

**“The Golden World”**  
**February 25, 2007**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Bruce A. Bode**

**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, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

**Lighting the Chalice (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.

**Musical Response ( sung by the congregation)**

I know this rose will open. I know my fear will burn away.  
I know my soul will unfurl its wings. I know this rose will open.

**Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences.

CONGREGATION: We are a stream whose source is hidden. Always our being is descending into us from we know not whence.

MINISTER: I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine.

CONGREGATION: Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.

MINISTER: From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all.

CONGREGATION: When it breaks through the intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through the will, it is virtue; when it flows through the affections, it is love.

(Statements from "The Over-Soul," Ralph Waldo Emerson)

### **Introduction to Reading**

My sermon series over the next few weeks will be on themes found in the work of Robert A. Johnson, an author with whom some of you may have an acquaintance. Robert Johnson is a Jungian Analyst who has written a number of books related to masculine and feminine psychology as well as to romantic love, but, at heart, he is a person of mystic vision, one who has experienced a unity of being that transcends all division and separation.

The mystic is often spoken of one who has an encounter with another reality, but Johnson, as a psychologist who deals with the human psyche and its different types of consciousness, understands the mystic vision as a different vision of this reality, a unitive seeing of our one reality in which the material and the spiritual are of one piece.

My reading this morning is from another person of mystic vision and understanding, namely, the great 19<sup>th</sup> century writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his essay, "The Over-Soul," the same essay from which our responsive reading was drawn, he speaks of a unifying presence and power that at once envelopes all things and is also at the center of each thing.

### **Reading**

The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains every one to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand and become wisdom and virtue and power and beauty. We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. Only by the vision of that Wisdom can the horoscope of the ages be read, and by falling back on our better thoughts, by yielding to the spirit of prophecy which is innate in every man, we can know what it saith: Every man's words who speaks from that life must sound vain to those who do not

dwell in the same thought on their own part. I dare not speak for it. My words do not carry its august sense; they fall short and cold. Only itself can inspire whom it will, and behold! their speech shall be lyrical, and sweet, and universal as the rising of the wind. Yet I desire, even by profane words, if I may not use sacred, to indicate the heaven of this deity and to report what hints I have collected of the transcendent simplicity and energy of the Highest Law.

## “THE GOLDEN WORLD”

### Introduction

Like the last two years, this Sunday I begin a sermon series planned to bring us through Easter Sunday. In western Christian tradition today is the first Sunday of Lent with last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, marking the beginning of a 40-day Lenten season. “Lent” derives from the Old English word, “*lencten*,” meaning springtime. So this is a time of introspection and of cutting away the old growth in preparation for the arrival of the new growth in spring.

This year’s sermon series is planned as a distillation of a number of themes from the books of Robert A. Johnson, an author whose work lends itself to introspection and the inner life.

As it happens, I am well-acquainted with the approach of Robert Johnson, both through his books and from personal conversation and relationship. Over a period of about 20 years I have been with him, I would estimate, on at least 10 occasions, at first in Grand Rapids where I arranged lectures and workshops for him at the Fountain Street Church where I was a minister, and then on numerous occasions after that, staying with him for several days at a time either in his desert home in the Anza-Borrego Desert or in residences where he has lived in the San Diego area. More than any person I know, Robert is a person who relates to and is attentive to the interior world.

I hope I am able to do justice to Robert’s work given the fact that, as I think most of you know, my father died suddenly and unexpectedly of a coronary arrest a little over two weeks ago. Since then I have been struggling to find time to be present with the interior dimension of my father’s death, particularly given all the practical details that have needed to be attended to at such a time.

My father was as good and decent a man as I have ever known, a person of sterling character, who would not have guessed at his own worth or what he meant to others. He would have been surprised and, I suspect, a bit embarrassed to hear the wonderful things said of him during and after his memorial service.

At the same time, what I am calling, “the interior life” was not the level at which my father and I met. We loved and respected and enjoyed each other, but we met primarily in and through common activities – “shoulder to shoulder” activity as Robert Bly might

say – and in and through family and community connections. The life of interior feeling and the life of the mind had to be mostly intuited by each of us with respect to the other.

In contrast to this, my relationship with Robert Johnson, who is approximately the same age as my father – Robert is 85; my father was 87 – has been almost entirely related to the interior life and the life of the mind. We have related mostly as friends in this way with leisurely and lengthy conversations on matters of feeling, philosophy, religion, and value.

But Robert has also functioned for me as something like a late-arriving godfather. A “godfather,” by his definition, is one who is assigned the role of attending to the inner life of his charge, one who guides and guards the “soul-life” of the individual. So, in this regard, I have sought him out, while he has sought me out as one who wished to engage at this level.

Thus, have I been blessed with a father who gave me life and who protected and nourished that life, who modeled for me the virtues of honesty, fairness, gentleness, trustworthiness, and non-obtrusiveness, and who encouraged me to pursue the path in life that seemed most to call to me.

And, in addition, I have been blessed with many teachers over the years, teachers relating to the intellectual, religious, and interior life, not the least of whom is Robert Johnson, who has been a godfather-like friend for me, one who time and again pulls me back, or tries to pull me back, from an overly busy life lived at the horizontal level to a more contemplative life lived at the vertical level.

We live – our world increasingly lives, it seems to me – on the exterior, material side of reality, so that to a large extent the interior, psychic side of reality is drowned out by the noise and the hurry of the exterior, material world.

But Robert Johnson is an example of a person who lives out of the interior, psychic side of reality. Constitutionally, it seems, this is where he must live. At any rate, it is where he does live, trying his best to find his way in our exterior, material world while keeping to the values of his interior world.

The two worlds are ultimately one, he believes, but how to live that unity and how to experience that unity is the problem. You can read about his struggle to relate these two worlds – the interior and the exterior, the psychic and the material – in his autobiography titled, Balancing Heaven and Earth: a memoir of visions, dreams, and realizations.

### **Dreams and visions fully part of reality**

For Robert, dreams and inner vision are fully a part of reality. Dreams and visions belong to the real world. They are as real as rocks for him – actually, more so. It is audacious, he says, to try to interpret a dream, “but I must relate to it somehow; I can’t just pretend it didn’t happen.” (Balancing Heaven and Earth, p. 197)

For him, to know who a person is and what that person is up to, he needs dreams from that person. The dreams that emerge from the unconscious depths of a person are more revealing for him than face-to-face conversation, though the best would be to discuss the dream with the person face-to-face.

When I was with him a little over a month ago, I related a dream to him of the night before – often we begin the day exploring the dreams of the night – and he was surprised and shocked by what the dream revealed. (I won't tell you what shocked him.)

He also told me that he has another friend – for he is a god-father/friend to many persons – that another friend who won't tell him his dreams anymore presumably because he is afraid the dreams would reveal that he should change his life, and apparently he doesn't want to do that just now.

But this is how Robert has made his way in the world ... through attention to his dreams, his visions, and his interior life. He is more comfortable and at home in the softer, fluid world of dream images than the harder, concrete world of material things. He is more sure-footed traversing the landscape of the soul than the geographical landscape.

### **An early vision**

The importance and meaning of the interior life was manifested to Robert already as a youngster. It happened in dramatic fashion. As an eleven-year old boy, he was roller-skating on the sidewalks of Portland, Oregon where he grew up, skating from his father's apartment back to the home of his mother. Midway between his father's apartment and his mother's home, he stopped at a drugstore to buy a Coca-Cola.

As he was about to enter the drugstore – his left leg was actually already through the door – two cars collided on the nearby street, one of them careening into him and pinning his right leg between the chrome of the car fender and the brick of the drugstore. The accident tore the main artery of his right leg, necessitating immediate surgery to try to save the leg.

That night following the surgery, he awoke sweating and shivering in his hospital bed, feeling nauseous and weak. Unbeknownst to him, the stitched-up artery had broken loose and he was slowly bleeding to death.

Now, feeling himself drifting toward oblivion, he mentally saw and felt himself moving slowly but toward an edge, a divide. He feared going over that edge and so began to mentally fight with all his might to keep from going over. But the edge drew closer and closer. He fought harder and harder. And then, suddenly, he was over the edge.

But now he found himself, not in a frightening, horrible place, but in a place that was glorious beyond telling. "It was," he writes in his autobiography, "pure light, gold,

radiant, luminous, ecstatically happy, perfectly beautiful, purely tranquil, joy beyond bound.” (p. 2)

This world, he would later name, the “Golden World,” a term he picked up from scholar of world mythology, Mircea Eliade. But at the time he had no language, only this experience of ecstatic bliss.

Meanwhile, an alert nurse noticed blood leaking through the cast on his right leg, and quickly the eleven-year old boy was rushed to surgery to try to repair the stitching in the artery.

And now, inwardly, his sojourn in this timeless, ecstatic realm was interrupted, and he found himself heading back toward the divide, but this time from the other side. And, now, he said, in words I will never forget, “I fought as hard as to keep from returning as I had previously fought to keep from going.”

But return he did: back to this earth, back to everyday reality, back to ordinary consciousness.

### **After the vision**

Many persons who have these so-called “near-death” experiences – and I have talked to some and read about a good many others – come back from these experiences with renewed purpose and interest in life. Their experience of this glory illuminates the rest of their days, and they know what they must do in the remaining time left to them.

This, however, was not the case with Robert. He was only eleven years old when he had this vision and not equipped to handle such an ecstatic experience. He did not know what to make of this vision of pure light and beauty. He writes:

No one can look upon even the antechamber of heaven without a lifetime of regret at what has been lost. Seeing through this mundane world to the golden, archetypal world was marvelous beyond description, but at the tender age of eleven it was almost too much. I was so blinded by the golden light of the divine world that I was spoiled for regular life. A curtain separating the two realms was for me forever parted. In the morning of that fateful day I was a giddy kid; by midnight I was a very old man in a boy’s body. (p. 3)

Indeed, the earthly reality to which he returned was now compromised by his physical condition. Infection set into his leg – this was before antibiotics – and two amputations on his right leg were required to save his life.

The loss of his right leg below the knee was traumatic enough, but even more traumatic for him was the loss of this “Golden World.” Again, he writes:

I lived with despair for some time following the auto crash. Managing crutches, getting used to an artificial leg, adapting to the world as a handicapped person – all these were difficult enough, but it was the loss of the Golden World after having seen the pure source of beauty that was the most difficult. It's better to live in oblivion of that world than to be teased by it. (p. 4)

Earlier, the choir sang words of Emily Dickinson,

Will there really be a “morning”?  
Is there such a thing as “Day”?

For Robert, five years later at the age of sixteen, such a morning arrived. He had been up all night, his first night of very hard, physical labor in a Del Monte canning factory in Vancouver, Washington. Determined to prove himself a man, he pushed himself to the limit, to the point that the stump of his right leg was bleeding into his boot. Finally, at 4:30 in the morning he was able to punch his time card and head for home.

But before going home, he had to seek some beauty, something to redeem the brutal, mechanical beast of a factory from which he had just emerged. And so he drove his borrowed car into the hills west of Portland where he knew he would find a view overlooking the valley that would take in the four snow-capped peaks surrounding Portland.

He hobbled out to a promontory just as the sun began to rise. And there – unbelievably to him – the Golden World again appeared. It was the same world he had seen when he was eleven, but this time he was fully conscious. He writes:

I can't really say whether I heard, saw, smelled, tasted, or touched that sunrise. No matter. It was an antechamber of heaven, and it was my native land. It lasted for about thirty minutes of clock time, but it was eternity in the heavenly realm.” (p. 7)

Now Robert had a confirmation that his earlier encounter with the Golden World in the hospital was not just an hallucination perhaps related to anesthesia; the Golden World was real.

### **Relating the Golden World and the everyday world**

And now began his life journey to try to integrate and coordinate his consciousness and awareness of this Golden World with our everyday world and its everyday consciousness and awareness.

To a large degree, this has been a lonely and solitary journey. Particularly, the next ten years of his life were spent in “terribly suffering – not physical suffering, but the subtle hell of loneliness and isolation.” (p. 9) As he says:

For years my life seemed upended by this glimpse of the divine. Nothing on this earth could fill my hunger for more of the ecstatic experience. None of the aspirations or goals that seemed to drive other people could hold my interest for long. History is filled with examples of mad ones, monks, sages, and seers who have undergone numinous encounters, and for such souls it becomes nearly impossible to lead an ordinary life.” (p. 9)

In this regard, again, I think of Emily Dickinson, who is certainly one of those souls who has undergone such numinous experiences, one torn between the glory glimpsed in a few ecstatic moments and the loneliness and lostness of long stretches of ordinary time. She writes:

If I'm lost – now –  
That I was found –  
Shall still my transport be –  
That once – on me – those Jasper Gates  
Blazed open – suddenly –

That in my awkward – gazing – face –  
The Angels – softly peered –  
And touched me with their fleeces,  
Almost as if they cared –

I'm banished – now – you know it –  
How foreign that can be –  
You'll know – Sir – when the Savior's face  
Turns so – away from you –

(Poem #316 in the R. W. Franklin edition)

I recall one time with Robert when we were in his desert house in the Anza-Borrego Desert, a house set high enough against the side of a mountain so the sun can be seen to rise over the desert floor below. We were up early at the breakfast table just as the sun was rising.

Sometimes, as the sun is about to rise or set, I like to watch it through binoculars. You have to be a little careful because the light can be too bright and damage your eyes, but with some caution, I find that it enhances the experience. And so that what I was doing that morning as the sun was rising.

Then, I said, “Here, Robert, take a look.” And so did, but then immediately handed the binoculars back to me, saying, “That's the color” – and refused to look anymore. The color and intensity of the light was too much a reminder of the glory of those ecstatic experiences

Indeed, there had been yet one more of these ecstatic experiences of the Golden World when Robert first visited India some forty years later when he was in his early fifties.

And this time, being more mature, he was better able to integrate the Golden World experience with his everyday experience, to bring together and balance heaven and earth.

### **Speaking of the Golden World**

So what is this Golden World? What are we to make of it, and how does it relate to our everyday world?

For Robert Johnson, the “Golden World” is not another reality, not a separate reality, not a future reality, but the reality *that is*, that *always is*, the larger reality from which we are born and to which we belong. It is the reality that provides meaning, purpose, and value in our lives.

But it is also the reality from which we are typically shielded, protected, and insulated by the curtain of our everyday, ordinary dual consciousness, the consciousness that divides and distinguishes things, as opposed to a consciousness that is able to glimpse a non-split, non-dual reality. (There’s nothing wrong with our ordinary consciousness, it’s just not the whole of reality nor does it connect us with the “whole” of reality.)

To have that curtain thrown open, as occurred to Robert as a youngster, is almost too much to bear. As Mary Oliver writes:

The great door opens a crack, a hint of the truth is given – so bright it is almost a death, a joy we can’t bear – and then it is gone.

(Mary Oliver, from “December,” White Pine)

To take in more than a small portion of the Golden World is too much, or to take it in for very long is too much. We can’t stand it. It wipes us out. It burns us up. It is like taking hold of a ten thousand volt electric cable with our bare hands.

At the same time, to try to ignore this larger reality, to live a life that doesn’t try to relate to it in some way, cuts us off from our home, for we belong to this reality.

When I went this past month to visit Robert, I had in mind that I would do a sermon series on the themes from his books. And while visiting with him, it occurred to me that I should begin the series by attempting to speak of his sense of the Golden World, for it has been his encounter with this world that has set him upon his path, and everything proceeds from and is related to these experiences for him.

So I had an opportunity to question him at some length on this: And here are some of his spontaneous, aphoristic comments that will hopefully will give you a glimpse of his glimpses into the Golden World.

First, of course, our everyday language, which belongs to dual consciousness, is inadequate: Thus, he says (I was taking notes):

“There’s no language for the Golden World. You can’t talk about the mystical world. As the saying goes, ‘If you can say it, it’s not true; if it’s true, you can’t say it.’”

“I’m completely stymied with it [language to speak of the Golden World]. Anything you say will stymie your audience, if not antagonize them.”

“Words are for the three-dimensional experience of mankind, but they [words] are the biggest set of evasions that man ever created.”

“The Golden World has its own speech and its own volition.”

I asked Robert: “How does the Golden World translate at the social and ethical levels?”

His response:

“Practically speaking, they don’t have much to do with each other. The church has forgotten its religious function and has become a moral and social organization – valuable, but not religious.

“I want religion from a church, but what I get is a muddled sociology, which is not without value. It [the church] works hard to keep humans good.”

“The mystical and the ethical are different levels of reality. The mystical world is dangerous around the practical world, and visa versa.”

“There is no split between the spiritual and the material.”

“We behave as if there is a split between the material and the spiritual, and this is where we lose the religious life.”

“Religion is the art of pulling things together. It has to do with bringing our splitness into some coherence.

“There’s no conflict between science and religion, both are illusions.”

“The church, as it is now, is probably the chief stumbling block in obtaining the Golden World.”

“Any attempt to gain the Golden World gets in its way.”

“It [the Golden World] is out of time, beyond process. It is always available, always there.”

“The non-dual world can be experienced in the here and now. We don’t have to do anything or move anywhere.”

“The Golden World is always there. One never obtains it, but sometimes it breaks through.”

“Living a good, practical, human life is the best one can do [said in the context of connecting to the Golden World].”

And, finally, a couple of concluding quotes related to the Golden World from his writings:

“I can say that gradually the two worlds – the Golden World and the earthly world – have come to coincide in me. I will argue against those who talk of heaven as the next world. It is more accurate to say that we all are in heaven right now, and we are all in hell right now. The difference in our experience has to do with each person’s capacity of perception.

At present, my friends have become the strongest expression to me of the Golden World.” (p. 285)

“It is ironic that often our breakthroughs into consciousness of the divine grow out of breakdowns in ordinary consciousness. Contact with the divine may at the time feel like pure suffering, and I sometimes wonder if all suffering is a vision of God too great to bear.” (p. 12)

“Each of us seems to have different degrees of the Golden World available to us, but I know that we all must have at least a taste of it.” (p. 277)

### **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**

And now we extinguish our 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.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on February 25, 2007. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)