

“The Heart’s Only Child”
Commitment Sunday, April 17, 2005
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Poetry

Just as at night we search the yard when vipers fall,
and all our fingers flame and burn to find a knife,
so do I also grope in darkness to find my God.
For God is not a phantom formed by fear or hope,
but the heart’s only child, born of despair and courage.
(Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Odyssey, a Modern Sequel*, Bk. VIII, 844-848)

What is this life, what secret yearning governs it?
There was a time I called its lavish longing God
and talked and laughed and wept and battled by his side
and thought that he, too, laughed and wept and strove beside me,
but now I suddenly feel I’ve talked to my own shadow!
God is a labyrinthine quest deep in our heads;
weak slaves think he’s the isle of freedom, and moor close,
all the incompetent cross their oars, then cross their hands,
laugh wearily and say, ‘The Quest does not exist!’
But I know better in my heart, and rig my sails:
God is wide waterways that branch throughout man’s heart.”
(Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Odyssey, a Modern Sequel*, Bk. XXII, 409-419)

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this Sunday morning.
Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to
seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that
make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history;
blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Congregational Covenant Statement (Spoken in unison)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to
serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our
truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment
shall endure.

Ceremony for Receiving Financial Pledges

Introduction

In case you missed the message last evening this is “Commitment Sunday” at QUUF, and, truly, having attended my first Annual Celebration Potluck Dinner & Program I can say, “There’s no place like QUUF.”

This Sunday at both our services – held at 9:15 and 11:15 – we are asked to make our financial pledges for the support of this religious organization for the fiscal year of 2005-2006, which begins this coming July.

This “Commitment Sunday” is the conclusion and culmination of our Stewardship Committee’s call to give attention and thought to the financial needs of this organization. Their theme this year is, “Let’s Nourish What We Cherish” – nourish this community that we cherish through our financial support of it.

For most of the church year we simply want to “do religion;” we don’t want to worry too much about the organization intended to help us “do religion.” Like an automobile, we want to be able to get in it and drive and not have to worry about the vehicle itself. But, of course, on occasion that vehicle needs attention in order to maintain it in good operating condition so it can get us where we want to go.

So too, on occasion, we need to pay special attention to this religious organization, this “vehicle of our religious transport.” On occasion we need to ask, “What does it take to maintain, sustain, and develop this Fellowship as an organization and an organism? And what should each of us as parts of that organization and organism be contributing towards its maintenance and development?”

In a couple of minutes the Stewardship Committee will hand out pledge cards and those of you who are members and friends of this Fellowship will be asked to fill out and hand in your estimate of what you plan and hope you will be able to contribute financially to this organization in this coming fiscal year.

This Fellowship is part of the “free church” tradition, which is to be understood theologically and spiritually, not materially. For indeed, as with other organizations, there are fees attached to light, heat, water, staff support, programs, and so forth.

But in the “free church” tradition there is no set amount required in order to maintain membership; there is no “membership fee” here. The idea, rather, is that free individuals are asked to take personal responsibility for their “free church” tradition through their financial support. And, of course, as our individual financial circumstances vary so our individual financial contributions will vary.

It’s also important that you, our children, are with us this morning for this ceremony. What you children are seeing this morning is your parents and other adults making a commitment to this Fellowship with regard to how much money they plan and hope to contribute to this Fellowship in this coming year.

These are often hard decisions because sometimes we don't have a lot of money, nor are we certain how much money we will have in the coming year. Also, there may be many groups and organizations we would like to support with the money we do have.

So how do we decide how much money we should contribute to each group that we would like to support? These are decisions each of us must make individually. It's part of what makes life interesting.

I hope that you children here this morning will also think about the value of this Fellowship in your lives – think about whether you, too, might contribute a part of your allowance (if you receive an allowance) and the money you earn to support this church that you are a part of.

I know that some of the thinking on the part of your parents and the other adults is that their support of this Fellowship is not for themselves alone, but also for you, your future, and the future of coming generations.

Will all of you, adults and children, please join me in a responsive reading that has to do with this church and its value and meaning in our lives. This responsive reading is written by Ken Patton, a prominent minister, now deceased, from the Universalist side of the Unitarian Universalist tradition.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature.

CONGREGATION: It is a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle.

MINISTER: It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person.

CONGREGATION: It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinions.

MINISTER: It is a house of truth-seeking, where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest, where mystics can abide in a community of searchers.

CONGREGATION: It is a house of art, adorning its celebrations with melodies and handiworks.

MINISTER: It is a house of prophecy, outrunning times past and times present in visions of growth and progress.

CONGREGATION: This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

Handing Out, Filling Out, & Gathering of Financial Pledges

Our Stewardship Committee members will now hand out the pledge cards for the 2005-2006 fiscal year. They ask that you, the members and friends of QUUF, please take a moment to write in your pledge. Then, in a couple of minutes, they will return to gather them.

If you have not yet decided on an amount for your pledge, please take the pledge card home with you and either return it next Sunday or send it in to the church by mail.

Beatus Meier, who can find or compose splendid and appropriate music for any occasion, will now play, "Music By Which To Fill Out Pledge Cards," by Claude Debussy.

Unison Statement

With these pledges we commit ourselves to the future of this religious organization. May our financial contributions, the labor of our bodies and minds, be used wisely for the support of this fellowship and the furthering of its wider purposes.

Singing Our Children Out

Go now in peace. Go now in peace.
May the spirit of love surround you
Everywhere, everywhere, you may go.

Reading

My reading this morning is a poem titled, "The Idol-Maker Prays." The poem is written by Arthur Guiterman and is the imagined prayer of an "idol-maker."

Who or what is an idol-maker? An idol-maker is an artist who carves images of deities intended to assist people in their meditations and worship.

And what is this particular idol-maker's prayer?

It is the prayer that he not worship the image he creates but, rather, that he be given the strength to turn away from this image. This idol-maker knows that no concrete image can ever capture the God that he is connected to, for his God has to do with the power of the eternal quest that always outreaches the concrete present.

So, too, are we all idol-makers, artists of our lives. In the moment that any of our works of labor and love – whether works or art other work, and however fine and beautiful these works might be – they already begin to fossilize and lose their luster.

That is to say, in the moment that the creative energy that provides the material, drive, and skill to create something becomes concrete and real, in that moment the energy already begins to leave the thing created.

Please attend to this prayer of the idol-maker:

Great God whom I shall carve from this grey stone
Wherein thou liest, hid to all but me,
Grant thou that when my art hath made thee known
And others bow, I shall not worship thee.
But, as I pray thee now, then let me pray
Some greater god – like thee to be conceived
Within my soul – for strength to turn away
From this new altar, when the task achieved,
He, too, from standing manifest. Yea, let me yearn
From dream to grander dream! Let me not rest
Content at my goal. Still bid me spurn
Each transient triumph on the Eternal Quest,
Abjuring godlings, whom my hand hath made,
For Deity, revealed, but unportrayed!
(“The Idol-Maker Prays,” Arthur Guiterman)

“THE HEART’S ONLY CHILD”

Introduction

My sermon this morning is an “auction sermon” – that is, a sermon related to the QUUF Service Auction that was held this past February 5 at the Port Townsend fairgrounds.

For these service auctions, as you know, members of the congregation are encouraged to put up for bid objects they have made, skills they possess, or work they will do.

It is also a custom among many Unitarian Universalist ministers to put up a sermon topic for bid at these auctions, so that the person with the high bid earns the right to choose a sermon topic for the minister.

So, being relatively new to the Unitarian Universalist ministry and wanting to be a good sport, I went along with this tradition, completely against my better judgment.

In truth, however, I have rather enjoyed thinking about and working on the “sermon challenge” presented to me – this by Maitland Hardyman, a pillar of this religious institution, and a person of generous heart who was considerate enough to select a piece of poetry he thought might interest and challenge me – though, I must say, that in preparing for this “auction sermon,” I couldn’t help but think of artists who have been commissioned to create a work of art for a patron. You can’t help but wonder, “Will the patron think he’s getting his money’s worth.”

But I suppose the artist has to try to let go of worrying about that and concentrate on the art, as I suspect the patron has to try to let go of expectations and simply take pleasure in the curiosity of seeing what the artist will come up with.

The text of the “sermon challenge”

The “sermon challenge” presented to me are the five lines of poetry you find printed at the top of your Order of Service today. You might find it helpful to have these in front of you this morning since these lines will serve as the text for my sermon – these five lines:

Just as at night we search the yard when vipers fall,
and all our fingers flame and burn to find a knife,
so do I also grope in darkness to find my God.
For God is not a phantom formed by fear or hope,
but the heart’s only child, born of despair and courage.

(Nikos Kazantzakis, The Odyssey, a Modern Sequel, Bk. VIII, 844-848)

These five lines are taken from a lengthy poem of the 20th century Greek author and playwright, Nikos Kazantzakis. The poem, The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel, is his masterwork, which he labored at for twelve years and which was first published in Athens in 1938. The epic poem runs to 33,333 lines, three times the length of the Homer’s original Odyssey.

In this work Kazantzakis takes up Odysseus’ story at the point where Homer’s story left off; namely, after Odysseus has returned from his twenty-year adventure – from the Trojan wars and then the long meandering journey back to his home and kingdom in Ithaca and to his wife, Penelope, and their son, Telemachus.

In Kazantzakis’ sequel Odysseus doesn’t hang around in Ithaca very long after he returns, nor does he stay with his wife, Penelope, who, as it turns out, seems only to have functioned for Odysseus as a magnet or muse. For soon, in Kazantzakis’ sequel, Odysseus is building a new sailing vessel, gathering a new crew, and putting out to sea again for a whole new series of voyages and adventures. As such, this new journey represents a modern exploration of freedom and the search of modern humanity for its soul and its God.

I confess I have only had time to dip into this large volume here and there, and so the greater challenge for me lies ahead, namely, sometime in the future to read and try to digest this entire masterwork, for my appetite has been whetted.

But this morning I make a start, trying to unravel the five lines that have been presented to me, lines that perhaps lie near the heart of this book.

These five lines also dovetail nicely with the sermon theme from last week when guest minister Chip Wright from Yakima spoke under the sermon title, “Everything you ever wanted to know about God but never thought to ask,” a sermon in which you were asked

to respond in writing to the question: “How do you identify, point at, or dismiss questions of God.” Or: “What is your current concept of God?”

I have read through the short written responses given to this question – they are posted for your edification in the back of sanctuary – and now this morning I will add another response to the question of the concept of God, namely, the response of Nikos Kazantzakis as rendered through the voice of this questing hero, Odysseus, and particularly as presented in these five lines of poetry.

Parsing the poetry

So let’s look at this five-line text to see what it might yield:

Just as at night we search the yard when vipers fall,...

This quest, this odyssey, this search for God takes place in the darkness. We come into this world from we know not where. We awake into it as from a dream. Thus our questions are asked, as it were, in the dark: How did we get here? Where have we come from? Where are we going? And what does it all mean?

The answers are not given. They have to be searched for. Or, let us say, that to the one who feels compelled to search, the given answers, the tradition-related answers, will not do; they have to be re-searched, re-appropriated and, perhaps, revised.

Such a search is a dangerous one – conducted not only in the dark, but also, as it were, with vicious vipers about, snakes slithering from trees, poisonous serpents on the prowl.

**Just as at night we search the yard when vipers fall,
and all our fingers flame and burn to find a knife,**

This search in this dark, dangerous place is a desperate one. We are most anxious to protect and defend ourselves. A sharp knife, a scalpel of discernment, would be more than helpful. And as ...

**...all our fingers flame and burn to find a knife,
so do I also grope in darkness to find my God.**

The search to find “my God” is as intense and desperate as a search to find a knife to protect one’s self in the dark from poisonous serpents ... for “God” has to do with that which is ultimate and most real in our lives.

As theologian Paul Tillich says, “God” is our typical word to refer to our “ultimate concern” ... so that, on the one hand, whatever is ultimate for you is “your God;” and, on the other hand, what we seek for in “our God” is that which is truly ultimate.

To put something less than ultimate in the place of what is truly ultimate is what is called “idolatry” – bowing down before that which is not capable of holding the energy of our devotion.

How much of our life is not related to the shattering of our “graven images” – the unraveling of our dearly-held concepts, beliefs, and ideals; the discovery that what we have served, worshipped, and given ourselves to is not ultimately capable of carrying the weight of our investment.

This is the crisis Odysseus encountered in his material and spiritual journeys, namely, that his old concept of God, his previous concept of what was most real, would not hold.

Returning to the text

Shortly after Odysseus’ return to Ithaca Kazantzakis has him sponsoring a feast for those over whom he rules. As the feast is about to begin the guests turn to their host and king to make a libation to the gods, to offer a prayer of thanksgiving before the meal, for a proper grace is always appropriate on such festival occasions:

Though all the guests were ravenous, they still refrained,
turning their eyes upon their silent, watchful lord
till he should spill wine in libation for the Immortals.
The king then filled a brimming cup, stood up and raised
it high till in the moon the embossed adornments gleamed:...

(The Odyssey, a Modern Sequel, Bk. I, lines 1025-1031)

And what was the prayer that Odysseus prayed? What grateful words did he have for the watchful gods? After briefly recounting some of his adventures, he cried:

Old comrades, O young men, my island’s newest sprouts,
I drink not to the gods, but to man’s dauntless mind!

All shuddered, for the daring toast seemed sacrilege,
and suddenly the hungry people shrank in spirit;
they did not fully understand the impious words
but saw flames lick like red curls round his savage head.
[But] The smell of roast was overpowering, choice meats steamed,
and his bold speech was soon forgotten in hunger’s pangs;
all fell to eating ravenously till their brains reeled.

(The Odyssey, a Modern Sequel, Bk. I, lines 1060-1067)

But what of modern Odysseus who has now turned away from the deities of his past and ours? In dismissing the old protecting gods has he altogether dismissed the notion of God or the search for God?

Is the reality of “God” the reality of our imagination only – not by any means to diminish imagination – but is the reality of God a human projection, simply and only? And is the

search for an “ultimate concern” the search of a bygone era and not applicable in our modern, material world?

God: the heart’s only child

We turn now to the last two lines of our text, where we read:

**For God is not a phantom formed by fear or hope,
but the heart’s only child, born of despair and courage.**

Here we see, first of all, what image of God has been shattered for Odysseus. We see what he can no longer regard as ultimate, namely: God is *not* the power that protects and preserves one’s individual life. Nor is God an image we should protect and preserve to calm our fears or give substance to our hopes.

That God, says Odysseus, says Kazantzakis, is a phantom, a shadow, a projection of human fear and hope – the fear that we might lose our life and our consciousness, the hope that we will be able to preserve our life and consciousness. The deity who cares about that will no longer do for Odysseus. That is not what is ultimate.

But is there a concept of ultimate reality that does retain power and meaning? Is there that which Odysseus, which Kazantzakis, can recognize as “God”? There is, for he says:

God is ... the heart’s only child, born of despair and courage.

That which is ultimate, of highest value, that which may be called “my God,” is related to and born out of the human heart. “God” is the offspring of the human heart, its only child – a spiritual ideal that emerges from the heart.

This God born from the heart is born out of despair and courage. What would you make of that?

Is it the despair, perhaps, that so little of the values of the human heart are seen to be embodied in this world? And is the courage, perhaps, the will to push forward toward our spiritual values and ideals despite this?

“I am certain of nothing,” writes poet John Keats, “but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of the imagination – what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not.”

(Quoted in a letter of Keats, 1795-1821)

In this regard I also think of Albert Schweitzer, recognized as one of the great humanitarians of the mid-twentieth century, comparable in our time to Mother Teresa, though of much less orthodox theology.

Schweitzer, born in 1875, and Nikos Kazantzakis, born in 1883, were personal friends. Schweitzer, says his brilliant translator and interpreter Kimon Friar, was “the man he [Kazantzakis] most admired in the living world.”

(*The Odyssey, a Modern Sequel*, p. xxiv)

And for his part, Schweitzer recommended Kazantzakis for the Nobel Prize in literature, which he lost by a single vote to Albert Camus in 1957, also the year of Kazantzakis’ death.

It was Schweitzer who spoke of a “will-to-love” that has made its appearance in the world alongside the “will-to-live.” This “will-to-love,” which may be symbolized by the human heart, is born of empathy – that capacity, clearly found in humans but also perhaps in incipient form in other creatures, to project ourselves into other lives, to see what others see and to feel what others feel. And the compassionate urge, then, “to treat our neighbor as we would be treated.”

We don’t know, says Schweitzer, what this “will-to-love” means for world process. And we stand perplexed before the sheer creative-destructive power of Nature that rolls over and through all things with seeming disregard for this little candle of love and compassion.

Yet, says Schweitzer, how can we disregard this inner compassionate urge, this drive that would extend itself into other life? It would seem to lie at the interior center, the very heart, of our being. And though we don’t know from whence it comes, or whither it is bound, or how it happens to be at all; if we would be true to ourselves, we must follow this inner urge. In so doing the river finds its sea and a human finds his God.

Perhaps this is something of the God that the searcher Odysseus has discovered, a God born from the heart in midst of despair – for where else is this God found outside the human heart? – and a God born of courage, out of the stubborn will to go forward even in the darkness.

A final exploration

There is yet more one thing that I would say today about this highest value related to the heart. And for that let us turn to the other quotation in today’s Order of Service, words also spoken by Odysseus:

What is this life, what secret yearning governs it?
There was a time I called its lavish longing God
and talked and laughed and wept and battled by his side
and thought that he, too, laughed and wept and strove beside me,
but now I suddenly feel I’ve talked to my own shadow!
God is a labyrinthine quest deep in our heads;
weak slaves think he’s the isle of freedom, and moor close,
all the incompetent cross their oars, then cross their hands,
laugh wearily and say, ‘The Quest does not exist!’

But I know better in my heart, and rig my sails:
God is wide waterways that branch throughout man's heart."
(Nikos Kazantzakis, The Odyssey, a Modern Sequel, Bk. XXII, 409-419)

Again in these lines we see Odysseus, Kazantzakis, distinguishing between his old God, who he now regards as all too human in its conceptualization, and this new God that is both "a labyrinthine quest deep in our heads" and the "wide waterways that branch throughout man's heart."

His former God was thought to have a separate existence – to be an external power that guided, guarded, and protected us from beyond. But this God, Odysseus concludes, is a shadow projection of human need – the fear and hope of which we spoke earlier. This God is truly a human invention, necessary though it might sometimes be.

But what about his new God – this "labyrinthine quest deep in our heads," these "wide waterways that branch through man's heart" – are these too simply human inventions since they are only known and experienced through the mind and out of the heart?

I think what Kazantzakis is saying is that the Quest is larger than and greater than the human mind and heart. It is through the human heart and mind that, at least on this planet, the Quest becomes known, and it is through the human mind and heart that the Quest is extended; but the Quest is not simply or only a human invention or projection in the way the phantom gods are.

This "dauntless mind of man" that Odysseus toasted at the beginning of this adventure does not belong strictly to humans. This restless urge to move forward and upward toward spiritual ideals and larger consciousness is not simply self-created, not simply ego-created. It is an urge that was present before humans were even a gleam in Nature's eye, and it will be urge in Being long after humans have departed the scene.

Thus, this forward-pushing urge, this "fierce unrest," is not primarily for the enlargement of the human world, though it serves that. Rather, this "Quest" is its own reality. It transcends the human heart and mind. The human mind and heart evolve as agents of this questing God.

As Kimon Friar, Kazantzakis' translator and interpreter, writes:

The soul...seems to Odysseus but a wick which the flaming Spirit consumes as it yearns to other kindling, that it might burn with a more rarified light.
(The Odyssey, a Modern Sequel, p. 797)

It is to this questing God that Odysseus would give himself. And this questing God needs Odysseus and by implication all of us to push the Quest further ... for we are part of this Quest. It is partly in and through us that the Quest goes on.

This questing God of Odysseus and Kazantzakis needs agents in the Quest. For, as with modern process theologians, this questing God is neither omnipotent nor omniscient,

neither all-powerful nor all-knowing. This God needs agents – agents like us. We are eyes and ears of and for this questing God.

We might grow weary of the task, fail at the task, fall by the wayside; yet the Quest will go on. This questing God will look for other agents to pick up the baton. For this questing God, though not all-powerful, is exceedingly stubborn and persistent. And this questing God longs endlessly for more awareness, more experience, and more compassionate feeling.

And this questing God, who is to found deep in our heads and who is the heart's only child, would beckon us, then, as he did Odysseus, to join in on this great adventure, to rig our sails and to explore the wide waterways that branch throughout the human heart.

Benediction

Now may peace be in our hearts,
and understanding in our minds,
may courage steel our wills,
and the love of truth forever guide us.

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again. Amen.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on April 17, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)