

“What Moves Us Emotionally”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
December 10, 2006
Bruce A. Bode

Call to Worship

This day is a new day that has been given to us;
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.
And let us count our many, many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
For the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together,
giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

We light this chalice
For the renewal of faith,
The wonder of hope,
The beauty of love,
And the gift of joy.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: On this third Sunday of the Christmas season, we celebrate the miracle of love, the creative power linking each to all, enabling us to find life good and beautiful.

CONGREGATION: Though I speak in human tongues or that of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

MINISTER: And though I have the gift of prophesy and understand all mysteries, and though I have all knowledge, and faith strong enough to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

CONGREGATION: Love is patient and kind, and envies no one. Love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude.

MINISTER: Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.

CONGREGATION: Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

MINISTER: Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will fail; as for speech, it will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

CONGREGATION: Faith, hope, and love remain; but of these three, the greatest is love.

(St. Paul, I Corinthians 13; Duncan E. Littlefair, adapted)

The Candle of Love

This is now the third Sunday of the Christmas season. Two weeks ago you children saw that we lit the purple candle, the Candle of Faith. Last week we lit the green candle, the Candle of Hope. Today we light the blue candle, the Candle of Love. Next Sunday we light the red candle, the Candle of Joy. And then on Christmas Eve, exactly two Sundays from today, we will light the final candle, the Christmas Candle itself.

Last week in lighting the Candle of Hope I spoke of hope as that power at the very center of our being and of all being that pushes and propels all things forward, part of the very energy of life itself.

Love, to me, is also something that is part of the very structure of things – not the energy moving things forward, but the power that relates and connects all things. Love is like the gravitational field that all the stars and their planets swim in.

We are separate individuals. Each one of us has our very own set of fingerprints that are like no one else's. And that's something to celebrate.

But something even more important to celebrate is the fact that all of us different individuals are also part of one thing – one humanity, one earth, one star-system, one universe. We are all small parts of one very large being, one gigantic creature.

Love has to do with the power of connection between all the parts of this immense organism. It's the power that holds all things together, that relates and connects and links all things.

So on this third Sunday of the Christmas season as we light the Candle of Love, we recognize and celebrate the ties of love that bind us and all things together.

We think, first of all, of our family members, friends, and neighbors, those persons most closely connected to us; but also of all other humans; and then all other creatures and life-forms; and even beyond these to the stars above us and the expanse of spaces between the stars ... for each thing is related to all things, all bound together in one glitteringly beautiful universe.

Alethea Westlund (9:15) Elizabeth Dennison (11:15), would you please light the third candle of the Christmas season, the Candle of Love.

Meditation

In the busyness of our lives and in the busyness of this season, and on this Sunday when we light a Candle to Love, let us enter into our time of silence and meditation through a poem titled, "In the Middle," written by Barbara Crooker.

In the Middle

of a life that's as complicated as everyone else's,
struggling for balance, juggling time.
The mantle clock that was my grandfather's
has stopped at 9:20; we haven't had time
to get it repaired. The brass pendulum is still,
the chimes don't ring. One day you look out the window,
green summer, the next, and the leaves have already fallen,
and a grey sky lowers the horizon. Our children almost grown,
our parents gone, it happened so fast. Each day, we must learn
again how to love, between morning's quick coffee
and evening's slow return. Steam from a pot of soup rises,
mixing with the yeasty smell of baking bread. Our bodies
twine, and the big black dog pushes his great head between;
his tail is a metronome, 3/4 time. We'll never get there,
Time is always ahead of us, running down the beach, urging
us on faster, faster, but sometimes we take off our watches,
sometimes we lie in the hammock, caught between the mesh
of rope and the net of stars, suspended, tangled up
in love, running out of time.

("In the Middle," Barbara Crooker, from Yarrow)

Let us be together in the silence.

Reading

My reading this morning, one many of you may have heard before, is often attributed to Nelson Mandela, but it's actually from Marianne Williamson in her book, A Return To Love. The reading has to do with the difficulty of loving the best within us.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we

unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

“WHAT MOVES US EMOTIONALLY”

A little theory

For a number of years I've had a little theory related to life and living – not a theory I want to push too hard, but on this Sunday when we light a candle to Love, I thought I'd share it with you, and you can take it for what it's worth and do with it what you will.

The theory goes that it's important to pay attention to what moves us emotionally, and not just because we are thereby helped to know what's going on within us – something important in its own right – but because it might give us clues as to who we are and what we ought to be about as human beings.

So for years I've watched what brings a tear to my eye, what causes words to catch in my throat, and what might take my breath away.

I've found that such emotional up-wellings can happen most anywhere and at most any time. But most often they take place when privately reading a novel or poem, or when singing a song, or when seeing a movie or a play, or in counseling settings with just myself and one other person, or in religious services such as a worship service like this, but especially at weddings and memorial services.

I often find I have to avoid looking into the eyes of couples getting married or into the eyes of family members at a memorial service, because if I catch a glistening eye, I can be gone in an instant.

I once talked about this with my main mentor in the ministry, Dr. Duncan Littlefair, whose responsive readings I am again using during this Christmas season. I told him that I often found myself breaking up emotionally during memorial services I was conducting so that I couldn't speak. “Stop it!” he said.

This was perhaps somewhat easy for him to say, because I had seen him on more than one occasion in memorial services speak fluently and without pause with tears coursing down the cheeks of his face. You couldn't tell from his voice that he was weeping at all, and if I hadn't been up close, I wouldn't have known. Somehow he was able to speak and weep at the same time.

But I'm getting off track. My theory is that there's value in paying attention to and reflecting upon what moves us emotionally in these ways, that from such emotional expressions we can gain clues as to what's important to us not only as individuals but perhaps also as a human species, and that in this way we can learn more about what we are made of and what we are made for, of what is to be valued and how we should live.

Philosophically, I don't generally like to split the mind apart from the body. But if I were to do so, I would conjecture that emotions are rooted more in the body than they are in the intellect or the conscious mind.

The conscious mind, the conscious attitude, may have figured things out in a certain way and may want to lead the body in a certain way. But the body has a "mind of its own," and our emotions might be considered the "thoughts" of the body.

Thus, our emotional expressions are not simply the body responding to what the conscious mind or intellect values, but the emotional expressions of our body may, at a minimum, remind us of what we really do value and have perhaps have forgotten; or, beyond this, the body and its emotional expressions may "value" what the conscious mind or intellect does not yet know, and which it would be important for the conscious mind to consider.

Thus, it is well not to dismiss or disregard these "thoughts" of the body, but instead to attend to them and bring them forward for reflection and conscious consideration; thereby, the conscious mind can learn what is valuable to our larger being.

Occasions of emotion

So what I have found in attending to these "thoughts," these emotional manifestations of my body?

I had occasion to reflect on this in relation to a movie *Flossie* and I recently watched together on DVD in our home. It was already quite late at night when we began watching this movie. I had been thinking of going to bed, but since we had already rented the movie, I said I would give it a try and see if I fell asleep during the movie. But I didn't fall asleep – it held me the entire time.

The movie, which played here in Port Townsend at the Rose Theatre for a time some months ago, was titled, *Akeelah and the Bee*, the Bee being a spelling bee.

Written and directed by Doug Atchison, the movie relates the story of an 11-year old girl, Akeelah Anderson, growing up in rough South Los Angeles, who, against all odds, makes it all the way to the finals of the National Spelling Bee contest for middle school students in Washington D.C.

It's what can be called a "feel-good movie," one in which the ending is not really in doubt; it's clear the heroine will somehow succeed in her quest.

And, indeed, I did "feel good" watching the movie. Several times I found tears sliding down my cheeks, and I noticed also that *Flossie* reached for the box of Kleenex more than once.

The next morning, as I was awakening, I was thinking about this movie and what it was in it that had moved me. I found, as I reviewed the movie in my mind and my own responses to the movie, that it touched on a number of the situations that typically call forth my deepest emotional responses. Not that there's anything particularly unique or unusual about the situations to which I emotionally respond – something movie directors and producers have noted – but let me enumerate some of these moments as portrayed in this movie.

1: Witnessing the struggle for self-worth

Let me begin with the struggle for self-worth, the affirmation of one's own value, worth, and dignity as a human being, the discovery of one's own gift, which was at the heart of this movie, as of many movies.

“Our most persistent, urgent, desperate, universal human need,” to quote my mentor, Dr. Duncan Littlefair, “is for self approval. To think well of our self.”

(From a transcribed sermon, December 16, 1990, Fountain Street Church, Grand Rapids, MI)

When you can feel a person struggling with this issue and then breaking through, there can be a connection and an emotional response related to that connection.

In the movie it was the struggle of the main character, Akeelah Anderson, played by a wonderful young actress, Keke Palmer, to affirm and value her gift, which was that she could spell words.

This was a talent not particularly valued by her classmates in her school, or by her mother, played by Angela Bassett, but it was something that she enjoyed and found meaningful, something that connected her to her deceased father, something she found that she was good at, and it was the gift that enabled her to recognize herself as a person of worth and value.

The reading I gave earlier from Marianne Williamson was referenced in this movie:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

So in this movie we see the struggle of this young girl to overcome her fear of standing out from others and of affirming her own gift.

I am reminded, in this regard, of a poem by Emily Dickinson in which she speaks of the discovery of her gift as a little girl, the gift, no doubt, of her poetic ability to put words to interior feelings, a gift that she said made her “rich.”

It was given to me by the Gods -
When I was a little Girl -
They give us Presents most - you know -
When we are new - and small.

I kept it in my Hand -
I never put it down -
I did not dare to eat - or sleep -
For fear it would be gone -
I heard such words as "Rich" -
When hurrying to school -
From lips at Corners of the Streets -
And wrestled with a smile.
Rich! 'Twas Myself - was rich -
To take the name of Gold -
And Gold to own - in solid Bars -
The Difference - made me bold -

([The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson](#), edited by Thomas H. Johnson, #454)

2: Witnessing the gift of mentorship

Related to the discovery of one's gift is the help of mentors who recognize and help us to value our gifts.

In the movie, there were initially three persons who recognized Akeelah's special gift: first, her teacher, then the principal of her school, and most of all a mentor, played by Laurence Fishburne, a mentor who as a youngster had also been an outstanding speller and had gone to the national finals. This was the key relationship in the movie, the mentor-student relationship.

It seems almost to be a rule of thumb that we have a hard time valuing our selves and our gifts unless and until others mirror and reflect our value and gifts back to us. We have only a dim inkling of who we are and what we can be until someone else recognizes our gold and helps us to begin to dig that gold out.

This, too, I find to be an emotionally moving experience: to witness a parent, a friend, a teacher, or a mentor assisting another human being with the discovery of his or her own worth and dignity, his or her own unique gift.

Along with this, I also find it to be an emotionally moving experience to witness the pleasure and pride of a parent, friend, teacher, or mentor as they watch another discover and develop his or her gift and grow into his or her self.

3: Witnessing dedication and discipline

A third occasion of emotional response is witnessing situations in which persons discipline themselves toward some goal. This goes beyond the simple affirmation of your person and gift and has to do with *developing* your gift, developing your power, your capacity – whatever that might be – pushing it, polishing it, and seeing what can be done with it.

What I find emotionally moving is witnessing dedication and sacrifice – seeing an individual not only discover his or her gift and goal, but also gain some idea of what is required to develop that gift and achieve that goal, and then to go after it, to be willing to make the needed effort and sacrifice in that direction.

This, to me, is the value of competition and games, such as a spelling bee. Such competitions are ways of developing and testing one's strength, one's skill, and one's dedication.

Competition, though often abused, has, I believe, its place in such a pursuit. The object of *true competition* is not to crush another, but, rather, each faithful to the rules, to engage together in the pursuit of a goal, each lifting and carrying and pushing the other toward the goal. That's the pleasure and joy of competition – the winning or losing, though a necessary goad, is quite secondary.

In the movie, Akeelah's goal was to win the National Spelling Bee contest in Washington D.C. I found it to be a delightful and moving experience to watch her preparation and discipline toward that goal.

4: Witnessing humility and openness

Another related part of the pursuit of a goal and of self-development is the capacity to swallow your pride and to acknowledge your need and your incompleteness. Here is where we begin to move even more beyond simple self-affirmation to take in a larger world. Here begins the recognition that one is part of the universe, not the center of the universe. Here begins the recognition that you can't really make it on your own.

In the movie, it was the recognition by Akeelah that in order to take the next step in her journey, she needed to truly listen to and learn from her mentor. She needed to humble herself even as she affirmed herself – for the two attitudes paradoxically belong together.

To see a person open his or her self in humility can be a moving thing.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

“Blessed are those who know their need of God.” (The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5)

How touched I am witnessing individuals engaging their own weakness, accepting their own need, learning from their own mistakes, picking themselves up after falling, persevering after failure and loss.

5: Witnessing integrity

Along with this recognition of being a part of the universe rather than at the center of the universe is the growing awareness that the *journey* toward a goal is more important really than the actual achievement of the goal. And, further, any achievement obtained by cheating or unfair means is not really an achievement at all; everything is thereby ruined.

Thus, in the pursuit of a goal there is to be: no cheating, no shortcuts, no deceit, no corruption.

To witness one staying on the path, resisting the temptation to take shortcuts, as with the heroine in this movie, I find to be an emotionally moving thing.

And to stay on the path, one must be willing to lose, to accept defeat graciously, which is, indeed, the recognition that the path is ultimately more important than the achievement of the goal, necessary as the goal is.

In the movie, this was demonstrated by a good friend and fellow competitor of Akeelah's, who in defeat was able to leave the stage graciously and with good humor, gladdening the hearts of all.

6: Witnessing justice

Conversely, to witness the cheater caught and the wrong-doing addressed is also emotionally compelling.

I have observed that hardly anything cuts me to the core more than situations of injustice, unfairness, and prejudice.

Thus, to see injustice addressed, and wrong-doers reprovved, and the wrong-doing repaired, touches an emotional core.

In the case of this movie, it was a young person – the mother actually – cheating in a spelling bee, and then being caught and the situation rectified.

7: Witnessing reaching out and reconciliation

Now in this journey toward wholeness, as we witness a person gaining strength and confidence by following a path of integrity, we also witness this person able to see the need of others, secure enough in self to begin to reach out to others.

In the movie, Akeelah, the heroine, is seen coming to a point where she can recognize and empathize with the needs of others: in her chief competitor, in her mentor, in her mother. Thus, she becomes a catalyst and a bridge for reconciliation and forgiveness.

Of course, there is hardly anything more emotionally compelling than to witness the coming together, the healing, the restoration, of that which has been damaged and broken.

Well-known film critic, Roger Ebert, reviewing this film when it first came out in April of this year, wrote these words toward the end of his review:

Now I am going to start dancing around the plot. Something happens during the finals of the National Bee that you are not going to see coming, and it may move you as deeply as it did me. I've often said it's not sadness that touches me the most in a movie, but goodness. Under enormous pressure, at a crucial moment, Akeelah does something good. Its results I will leave you to discover.

8: Witnessing a unity greater than separateness

And I don't have to totally give away the plot either, but what I can say is that Akeelah's reaching out beyond herself to her competitor brought forth a response in him so that now the two of them were not only doing their individual best, but they also were rooting for each other to do their best – and, by means of this, *together* they were able to achieve something never before accomplished.

This is what takes my breath away: two individuals seeing themselves as one body above and beyond the inevitable, difficult, and beautiful competition of life.

Occasionally, in athletic contests I have witnessed this as well, where competitors of equal strength and skill have pushed each other to the limit, both going beyond what they thought they were capable of, both achieving heights they could not have reached without the other, so that, as we say, "It's a shame that one has to lose."

In such situations, the game itself clearly takes over, transcending the winning and the losing.

In this regard, a few years ago I witnessed a remarkable event in the 2003 Presidents Cup Golf Match between the United States, led by captain Jack Nicklaus, and an International team, led by captain Gary Player.

The match was being played in November over a long weekend in South Africa, Gary Player's home country. And it proved to be an outstanding, hard-fought match, with much drama, many twists and turns, but finally ending in a flat-out tie.

In the case of ties in Presidents Cup competition, the rules call for each of the team captains to pick one player to represent the team in a sudden-death playoff, someone they have selected before the competition even begins. In other words, the outcome of the whole team competition rests on the play of these two players.

So with the contest now tied, the paper is unfolded and the names of these individual team representatives revealed. Jack Nicklaus picked as his representative – no surprise – Tiger Woods. Gary Player picked as his team representative – also no surprise – Ernie Els, who, like Player, is from South Africa. They call him "the Big Easy," because of his relaxed swing and demeanor.

So the two players start the sudden-death playoff at the difficult 18th hole. They both par it. Then they go back to the first hole on the course. They both par that as well. And then on to the second hole of the course, a par 3.

On this hole both players hit poor tee shots, Tiger landing about a 100 feet away from the hole and Els about 50 feet away. Tiger's first putt rolled past the hole about 15 feet. Els' first putt rolled to within about 5 feet of the cup.

Tiger then sank his putt, characteristically pumping his fist at the hole as the putt dropped – “the most nerve-racking moment I've ever had in golf,” he said later.

Now it's up to Ernie Els. With the weight of not only his own team but also that of his country upon him, he also drilled the putt, later admitting, “The first time ever I felt my legs shaking on the golf course.”

Now the rules called for the players to return to the 18th hole again, until one of them could best the other. But it was starting to get dark. They could probably still play for a time, but it was starting to get dark. If they kept playing and kept tying, they would have to resume play in the morning.

“Gary,” said Jack Nicklaus to his long-time rival and friend, “let's talk about this.”

And so the two old warhorses huddled together. Then they went to their respective teams. Then they huddled again. Again, they went back to their teams. And then, finally, one more time with each other and with the head official. And then they declared to the waiting public:

“It's getting dark. We've played hard. It's not fair that the outcome of this wonderful team match should rest on the shoulders on these two individual players. Our two teams will share this year's Presidents Cup.

By no means was everyone in the golf world pleased with this decision that transcended the rules of the golf match and which didn't produce a winner. But to me it was one of the most moving moments I have ever witnessed in sport, for it was a recognition of the greatest cosmic truth we can know, the principle that our unity is prior to and greater than our separateness.

This was only a game, but to me it was a real-life example of the ties of love that bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Benediction

May the Love that overcomes all differences,
that heals all wounds,
that puts to flight all fears,
that reconciles all who are separated,

Be in us and among us,
Now and always. Amen.
(Frederick E. Gillis)

Extinguishing the Chalice

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 sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on the third Sunday of the Christmas Season, December 10, 2006. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)