

**“I’m Glad You Asked That Question…”**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**June 13, 2010**  
**Bruce A. Bode**

**Lighting of Chalice** (spoken in unison)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure.

**Opening Words & Musical Response**

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this concluding Sunday of the church year.

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.

**A Litany of Recognition and Appreciation**

As this is the last Sunday of our regular church year before we move into our summer schedule, we wish to recognize and thank the many persons who have contributed in various ways to our Fellowship during this past church year. Thus, we have prepared “A Litany of Recognition and Appreciation.” It’s comprehensive – even exhaustive – but the idea is to give you a feel for the amount of labor and love it takes to maintain and enliven this Fellowship. When your position is named, please stand, and then be seated again after the congregation recognizes you with their response. For some persons this may mean standing on more than one occasion.

**A Litany of Recognition and Appreciation (2009-2010)**

INTRODUCTION: On this concluding Sunday of the church year, we recognize and appreciate those who have contributed to the health and vitality of our religious community this past year.

MINISTER: Choir Director, Pianists, Music Program Committee Members, Choir Members, and all persons who have provided Special Music this past church year or who have helped with the music program, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For the music you play for us, the songs you sing to us, and the joy you bring us, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Religious Education Director, Religious Education Assistant, Youth Advisors, Teachers and Classroom Assistants, OWL Facilitators, Mystery Pal Players, Child-Care Providers, Religious Education Committee Members, Fellowship Family Camp Organizers, and all who have worked with our children and young people in this past year, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For the time, skill, love, and care with which you bless our children and young people, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Office Administrator, Office Volunteers, Newsletter Editor, Newsletter Proofreaders, Newsletter Assembly Team, Webmaster, and Technology Committee Members, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For making our office a friendly and helpful place, for maintaining its computers, phones, and copiers, and for keeping us informed about the activities and programs of our Fellowship, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Membership Committee Members, Ushers, Greeters, Coffee & Tea Makers, Hospitality Committee Members, and Sound Technicians, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For welcoming new persons into our Fellowship, for preparing our sanctuary for services and welcoming us to these services, and for your hospitality and good cheer before and following the services, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Cares & Concerns Committee Members, and all who have provided rides, meals, conversation, and visitation with fellow members and friends in times of physical, emotional, and spiritual need, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For extending your hearts and hands in creating the beloved community, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Governing Board Officers, Governing Board Members, Nominating Committee Members, Program Council Attendees, Long-Range Planning Committee Members, Committee on Ministry Members, and Ministerial Internship Committee Members, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For the many hours you dedicate to the organizational complexities of our Fellowship, and for your skill, wisdom and devotion in attending to the overall health of our congregation, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Finance Committee Members, Special Funds Committee Members, Fundraising Oversight Committee Members, Stewardship Committee Members, Personnel Committee Members, Board Treasurer, Assistant to the Treasurer, and Building Fund Treasurer, and all those who helped with the Annual Service Auction and Annual Stewardship Dinner, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For the love you show to this congregation through your care of our finances, and for your dedication and vision in preparing for future possibilities, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Sunday Service Committee Members, Summer Speakers, and all who have presented in our worship services this past year, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your efforts to make our Sunday gatherings times of spiritual refreshment and community celebration, and for your courage in sharing what is in your heart, of your soul, and on your mind, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Custodians, Facility Hosts, Members of the Building and Grounds Committee, the Aesthetics Committee, Lawn Mowers, Weed Warriors, Banner Makers, Banner Hangers, Flower Arrangers, Flower Providers, Art Displayers, and all who have assisted with the upkeep and enhancement of our buildings and grounds this past year, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your practical skill, physical labor, and artistic interest, and for your desire to make our Fellowship home both functional and pleasing to the eye, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Adult Learning Program Committee Members, Covenant Group Facilitators, A-HA! Group Organizers, Men's and Women's Retreat Organizers, Friendship Dinner Organizers and Providers, Librarians, and all who have facilitated and taught classes, led field trips, or been involved in providing adult programming for our congregation and the larger community, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your willingness to share your skill and interest, and for your efforts to expand the mind, deepen the heart, and delight the senses, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Building Construction Committee Members, Building Steering Committee Members, Building Use and Completion Committee Members, and all who have been involved in planning for our new building, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your time and thought in planning for our future, and for your efforts to consider the good of the whole congregation and to involve them in this process, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Building Volunteers, Building Volunteer Coordinators, Building Volunteer Supporters, and Building Celebration Committee Members, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For all the time, effort, skill and care you have put forth in building our new building and celebrating our entry into it, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Social Justice Council Members, Designated Offering Committee Members, and all who have been involved in programs of congregational outreach to the larger

community, such as Church Hosting for the Homeless, Habitat for Humanity, and the WAVE Food Drive, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your vision and will in connecting our congregation to our larger community and world, and for your belief that religion relates to justice and that faith fuses with action, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Denominational Affairs Committee, Washington UU Voices for Justice, and all persons who attended last year's Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly in Salt Lake City, Utah or our Unitarian Universalist Association Pacific Northwest District Assembly in Bellevue, Washington, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your vision of the larger liberal religious community, and for your recognition that we benefit from the resources of others in our struggle for justice and in the strengthening of our own Fellowship, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Green Sanctuary Committee Members, and all persons who have been part of the projects of the Green Sanctuary Committee this year, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For your care for and love of our Earth, and for your dedicated and creative efforts to help us all to honor it, heal it, and preserve it by living sustainably upon it, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Children and Youth of this Fellowship, all those from infancy through high school age, please stand as you are able, and remain standing:

ALL: For your willingness to listen and inquire, to take in and reach out, and for the energy and enthusiasm you bring us, we express our thanks and praise.

MINISTER: Members and Friends of this congregation, and all present at this service, please stand as you are able:

ALL: For the faith, hope, love, and joy that comes from being together, singing together, learning together, visioning together, planning together, building together, celebrating together, wondering together, and serving together, we express our thanks and praise.

## **“I’M GLAD YOU ASKED THAT QUESTION...”**

### **Introduction**

For this concluding Sunday of the regular church year, like the last several years, I’ve invited you to send me any questions you have. This year I received more questions than I can easily do any kind of justice to in the length of time I have, and so I will invite those of you whose questions I am not able to get to this morning to speak to me personally about your question or questions.

I want to thank those of you who have taken the time to formulate questions and send them to me. And, also, to make the same disclaimer I make every year in regard to these questions: namely, to please understand that my responses are aimed at the question and not the questioner. So, please, don't take my responses personally.

This year I received a number of questions that have to do with large philosophical and religious issues that I can only touch on – issues like the relationship between the ideal and the real, and the place of good and evil and pain and suffering in our human lives. Here's a question that might well go to a professor of philosophy:

QUESTION: "What is the relationship between The Ideal Man (Plato, Chuang Tzu, Nietzsche, etc.) and The Practical or Real Man?"

RESPONSE: In reflecting on these questions this week, I didn't have a chance to speak to a professor of philosophy, but I did have the opportunity to discuss some of these questions with others. First, with some golfing friends and their spouses; and, then, at some length with author Robert A. Johnson, who I visited in San Diego this weekend in connection with a memorial service I officiated at yesterday in San Diego.

My golfing friends suggested that the relationship and difference between the ideal man and the practical or real man could be seen in Obama before he became president and after he became president.

With Robert Johnson, we had a long discussion of levels of reality, a subject he has been contemplating for years. (He just celebrated his 89th birthday week.) Johnson feels it's very important to differentiate levels or planes in life (such as the difference between the literal and symbolic, historical and mythological, or the ideal or the real levels). It's important to know what level you're dealing with and talking about, and to know what belongs to the different levels.

With regard to the ideal and the real levels of life, Johnson quipped that "No man is a hero to his servant." And he pointed out that traditionally in Catholicism one cannot be canonized as a saint until a minimum of a 100 years have gone by (although they are trying to get Mother Teresa in more quickly because of all the problems going on in the church, though some who knew her well can testify to her crankiness at times, which makes the point here.)

But, typically, you need plenty of time and distance from the real to scrub it up so it can live in the ideal world.

Nevertheless, says Johnson, the goal in life is not to choose between the two but to try to bring the ideal and the real together, not to give up on the ideal and simply acquiesce to the real, but to try to bring them together and to synthesize them. Johnson's own autobiography, titled Balancing Heaven and Earth, is largely an exploration of the possibility of discovering eternity within time, wholeness in the midst of duality, and the ideal within the real.

The purpose of religion, Johnson says, is – or ought to be – that of pointing to the ideal (which is wholeness). An example of this is the Christian religion in which the central symbol is that of Jesus the Christ – “Jesus the man on earth” is the real, while “the Christ” is the ideal. This symbol speaks of the possibility of the ideal and the real, the divine and the human, joining together, synthesizing – not an easy task, for it involves a crucifixion.

Obviously, there is a great deal more that could be explored here, but let’s move on to a second question.

QUESTION: “Bruce, I have a question for you: ‘Why do bad things happen? Like the really bad stuff: child molestation, genocide... I know this question presupposes some type of universal “good” or “plan.” I struggle with putting these terrible things into my worldview. Or any worldview, actually, other than 1. the Christian: we are sinful and bad, or 2. there is absolutely no moral order in the universe.’”

RESPONSE: As this questioner suggests, there are world-views in which the question of why humans do bad things is readily accounted for. The Calvinist world-view in which I grew up, for example, held that the human race was fallen and depraved and thus prone to evil. The question from that perspective was not why do bad things happen to good people – as a popular book title has it – or why do humans do bad things, but why do good things happen to bad people, and why do bad people do good things. The answer in that tradition is “common grace,” in which it is held that God restrains the evil inclinations of people to which they are naturally prone.

My discussion with both my golfing friends and Robert Johnson on this question centered on the idea of good and evil as categories of human thought. Good and evil is a world of duality that belongs to our human world. There is no good or evil in nature.

We humans have been kicked out of the non-dual wholeness of nature. That’s what the story in the Garden of Eden is about. Now we have the knowledge of good and evil. This came about through the evolution of the neo-cortex of the brain, the evolution of self-consciousness. And now the question is: Can we re-enter eternity? Can we again experience the wholeness of nature, but now consciously?

And the idea, then, as I see it, is to try to live simultaneously on two planes – both the human world of duality and judgment, where we see horrific things like child molestation and genocide – and the non-dual realm of nature where things simply are what they are and there is no judgment.

Again, obviously, this is a huge question that I can only touch on. But let give you one of my favorite quotes related to this question. It’s from Stephen Mitchell in the introduction to his translation of the Tao Te Ching, ascribed to Lao Tzu. Stephen Mitchell writes:

Lao-tzu's central figure is a man or woman whose life is in perfect harmony with the way things are [that is, with the Tao]. This is not an idea; it is a reality; I have seen it. The Master has mastered Nature; not in the sense of conquering it, but of becoming it. In surrendering to the Tao, in giving up all concepts, judgments, and desires, her mind has grown naturally compassionate. She finds deep in her own experience the central truths of the art of living, which are paradoxical only on the surface: that the more truly solitary we are, the more compassionate we can be; the more we let go of what we love, the more present our love becomes; the clearer our insight into what is beyond good and evil, the more we can embody the good.

(Tao Te Ching, version by Stephen Mitchell, pp. viii-ix)

QUESTION: "Bruce, please address the value and meaning of suffering (if any) in general and in light of the recent death and long-term suffering of Jan Givens and her husband."

RESPONSE: In my discussion with Robert Johnson on this question, he pointed out that the word "suffer" originally meant to allow ... as in the Gospel story where Jesus says, "Suffer the little children to come unto me," that is, "allow" the little children to come unto me.

And that is what our aim should be ... to open ourselves to whatever comes our way.

When Carl Jung was asked what the meaning of life was, he said it was "To relocate the center of gravity from the ego to the Self." "Self" – capital "S" – was Jung's term for a deeper center in a person.

Of course, the ego does not want illness or disease, and rebels against it. But if one can open to it and move with it, one's spirit and life may be expanded.

Theoretically, an illness or disease is no different than anything else that comes into one's life. These are simply events to be lived and processed. They are to be received, not necessarily with gratitude – I can't quite make it to that point – but received nonetheless. Again, the task is not to judge.

Success and winning often puff up the ego. Illnesses and losses are typically taken as defeats for the ego. But it is often in grappling with these defeats that a person moves to a deeper center within themselves. Both they and others experience a larger life and deeper center.

The situation of Jan Givens (who lived with ALS for over five years and whose memorial service will be held this afternoon) can illustrate this point. Certainly no one wanted this horrific disease. But by receiving this disease as she did, an unbelievable beauty of spirit shone forth from her, and wonderful times of tenderness and love within the family and among friends took place. It became a real living experience – not an experience that one asks for – but an experience that when it comes one receives and opens to.

This, too, is part of the whole. This, too, is part of nature or part of the will of God, however you conceive that. And our task is to embrace it and to live it all. We are part of the ongoing creativity of life and being, and our task is to taste and to live what life presents to us – not to judge it, but to live it, and in so doing to find the meaning and value that is present in each part of life.

And let me add: sometimes the pain and suffering is too much – more than can be humanly borne. This, too, is part of life – unfathomable and unexplainable to us at times. But this, too, is to be accepted, allowed, embraced.

QUESTION: “Bruce, you speak of grief and sorrow as essential elements for healing. How is this so? How does this work? How do you see this actually functioning? How do grief and sorrow aid in healing?”

RESPONSE: I’ve been speaking this morning about living on two planes and about the difference between the ego, the smaller center of the psyche, and the Self, the larger center of our psyche.

But I believe in “giving the ego its rights” – that’s how I speak of it. So when the ego is injured – that is, when something to which the ego is attached is ripped away, there must be a reaction and a response. And grief and sorrow are simply part of that response.

Grief and sorrow are part of nature’s way in us. Just as with a physical injury, there is a bodily response to that injury, so with an emotional wound, there is an emotional response (though in another sense I don’t like to separate body and psyche like that). Healing of the psyche occurs when you allow it, or encourage it, to respond in the way it does – through sorrow and with tears and grief.

Thus, we need to allow a place and space for these emotions to have their play. Just as physicians working with the body try to remove hindrances to nature’s own healing processes – or even provide aids assisting nature’s efforts at healing – so with injuries and losses that cut us emotionally we need to allow nature room to operate and not block its natural responses. And sorrow, grief, tears, talking, and the support of friends is nature’s way to restore us and bring us back to emotional and mental health.

There’s a quote I like of the Rev. A. Powell Davies, who says:

When sorrow comes, let us accept it simply, as a part of life. Let the heart be open to pain; let it be stretched by it. All the evidence we have says that this is the better way.

### **Questions on the role of the minister**

Now I have a couple of questions dealing with the role of the minister.

QUESTION: “If we are basing much of our teaching as Unitarian Universalists on the works/teachings of Jesus, like dignity, helping the poor, etc., even assuming as I do and you do, that he was not divine, but a great teacher; and even knowing how the Unitarian tradition (at least) came out of Christianity, how can you, or do you, balance the incredible teachings with the many in our community who eschew anything Christian? How can you or do you teach the many profound truths of Christianity without turning off half or more of the congregation? Or, do you find common threads among the Fellowship that make it okay to talk about Jesus in a meaningful way? How do you sort through the historic Jesus to get to the more universal truths?”

RESPONSE: It’s true, as suggested by this questioner, that we have persons belonging to the Fellowship who come to it from very different personal needs.

On the one hand, there are persons who bear wounds, some very deep, that are associated in some way with the Christian religion, so that there is an almost automatic negative reaction to anything that comes with the label, “Christian.”

And, on the other hand, there are persons connected with this Fellowship for whom religion to be real must be connected with Christianity. If it isn’t Christian or somehow connected to Jesus and the Christian tradition, it doesn’t feel like religion.

And in some cases, both are true in the same person: that is, the table has been set by acquaintance with some part of the Christian tradition, but the person doesn’t ever want that meal again; but at the same time the person doesn’t imagine there could be other tables with different menus.

As to the question about how I try to work with the Christian tradition: First, I don’t usually think about whether something is part of the Christian, Buddhist, Taoist, or whatever tradition; or whether the teacher is Jesus, Siddhartha, Lao Tzu, or whomever. I’ll pull from any tradition and any teacher in dealing with what makes life whole, how we are connected, and how we should live. Mostly, I find pull from modern thinkers and poets. Paul Tillich, Albert Schweitzer, Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung, and Robert Johnson have been the thinkers who have shaped my religious philosophy. And Walt Whitman, Robinson Jeffers, Mary Oliver, Emily Dickinson, and Robert Frost have been the poets that have meant most to me.

And, specifically, with regard to the life and teaching of Jesus and the Christian tradition, which is deeply in my bones (at least parts of the Protestant tradition), I think of there being four basic approaches to Jesus:

- 1) the Orthodox approach, in which Jesus is regarded as a savior figure;
- 2) the Liberal approach, in which Jesus is regarded as a teacher;
- 3) the Scholarly approach, in which Jesus is a historical figure;
- 4) the Mythological approach, in which Jesus is understood as a symbol – the Christ within.

For better and worse, to the chagrin of some and the pleasure of others in our Fellowship, I work with the latter three approaches to Jesus – the Liberal, the Scholarly, and the Mythology – as I judge it fits the season, the theme, or the need.

What I would also like to say, however, is that this is not a necessity for my religion. I use the Christian tradition in freedom as I judge it serves, and, hopefully, not out of fear, favor, or even to seek balance.

QUESTION: “Bruce, does your job description include ministering to people individually as well as through Sunday services? If so, under what kinds of circumstances would it be OK to contact you for help or advice, and what should I expect from you?”

RESPONSE: Yes, certainly, my role as a minister includes ministering to individuals and families, and particularly during times of crisis, whether physical or emotional or both. But not limited to times of crisis. If for whatever reason, you would like to meet with me, I will do my best to find the time. I’m not a therapist, but the confidentiality is the same as with a therapist.

As to what to expect from me? I will try to be present with you and for you with as much of my self as I can.

### **Questions seeking advice**

And I have a couple of questions seeking advice.

QUESTION: “Hi Bruce, if you were just starting out, what three spiritual books would you recommend & why?”

RESPONSE: I prefer the word “religious” to the word “spiritual,” because “spiritual” tends to relate to only part of a person as when we speak of “body,” “mind,” “heart,” “soul,” “spirit.” “Religious,” on the other hand, even in its etymology, has to do re-connecting the whole of one’s self with the whole of being. Also, “spiritual” in my experience tends to send a person up, out, and away. I prefer to send a person down, in, and here.

So I’m going to rephrase this question to read, “What three books relating to the religious quest would you recommend and why?”

In recommending books, I would typically want to do that on an individual basis, but that won’t work in this setting. So here are a few of resources that have meant something to me in my religious quest.

Robert Johnson’s Owning Your Own Shadow, which tries to bring in the parts of ourselves that we tend to neglect.

The Power of Now by Eckart Tolle, a quiet little book that to me gets at the essence of

religious enterprise.

The Power of Myth, which is the transcription of a six-part video series of Bill Moyers interviewing Joseph Campbell. Very readable, full of wisdom.

And I'll throw in a couple of others that have been influential in my own life. Albert Schweitzer: An Anthology – a compilation of short quotes from the writings of Albert Schweitzer, one of the geniuses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

And, finally, I'll include Walt Whitman's greatest poem, "Song of Myself," which is divided into fifty-two sections or chants. I don't know if Whitman meant it to correspond to the number of weeks in a year, but one could do worse than to read one section a week over a year's time.

QUESTION: "Bruce, I'm forwarding a question posed by a friend who thought it was too late to send in- which may be true- but here it is anyway, simply: What is worth doing?"

RESPONSE: If your friend were to sit down with me in my office and ask this question, I would go at it this way:

I can't tell you what's worth doing for you. And I don't want to even suggest what's worth doing for you. But I will suggest some questions you might ask yourself, and out of this you may start to get a sense of what's worth doing *for you*. Here are the questions:

What makes me come alive?  
What do I love?  
What is my highest good?  
What makes me deeply happy?  
What calls to me?  
What makes me feel most connected and related?

Seek to make your contribution to your community and the world out of these questions, rather than out the following questions:

What do my parents want me to do?  
What do I think I ought to do?  
What do I think is my duty?  
What makes me comfortable?  
What makes me feel secure?  
What is financially rewarding?

And a caveat: It's not that these latter questions can be ignored. They need to be taken seriously and dealt with. But they are not the questions to ask in terms of "What's worth doing for you?"

QUESTION: “I understand you have grown children. What advice do you have to keep these relationships healthy and happy?”

I start with the idea, as Kahlil Gibran expressed it, that:

Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you,...

Therefore, don't assume that you know what life is asking for or calling for from them. Therefore, give as little advice as possible, even if asked.

Also, live your own life, for your children's sake, so that they don't have to live your life for you.

Also, be aware of the possibilities for resentment with children toward their parents. This is because, as Robert Johnson puts it, parents are the ones who have the difficult job of civilizing their children (thus, knocking them out of the Garden of Eden). That civilizing process is not necessarily an easy or pretty process, and certainly not always appreciated.

And, finally, and from another angle, be aware of how important parents are for their children. Don't underestimate what parents mean to them, or how important they are. In the psyche of the children, parents are gods and goddesses. Thus, accept the divine role, delight in the role, and don't abuse the role. Indeed, love your children as tenderly as God is said to love and care for his children.

### **A personal question**

And, finally, one personal question.

QUESTION: “What is best for you about your job as a minister, about the work you do?”

RESPONSE: From the time I was a youngster of ten, the idea of being a minister was in my mind. And so it's been a privilege to be able to do the kind of work that always drew me.

And, I suppose, what draws me about the work is its depth and breadth – dealing with serious life issues both practically and theoretically.

I like the generalized nature of my work – its wide variety. And within that variety what I like best is facilitating poetry classes, meeting individuals in one-on-one settings, and being part of the Quimper Golf Fellowship.

### **Benediction**

And now may the faith we nourish here

And the memories we gather here  
Give us hope for the future.  
May the love that we share  
And the companionship we feel  
Strengthen us and bring joy to our hearts.  
And may the blessings of our fellowship rest upon us,  
This day and forevermore.

### **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 preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on June 13, 2010. The spoken sermon, available on CD at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)