

**“Necessary Tensions: Life and Renewal:
‘Here are your waters and your watering place...’”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010
Rev. Bruce Bode**

Poetry for bulletin

Your destination and your destiny's
A brook that was the water of the house,
Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,...
Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.

(Robert Frost, excerpt from "Directive")

Lighting the Chalice (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.

Call to Worship

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, "i thank You God")

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)

Reading

My sermon this Easter Sunday morning will be the concluding sermon in a six-part series that has to do with what I have been calling "necessary tensions" or "polar tensions" in life – tensions that are inherent in reality and which belong to each other, tensions that if evaded, unrecognized, or split apart cause psychological, spiritual, and emotional pain and suffering beyond what is required by nature.

And this Good Friday/Easter weekend, I am dealing with the greatest of all the polar tensions of our lives: the tension between life and death, creation and destruction ... and the human responses of joy and sorrow that accompany these polar opposites.

Two days ago on Good Friday, I dealt with one side of this polar tension, the pole of death, despair, loneliness, sorrow, and grief. And I dealt with that pole through readings, both traditional and modern. The traditional readings were those of the suffering and death of the Christ-figure, and the modern readings were poems of Robert Frost that were related to his "acquaintance with grief."

For my Easter message today, I am following the same format, namely, the reading of the traditional Easter story from the Christian scriptures, and then for the bulk of my sermon tracking Robert Frost's last critically-acclaimed poem titled, "Directive," which to me is a modern rendering of the resurrection theme.

Our first reading, then, is from the Christian scriptures and the discovery of the empty tomb – that is to say, the discovery by Jesus’ followers that the life of his spirit, the message of his teaching, and the essence and quality of his presence and personality did not disappear with the death of his physical body.

I read from the Gospel of St. Mark, the 16th chapter, using the traditional King James translation:

And when the sabbath was past [the Jewish Sabbath], Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, that they might come and anoint him [anoint Jesus’ body].

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

And they were saying among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the tomb [the tomb being shaped like a cave]?

And looking up, they see that the stone is rolled back: for it was exceeding great.

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

And he saith unto them, Be not amazed: ye seek Jesus, the Nazarene, who hath been crucified: he is risen; he is not here...

And now in preparation for Robert Frost’s poem “Directive” that I will be reading in the sermon, and which you can find as an insert in your Order of Service, I want to read the scripture passages that I find alluded to in this poem. Frost refers directly to one biblical passage in the poem, which I will come to in a minute, but I also find allusions to at least seven other biblical passages that echo in the poem. I won’t have a chance in the sermon to refer to most of these, but I will read them now in the order in which I find them appearing in the poem, so that you get some sense of how rich this poem is, and how deeply steeped Frost was in the biblical tradition.

Matthew 4:17: Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

Mark 8:34-35: Jesus called the people and his disciples to him and said, “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Mark 10:13-15: People were bringing children to Jesus, for him to touch them. But the disciples scolded them for it. But when Jesus saw this he was indignant, and said to the disciples, “Let the little children come to me; do not try to stop them; for to such belong the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.”

Revelation 22:1: Then the angel showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, flowing out of the throne of God.

Psalm 51:17: A broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

Mark 4:11-12: [And this is the passage directly referred to in the poem.] When Jesus was alone, the twelve disciples, together with the others who formed his company, asked what the parables meant. Jesus told them, “The secret of the Kingdom of God is given to you, but to those who are outside everything comes in parables, so that they may see and see again, but not perceive; may hear and hear again, but not understand; otherwise they might be converted and forgiven.”

Matthew 26:27-28: And Jesus took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to the disciples, saying, “Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the new testament, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

John 4:13-14: Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water that I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will be an inner spring always welling up for eternal life.”

**“Necessary Tensions: Life and Renewal:
‘Here are your waters and your watering place...’”**

The Robert Frost poem titled, “Directive,” that will serve as my text for this Easter Sunday sermon is not as well-known, or as much anthologized, or as readily understood as many of Frost’s other more popular poems, several of which I have explored in this sermon series. But though this poem is not so well-known as many others, it takes us to places none of his other poems venture or reach; and, indeed, as I said earlier, this poem has been critically acclaimed as Frost’s last great poem.

“Directive” was written late in Robert Frost’s life, around his 70th year, and at a time when he both needed and underwent a process of renewal. By Frost’s 70th year, he had achieved great recognition as a poet – something he had sought.

He had also come through a great deal of personal difficulty: poverty, depression – that of his own, as well of friends and children.

He had witnessed the death of four of his six children, two in childhood – I spoke of the first of these last week in relation to his first-born child, Elliott’s, death at the age of three and a half years – and, also two adult children; his daughter, Marjorie, dying shortly after giving birth; his son, Carol, taking his life by his own hand.

His wife, Elinor, his life’s partner from high school years, had also died by this time. Additionally, one of his two remaining children was emotionally very unstable and required a lot of attention.

This poem, "Directive," then, was written in the context of one who knows the anguish of the broken heart and the dryness of the thirsty soul. I invite you to follow along now with the printed words in the Order of Service as I read Robert Frost's "Directive."

Directive

Back out of all this now too much for us,
Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
Like the graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,
There is a house that is no more a house
Upon a farm that is no more a farm
And in a town that is no more a town.
The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you
Who only has at heart your getting lost,
May seem as if it should have been a quarry –
Great monolithic knees the former town
Long since gave up pretense of keeping covered.
And there's a story in a book about it:
Besides the wear of iron wagon wheels
The ledges show lines ruled southeast northwest,
The chisel work of an enormous Glacier
That braced his feet against the Arctic Pole.
You must not mind a certain coolness from him
Still said to haunt this side of Panther Mountain.
Nor need you mind the serial ordeal
Of being watched from forty cellar holes
As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins.

[Firkins are wooden barrels or tubs used for butter or lard or pickles,
and some firkins have a hole in them by which they can be hung up on
a hook or peg, holes from which wild animals might watch you.]

As for the woods' excitement over you
That sends light rustle rushes to their leaves,
Charge that to upstart inexperience.
Where were they all not twenty years ago?
They think too much of having shaded out
A few old pecker-fretted apple trees.
Make yourself up a cheering song of how
Someone's road home from work this once was,
Who may be just ahead of you on foot
Or creaking with a buggy load of grain.
The height of the adventure is the height
Of country where two village cultures faded
Into each other. Both of them are lost.
And if you're lost enough to find yourself
By now, pull in your ladder road behind you

And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me.
Then make yourself at home. The only field
Now left's no bigger than a harness gall.
First there's the children's house of make believe,
Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,
The playthings in the playhouse of the children.
Weep for what little things could make them glad.
Then for the house that is no more a house,
But only a belilaced cellar hole,
Now slowly closing like a dent in dough.
This was no playhouse but a house in earnest.
Your destination and your destiny's
A brook that was the water of the house,
Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,
Too lofty and original to rage.
(We know the valley streams that when aroused
Will leave their tatters hung on barb and thorn.)
I have kept hidden in the instep arch
Of an old cedar at the waterside
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,
So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.
(I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)
Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.

Dryness and Depression

Naturally and inevitably a life goes dry:

whether from following the same routine, day after day, until all the moisture has been wrung out of a given way of life;

or from having too much come at us ... too much, too fast ... so that the soul, the essential self, can't keep pace – dehydration from over-exertion, from over-busyness;

or from being buffeted, as Robert Frost was, by difficult and unforeseen events of life: the death of loved ones; accident, illness, injury; breakup of a relationship or family; collapse of a business or a job; failure to achieve; loss of a dream; shattering of a religious philosophy.

In these ways and others, a life goes dry; and one enters the valley of the shadow, descends into confusion, loneliness, and despair. And the question becomes: *Where* can water be found, and *how* can I drink of it?

I have a theory on the relationship of dryness and depression – and I’m not talking about clinical depression here, but ordinary, everyday depression, though the two, clinical and ordinary depression, may sometimes slide into each another and be causally connected.

But dryness and depression are related. I would think that is clear to everyone. The question is: How are they related?

You may know how it is to be depressed: You simply can’t move; the body won’t budge. Someone says, “You gotta’ snap out of it,” and you can’t even roll your eyes to protest. The regular tank has run dry, and so has the reserve tank.

Such depression is commonly regarded as the *cause* of the dryness that we feel. And it’s true, I believe, one can get to the point where the depression itself is a problem and has to be treated.

But, in general, so my theory goes, it’s not the depression that causes the dryness; rather, it’s the other way around; namely, spiritual dryness is what brings about depression.

And here’s the really interesting thing about this theory: the dryness brings about the depression, not to buffet us, but to heal us!

The depression comes to get us to slow down, to get us to reflect on what we’re doing and where we’re going; and to turn us inward where we might find water to slake our spiritual thirst.

We have an analogy in nature, namely, a depression in the land – a place where the land is lower than the surrounding area, and this, of course, is where the water accumulates.

Well, so, too, by going down, by seeking the low place, by depressing, we can find sources of renewal for our lives.

The poem before us this morning, “Directive,” is a journey into such a “depression.” It’s a stepping back and a re-treat from a life that has gone dry in order to turn around, to go backward, to go inward, and to go down ... with the aim and hope of finding a source of water to quench the dryness of the soul.

The poem divides itself into three main parts:

First, a short introduction that lets us know what we have to leave and where we have to go;

Secondly, a little map of the road to get us to where we need to go;

And, thirdly, the work itself in the place that we need to be.

Stepping back

I don't have time this morning to take you step by step through the whole poem (though I would enjoy doing so), but what I will do is to highlight some elements of it, beginning with the first line, which demands some attention. The first line reads:

“Back out of all this now too much for us,”

There are at least two ways this could be read: one, in which a person is backed out, forced out, of a situation because it's all too much. In this reading, one is not intentionally backing out, but, as I say, one is pushed back, knocked back, thrown back.

Or, this line could be read as the beginning of a directive ... so that the poem, as the title indicates, is a “directive” right from the start, the *command* to: “*Back out* of all this now too much for us” – in other words, an active, intentional stepping back.

And Frost must certainly be hearing the opening lines of a famous sonnet by one of his own favorite poets, William Wordsworth, who wrote:

“The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!...”
...we are out of tune.

But whether forced back, or deliberately stepping back, or maybe a combination of the two; there are times in a life when this is precisely what one must do, what the soul must do ... if it will be saved, if it will find renewal. One needs to step back and leave this world that has grown stale, this world that is “all now too much for us.”

Step back, retreat, turn around, repent, retrace your steps – the Kingdom of God, the wholeness that you seek, is no longer in the direction you have been going.

It's in a different direction, and not in a place of light or loveliness or excitement.

It's not at the popular watering hole.

And it's backward not forward; it's a return to the place of departure, and it's a sorting through the debris of the life that has been lived.

Our journey toward Easter renewal and wholeness is, as the poet says:

“Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
Like the graveyard marble sculpture in the weather...”

There you will find:

“...a house that is no more a house
Upon a farm that is no more a farm
And in a town that is no more a town.”

This is where we are going on this journey, says the poet, ...to a time “made simple,” ... but, really, not simple at all.

Where we are going is exceedingly complex, and it will be difficult and even painful.

But we are already in difficulty, and we are already in pain, and our souls are dry as dust, so this is a journey it would well to undertake.

Lost enough to find yourself

And now I’m going skip you through the first part of this journey – in which the poet-guide would lead you through various parts of your past, and actually make you more lost than you were when you started the journey – I’m going to skip you all the way down to the crisis point of this journey of renewal, which is found in the lines about two-thirds of the way through the poem, the lines that read:

“...if you’re lost enough to find yourself
By now,...”

And here, surely, we must call to mind the words of Jesus that I read earlier: “The one who would find his or her life must lose it.”

“...if you’re lost enough to find yourself
By now, pull in your ladder road behind you
And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me.”

And has the poet here climbed a tree into a children’s tree-house that overlooks the area, pulling in the ladder rope behind him, and putting up a sign “CLOSED”?

Whether or not that is the case, the poet is saying, “Pilgrim, you who would be renewed, leave everything behind you, shut out all distractions, and enter the most secret, sacred precinct of your soul, the innermost place, the Holy of Holies, which no one else knows about, and which you must now discover and re-discover.”

The holy place

This, says our poet-guide, is the place where you need to be, the place where the work of Easter renewal can occur.

This is the place of surrender, the place of letting go of what was and will never be again, of admitting that you now know nothing, and that you cannot make it on what you were, or thought you were; you cannot make it on what you knew or thought you knew.

You are lost, you do not know the way – “We admitted we were powerless, that our lives had become unmanageable” – the paradoxical first step, as the twelve-step programs know, toward finding your way.

And now our poet-guide, with a certain irony, says:

“...make yourself at home.”

You are where you need to be, so look around, try to familiarize yourself with this landscape of your soul.

Gall

“The only field
Now left’s no bigger than a harness gall.”

A gall has three pertinent meanings here: First, it is a worn or irritated place on the skin. Secondly, and interestingly, it is a barren spot in a field where spring-water oozes up. And, thirdly, it is the bitter drink offered to the Christ on the cross, which we read about this past Friday noon.

And a “harness gall,” then, is a worn spot on a horse that has been rubbed sore by a harness or a loose saddle.

In other words, the soul has come to a vexed or irritated place.

And how strange that this place of vexation and irritation might also be the place of refreshment!

Where the saltiest of our tears drop, there, paradoxically, a living spring bubbles up – resurrection occurs at the place of crucifixion and by embracing one’s crucifixion.

“First there’s the children’s house of make believe,
Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,
The playthings in the playhouse of the children.
Weep for what little things could make them glad.”

This is the parched soul returning to childhood, sorting through remnants of playthings, each one holding memories of hours spent with the imagination – the time of the opening of a life to the dreams of the world.

I think here of psychoanalyst Carl Jung at a spiritually difficult time in his life deliberately returning to a childhood game of making little waterworks by a lake.

I think of myself and of a box of little trinkets and treasures I collected as a child, and which I still have with me ... gems and stones and marbles, Cracker Jack Toys, rabbit's feet ... whole worlds contained in little playthings.

And I think of Robert Frost, with heart-rending memories, weeping not only for his own difficult childhood, but also for the childhood times of his own children ... four of whom, as I said, have by now died.

“Weep for what little things could made them glad.”

And now weep as well:

“...for the house that is no more a house,
But only a belilaced cellar hole,
Now slowly closing like a dent in dough.
This was no playhouse but a house in earnest.”

In the other words, weep for the real houses and identities of our lives, the places of greatest intensity, the places where the soul was put through its paces in all its complicated complexities.

Weep for all the worries and wounds that have cut up your soul so that its vitality has slowly collapsed upon itself, like an abandoned house overgrown with lilacs, or like a disappearing dent in bread dough.

And what do you want with me, O discarded fragments of my soul?
Why have you brought me to such a place of carnage and crucifixion?
Have you brought me here only to torment me?
Is it my grief and despair that you are after?

“Your destination and your destiny's
A brook that was the water of the house,
Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,
Too lofty and original to rage.
(We know the valley streams that when aroused
Will leave their tatters hung on barb and thorn.)”

At the place of wounding, there is also the balm, the source of our healing.

In our story, it's a little brook that runs right of out a spring ... cold, clear, and consistent in its flow ... water for the dryness of our souls, water that, as the Book of Revelation says, is like “a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, flowing out of the throne of God.”

Here is where our soul's journey has brought us – our destination and our destiny. We have returned to the original source and inspiration of our life, to living waters; they have not disappeared; they have not dried up!

But: can we drink from these waters? Will we be permitted or able to drink? What will our poet-guide say?

The broken cup

There are those who say that Robert Frost is ultimately a cynic; that beneath his folksy, pastoral, avuncular, and witty persona, there lies a dark, despairing, and cold man with an unrelentingly cynical view of reality.

And there is a good bit of evidence to support this view. So: will he allow us to drink?

“I have kept hidden in the instep arch
Of an old cedar at the waterside
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,
So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.
(I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)
Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.”

Our poet-guide is no cynic, as least as I read this story, though some critics have disagreed.

But what I see here is that having traversed dark, terror-ridden, and broken places in his own life; Robert Frost has still found life to be of worth and value. Like Albert Camus, he found an invincible summer in the midst of winter.

And, having taken this journey himself, he knows how to guide others through treacherous landscape, so that they, too, might come to a spring of living water and drink freely and fully.

Note that the cup or goblet with which we drink this living water is a child's cup – “unless you become as a child, you cannot enter the Kingdom.”

And, yet, this child's cup must be, as it were, stolen from childhood. So it would seem, some cleverness, savvy, or magic is involved to get back to this place. You can't just walk up with your accomplished adult life and demand to be served this living water.

This sacrament of drinking will be a humble affair, for please note that the cup is a broken cup, as the cup of our life is broken.

And yet, though broken, it is as serviceable as the Grail cup itself, that magical, mythological vessel originally used at the Last Supper at the institution of the Eucharist.

And the one who drinks from this broken cup, as with the original Grail cup, is in communion with the divine source of life and energy. For this broken cup is not the common cup, it is *your* Grail cup, the cup of *your* salvation.

And furthermore, not everyone is in a position to drink from this cup. Indeed, how often have you yourself refused the call, been too ignorant or arrogant or frightened or distracted to listen to the call and so to make the required journey into the night?

To be able to drink from this cup requires the kind of difficult journey the soul has just gone through. It requires sincerity, surrender, sorrow, and sagacity.

And, then, meeting all these requirements, one may be in a position to be renewed or saved, but not through any skill of the ego ... but only by grace, by power greater than your ego, whether that power is understood as within or without, or as both within and without. For it is precisely in the willingness of the ego to become lost that the place of living water can be found.

And yet, it is a place that can be known to you. As a matter of fact, it is a place *for you*; it is a place *just for you*!

“Here are your waters and your watering place.”

Your spring, *your* well, *your* fountain.

Dip the broken cup of your life into its cool, crystalline waters.

Fill the cup until it is full to overflowing.

And then drink ... drink deeply ... drink to the renewal and salvation of your soul ... drink ye all of it.

“Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.”

Moment of Reflection

Closing Hymn #270 “O Day of Light and Gladness”

Closing Words

Our closing words are from Emily Dickinson:

Have you got a Brook in your little heart,
Where bashful flowers blow,

And blushing birds go down to drink,
And shadows tremble so –

And nobody knows, so still it flows,
That any brook is there,
And yet your little draught of life
Is daily drunken there –

(Emily Dickinson, from poem #136, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed., Thomas H. Johnson)

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
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 given by the Reverend Bruce A. Bode on Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010, at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, the sixth and final sermon in a series on “Necessary Tensions in Life.” The spoken sermon, available on CD disc at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)