

**“Ecstasy” (“Easter Sunday”)
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
April 8, 2007
Bruce A. Bode**

Call to Worship

On January 1, 1918, near the end of World War I, the American poet e. e. cummings was released from a French prison after serving three months under suspicion of being a spy. Reborn out of that prison darkness back into the light of the natural world, the poet was ecstatic with joy and cried out:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun’s birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any – lifted from the no
of all nothing – human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)
(e. e. cummings (1894-1962))

Lighting of Chalice (spoken in unison)

We come together this Easter Sunday
To renew our faith in the holiness, goodness and beauty of life;
To reaffirm the way of the open mind and the full heart;
To reclaim the vision of an earth more fair, with all her people one.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: Some things will never change. Some things will always be the same.

CONGREGATION: The glitter of sunlight on roughened water, the glory of the stars, the innocence of morning, the smell of the sea in harbors;

MINISTER: The voice of forest water in the night, a woman's laughter in the dark, the clean hard rattle of raked gravel, the cricketing stitch of mid-day in hot meadows, the delicate web of children's voices in bright air;

CONGREGATION: The leaf, the blade, the flower, the wind that cries and sleeps and wakes again, the trees whose stiff arms clash and tremble in the dark, and the dust of lovers long since buried in the earth;

MINISTER: The feathery blur and smoky buddings of young boughs, and something there that comes and goes and never can be captured;

CONGREGATION: The tarantula, the adder, and the asp also will never change. Pain and death will always be the same.

MINISTER: But under the pavements trembling like a pulse, under the buildings trembling like a cry, under the waste of time, under the hoof of the beast above the broken bones of cities, there will be something growing like a flower –

CONGREGATION: Something bursting from the earth again, forever deathless, faithful, coming into life again like April.

(Thomas Wolf, The Web and the Rock, adapted)

A Time for All Ages

Good morning, children. Were some of you visited by the Easter Bunny this past evening? I believe I caught a glimpse of the Easter Bunny here at the church earlier.

One of the things the Easter Bunny is celebrating is the coming of the spring, the new life that is springing up all over – all the buds, blossoms, and leaves on the flowers, plants, and trees at this time of the year.

Some of you may remember that last year at this time I talked about some of the plants that lived in the woods near where I grew up as a youngster in Lynden, Washington. In the woods across the road from my house there were some lovely white lilies that would bloom around Easter. These lilies are called trillium.

Every spring as a boy I would go out into the woods looking for these lilies – I knew right where they were. And even though I hadn't been back to those woods in the spring for a long time, I still thought I remembered where they were.

And to find out if my memory was correct, last year after these Easter services, I went for Easter dinner at my parents' house, and after the dinner I went to see if those lilies were still there. I stopped my car along the side of the road where I thought they were and I stepped into the woods – and, sure enough, there the lilies were just as I remembered them.

Also, last year when I talked to you children about these lilies, after the first service a very thoughtful person who had heard me talk about them went home and quickly dug up some of these lilies from her yard and immediately brought them back to the church so I could show the children at the second service what these lilies looked like.

And so after the second service was over, I planted some of these lilies in my yard. I wasn't certain if they would come up this year because they were underground almost all of the year. But I looked a few days ago and sure enough there they were – just now starting to bloom.

I hope these lilies don't mind being dug up, but I'm sure they would like you children to see and admire them. And I will re-plant them as soon as our services today are over.

So people from all over the world in the Northern Hemisphere are celebrating the coming of spring on this Easter Sunday. They think of all the new life, and they think of the energy that is present in everything that is.

And so at Easter we also think about what new life is present in us. Maybe you can think of some things that are new in your life this year – something that wasn't part of your life last year. Maybe it's a new thought, or a new interest, or a new friend.

At any rate, Easter is a time of the year for celebrating the new life that is all around us in nature and also the new life that is within us.

Scripture Reading

Growing up, I was deeply rooted in the stories of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, to the point that many of its phrases are imprinted in the memory vaults of my brain.

I had occasion to recall one of those phrases upon the death of my father, which took place abruptly from a massive coronary attack on the early evening of Friday, February 9, just about two months ago.

I related a bit of this experience in my monthly ministerial column in our March Newsletter. It was the experience, after receiving a telephone call from St. Joseph's Hospital in Bellingham, of hurrying as quickly as possible to the emergency room of the Hospital to view the body of my deceased father.

As a longtime parish minister I have been in hundreds – thousands – of hospital rooms, and have been present with the bodies of many, many persons who have died. Still, I went this time not knowing quite what to expect – for, after all, this was my father.

But upon entering the emergency room and seeing my father's cold body, it was the immediately the sense of "He is not here." Those words, actually: "He is not here."

Where do such words come from? They come from the Easter story with which I was

very familiar, the part of the story where the women close to Jesus come to visit his tomb in order to anoint his broken body with oil. But instead of finding Jesus' body, they encounter an angel who announces, "He has risen, he is not here."

So, too, the spirit of my father was absent from his body. His spirit had arisen: it was not there. A lifetime of his spirit being part and parcel with his body, but now in an instant gone and present instead in a thousand memories and images.

My reading this Easter Sunday morning is the traditional Easter story, which now carries a new meaning for me. I read from the Gospel of St. Mark, the 16th chapter, the Revised Standard Version:

And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun was risen.

And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?"

And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back; for it was very large.

And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed.

And he said to them, "Do not be amazed: you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here..."

"ECSTASY"

Faust and Easter music

Last Sunday I spoke in part about the German literary classic, Faust, written by Wolfgang von Goethe. I spoke about the episode in which Faust as a middle-aged, college professor at the height of his career is about to end his life.

Faust's life has come to a complete standstill, an absolute dead-end. The energy that once animated him has been almost completely used up, and now he is lonely, disconnected, and desolate; his life is barren, both meaningless in the present and hopeless for the future. All his learning, all his immense study and philosophical investigation, has not brought him closer to the heart of life; it has only tangled him up, and he knows no way out.

Thus, he is about to drink a vial of poison he had hidden away, almost as if he expected this time might come for him. But just as he is about to take the poison and so end the torment of his present consciousness and his miserable existence,

he hears the strains of Easter music. The sound of an Easter celebration comes through his window from outside his study. This “sound of music” is enough to give him pause. So he puts down the vial of poison, leaves his study, and joins the crowd of Easter celebrants.

When Faust returns to his study, warmed by the celebration, a little black poodle dog that had attached itself to him slips by him into his study, bringing with it a whole new energy. Where the little black poodle dog walks on the stone floor of his study, flames of fire appear. And soon that black poodle metamorphoses into an even more fiery figure, namely, his lordship, the devil, Mephistopheles.

Mephistopheles announces himself as “part of the part which once was the whole.” In other words, Mephistopheles holds the energy from the life that Faust had cut off and disregarded, energy from the other side, energy that is regarded as demonic, but in actuality is the very energy that could revive Faust’s desiccated life – *if* he can find a way to integrate it while not being destroyed by it.

Solution to suicide

My sermon this Easter Sunday morning, the last in a series of eight sermons on the books and ideas of Robert A. Johnson, will focus on a little book titled, Ecstasy: Understanding the Psychology of Joy.

We begin by noting that when distraught and troubled patients, like Faust, appear in Robert Johnson’s consulting room, confessing that they have had it and want to end their lives and be done with everything, Johnson’s typical approach is to say, “Yes, yes, let’s do that, let’s end your life; but let’s do it in such a way so as not to harm your body.”

In other words, “Your diagnosis is correct. Something needs to die. Something needs to give way. Your present way of life, your present consciousness, has come to an end-stop and needs to be sacrificed. So your diagnosis is correct, but your solution is incorrect. What is called for is not the sacrifice of your body, but the sacrifice of your present consciousness.”

The Easter celebration

Easter is a celebration of a new consciousness, a new understanding, a new approach, a new perspective, a new vitality, a new life that has arisen out of the death and sacrifice of the old life, the life that had run dry.

Inevitably a given way of life does run dry. You can’t keep running down the same path and not expect it to lose its vitality and energy. Thus, just as the life of nature about us must renew itself each year, so, too, we must be periodically renewed.

“Ecstasy,” says Robert Johnson, is the experience of being connected to the life-force. And joy is the emotion of such ecstatic experience – an exultation of spirit in being connected with the energy of life.

But how do we connect with this energy, this life-force? And where is the ecstasy and joy that might be ours, that could be ours, that should be ours? After all, if we are part of the life-force, if it is in us and all about us, then in theory it shouldn't be all that difficult to be carried by ecstasy and filled with joy.

“Ecstasy.” It's from the Greek – *ex stasis* – and means “standing outside one's self.”

What does it mean to “stand outside one's self?” It means standing outside our present sense of who we are, standing outside our present identity.

Almost always our present sense of who we are is too small, too limited. We close ourselves off. We shut ourselves away from the life-force that energizes all that is.

The god Dionysus

A personification of this life-force is found for Robert Johnson in the Greek deity, Dionysus. At one time Dionysus was a most powerful deity with many worshippers: the god of wine, the god of ecstasy, a shape-shifter, with the goat as his primary symbol, the “capricious, unpredictable” goat. (Ecstasy, p. 3)

Followers of Dionysus would commune with their deity by eating the flesh of the goat and by drinking the fruit of the vine, the goat representing the body of the god and the wine representing the blood of the god, just as in the Christian Eucharist the bread is the body and the wine is the blood of the deity.

Such ceremonies of communion are aimed at the experience of ecstasy, where one stands outside of oneself “transcending time and space to become for a moment divine.” (Ecstasy, pp. 31-32)

Through simple acts of eating and drinking, partaken in awareness, one is lifted outside oneself and touches an energy that “makes us truly alive and connects us with every living thing.” (Ecstasy, p. 3)

Dionysus and Jesus

There is a famous Christian chalice – the Antioch chalice – that depicts Jesus “engaged in one of Dionysus's favorite activities – swinging on a seat of grapevines, poised between two worlds.” (Ecstasy, p. 31)

As Robert Johnson points out in his book Ecstasy, there are many mythological parallels between Dionysus and Jesus:

“...both [are] sons of divine fathers and mortal, virgin mothers.... both [were] hailed as the King of Kings. At Eleusis the followers of Dionysus celebrated his “Advent” with a newborn baby placed in a winnowing basket – the forerunner of baby Jesus in the manger.

“Both Jesus and Dionysus die – Jesus on the cross, Dionysus at the hands of the Titans; and both are reborn, symbolizing the life that does not end. Dionysus ascends to Olympus, Jesus to heaven, and both sit at the right hand of their father – [Zeus, being the father of Dionysus].

(Ecstasy, pp. 31-32)

“To worship Dionysus,” says Robert Johnson, “is to worship the life force (Ecstasy, p. 34) ... to touch Dionysus [is] to feel a part of the ecstatic, creative, and eternal force of life.” (Ecstasy, p. 35)

It should be no surprise, therefore, that the primary Dionysian festivals took place in the spring of the year, for Dionysus “represents the continual rebirth of life in the spring....” (Ecstasy, p. 11)

Where is Dionysus today?

For Johnson, deities, such as Dionysus, are symbols and representations of archetypal powers, eternal powers present within and about us. And so the question for him is: Where is this power of Dionysus to be found today?

In Roman times, Dionysus, the god of ecstatic *spiritual* experience, was taken over by the Roman god, Bacchus, a god of drunkenness and excess, essentially devoid of spirit.

And Christianity drove the Dionysian principle underground. Dionysus’ goat become a symbol for the Devil. You see the Devil depicted with the face and horns of a goat.

But the archetypal powers within us that are personified and symbolized by the gods and goddesses do not go away. And if they are pushed away, they simply come at us from the side and from below in destructive and negative forms. Says Johnson:

...our refusal to honor an ethical, caring human drive can transform it into something wild and destructive.

(Ecstasy, p. 18)

This is mostly what we see today in our society, a Dionysian energy turned sour and lacking in spirit and inwardness. “The loss of spiritual ecstasy in Western

society,” says Johnson, “has left a void that we fill in the only way we know how: with danger and excitement.” (Ecstasy, p. 17) “Craving spiritual ecstasy, we mistakenly seek material fulfillment.... more money, more food, more sex, more drugs, more drinks, more oblivion.” (Ecstasy, p. 20)

But such material and physical attempts to achieve spiritual ecstasy do not ultimately satisfy – one simply craves more and more and more and more, but the void is never filled, and the urge results only in addiction. Writes Johnson:

Addiction is the negative side of spiritual seeking. We are looking for an exultation of the spirit; but instead of fulfillment we get a short-lived physical thrill that can never satisfy the chronic, gnawing emptiness with which we are beset.

To fill this emptiness, we need to reconnect with the capacity for ecstasy that lies dormant within us.

(Ecstasy, p. vii)

And so how do we do that? How do we connect with the power of life that we see springing up all around us at this time of the year? That same creative power is within us, too, but how and where do we find it?

One undeveloped side

As I indicated earlier, with any movement in one direction, after a time the energy will wear out and be used up. The life-force will want to head off in a new direction and will balk about being continually forced into one path, which becomes a rut.

Thus, as with Faust in my opening story, it is time to go to the other side. For Faust, it meant leaving his study and going outside into the streets and marketplaces. For another person, it may mean leaving the streets and marketplaces and going into a study.

The point is to go to the other side, your undeveloped side, for here is where the energy is stored, and here is where you can be re-stored.

If you are all in the head, like a Faust, it means going to the heart. If you're all in the body, it means going to the mind. If you're all in feeling, it means going to thinking. If you're all in the outer world, it means going to the inner world. If you're all in the inner world, it means connecting with the outer world.

By analogy, if you're right-handed, it means going to your left-hand. If you're left-handed, it means going to your right hand.

To do this may be awkward and even uncomfortable, but here is where the energy is stored – not in what you are good at, not in what you have succeeded at, not in

what you can control, but precisely in what you cannot yet control. Here is where Dionysus lives for you, for Dionysus is energy and spirit and vitality and life; he is a shape-shifter.

So you may ask yourself: What is it I have always wondered about but have never had the courage to try because I feared failure? What is it that was frowned on or forbidden me or knocked out of me that might yet have meant something to me or been important for me?

Or maybe it will be a return to something that once appealed to you in your childhood and youth, but that got dropped along the way because of having to become a responsible adult. There may be that which has lain dormant in you for years, but which, for that very reason, has accumulated energy and is just waiting to sprout and blossom with a little attention from you.

Is there any place where you once heard music, but by now have nearly completely forgotten it? By recalling that music and returning to that place, you may be surprised to find that a line of melody is still there. That melody line, I would suggest, belongs to Dionysus, the god of ecstasy, the energy of Easter.

Consciousness and ecstasy

One other place to find Dionysus, suggests Robert Johnson, is through the work of consciousness.

The function of our ego, our conscious self, is to integrate and relate our present awareness with that which is beyond our present awareness – to relate our current understanding to the unfathomable life-force that jewels the heavens above us with billions of nuclear furnaces and animates all forms of life upon this planet, our own included. To connect with that larger life – the life out of which we have arisen – is to connect with Dionysus.

I have just spoken about going to the other side where unused energy has been stored. But a lot of our energy is siphoned away through conflicts between opposing elements of desires ... so that our desires, which carry energy, simply cancel each other out and the energy is dissipated and wasted.

So the task here is to try to bring these conflicts to consciousness and to hold them. The task of consciousness, says Johnson, is not first of all to make decisions about which desire to choose, but to hold conflicting elements of desire together in awareness until a resolution presents itself from beyond the conflicting elements.

It's like the experience of going to sleep after struggling for hours and hours with a problem that will not resolve itself. Finally, exhausted you've had it and you fall sleep. However, when you awake, a solution has presented itself unbidden –

a solution that was not the product of your conscious will. Nevertheless, it was a solution that required the prior attention and concentration of your conscious will.

Conscious suffering and the symbol of the cross

This is what I talked about two days ago on Good Friday in relation to conscious suffering and the symbol of the cross.

Psychologically and symbolically speaking, the cross is the meeting place of conflicting elements of desire and need – “pairs of opposites” that are represented by the horizontal and vertical arms of the cross, a “double pair of opposites,” as Johnson says, with ourselves placed squarely in the center where these pairs of opposites meet.

(The cross Johnson prefers is the Greek cross with the arms equal in length, as opposed to the Roman cross where the shorter, horizontal arm is placed well above the center on the longer, vertical arm, thus lacking balance.)

Our task is to receive and suffer these pairs of opposites in the full weight of consciousness.

Johnson’s idea is that with any pair of conflicts that one suffers, if one can hold on and not flee – stay in the room, don’t split, because that simply pulls the opposing sides further apart – but hold on and work at bringing the opposing forces into greater clarity and awareness ... if one can do this, then a solution from beyond these pairs of opposites – from a deeper, underlying unity of life and being that holds these opposites – will eventually present itself. Johnson says:

We are conscious enough to be torn by the conflicts of life but not yet conscious enough to sense life’s underlying unity.

(Inner Work, p. 39)

As long as you think in terms of this one or that one, you are still caught up in the world of the small, personal ‘I.’ But, if you can stand to live in paradox long enough, then a transformation takes place and a new consciousness is born.

(Contentment, p. 79)

Johnson gives the following everyday example of what it means to be on such a cross: Suppose on a given morning you believe you should be inside working, but you don’t feel like it and would rather go for a hike. These two contradictory wishes – one from one side of the cross, the other from the other side – will cancel each other out if you continue to view them as contradictory to each other.

Thus, you might stay in and work, but feel resentful and irritated and not do your best work. Or, on the other hand, you might go for a hike, but feel guilty the whole time

because you know you should be working, thus spoiling the pleasure of the hike. In other words, a kind of minor crucifixion.

Now perhaps you could develop a compromise: go first to one side, and then to the other side. That is, take a short walk, and then following that do some work, or visa versa. This can be useful, and maybe the best we can usually do.

But, suggests Johnson, there is a better way, namely, to sit down, take a few deep breaths, and quietly bring both of your desires to greater clarity and awareness. That is, it is good to work and meet your commitments; it is also good to relax and play.

“What then,” he asks, “is the greater whole that encompasses both of these virtues?” The solution that will arise will depend on the particularities of your life and the dynamics of the opposing energies within you. Perhaps you will need to adjust your priorities and your schedule for a greater balance. Perhaps there is a way to bring more play into your work.

(from Contentment, pp. 72-73)

The point is that instead of just going on neurotically suffering these conflicts and contradictions, we attempt to bring more clarity and consciousness to the oppositions, letting them to rub against each other, and thus allowing an underlying unity that is beneath them to manifest itself – to move these oppositions from absolute contradictions that cancel each other out, to paradoxes, that is to say, to polar opposites in which the two sides are related to each other by a deeper unity, which then results in a revelation, a restoring energy that comes from beyond the opposition – and this is where Dionysus lives. Says Johnson:

To view the elements of life as paradoxical is to open up a whole new series of possibilities. It is our inability to see a hidden unity that is problematic. To accept paradox is to earn the right to unity.

(Contentment, pp. 74-75)

This work toward becoming more conscious is not easy work, and we probably fail at it more than we succeed.

But this work does not require that we be perfect; it only requires that we make an effort to step in the direction of this work.

In the end, Johnson believes there is a grace in life that holds us and supports us and even carries in these efforts, and through much failure. As I have heard him say,

“We take one step forward, and we slide two steps back; but we get to heaven anyway, because we headed in the wrong direction to begin with.”

Benediction

In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time
There shall be no ugliness or death
For yourself or for any life that your life touches.

Seek goodness everywhere; when it is found
Bring it out of its hiding-place
And let it be free and unashamed.

Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption.

Encourage virtue into whatever heart
It may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow
By the shame and terror of the world.

In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time
You shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world,
But shall smile instead to its infinite delight and mystery.

(Preface to “The Time Of Your Life” by William Saroyan)

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.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Easter Sunday, April 8, 2007. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)