive religious library I had ever seen outside of seminary. She had been raised by Congregationalist missionary parents, had lived all over the world, had married and settled in Tulsa, raised a family, including one of our Unitarian Universalist ministers who is now retired in Michigan. She was a member of the Search Committee that brought me to that church. When I knew her she was in her 80’s and eventually I had the honor and responsibility of officiating at her Memorial Service.

Sally Campbell was telling me something significant about the spiritual journey that involves freedom; that it begins when you say, I don’t believe that. I don’t believe what the church says I should, just because the church says it. I don’t believe that human beings are always wrong and not to be trusted. She was telling me that the first step of the spiritual journey starts when you declare yourself a spiritual rebel.

*“You have to leave home and meet, learn about, and learn to love others who are different and believe differently than you. To be a spiritual rebel begins with courage. Eventually, you come to know who you are through a deep relationship to those who believe differently than you. You come to yourself first by contrast, by what you are not, by what you don’t believe, by being a spiritual rebel and acting upon the courage to leave home. But you cannot remain a rebel all your life, finding your identity in what you are not. So, you devote your life to studying others, living and dead, to feel who they are, how they’re similar to others and how their individuality makes them unique from others. You begin as a rebel, but to follow the spiritual journey today you must take the step of deep relationship. That’s when you find the free pew. And in the free pew you will find the sacred quality of the individuality of all souls. You will be free and be yourself.”*

This beloved mentor of mine taught me that spiritual freedom means more than just being the rebel, though it begins there. But, the rebel might only be, or primarily be, serving his or her own self-interest. The spiritual freedom of the free pew, to which this faith tradition is devoted, means that the individual who occupies it is in a spiritual relationship with others, and is devoted to shaping relationships that deepen individuality through the courage of extending freedom. The aim is the full individuality of who each of you is. The free pew means individuality matters ultimately, and individuality matters for more than just for you. Individuality matters more than your self-interests, or your preferences, or your needs, or your current beliefs. You find yourself free through the lives of others, not away from them. The spiritual rebel first declares, “I can say and believe anything,” which in one sense, is like being a teenager who tells his parents he can believe what they do not. And in one sense it is true. The teen must leave the father and mother to become himself, to seek after his own life. He must first be a rebel, and then a seeker. He must first engage the authority of his own experience instead of relying on the experiences of others for what he himself believes.

But, a seeker is someone searching for something. Life is a journey, but there are things to see along the way. And, more importantly, there are deep relationships that help shape who we are. And the spiritual seeker who seeks the spirituality of the freedom he has felt, will find its spirituality in compassion; in sitting in a free pew looking around at the faces of those with whom she shares the deepest of all relationships. She starts a rebel, becomes a seeker, and then inevitably is faced with a question that is spiritual because it is about transcendence: What do I serve? And maybe, just maybe, in engaging that question out of the freedom that initiated it, she arrives in the free pew. She finds a spiritual tradition that lays claim to the free spirit, the freedom that comes from and serves compassion because it serves the individuality of us all.

*“The individual without a community is empty,”* said Professor Gilkey, *“and subject to all kinds of absolutisms.”* And without a congregation devoted to Spiritual Freedom through the free pew, the Chairman of the Board of our Philadelphia Unitarian Church would have been absolutely secure in the absolute certainty of his absolute belief in slavery, as many sitting in other churches at that time were. A faith in Spiritual Freedom through the free pew may be the only faith that saves us from the certainty that what we believe is what God believes!

But today, to get community, to get connection, Spiritual Freedom can easily be betrayed.

When I first came to a Unitarian Universalist church, in Nashville, Tennessee in 1978, I came as a spiritual rebel, identifying myself by what I did not believe. And admittedly, I was as baffled by this faith perspective as later I would find other clergy in other faith traditions to be. At first it seemed to me that a person could believe anything and be a part of this church. In fact, that is often the description; that you can believe anything in a Unitarian Universalist church because they don't believe anything there.

“What does your church believe?” It's the common question asked after someone confesses where they go. But, churches don't “believe” things, individuals do. The purpose of religious fellowship is to liberate and cultivate the spirit. It is not to believe the same things and toil towards a conforming purity. But, that is the tendency of all groups and communities, even ours; to lean towards a singularity of belief that smothers freedom.

I remember reading a minister's blog entry that, though he was not a Unitarian Universalist, hinted at what all religious community of any kind leans towards. He gave the justification for writing his blog, saying that what he writes in his blog is *“the kind of stuff that should go into sermons, but often doesn't,”* adding, *“There's a sense of more freedom and safety (in a blog).”*

I cannot tell you the number of times in my 24 years in the ministry when a clergy person has said to me something like this: *“I wish I could say the things in my church that you do in yours.”* I don't think they mean they believe theologically what I believe. And it's certainly not said because you can believe anything you want and be in

this church, because every clergyperson who has said it to me holds deep convictions and not just “anything he wants to believe.” Why someone would not say from the pulpit what is believed, or would write in a blog things he did not feel free safe to say from the pulpit, is about the nature of the free pulpit in a particular congregation. I have been in so called liberal churches where I was not free to say what I believed without chastisement. It’s not a liberal or conservative thing. Churches, congregations, don’t believe things, but often the way they do things does reveal that they think they should.

Because, anybody in any pulpit CAN say whatever they want in their sermons. That is never the issue. But, will the congregation hear it without reprimand? Will individuals support the preacher when the preacher declares what they as individuals do not believe, even are against? Is their nothing we can serve larger than the self-interest of our own personal opinions? Or, is church just personal opinion elevated to God’s, or, in the absence of God, making all human opinion of equal value? Do the bonds of love keep open the gates of a spiritual kind of freedom? Or, do the bonds of purity, explicit or implicit, keep open the gates of conformity, absolute absolutism or absolute relativism? To say it theologically, in this church and faith tradition, freedom is the means by which God works in this world.

If a spiritual community, a church congregation can receive the words from the pulpit, through a bond of affection that is aimed at the liberation and cultivation of the spirit, then the two plaques in our church in Philadelphia make sense. If a spiritual community, a church congregation opens its membership up to all kinds of differing theologies which hold to the finite narrowness of all human belief and affection, then the two plaques in our church in Philadelphia make sense.

If a spiritual community can both understand human finitude and hold fast to the liberating power of the Spirit, then the two plaques in our church in Philadelphia make sense. And, offers seekers a view of who we are, what we hold about the capacities of human nature, and how human existence can be liberated towards a greater fulfillment of creation.

To this day these two plaques remain, even when the individuals they name are gone and largely, if not completely, forgotten. The one that names the minister does not honor him, but the bonds of affection, the covenant that forms spiritual community and aims it toward freedom, and the Freedom of the Pulpit that symbolizes freedom as the form God takes in this world. And the second, which names the Board Chairman, is not in honor of his opposing view. It does not symbolize diversity of belief, nor that a single community could contain two differing viewpoints. It does not honor what time has proven unredeemable. It reminds us all of human limitation, that nothing in human existence and no one who lives or has lived, can know Truth completely and fully and absolutely. We see through a glass darkly and it is not through knowledge or believing the right things and saying the right creeds, that humanity is saved from our own errors. That plaque symbolizes that only a Love for all souls can save us from ourselves through freedom.

What you have in these two plaques, housed in the same building, is the representation of our distinctive faith tradition as Unitarian Universalists: The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom, wherein all creation can unfold unto its fulfillment and all souls can be redeemed.

AMEN.

*Ralph Ellison and the Emergence of the Invisible Man*  
All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan  
February 3, 2008  
The Reverend Doctor Brent A. Smith  
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*Readings*

*Prologue to Invisible Man, by Ralph Waldo Ellison*

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then, too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.

One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name. I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels and demanded that he apologize. He was a tall blond man, and as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me, his breath hot in my face as he struggled. I pulled his chin down sharp upon the crown of my head, butting him as I had seen the West Indians do, and I felt his flesh tear and the blood gush out, and I yelled, "Apologize! Apologize!" But he continued to curse and struggle, and I butted him again and again until he went down heavily, on his knees, profusely bleeding. I kicked him repeatedly, in a frenzy because he still uttered insults though his lips were frothy with blood... - when it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually, that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare!... But I didn't linger... The next day I saw his picture in the Daily News, beneath a caption stating that he had

been “mugged.” Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man!...

I can hear you say, “What a horrible, irresponsible bastard!” And you’re right. I leap to agree with you. I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?... Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement. Take the man whom I almost killed: Who was responsible for that near murder – I? I don’t think so, and I refuse it. I won’t buy it. You can’t give it to me. *He* bumped *me*, *he* insulted *me*. Shouldn’t he, for his own personal safety, have recognized my hysteria, my “danger potential”? He, let us say, was lost in a dream world. But didn’t *he* control that dream world – which, alas, is only too real! – and didn’t *he* rule me out of it? And if he had yelled for a policeman, wouldn’t *I* have been taken for the offending one? Yes, yes, yes! Let me agree with you, I was the irresponsible one; for I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society. Some day that kind of foolishness will cause us tragic trouble. All dreamers and sleepwalkers must pay the price, and even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all. But I shirked that responsibility. I became to snarled in the incompatible notions that buzzed within my brain. I was a coward...

But what did I do to be so blue? Bear with me.

*Psalm 137*

- 1 By the rivers of Babylon,  
    There we sat down, yea, we wept  
    When we remembered Zion.
- 2 We hung our harps  
    Upon the willows in the midst of it.
- 3 For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song,  
    And those who plundered us *requested* mirth,  
    *Saying*, “Sing us *one* of the songs of Zion!”
- 4 How shall we sing the LORD’s song  
    In a foreign land?
- 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
    Let my right hand forget *its skill!*
- 6 If I do not remember you,  
    Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth—  
    If I do not exalt Jerusalem  
    Above my chief joy.
- 7 Remember, O LORD, against the sons of Edom  
    The day of Jerusalem,  
    Who said, “Raze *it*, raze *it*,  
    To its very foundation!”

8 O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed,  
Happy the one who repays you as you have served us!  
9 Happy the one who takes and dashes  
Your little ones against the rock!

### *Sermon*

Invisibility is a mythological concept that is cross cultural, cross historical, found in the world's religions, all cultures, and in secular disguises. From the ancient Greek gods and goddesses who could travel unseen by the human eye, to demons that inhabited men and women in first century Judea, to H.G. Wells' *Invisible Man* and Harry Potter's Cloak of Invisibility, not to be seen has teased human being. The movie, *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*, offered a strange twist on the idea because the shrunken kids' concern was not that they wouldn't see their parents again, but that their parents wouldn't see them! What are the invisible forces that animate fire and propel the wind?, a form of the "invisibility question" confounding humanity from the dawn of time.

To be visible is to known. It is to have authority, while to be invisible is to be impotent or become subversive. Pretend you do not hear your child and her complaints become more vocal until he is yelling out of frustration. But, pretend she is invisible and there is an initial subversive delight, until she is ready to quit the game and when you don't the anxiety multiplies exponentially. To be visible is to have an identity, to possess individuality derived from the relationship of being recognized and known. While there is a subversive possibility in it, invisibility carries with it the vulnerability of the threat of non-being. We are seen by somebody and we know we are alive, for it is only the dead who no longer possess the capacity to be seen.

It is a quality of existence's inherent relatedness, and to a covenantal theology it is foundational. Part of our individual existence, derived from relatedness, is that we are visible to others, and when in the depths of despair, of burdens too arduous and overwhelming, we justifiably cry out, "Lord, why do you not see my distress or respond to my lamentations?" To be invisible, or to render another invisible, is to deny the relatedness that makes humanity human, and God Divine.

Ralph Waldo Ellison's book, *Invisible Man*, begins like a punch in the stomach: *I am an invisible man*. Psalm 131 ends like a punch in the stomach: *O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed, happy the one who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock!* One of the marks of Western culture since the Enlightenment, a culture that has been directly shaped and guided by the foundation of liberal religion in general and the emergence in the 1600's of Unitarianism in particular, is its emphasis on the fullness of individuality, the potential of creation. The Protestant Reformation of the 1500's elevated the individual believer over the Christian Church itself as the guardian of the meanings of the sacraments, practices, and doctrines. Called by one author, "*Christianity's Dangerous Idea*" this brought the prospect of menace and mayhem through one question: "*Who has the authority to define faith, institutions or*

*individuals?”* The lineage of our faith tradition as Unitarian Universalists answers resoundingly, “the individual,” and yet this faith is built upon a presupposition: for one to claim that authority, step into it and towards the fullness of creation as a being made in a Divine Likeness, the self has to be seen or see itself. And it must reciprocate by seeing others!

That’s the punch in the stomach. Ellison’s book is startling, as must have been the message delivered by the prophets of old in their times and to their culture. There are certain others we don’t see. We make them invisible by our refusing eyes. It’s the deepest of ironies in a culture that lifts up individual rights. It’s the deepest of ironies at a time in history when we parade around and flaunt the uniquenesses and idiosyncrasies of the celebrity-self. Men lament how in the workplace, after they pass a certain age, employers no longer see them as having a future in the company. Women witness to attaining a peculiar invisibility at a certain age when they realize men no longer caress them with their eyes. We stand for the dignity of the individual as a culture, and as a faith tradition we proclaim this as a religious and sacred quality to existence. Yet, invisibility is time’s tendency, if not the condition society imposes on one. We obsess over Brittany in order to forget that we neglect the ironic vision that followed Katrina’s destruction, of men and women and children sitting on the roofs of their houses forgotten by a culture and a government and a people who rendered them invisible even to the eye trained to see them. The invisible emerged!

Ralph Waldo Ellison began *Invisible Man* sixty years ago when he lived in Harlem and had spent years as a writer, book reviewer, and political activist. He had suffered years of invisibility, from the poverty of his early years in Oklahoma as the “poorest of the poor,” to being hunted constantly by Jim Crow, to his artistic talents suppressed by Tuskegee Institute, and to his ambitions which were frustrated and overtaken by the talents of friends Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. Ellison was a musician and sculptor, who holds a distinctive place in American and African-American literary history. He understood Black folk-culture and didn’t despise it as many blacks and whites did, worship it as many blacks did, or parody it as whites did.

*“Ellison’s view was that the African-American culture and sensibility was far from the downtrodden, unsophisticated picture presented by writers, sociologists and politicians, both black and white. He posited instead that blacks had created their own traditions, rituals, and a history that formed a cohesive and complex culture that was the source of a full sense of identity.”* *Invisible Man* uses African-American and classic Western cultural themes in a similar fashion to Ellison’s heroes T.S. Eliot in *The Wasteland* and James Joyce in *Ulysses*. Its opening line in first person narrative – *I am an invisible man* – recalls in its cadence another novel which captures a deep mythology in the American experience and identity, Melville’s *Moby Dick – Call me Ishmael*. A blues and jazz musician, Ellison’s book uses this form of expression to ask a question that at once embodies the African American experience and begs the universal human condition religion is meant to engage, innocently asked by Louis Armstrong: *What did I do to be so black and blue?*

Ellison understood the blues, explaining, “*The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.*” To the ancients it was Psalm 137, and to the moderns, Armstrong’s lament.

*Invisible Man* is not an autobiography but a lyrical adventure of suffering and striving in order to transcend. It’s more than just how a culture rooted in the idea of individuality ironically betrays itself by rendering some individuals invisible. It is also about how we are complicit in making ourselves invisible, and it is about how an individual becomes a full functioning, free person. *I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived*, Invisible admits at the beginning of the novel. *Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?... Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement.*

As a form of agreement, recognition, individuality, is the fruit of covenant.

To be invisible is not to be in a position of authority, while to exist is to be in a position of authority. To be invisible is not to be acknowledged, even in situations where races and people of difference seem to mix. To be invisible is not to have a voice, so when one “gets a voice,” individually or as a community, visibility and existence emerge. To be invisible is to be inconspicuous, while to exist is to be noticed. To be invisible is not to be known by name, although only to be known by name renders one invisible without knowing it. To be invisible is to be in the hibernation of betrayal, a hibernation society relegates one through conformity to expectation, or a hibernation one chooses through fear and a lack of courage to be oneself. It is the spiritual disease whereby the self is not in possession of the authority that comes with being created.

We are blind to our brothers and sisters in the various differences of faith by not heeding the imperative to connect between faiths, choosing instead the blindness of confinement in our small faiths. We are blind to the rights of gay men and lesbian women when we do not demand they be treated equally in civic affairs, and instead allow religious doctrines to proclaim they aren’t created human and in a Divine image. We blind ourselves to racism when, as here, local affairs are guided by faith traditions which show no evidence from history that they have been enmeshed in racial and ethnic justice. We blind ourselves to the educational needs of intercity children when our public schools want for a public ethic. And we are blind to how church and state can oppress the human spirit when they are not separated so as to protect persons from the tyrannical capacities of both of them in collusion.

Yet, invisibility doesn’t just blind us, for we are complicit, too, in our own invisibility. I know people who want their church, their spiritual community, to be and remain invisible. Strangely enough, invisibility is sometimes sought after, and ironically by those whom you least expect. The leading volunteer for all kinds of social justice

projects at one church I served unexpectedly to us cringed when we sponsored a public rally against the anti-Semitic acts of local bigots who had terrorized the new Jewish synagogue down the street by painting huge swastikas on its sides. “This church building is new, we have a huge mortgage, and someone might burn our new church building down!” she said. “We didn’t have this problem when nobody knew who we were or where we worshipped.” And she was right, that hadn’t been an issue before and the new church building could go up in smoke.

Invisibility is a strange spiritual disease that is treatable by cleaning the wound with memory and hope. Remembering what consecrates existence from its beginning. And then reforming ourselves and our world and beginning again. Remembering, turning, and being revolutionized to rebuild and remake the world.

“*Wade in the water*” goes the old Negro spiritual, because it was the first step into the water by the slave that made human steps invisible to the runaway slave hunter and his dogs. When the ancient Hebrews, having had their city and sacred temple destroyed by the Babylonians, their men murdered, their women raped and enslaved, stood by the waters of Babylon and were ordered to sing a joyous song, “we laid down and wept, and wept for thee, Zion.” They wept for they remembered that centuries before they had stepped into the waters of the Red Sea, with a faith in the Author of Freedom, to escape their enslavement at the hands of the Egyptians and slaughter by Pharaoh’s approaching army. Step into the waters of remembrance of how humanity has enslaved itself, how we take dignity from human existence. Remember this, our capacity to make invisible, men and women of flesh and blood. And remember, too, how we can by our denial and our timidity, our submissiveness and our loss of nerve, make ourselves invisible, and deny the very qualities that led those of old to declare we are made in the image of God.

And having remembered by stepping into the water, and becoming invisible to the slave hunter, risking as the ancient Hebrew did in stepping into the Red Sea and crying out at the waters of Babylon, step out of the water clean and full of resolve, healed of invisibility and the enmity to lord power over others by cloaking them in our revenge. Step out of the water and see, singing songs of lamentation and wandering, but nevertheless resolving that your singing will not be in vain. I will become visible, and will endeavor to be free. I will become visible *and* responsible, and in freedom seek after a love of all souls which reforms and rebuilds the world.

AMEN.

*Lenten Sermon Series:*  
*Spirituality as Seen through the Sciences: Yoga and the Brain*  
All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan  
March 12, 2006  
The Reverend Doctor Brent A. Smith  
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*READINGS*

*The Varieties of Religious Experience, Lecture II: Circumscription of the Topic,*  
*William James.*

Most books on the philosophy of religion try to begin with a precise definition of what its essence consists of... Meanwhile the very fact that they are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word 'religion' cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name. The theorizing mind tends always to the over-simplification of its materials. This is the root of all that absolutism and one-sided dogmatism by which both philosophy and religion have been infested. Let us not fall immediately into a one-sided view of our subject, but let us rather admit freely at the outset that we may very likely find no one essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important in religion. If we should inquire for the essence of 'government,' for example, one man might tell us it was authority, another submission, another police, another an army, another an assembly, another a system of laws; yet all the while it would be true that no concrete government can exist without all these things, one of which is more important at one moment and others at another. The man who knows governments most completely is he who troubles himself least about a definition which shall give their essence... And why may not religion be a conception equally complex?

Consider also the 'religious sentiment' which we see referred to in so many books, as if it were a single sort of mental entity.

In the psychologies and in the philosophies of religion, we find the authors attempting to specify just what entity it is. One man allies it to the feeling of dependence; one makes it a derivative from fear; others connect it with the sexual life; others still identify it with the feeling of the infinite; and so on. Such different ways of conceiving it ought of themselves to arouse doubt as to whether it possibly can be one specific thing; and the moment we are willing to treat the term 'religious sentiment' as a collective name for the many sentiments which religious objects may arouse in alternation, we see that it probably contains nothing whatever of a psychologically specific nature. There is religious fear, religious love, religious awe, religious joy, and so forth. But religious love is only man's natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only the ordinary fear of commerce, so to speak, the common quaking of the human breast, in so far as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it; religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight, or in a mountain gorge; only this time it comes

over us at the thought of our supernatural relations; and similarly of all the various sentiments which may be called into play in the lives of religious persons. As concrete states of mind, made up of a feeling plus a specific sort of object, religious emotions of course are psychic entities distinguishable from other concrete emotions; but there is no ground for assuming a simple abstract 'religious emotion' to exist as a distinct elementary mental affection by itself, present in every religious experience without exception.

As there thus seems to be no one elementary religious emotion, but only a common storehouse of emotions upon which religious objects may draw, so there might conceivably also prove to be no one specific and essential kind of religious object, and no one specific and essential kind of religious act.

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow. In these lectures, however, as I have already said, the immediate personal experiences will amply fill our time, and we shall hardly consider theology or ecclesiasticism at all...

## **The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali** **Introduction, Commentaries, and Translation**

<http://www.rainbowbody.net/HeartMind/Yogasutra.htm>

Patanjali is not the inventor of yoga, but rather yoga's most popularly known scribe. What has become known simply as the "*Yoga Sutras*" (sutra means thread) or almost equally as common, as the "Yoga Darshana" (the vision of Yoga), is actually a compendium of an ancient pre-existing oral yoga tradition consisting of both practical advice and theoretical context. The most accepted format of the *Yoga Sutras* consists of four chapters (called padas) written in the Sanskrit language approximately 2000 years ago in Northern India while utilizing the terminology of the time, i.e., Samkhya philosophical trappings. The dates ascribed to the *Yoga Sutras* vary widely from 250 BC to 300 AD. 250 AD is very improbable based on comparative analysis with similar texts, grammar, and concurrent philosophical ideas of the era. This latter date is a conjecture based on the lack of any prior commentaries on the *Yoga Sutras* before this date...

As a system, the type of yoga as put forth by Patanjali, is non-theistic, having not even the slightest suggestion of worshipping idols, deities, gurus, or sacred books; but at the same time it does not contain any atheistic doctrine either...

Meditation (dhyana), Practice (abhyasa), and Vairagya (non-grasping) are the Keys ..

A careful reading of the *Yoga Sutras* will reveal to the astute meditator, an elucidation of the hindrances to meditation (in the forms of kleshas, samskara, vasana, vrtti, and karma which in turn are caused by avidya or ignorance) as well as their remediation through the various effective processes of liberation (mukti) that occur and/or are available through the main remedy of meditation and its auxiliary practices... Thus it is safe to say that the *Yoga Sutra* is an excellent companion for those who would

use meditation as a path. Here one may use the Yoga Sutras as a lab book. Read a little, then practice, read some more, practice, read, and so forth in that way. The lab book enhances the practice. Here it is the **practice** which reveals. **It is our experience which educates our beliefs. Our beliefs must conform to "reality", not the other way around. Such then are mutual synergists. Patanjali warns against domination of the vritti of preconceived beliefs (no matter how authoritative), and tells us to be present in our experience.**

## **The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali**

### **Chapter One: Samadhi Pada**

... man's spiritual milieu is that his cognitive faculties are disconnected from the Great Web of Creator/Creation. This disconnection or spiritual self alienation is called ignorance (avidya) and is the cause of his suffering (dukha).

Samadhi Pada: Sutras 1-3

1.1: From the portal of the Eternal Now (atha) -- freed from the structure of linear time and space -- from the non-ending beginningless ineffable stillness -- the eternal truth -- the Universal Intelligent Source from which all traditions and written laws are mere poor substitutions-- from HERE -- emanates the authentic instruction of the transcendental non-dual method that restores integrity called yoga (the process of joining together and making whole) -- unfettered by temporal limitation and corruption. In Pure Integrity in All Our Relations, yoga is all-ways available here and now (in the sacred present), and as such, it is at once, the arrival, the abiding, and the unborn universal presence which when experienced is recognized instantaneously as our true spiritual home. We will then truly know when we have arrived home.

1. 2: Yoga occurs when the machinations, vacillations, perturbations, whirlings, spinning, and agitations (vritti) of the mind-field (citta) dissolve, cease, and become still (nirodha)

1.3 So that (tada) the original clear light (drashtuh) of our inherent original true nature as-it-is (swarupa) can shine through. We then strongly and firmly abide (vasthanam) and become consummated in our original true nature (swarupa) of pure consciousness [without being uprooted in false identification, dissipation, dissuasion, distraction, or disease of consciousness by action of the vritis].

*PRAYER*

*Aum [Chanted]*

*SERMON*

Sometime before October 8, 1772, a woman named Phyllis Wheatley stood before a panel identified as *“the most respectable characters in Boston,”* including a number of clergymen of churches that fifty years later would be a part of the emerging American Unitarian church. The reason for this panel’s interrogation of Ms. Wheatley was *“to verify the authorship of her poems and to answer a much larger question: was a Negro*

*capable of producing literature?" (The Trials of Phyllis Wheatley, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 5).*

Phyllis Wheatley was brought to this continent against her will eleven years earlier, enslaved as a seven year-old from either Guinea, Sierra Leone, or Senegal, and her slave master, John Wheatley, had gathered the group to make their determination of her authorship. Historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr., calls this moment "*the primal scene of African American letters,*" and indeed she convinces the panel she wrote her poems, and her "*Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*" became the first book of poetry published by a person of African descent in the English language, marking the beginning of an African-American literary tradition."(IBID, 31)

But you see the irony! A black woman had to convince white men that she could write poetry because the white, European cultural orthodoxy of the day deemed it improbable for a black women to exhibit human intellectual characteristics or to have experiences that mattered. In fact they surmised this by reading existence through what they derived as "Biblical doctrines" that supported slavery! Our understandings of the human intellect and the workings of the brain remain so rudimentary and immature that a mere 300 years ago it was held that intellect was a function of skin color. A recent study headed by a University of Chicago geneticist has shown natural selection still working on the human brain today as it did only 6,000 years ago when Africans migrated to northern Europe and white skin color probably appeared as an adaptation the human body needed to admit sunlight for vitamin D synthesis.

We have yet to expand our understanding of human experience to affirm and confirm that experiences that are different than our own have an authority, especially a religious authority, which we can grant even though we may not understand them. That is the central religious problem today! It is in acknowledging the religious authority of an "other."

The brain is an evolutionary organ, perhaps the best example of evolution both over the span of human history and in the single lifespan of every individual. Changes in the way it functions can be measured and observed in each one of us from cradle to grave, and since it is the receptor and processor of stimuli and phenomena, and somehow derives meaning from the body's experiences and the mind's own experiencing of its own thoughts, your brain is evolving even at this very moment. You are inside of this evolutionary process such that it is the supreme challenge to see what you are, while you are!!! It is the question humorously asked, "Does the fish experience and know water?"

But in terms of the tens of thousands of years since the appearance of the human species, the brain itself has only really recently come under the scrutiny of modern science. And where the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed scientific achievements in the sky, the heavens, and on the moon, just as remarkable has been the advance in our understandings of the interior workings of human being.

A little over one hundred years ago was published what many philosophers, psychologists, and theologians describe as the most important book of the last century, William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In this record of his London Gifford Lectures, James identified the religious experiences of individuals as something worthy of observation, study, and analysis. It helped shepherd a monumental change in scholarly and popular understanding of religion to our own day. While for some, religion continues to be the doctrines and beliefs articulated by individuals, embodied in religious community rituals, espoused in faith traditions, formulated into creeds and doctrines and dogmas, for a significant number of us religion is concerned with the nature of human experience. Instead of arguing over whose god is bigger and better and holds the truth for all, or which religion is true, for many of us religious discussion and theological revelation begin with asking others, "What are the characteristics of experiences you have had that you would describe as religious?" This fundamentally different approach to religion has been part and parcel of our Unitarian and Universalist faith traditions since the 1500's, and an implicit part of Western religious traditions for thousands of years, especially in the mystical traditions which prize direct experience over conformity to doctrine.

While minister at a Unitarian Universalist church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, I had a woman in a newcomer's class who boldly told me she spoke in tongues and asked if that would be acceptable at this church. To be frank, I said, she would be the only one here that I was aware of who did that; and that worship was experienced here in a manner that speaking in tongues would disrupt. But as far as the integrity of the experience itself as a religious experience, I didn't in it! I find it a fascinating expression of an individual's connection with the Great Mystery of Being! Growing up our neighbors were Penecostals and I had gone with them to their church on a number of occasions, witness tongue speaking, and confessed to her and now to you of my interest in the practice. It is not my spiritual practice. I don't do it, never have, and have never envied or coveted it. It is called glossolalia, is cross-cultural, and also occurs in religions other than Christianity. It could be an experience that is learned; that is, that people learn they "speak in tongues in these here parts" and proceed to exhibit it as acceptable worship behavior. Or, it could be some kind of change in the brain's functioning. I just find it a fascinating form of human religious experience and expression, as I find other religious experiences fascinating. The capacity for variety in human experience, and religious experience at that, is boundless!

Glossolalia could be what Dr. Herman Sullivan of our congregation told me is called the neuro-transmitter effect. In a primer he was kind enough to give me this past week, he said it could be an experience that we could liken to the marathoner who gets what is called the "runner's high;" that is, a release of endorphins that act upon certain parts of the brain to create a real experience of pain relief. The brain and nervous system are hard-wired such that when they are stimulated in particular ways, especially by stressors placed upon them, a heightened emotional sense of well-being can occur.

These can be triggered by vigorous physical exercise or by ingesting certain drugs or by other impressions. Other states, like seizures, can be brought on by stimuli like

strobe lights or, perhaps, certain parts of musical pieces from Mozart to “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” Glossolalia could be a “*fugue state, an altered state of consciousness in which a person may move about purposely and even speak, but is not fully aware... a type of complex partial seizure.*” (MedicineNet, <http://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/hp.asp>) Whatever the analysis, there are states of the brain that we are just beginning to learn about, and states of consciousness that we have been trying to learn about in just a century and a half. And the medical study of these, and the religious study of these, are strengthened or hindered by how we conceive of the value of individual experience; whether we take individual experience on its merits to try to understand it, or accept or discard it based on prior belief structures, like orthodox religious doctrine.

It could be said that in the West the central religious question is, “What is the truth of the purpose of this life?” Judaism’s claim is that life’s purpose is found in the covenant between Yahweh and his people. Islam’s claim is that life’s purpose is found in the pronouncement that there is no God but Allah. Creedal Christianity’s claim is that life’s purpose is found through the redemptive suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the West, religion largely is measured by its “truth value.” But in the East, particularly India, and the religions emanating from it, Hinduism and Buddhism, and especially as seen in yoga as a deep, spiritual practice, the central religious question is, “Why does human experience engender suffering?” Yoga responds, “Because we are ignorant.” In the East, religion largely is measured by its “experiential value,” which may go a long way to account for why our Unitarianism has been linked up with the religions of India since the early 1800’s, and our Universalism so easily engaged others faiths! The practice of yoga and yogic states are to alleviate our ignorance by an experience of “binding tightly” (the meaning of the word, “yoga”), that is, what we would call the union of the individual soul with God, the yield of the yogic state. It is a practical practice with practical, experiential results.

Yoga is practical not doctrinal, experiential and not receiving revelation second-hand. It cannot be done alone but requires the guidance of a teacher, a guru. It requires a renunciation of the secular world, a virtual “dying” to the world of the material and a rebirth into the world of the spirit. This rebirthing is an enlightenment, a deliverance from the ignorance of treating passing phenomena as ultimate, until one sees, is enlightened to, how existence is pure Spirit; and that this pure Spirit is the lasting substance of the Self, Being, and God, “*the Veritable Self, the immortal element in the human being.*” (*Patanjali and Yoga*, Mircea Eliade, 17)

Yoga involves a rejection of the world as it is, a kind of devaluation of materiality that in the West yields pessimism and narcissism and despair, which is why we struggle to understand the experiences of others whose religion is not ours. In Yoga, and the religious traditions of India, “*One rejects this world and depreciates this life because one knows that there exists something else, beyond growth, beyond temporality, beyond suffering.*” (IBID, 18) It is a renunciation out of a sacred thirst for what lasts, what we in the West might call an experience of God through the *via negativa*, the shedding of the temporal and transient, what is “not God” and “not Ultimate.”

It is a liberation and emancipation from conceptions we have about existence that cause us to experience it as having lost its sanctity, in order to cultivate the sacred that is the true spiritual identity and substance of the Self. In yoga it is done through meditative practice that is like peeling back the layers of a real onion until one has, at last, discarded all the layers that are part of the onion but not its true self, until what is left is the center, what lasts, which is Spirit.

And the brain, this marvelous evolutionary organ, which can process our real experiences such that we think and can conceive and can take phenomena of our life and put it into a whole understanding of things, an intellect, this too is part of what composes our ignorance of the true nature of the Self. Remember, it was human intellect and its products, culture, that caused those white Bostonians to question whether the black slave woman Phyllis Wheatley could have written those poems! That whole scene, the skepticism of the white men as well as the poems of the black woman, were all products of the intellect, all components in the ignorance of who and what “human being” really is, an ignorance that yields suffering.

Or, to say it another way, in words that we in the West might use, in yoga there is the brain and its real functionings and the brain-states it generates, some of which we can understand and some of which are a deep mystery; like glossolalia, speaking in tongues, which is a brain-state, and much more we do not understand. There are these brain-states that contribute both to an ignorance and an understanding of who human beings really is, and then there is the mind, the Self, the atman, that part of us which, like the center of the onion, when all is peeled back, is in essence, Spirit.

*“... man believes, in effect, that his psychomental life – the activity of his sense, emotions, thoughts and desires – is identical with the spirit, the Self. Thus he confuses two wholly autonomous and opposing realities, between which there is no real connection but only illusory relations, for psychomental experience does not belong to the spirit (remember, the white men could not CONCEIVE OF a black woman thinking, emoting, processing, and writing!)... Yoga, on the other hand... values the practice of contemplation, which alone has the capacity to reveal experientially the autonomy of the spirit’s omnipotence.”(IBID, 26)*

The yogic state is an experience of the merging of all souls as the Spiritual nature of humanity and, indeed, of all the cosmos. And it is our real life that hides this “really real” from us through our ignorance of it.

To conclude with a personal example upon which I ask your forbearance. Tomorrow, our daughter and son-in-law embark upon a two year journey with the Peace Corps in Senegal, Africa, the country from which it is likely Phyllis Wheatley came. My brain and all the experiences, senses, thoughts, desires, and emotions work to create a grand product of the intellect: They will be gone and I will suffer at their parting and their separation from us. This is real and not an illusion. And there will be suffering which we

will know here and they won't there, and they will know there and we won't here. Such is the nature of existence and its reality. Yet, it is my faith, born of my experience, which yields this: It is my ignorance that holds these realities as having an eternal and unchanging quality that they do not possess. Suffering is real but it is not ultimate. The Spirit is, and is one. We are united and connected and covenanted and bound beyond all space and time, distance and temporality. We will change as is the character of what our intellect will insist is the deepest nature of all things. But there is something deeper still, a spiritual center to existence that does not change. We acknowledge it here and it will be with them there, and wherever they go, indeed, it will be with all of us wherever we go: There abides a unity and freedom of the Spirit, a connection best expressed by dispelling our ignorance and coming to a love for all souls!

AMEN.