

“Seeds of Memory”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
August 24, 2008
Bruce A. Bode

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

We drink from wells we did not dig.
We have been warmed by fires we did not build.
We light this chalice in thanksgiving
for those who have passed their light to us.

(Deuteronomy 6:11, adapted)

Opening Words & Musical Response

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this lovely summer 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 integrity, 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.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: In the struggles we choose for ourselves, in the ways we move forward in our lives and bring our world forward with us,

CONGREGATION: It is right to remember those who gave us strength in this choice of living.

MINISTER: We share a history with those lives.

CONGREGATION: We belong to the same motion.

MINISTER: They too were strengthened by what had gone before.

CONGREGATION: They too were drawn on by the vision of what might come to be.

MINISTER: Those who lived before us, who struggled for justice and suffered injustice before us, have not melted into the dust, and have not disappeared.

CONGREGATION: They are with us still.

MINISTER: The lives they lived hold us steady.

CONGREGATION: Their words remind us and call us back to ourselves.

MINISTER: Their courage and love evoke our own.

CONGREGATION: We, the living, carry them with us.

MINISTER: We are their voices, their hands and their hearts.

CONGREGATION: We take them with us, and with them choose the deeper path of living.

(Kathleen McTigue, adapted)

Reading

This morning's reading is from Albert Schweitzer and from his small classic on childhood titled, Memoirs of Childhood and Youth. Here he looks back at his youth and what he remembers, what stirred him, and what influenced him. He writes:

One thing stirs me when I look back at my youthful days, namely, the fact that so many people gave me something or were something to me without knowing it. Such people, with whom I have, perhaps, never exchanged a word, yes, and others about whom I have merely heard things by report, have had a decisive influence upon me; they entered into my life and became powers within me. Much that I should otherwise not have felt so clearly or done so effectively was felt or done as it was, because I stand, as it were, under the sway of these people.

Hence I always think that we all live, spiritually, by what others have given us in the significant hours of our life. These significant hours do not announce themselves as coming, but arrive unexpected. Nor do they make a great show of themselves; they pass almost unperceived.

Often, indeed, their significance comes home to us first as we look back, just as the beauty of a piece of music or of a landscape often strikes us first in our recollection of it. Much that has become our own in gentleness, modesty, kindness, willingness to forgive, in truthfulness, loyalty, resignation under suffering, we owe to people in whom we have seen or experienced these virtues as work, sometimes in a great matter, sometimes in a small. A thought which had become act sprang into us like a spark, and lighted a new flame within us.

I do not believe that we can put into anyone ideas which are not in him or her already. As a rule there are in everyone all sorts of good ideas, ready like tinder to catch fire. But much of this tinder catches fire, or catches it successfully, only when it meets some flame or spark from outside, that is, from some other person.

Often, too, our own light goes out, and is rekindled into flame again by some experience we go through with a fellow-human. Thus, each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flames within us. If we had before us now those who have thus been a blessing to us, and could tell them how it came about, they would be amazed to learn what had passed over from their lives into ours.

Similarly, not one of us knows what effect our life produces, and what we give to others; that is hidden from us and must remain so, though we are often allowed to see some little fraction of it, so that we may not lose courage. The way in which power works is a mystery.

(Albert Schweitzer, Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, pp. 67-8, adjusted for gender)

“SEEDS OF MEMORY”

Introduction

I didn't know a few months ago when I chose this sermon topic on memory of loved ones that it would be particularly appropriate for this Sunday, but it is, given the fact that later this afternoon we will be holding a memorial service for a lovely member of this congregation, Margaret McLaughlin, who died this past Monday at the age of 81.

But, of course, the topic of memory and of remembering those we have loved is always an important and timely theme, for so much of what makes

us a distinct species is related to our capacity to remember.

I become acutely aware of this in relation to my own mother, who bit by bit is losing her memory to Alzheimer's Disease, bit by bit losing so many of the qualities that define, distinguish, and make her a person.

And earlier this summer I officiated at a service in Grand Rapids, Michigan for a long-time friend – I wrote about this in my last Peninsula Daily News ministerial column – who was one of the most highly creative individuals I have ever had the privilege of knowing: a building designer, a lyricist, an artist, a cartoonist; wildly imaginative, full of whimsy, and verbally so keen that you hung on his every word – and also one of the gentlest, sweetest souls one could hope to know.

How difficult it was, then, over the last ten years of his life, to watch Alzheimer's Disease gradually but steadily unravel his fine mind until he was a helpless shell of his former self, incapable of caring for his simplest needs, of recognizing his family members and closest friends, and, of course, of sustaining his artistic and verbal abilities.

So it is that so much of what makes us human hangs on memory, the capacity of our physical brain to remember ... though I also believe, and have recently read studies that indicate, that there's also a kind of body memory that Alzheimer's Disease does not undo, in which persons with severe Alzheimer's will somehow continue to learn at a different level, will learn, for example, who treats them kindly. They will remember and gravitate toward those persons.

The heart's own seed

At any rate, my sermon this morning as the summer winds down, addresses the question of: What remains after the death of a loved one? And what is it that is passed on from one life to another?

The sonnet printed at the top of today's Order of Service provides one answer.

There will be something here, some part of this
Left over past our final soft caress –
A breeze at twilight carrying a kiss,

The fragrance of a petaled loveliness
That we have known, some little shining edge
Of ecstasy on beauty's golden dart –
And we will stand beside the jasmine hedge
Again, and love will spring from heart to heart.

For memory will keep what it has heard
Forever etched upon the heart's own seed,
And time shall not erase one tender word
That love has written down for future need.
Oh dearest, hold this knowledge and be glad –
Not even death destroys what love has had.

(“Not Even Death,” Margaret Jane Cole)

This simple, straight-forward poem suggests that the heart has its own seed upon which memory etches itself.

Like etchings upon metals of bronze, silver, or copper; so memory etches itself upon the seed of the heart, and these seeds of the heart then are preserved for future use and need – little packets of information that at the appropriate time will germinate, sprout, take root, grow, blossom, and bear fruit.

The heart, the poem suggests, is like a storage bin, a great storehouse where seeds of memory are kept and preserved.

What we remember

These seeds of memory in the storehouse of our heart, however, are not necessarily known to us at the time they are gathered – my earlier reading from Albert Schweitzer suggests that. It’s only later in life and as we look back that we realize what we were gathering.

Seeds, of course, are often tiny little things, so tiny that you don’t even know they’re adhering to you ... as when, for example, you walk through a field of grasses and wild flowers or through a woods. The seeds from the various plants, unbeknownst to you, stick to your clothing, attach themselves to the hair of your head, gather in the cuffs of your pants, and all without your awareness – you don’t even know you are collecting them, carrying them, scattering them.

The poet Robert Bly says that each day we are asked to remember one or two things, just one or two things each day as we go through life. These are things that our parents aren't aware we are remembering, things that aren't by any means the national news of the day, and things that often we ourselves are not aware we are remembering. Writes Robert Bly:

Someone tries to teach us.
In childhood, he calls us
each day to remember
one or two things only.
I remember I fell
one Sunday from my parents'
car, I saw it leaving
me on the road, going.
My parents do not recall it.

(from "Four Ways of Knowledge," The Man in the Black Coat Turns)

So we don't know – and can't control – why we remember what we remember but, apparently, something in us wants to or needs to remember.

Something in us, our heart perhaps, wants to remember. Let us call it our "heart," our deepest emotional self. Let us say that our deepest emotional self wants to collect these memories and store them for future reference, use, and need.

Or, let us say it is our soul that collects these memories. Let us call it our "soul." Let us say that what we most essentially are wants and needs to remember.

But we, in our conscious selves, don't even know why at the time. Maybe later we will learn why these seeds of memory adhered to us. Maybe later we will learn why the heart and the soul collected, gathered, and stored the particular memories it did. But at the time we really don't know what we are gathering or why.

The mystery of memory

Do you, for example, know why you remember what you remember?

Many of you here today, like myself, have had many years of gathering memories, but have you figured out *why* the particular seeds of memory that have adhered to you did so?

Why do the heart and the soul gather the memories that they do? – memories that are often, even usually, utterly strange, odd little things with no apparent rhyme or reason to them. It's not a rational thing, not an intellectual thing, not a controllable thing.

The things we remember are not what our parents would think we might remember (and, of course, often they'd just as soon we wouldn't remember what we remember), while the things they wanted to teach us are often completely forgotten – “What, you told me that?!”

Here's an example of the oddness of memory. It comes from a memorial service that I officiated at several years ago in which a grown granddaughter spoke about her dear, departed grandmother. She said:

I have the oddest little memory of my grandmother,” she said. “I remember that when she was eating and nearly all the food on her plate was gone she would use her little finger to pick up the crumbs from the plate. Then she would put her little finger to her mouth and eat those crumbs. In this way she cleaned her plate.

The granddaughter continued:

I don't know why I remember that, but I do; and now I find myself doing the very same thing! When I am about finished eating, I pick up the crumbs from my plate with my little finger and I put them to my mouth; and when I do, I think of “grandma.”

Crumbs on the plate. Little crumbs of no apparent account. Yet these crumbs are the seeds of memory.

What is imparted to us is not usually what others have tried to impart to us. And, actually, what others *try* to impart to us is often remembered, if at all, only negatively ... what is most remembered is the *pressure* of the teaching and less the teaching itself.

So it seems that what is most useful to us are seeds of memory that we don't

even know we are receiving and which others don't even know they are giving.

What is remembered by us is something that has "soul-stuff" attached to it, or "heart-stuff;" or something that wants to attach to our soul, or take root in our heart; or something that our soul notices, or that our heart is pulled by.

Heart, soul, and memory

So what do the soul and the heart like to remember?

The soul, that unoriginated fire out of which we are born, I believe likes the following: reality, vitality, authenticity, and spontaneity. In other words, the soul likes what it itself is.

And the heart, what does the heart like? The heart, I believe, likes these things: connection, care, concern, and courtesy. And also this: kindness, gentleness, tenderness, and modesty. The heart likes what it itself is.

And so the heart and soul usually without our conscious knowledge, gather, collect, store, and preserve seeds of memory so that they themselves might be nourished.

What we give

This may give us a clue as to how we should live our own lives and what it is that we give or have given to others, for we truly give to others when we give of ourselves – naturally, spontaneously, lovingly, and without necessarily the shaping of forethought, and certainly not the shaping by manipulation. You have to let go, let the heart bubble over, let the soul have its play.

A story of memory

Who has dropped seeds of memory into your heart or into your soul?

A few years ago in reading Bill Moyers' interviews with American poets, I was struck by an interview with a contemporary American poet of Chinese descent by the name of Li-Young Lee (who I heard read in Seattle last year).

Li-Young Lee's father, as he describes him, was a brilliant man of huge intellectual and artistic talents. He was also a wild and exuberant man, a scholarly man with a command of seven languages – he taught Shakespeare, Kierkegaard, and opera – an entrepreneur who could make money and as easily let it go; a man who for some years served as Mao Zedong personal physician, and who, in 1949 when the Peoples' Republic of China was established, was forced to flee to Jakarta, Indonesia (where Li-Young Lee was born), and after a time from there again to Japan, Macao, and Singapore, before ending up in Hong Kong, where he became a successful Christian evangelist, and then finally moving to the United States where he became a Presbyterian minister.

And he was a forbidding presence of a man, a person who felt he needed to give an appearance of strength, an individual who could not allow doubt into his public or even his private conversation, a demanding man to his children, with very high standards, the template by which his sons and daughters were to measure their lives.

But what was remembered of this man? No doubt all of this has gone into his children in some way, but what his son Li-Young Lee remembers and appreciates was the opportunity to read his father's Bible after his father's death.

And what did Li-Young Lee find in his father's Bible? He found notations in the margins of his father's Bible ... notations related to questions and doubts his father had ... questions and doubts his son had not known his father entertained because his father had never expressed them to his son, or perhaps to anyone else.

But in his father's Bible, in the *margins* of his father's Bible, at the *edge* of his father's outward life and character, Li-Young Lee saw a father in conversation with the sacred writings. And he saw, for the first time, a father in search, in doubt, and in need. For the first time, in other words, he saw a *human* father.

And what a gift that was for his searching son! And how thankful the son was for this gift:

these seeds of memory his father didn't even know he was passing on to his son;

these seeds of memory dropped in the margins of the sacred writings;

these seeds that were planted in the margins, off to the side, not in the sacred text itself, not in what was standard and expected, not in the holy words, but off to the side, in the margins, at the edge, scribbled, some, no doubt, illegible;

these were the seeds: tiny, apparently insignificant, scattered seeds, not expected to be seen or found or used;

these were the seeds that his son valued the most and found most useful.

Li-Young Lee's father was human in other ways as well, and he planted other seeds of memory, gave his son other gifts that the poet didn't know he was receiving at the time, nor did his father know that these were the seeds he was planting or the gifts he was giving.

But one day in his adulthood, Li-Young Lee, now married, was carefully and tenderly removing a splinter from under the thumbnail of his wife's right hand when it dawned on him where his capacity to so tenderly attend to her in this way had come from. Li-Young Lee wrote about his discovery in a poem titled, "The Gift."

And let me introduce you to this poem with the poet's own comment about the precipitating event and experience that lay behind this poem. In his interview with Bill Moyers, Li-Young Lee said:

I was with my wife in a hotel and I woke up and heard her sobbing. I looked for her and she was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, sobbing and holding her hand. I noticed that her hand was bleeding, and when I looked there was a splinter under her thumbnail. My father was dead at the time, but when I bent down to remove the splinter I realized that I had learned that tenderness from my father.

(The Language of Life, p. 262)

Here's the poem:

To pull the metal splinter from my palm
my father recited a story in a low voice.
I watched his lovely face and not the blade.
Before the story ended, he'd removed
the iron sliver I thought I'd die from.

I can't remember the tale,

but hear his voice still, a well
of dark water, a prayer.
And I recall his hands,
two measures of tenderness
he laid against my face,
the flames of discipline
he raised above my head.

Had you entered that afternoon
you would have thought you saw a man
planting something in a boy's palm,
a silver tear, a tiny flame.
Had you followed that boy
you would have arrived here,
where I bend over my wife's right hand.

Look how I shave her thumbnail down
so carefully she feels no pain.
Watch as I lift the splinter out.
I was seven when my father
took my hand like this,
and I did not hold that shard
between my fingers and think,
Metal that will bury me,
christen it Little Assassin,
Ore Going Deep for My heart.
And I did not lift up my wound and cry,
Death visited here!
I did what a child does
when he's given something to keep,
I kissed my father.

(“The Gift,” Li-Young Lee, [The Language of Life](#), Bill Moyers, pp. 261-62)

Benediction

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other's arms
And the larger circle of lovers,
Whose hands are joined in a dance.

And the larger circle of all creatures,
Passing in and out of life,
Who move also in a dance,
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments.

(Wendell Berry)

Extinguishing of the 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 sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Sunday, August 24, 2008. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)