

**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**December 16, 2007**  
**“The Deepest Essence of Love”**  
**Bruce A. Bode**

**Lighting the Chalice** (in unison)

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

**Opening Words**

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)

**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)

### **Lighting the Candle of Love**

Well, children, Christmas is getting closer to us. Have you noticed? Can you feel it?

Two weeks ago only the purple banner was hanging on the front wall of our sanctuary; the rest of the wall was quite bare. But now look! There is a green banner from last week. And now this week a blue banner. And next week there will be a red banner. And after that Christmas will be very, very close.

So, too, with the candles of our candelabra: Two weeks ago we lit the purple candle of faith. Last week it was the green candle of hope. This week it will be the blue candle of love. And next week it will be the red candle of joy. And then, finally, on Christmas Eve, we will light the Christmas candle itself, the one that contains all the other colors in it.

Now there are many ways we use the word “love,” but all of them, I think, have to do with connection – how we are connected to our parents, to our brothers and sisters, to our friends, to our animal companions, to the earth and its many forms, and to the universe itself and the creative power that generates everything that is.

Love is like gravity. It’s like a force-field of connectivity, a web, a net in which each thing is connected to every other thing.

Often we are not aware of these ties that connect us. But in this Christmas season we try to pay special attention to the ties of love that bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Nakaia Millman (9:15), Alethea Westlund (11:15), will you please light the third candle of the Christmas season, the Candle of Love.

## Congregational Announcements

As there is no reading in today's service, I'd like to begin the congregational announcements by reading several paragraphs I came across yesterday, namely, the literary and historical notes of yesterday's THE WRITER'S ALMANAC with Garrison Keillor. These notes, I think, are not unrelated to this Sunday on which we light a candle to love.

It was on this day [yesterday, December 15] 1791 that the Bill of Rights was adopted by the United States, thanks in part to a man who hasn't gotten a lot of credit, George Mason. He was a lifelong friend of George Washington's who wasn't interested in politics, but when Washington was named Commander of the Continental Army, George Mason reluctantly took over his friend's seat on the Virginia legislature. And then Mason was assigned by chance to the committee to write the new state constitution.

Mason had read the philosopher John Locke, and he liked Locke's idea that all people are born with certain rights, and that government's purpose should be to protect those rights. George Mason believed that the best way to protect those rights would be to list them in the constitution itself. And so he put together Virginia's "Declaration of Rights," the first government document in history that specified the absolute rights of individuals. Mason's ideas about rights and freedom influenced a 25-year-old legislator named James Madison, who passed them along to his friend Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson would go on to use Mason's ideas in his own draft of the Declaration of Independence.

Mason was asked to participate in the Constitutional Convention after the war, but he disagreed with the other delegates on numerous issues, especially slavery, which he thought should be outlawed in the new constitution. He fought for the inclusion of a list of rights, like the "Declaration of Rights" in the Virginia Constitution, but his idea for a bill of rights failed by a wide margin.

And so, when it came time to sign the new U.S. Constitution, George Mason was one of the only men there who refused. He said, "I would sooner chop off [my] right hand than put it to the Constitution as it now stands." His decision ruined his friendship with George Washington. The two men never called on each other again. But he hoped that his protest would encourage an eventual passage of a bill of rights, and it did. His former protegee, James Madison, introduced the Bill of Rights into the first session of Congress in 1789, and Madison used Virginia's Declaration of Rights as the model.

Even with the Bill of Rights, the U.S. Constitution didn't provide full citizenship to blacks or women, among others, and it has had to be amended again and again over the years. But when we think of what it means to have a free country, most of our ideas about the meaning of freedom come from those first 10 amendments, adopted on this day in 1791, which include the freedom of religion, freedom of speech,

freedom of the press, freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures, and the right to a fair trial. George Mason died in 1792, a year after those freedoms and rights became law.

And now I would to welcome you to our service this morning in this Christmas season, where the principles of our free association affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; and,
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

### **“THE DEEPEST ESSENCE OF LOVE”**

#### **Personal love**

Last week in my sermon titled “Thirst,” I spoke about the deep human need – the thirst – for human intimacy.

I said that we humans belong to other humans at a very deep level, even a cellular level; that we have evolved for human connection, human companionship, human relationship, human bonding.

The strings of our hearts are tuned to vibrate in rhythm with other human hearts. The pulse of our heart is set to beat in time with the pulse of other human hearts.

When as infants, for example, that human heart connection is not present, there is, as the medical community puts it, a “failure to thrive” – the child will physically fail.

And later in life, when deep, personal bonds of intimacy and connection are broken, as for example at the death of a life-partner, then our grief is very great, meaning drains from what previously interested us, and sometimes we are inconsolable to the point that we never again are restored to the vitality of life that we once had.

Thus, last week I spoke of love that was concrete, personal, and selective. And I recommended that in this season of the human heart we tend the hearth fires of our intimate connections in life.

This week I’m going to head, in what may initially seem like a very different direction ... far away from concrete, personal, and selective love to a different kind of love, a love that is abstract, non-personal, and non-selective. We shall see if this type of love returns us to the concrete and personal love, and how or if these two kinds of love are related.

#### **Non-personal love**

The point of departure for my thoughts and reflections this morning is a quotation I found in a memorial pamphlet for Niels Holm at a celebration of his life on October 3.

Neils, who was connected both with our Fellowship as well as the local Buddhist meditation group led by Adriane Oliver, died of cancer this past September 27, just two days short of his 66<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Some of you may recall that Niels expressed his gratitude for his life-partner, O'Neill Louchard, during the Joys and Sorrows portion of our service just a couple of weeks before his death.

By this time his body was thinned and ravaged by the cancer that would shortly take him. But he stood before us, knowing he had only a little time left, and with tears of gratitude flooding his face, and long pauses where he could not speak (which yet spoke volumes), he expressed his gratitude and love for O'Neill.

Following his death she lovingly and skillfully put together a memorial pamphlet that included some of Niels favorite quotations, among them this one from an admired Buddhist teacher named Adyashanti.

The deepest essence of love doesn't fall in and out. Love is, period. It loves even people your personality might not like.... This love is a deep and simple recognition, something intuitively knowing and meeting itself in each experience, in each being, and in each pair of eyes. It meets itself in everything that happens. It's the love simply for the fact that there's anything happening at all, because that's the real miracle. It could so easily be that nothing exists, much easier to have nothing than something. It's a miracle that anything happens and [that] we live in this abundance called life."

(Emptiness Dancing: Selected Dharma Talks of Adyashanti, p. 118, also quoted in the memorial pamphlet)

### **The miracle of being**

Whenever I come across someone who speaks of the miracle that anything is my ears perk up. This is my language, my root philosophy, my religious base. I want to shout from the rooftops:

"Pay attention, everyone! Don't you see that something is! Nothing had to be and yet something is!

"Imagine, there might have been nothing at all – no you or me, no flowers or trees, no earth or sky, no sun or moon or stars at night. Imagine that there might have been nothing at all forever and ever and ever and ever.

"But that isn't the case; there's not nothing, there's something! Something is! Being is!

"And don't you see what an astonishment that is?! Don't you see that every single day every single thing is lifted, as e.e. cummings exclaimed, from the "no of all nothing."

"Don't you see what a miracle that is?! It is the only real miracle. Something is where nothing might have been."

## **Restraint**

That's what I want to shout from the rooftops!

But, of course, I don't. I keep my thoughts and feelings under wraps. Maybe an occasional leakage. But normally my thoughts and feelings in this regard are well-guarded ...

... because, I must confess, that my enthusiasm in this regard is often met with a rather ho-hum indifference that puzzles me: "Yes, yes, we can see that there is something is rather than nothing – duh!"

So, in general, I restrain my enthusiasm. As certain hens will stealthily lay an egg in the bushes and walk away from the prize with but a low cackle, so, too, I restrain my enthusiasm before the miracle of being, before the fact that something is rather than nothing.

However, when I come across a quotation like the one I gave you from the Buddhist teacher, I start to crow like a rooster who has, perhaps, come across this egg and acts like he himself laid it.

(Incidentally, I checked out my hen analogy with chicken farmers Carl Nomura, Lois Twelves, and Andy Driscoll, and I take responsibility for any factual errors.)

## **A double miracle**

A couple of years ago I came across another prize egg. It was a poem by Quentin Wald, an engineer turned poet in his retirement, who lives in Port Townsend.

In an evening reading here in our sanctuary, I requested that he read a poem in his book titled, the farthest shore. The poem is titled, "That I Exist."

Really  
there is only one miracle –  
that I exist,  
that there should be, could be,  
an awareness that is I,  
in an unfathomably complex world  
of fire and ice and space and time.  
All mysteries pale beside the one.

Why should there be  
this living I that seems to know  
a buzzing, blooming world  
and organizes the meaning

of passing events for its own use  
and even finds mathematical rules  
that order its grander features?

Why should there be anything  
and this little light to know it,  
this spark that knows its finitude  
in space beyond comprehension  
in the perceived confusion  
that has existed untold ages before  
and unimaginable eons to come?

Strange that there should be  
this awareness, holding little models  
of bits of the perceived world  
strung on the uncertain thread of memory.  
Understanding is not to be hoped for,  
there is only astonishment.

(Quentin Wald, "That I Exist," the farthest shore, p. 44)

The lines I particularly like in this poem are:

Why should there be anything  
and this little light to know it,...

... a kind of double miracle: first, that there should be anything at all; and, secondly, a part of this anything that can observe and know itself.

### **Two mindsets**

I had lunch with Quentin about a month and a half ago and we discussed a difference in mindsets with respect to these things.

The one mindset is curious and interested in how reality works:

what its nature is, what makes it tick, and how it functions;  
what its component parts are and how they parts relate;  
where it might be going, if anywhere;  
what it might mean, if anything;  
and how it might be useful and of benefit to us.

The other mindset is simply taken by the fact that reality *is*, that there is something rather than nothing, that being is rather than non-being.

This mindset is not first of all seeking understanding; it simply beholds and wonders and praises. In other words:

before we ask *what* something is, we are simply astonished *that* it is;  
before we ask in what ways being is benevolent, or malevolent, or indifferent to us, or all three in combination; we simply notice that it is;  
and before we ask how it serves us or how we are to serve it, we simply marvel at its presence: – “Why should there be anything/ and this little light to know it?”

Often these two mindsets meet and overlap so that a person who is curious about how something works is sometimes overcome by the simple fact that it *is*. And so, too, the one who simply beholds is sometimes curious to press further toward greater understanding of its nature and interior connections.

### **A conversation**

A few days ago in preparation for this morning’s message, I had a lengthy conversation with a person that I knew had spent large parts of his lifetime reading about and puzzling over the nature of being, a person deeply interested in both physics and metaphysics: what the nature of reality is, how consciousness and matter played off against each other, what is driving things, how we humans fit in, and so forth.

After we were well into the conversation, I inquired about his interest in the simple “is-ness” of things, the miracle of being itself.

“Ah,” he confessed, “I’m a do-er not a be-er. With all my exploration, I seldom stop before the being of Being. My mind is always going, going, going ... trying to comprehend, to describe, to understand. I know that in some ways this disconnects me, like a photographer who is always photographing reality, with the camera an interject between himself and reality. As fish in water are not likely to inquire about the water in which they swim, so most of us, myself included, are not likely to inquire about the fact of being itself, but rather simply take it for granted.”

And so we had a great conversation, with both of us I think a little envious of the other: he at my interest and astonishment at the sheer fact of being; I at his knowledge and understanding of the physics of being.

### **A red circle**

In India, there is a practice of which Joseph Campbell has spoken and of which I’ve spoken to you before ... the practice of drawing a red circle around an object. It might be any object: a stone, a tree, a flower, a child, a cow. (In India, symbolically speaking, all cows have red circles drawn around them.)

By drawing a red circle around an object, you change your orientation to it. Now you take it in as part of the wonder of being. It is no longer an object, no longer something to be used in a practical or instrumental way.

Now you stand before it with a different orientation. You don't owe it. You don't command it. It is not there for your use. It is simply there and you are simply here. And the two of you are one.

You don't stand apart from it. Its being and your being are one being. It is part of the same miracle of being that you're a part of. And so you enter into an I-Thou relationship with it. There is a connection, a love relationship ...

## **Return**

... which returns me to the original quotation with which I started:

I hadn't before considered that the "...deepest essence of love is ... simply for the fact that there's anything happening at all."

That, says the Buddhist teacher, Adyashanti, is the deepest love there is – the love for the sheer fact of being, that anything's happening at all.

And when one awakens to that then everything that exists takes on a glow – even those things that are difficult for us, even those things that may and eventually will destroy the eyes that see and the brain that enables us to behold.

In this love – which is also the non-selective agapic love of which the Christian scriptures speak, the love that extends to all without discrimination – one recognizes that one is part of the miracle of being, and thus a connection is made that lands on everything that is.

Within this vastness of being there are those things that are close to us – “those loved ones nearest the stage,” (line from “Perfection Wasted” by John Updike) of whom I spoke last week. They are the particulars through which the universal miracle of being is made most deeply manifest to us.

But it is also good to know that what is true of the ones closest to you is also true of all things.

And sometimes at Christmas that kind of love also takes hold of us and our hearts are filled to overflowing, so that we reach out, not only to those near and dear to us, but also beyond our circle of intimacy to those on the street and those in distant lands. And then beyond on that to all things of the earth, and beyond that to the vastnesses of this whole, wide and wild universe and its creative power.

And then, having stretched ourselves toward that “farthest shore,” we return to ourselves, to the one who is looking out ... for as, it happens, we are also part of that creative miracle of being ... and our own being is as a much a wonder as the being outside us is.

And isn't that a miracle! – to see the connection between ourselves and the creativity that has jeweled the heavens with billions of nuclear furnaces ...

... to know that we are part of this creativity, part of the sheer miracle of being ... for a time ... in this place ... and yet connected to all things ... in all time and space ... and connected to the zero point out of which all time and space have emerged ...

... to see that and to connect with that is, I'll agree, the deepest essence of love.

### **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 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 the third Sunday of Christmas, December 16, 2007. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)