

“On Taking Things Personally”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
January 24, 2010
Rev. Bruce Bode

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

Though our knowledge is incomplete,
Our truth partial,
And our love imperfect,
We believe that new light is ever waiting
To break into our hearts and minds,
To enlighten our common path,
That there is mutual strength in willing cooperation,
And that the bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.

Opening Words:

Come, come, whoever you are.
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving – it does not matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times.
Come, yet again, come.

(Mawlana Jalal-al-Din Rumi)

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: The universe does not revolve around you.

CONGREGATION: The stars and planets spinning through the ballroom of space dance with one another quite outside of your small life.

MINISTER: You cannot hold gravity or seasons; even air and water inevitably evade your grasp.

CONGREGATION: Why not, then, let go?

MINISTER: You could move through time like a shark through water, neither restless or ceasing, absorbed in and absorbing the native element.

CONGREGATION: Why pretend you can do otherwise?

MINISTER: The world comes in at every pore, mixes in your blood before breath releases you into the world again.

CONGREGATION: Did you think the fragile boundary of your skin could build a wall?

MINISTER: Listen. Every molecule is humming its particular pitch. Of course you are a symphony.

CONGREGATION: Whose tune do you think the planets are singing as they dance?

(Lynn Ungar, "Boundaries," from *Blessing the Bread*)

Reading

My sermon exploration this morning is based on the reading that I have for you. It's a reading from author Robert A. Johnson in a little book published in 2008 titled, Inner Gold: Understanding Psychological Projection. The heading of this reading is titled, "Taking Inwardly What Is Inward."

All affect is interior. Any emotional impact we experience is inside us. If someone were to denounce me, spreading all the gossip and defamation he might find, I would probably wither. It would weigh me down, but the withering is my interior matter. If you hurt my feelings, it is an interior matter for me.

If you accuse me of having green hair, that won't bother me. "It's not true!" I'll say. But if you announce that I was rude yesterday, I'll have to duck. If it has an impact, it means there is a war inside of me. You set it off, but what you set off is my business. Anything that can burn in a person should burn. Only the things that are fireproof are worth keeping. If you can hurt my feelings, they had better be hurt, because it's an error in me.

To take inwardly what is inward is a great art. I'm getting better at it. I don't get my feelings hurt as much anymore. But there are still things that make me wince. That means there are things inside of me I haven't dealt with yet. One of the most powerful realizations we can have is that all affect is interior, and it needs to be understood and worked on in an interior way.

If someone has your gold, or even if you just think they have taken your gold, and then they displease you, you might become furious. Knowing what is going on at a deeper level can save you from that kind of suffering. You have no right to be dependent on anyone, or jealous of them. You have no right to be lonely. My saying this won't cure you in a day, but it might be the beginning of a cure. Dr. von Franz nearly knocked me over when she said, "Shyness is just arrogance." I'm the shyest person on earth! She spoiled it for me.

(Robert Johnson, Inner Gold: Understanding Psychological Projection, pp. 28-29)

"ON TAKING THINGS PERSONALLY"

Introduction

My sermon exploration this morning, as I mentioned, is based on the reading I gave you, and I think it might be helpful in approaching my subject to talk a little bit about the author of that reading.

Robert A. Johnson is someone I have known for about twenty-five years, first as an author that I used to set up lectures for in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and then later as a

friend and mentor. Over a period of about a dozen years, every other year or so, I would visit him for several days at his home in San Diego and also accompany him to the Anza-Borrego Desert, about seventy miles east of San Diego, where he has a modest house that overlooks the desert floor at the end of a two-mile dirt road. I spent many wonderful days with him there.

Then, when Flossie and I came here to Port Townsend in 2004, the two of us began visiting Robert in San Diego on my annual January reading break. We just returned from such a visit this past week.

Robert Johnson and the interior life

Robert, who is now eighty-eight years old, is a most interesting person and has had a most interesting life, to say the least. His has been an introverted life devoted to the interior, spiritual, and feeling aspects of life. This is in contrast to the thrust of our extroverted society, which tends in its orientation toward the exterior, material, and mechanical aspects of life.

Thus, for Robert, living in our society has always been a somewhat uncomfortable fit. And his own psychological type, as he judges it, matches most closely that of India – but not the new India, which is moving at a rapid pace toward the Western world, but old India. That’s the India that appeals to him.

When he was in his fifties, Robert finally got up the courage and money to visit India. It so touched him that he returned each year for about twenty years, staying three to four months at a time to bathe in the feeling atmosphere that fed his interior being.

An example Robert gives of the kind of atmosphere that fed him is that there you might be riding your bicycle along a road and a complete stranger on another bicycle might come beside you, take your hand as you ride, hold it for a time, and then, without saying a word, release it and go on his way. Robert recommends that you not try that in our society.

For Robert, the interior and exterior realms, the spiritual and material, are ultimately one. But, as I say, his natural orientation and interest has been with the inward, interior life.

This inclination became further set for him in relation to an accident that took place when he was just eleven years old. A runaway car hit him as he was entering a store in Portland, Oregon, and, as a result, he lost his left leg below the knee. Thereafter, he has made use of a prosthetic limb.

Accompanying that accident and the loss of his leg was a near-death experience, a visitation from the “Golden World,” as he puts it, in which he was washed in a radiant, luminous light. “It was,” he writes in his autobiography, “pure light, gold, radiant, luminous, ecstatically happy, perfectly beautiful, purely tranquil, joy beyond bound.” (Balancing Heaven and Earth, p. 2)

Robert would have preferred not to have to return from that beautiful place, but return he did. From that point on, a major task of his life has been to figure out how to re-discover and integrate that Golden World experience into the experiences of our everyday world.

For Robert, the dreams that arise from our interior being, and which are expressions of our interior being, are very important. For him, dreams and visions are as real as concrete, exterior reality – actually, more so. He remembers the dreams of his inner world like most of us remember events in the outer world. And his dreams have the impact for him that outer-world events have for most of us. His life has been punctuated by significant dreams, which both indicate for him what’s going on inside and what direction he ought to take in life. He obeys the messages of those dreams and tries to live his life in accordance with them.

One of those significant dreams, which you can read about in his autobiography titled, Balancing Heaven and Earth, took place in his mid-twenties soon after World War II when he took a ship to Europe. There, through a series of what he now calls “slender threads,” he began taking classes and undergoing psychological analysis at the newly-founded Jung Institute in Zurich, Switzerland.

One day he brought what he knew to be an important dream to his Analyst. His Analyst, however, perhaps not knowing what to make of the dream, refused to deal with it, dismissing it as “old man’s dream.”

Robert didn’t find this approach particularly helpful, and so, mustering all his courage, he quit the analysis. At the same, however, he was also attending classes with Emma Jung, Carl Jung’s spouse. And so he also showed her a written copy of the dream. She said nothing about it, but the next day Robert received a phone call from the man himself, Mrs. Jung’s famous husband, Carl Jung, then around sixty years old. Jung said, “I want you to come over to my house; I want to talk *at* you – that was the word he used – about your dream.”

Excited and trembling, Robert went to Carl Jung’s house as requested. Thereupon, Jung proceeded to lay out for Robert, on the basis of that dream, who he inwardly was and what he should be about in life.

The import of the dream’s message was that Robert’s was to be a solitary life devoted to the interior world. If he did nothing in the outer world, his work on the inner world was still important, and the outer world would support him, if he stayed true to his calling. Also, Jung said he should quit the Institute and go at things in a more individual way.

Robert did quit the Institute, and his life has been one adventure after another following this path of “slender threads.”

Dreams as x-rays of the soul

For Robert, a dream might be compared to an x-ray of the psyche or soul. Just as an x-ray of the body indicates what is going on physically inside the body, so a dream indicates what is going on at the psychic and interior level of our being.

And, just as it helps to have a person like a radiologist trained to interpret and show you the meaning of an x-ray of the body, so it helps to have a person conversant with the language and symbols of dreams assist you in gaining some sense of the dream.

Thus, I think of Robert as kind of “radiologist of the soul,” one who can help you understand the value and meaning of the images that arise from our interior being.

And, just as in seeing an x-ray of the body, you might have some inkling of what’s going on, but really need assistance in understanding and interpreting it; so, too, with the dreams of the interior self, you might have some idea what’s going on, but it helps to have someone who has spent their life studying these things to assist you.

Finally, just as one might be a bit hesitant with respect to an x-ray of the body to ask, “Doctor, what do you see there; what does this mean?” fearing the results; so, too, one might be a bit reluctant with regard to dreams to ask, “Doctor, what do you think? What do these strange images and these strange events indicate?”

For Robert, as a “radiologist of the soul,” to get to know you at a deep level, he needs to have your dreams. Just as a radiologist of the body to know what going on inside you physically needs to have an x-ray of the body, so he needs your dream to know who you are. And I can tell you it can be a little unnerving to share a dream at the breakfast table and have him say, “Oh, I didn’t know that about that you.”

But, for me, over the years, it’s been a great privilege to know Robert and to visit with him. He always helps to put me in touch with my interior being – or, at least calls attention to how I have gotten out of touch.

Hurt feelings

Well, now to turn to the reading that I gave you earlier from Robert Johnson. It’s a reading that I first came across about three years ago as an unpublished essay, which I found in Robert’s apartment among a stack of other unpublished essays. At the time, I copied portions of that reading into my notebook, asking Robert’s permission to use it sometime for a sermon theme, which he granted. Since then a publisher gathered up some of these essays and published them in the little book I read from earlier.

The particular part of the reading that both attracted my attention and perplexed me was the words:

Anything that can burn in a person should burn. Only the things that are fireproof are worth keeping. If you can hurt my feelings, they had better be hurt, because it’s an error in me.

How is this to taken?

Is there anyone here who doesn't get his or her feelings hurt? Would what it mean to come to a place where you didn't get your feelings hurt? And should that be a goal?

Also, aware of how our own feelings can be hurt, we avoid trying to hurt the feelings of others. We are often upset when we find out that we have hurt the feelings of others. They may now think badly of us, and that may distress us, too.

Thus, we take pains to avoid hurting the feelings of others. We develop strategies in this regard. Instead of speaking to others directly about something that might concern us, to try to protect both them and ourselves, we talk about them when they aren't present. Then we're distressed if we find out that they might have overheard or learned through the grapevine what we were saying about them.

How silent a room can become when the person you are talking about enters it.

Or, have you had times where you have entered a room and found it go quickly silent? You can easily guess what the subject of the conversation has been.

Or, again, have you ever overheard others talking about you when they didn't know you could hear them? What do you do in those situations? Do you edge closer to hear more clearly what they are saying about you so you can get the "unvarnished truth"? Or, do you move away because you don't want to hear what they are saying, and also because you know they would be embarrassed if they knew you were listening to what they were saying about you?

I was once in a room and overheard a co-worker complaining to another co-worker in the adjacent room – the doors were open -- about my sermon topic for the coming Sunday. And it wasn't just a single-sentence complaint, it was starting to go on. And so I said in a voice that could be clearly heard, "Gladys," – not her real name, of course – "Gladys, I can hear you." "Ahoouh!" She screamed and ran out of the room and out of the building. Neither of us has ever spoken of the event.

I once overheard someone say about me, "He's such a baby sometimes." I was in my forties at the time.

I have also overheard people talking about me in positive ways, saying sweet things about me it might be difficult to say directly. I didn't find that a particularly comfortable thing either.

The ego

It's not easy being a human being. And a main part of the reason for that is because in our species there has evolved what is called the "ego."

What is the ego?

As I understand and define it, the ego is structure in our brain that gives us the capacity to reflect upon ourselves and the life around us – the capacity for *self*-consciousness, for the awareness of having a self, or of being connected to a self. It is the capacity to identify ourselves with a name.

I watched for the development of the ego in my children. I noticed that they first started using the word “I” at about age two. Before that they might speak of themselves in the third person. “Katie is hungry,” rather than, “I am hungry.”

At about age two – the terrible twos – is when we humans first begin to identify ourselves by name. And now we are not just products of nature living our lives out by interest and instinct (like small children or plants and other animals); now, nature provides a twist: we begin to *know* that we are products of nature.

Thus, we begin to be able to reflect on ourselves and our appetites and interests, and to develop opinions about ourselves. We also begin to develop the possibility of becoming attached to ourselves, to make projects of ourselves, to think well of ourselves or to think badly of ourselves, and to become sensitive in relation to ourselves. We become invested in ourselves. In other words, we begin to take ourselves personally.

Taking ourselves personally

And now the question: Should we take ourselves personally?

Let me take two different approaches to this question.

The first approach is that this is the world we typically live in, where we do take things personally – all of us. We are all more or less attached to who we are, how we are doing, what we look like, what our reputation is, the value of our opinions, what we own, who we associate with, what the future will hold, etc., etc.

This is the world we live in. This is the level of consciousness that most of us operate at most of the time. Thus, we have to be aware of this world and deal with it at this level.

And, indeed, as I mentioned earlier, we have strategies of all kinds for handling the issues and concerns related to taking things personally. We develop strategies for dealing with the various fluctuations of moods, feelings, and emotions related to our ego and its attachments – the times it is elated, deflated, inflated, offended, flattered, greedy, grasping, proud, whimpering, whiny, perplexed, confused, complaining, excusing, rationalizing, overwhelmed, sad, happy, anxious, despairing, suicidal, etc., etc. – all the different states that belong to the ego and its attachments. In the self-help section of any library or bookstore, you can find advice on how to handle the various states of ego-attachment.

And, if we are going to live in society, we have to be aware of and sensitive to the similar states of ego-attachment of those with whom we live and associate.

And so we have similar strategies for dealing with our family members, friends, enemies, work associates, etc. Again, one can find similar advice on these fronts.

A second approach

But there's another approach to this question of whether or not we should take ourselves personally. Here the response is, "No, we should not take ourselves personally." As the reading suggests, that's an error in us.

Thus, a second approach is related to the spiritual quest of seeking "ego-detachment" – that is, detachment from the ego as the center of our being, and, instead, relating the ego to a deeper center in our being and to larger life out of which our being arises and of which it is an expression.

In this approach, we may distinguish between a smaller "i" – spelled in the lower case, as the poet e. e. cummings, for example, does – and another "I," spelled in the upper case, a larger and greater self that the smaller "i" should serve.

There's a poem I've given you before that distinguishes between the smaller "i" and the larger "I." It's by Juan Ramon Jiminez titled, "I Am Not I." It goes like this:

I am not I.
I am this one
Walking beside me whom I do not see,
Whom at times I manage to visit,
And whom at other times I forget;
The one who remains silent when I talk,
The one who forgives, sweet, when I hate,
The one who takes a walk where I am not,
The one who will remain standing when I die.

("I Am Not I," Juan Ramon Jiminez, tr. Robert Bly, p. 246, The Soul Is Here For Its Own Joy)

The goal here is for the smaller "i" to be aware of and to relate to the larger "I."

The goal is not to be pretend to be the master of the house, but the servant.

The goal is to be able to view your own life as you would other life, to be entirely without prejudice toward your own life.

The goal is to enable more of the larger "I" to emerge – because that's where the energy, creativity, and compassion is to be found. The smaller "i" is to be a conduit, a vessel, for that energy and creativity – and it is not to think that it owns it.

Returning to the passage

The passage that I read to you from Robert Johnson ultimately relates to this second approach to taking things personally.

As I mentioned earlier, I had been aware of this passage a few years ago, and had wondered about it, and was perplexed by it. But this year, I decided I would set myself to speak about it. And so I put it out as a sermon theme for today, hoping I would have a chance to discuss this passage with Robert before preaching about it.

And I was able to speak with him about this passage. A little over two weeks ago I read his own words to him – the passage I read to you earlier. When I finished, he said, “Yes, it’s all true – unlivable, but true.”

In his essay, he had written, “All affect is interior. All emotional impact we experience is inside of us.” In other words, all fear, all anger, all jealousy, all anxiety, all embarrassment – and the positive emotions as well – all of this is what we place on reality – it’s not reality in itself. It’s what we lay on reality.

In our conversation about this passage – and I was taking notes – Robert said, “I am disobeying reality if I play as if they [these affects and emotions] are out there.” And again, “Where you can be hurt or pleased, you find out your vulnerabilities. If you want to work on an illusion [that is, how you are not in accord with Reality], go find where you are vulnerable.”

The ego, says Robert Johnson, is properly an organ of awareness. Reality – or God, which is for him a synonym for Reality – needs the human faculties for awareness. The ego is, thus, an organ of God, an organ of Reality, for coming to consciousness. As the poet Robinson Jeffers says, “We are the eyes and ears of the universe.” We are God becoming conscious of itself.

But, typically, perhaps most of the time, we use the ego, not as organ of awareness, but as an organ of expectation or judgment. We put the ego in the place of Reality instead of accepting reality as it is.

“Why is it raining on my birthday?” says the ego of expectation ... rather than, “It’s raining and it’s my birthday” – that’s the ego as an organ of awareness. It simply makes us aware without judgment.

Says Johnson, “We need the ego to size something up and to say what it is, but not to say whether it is good or bad.”

“One,” he says, “should live with no personal expectations of reality.” That would be the goal.

And again he said, “The aspect in back of affect is the misjudgment or expectation of Reality. It’s putting the ego in the place of God. That’s what this is all about and everybody does it.”

“Where am I functioning on faith in God – [faith in Reality as it is] – as opposed to faith in my expectations [of Reality or God]?”

And here’s a difficult statement, “ Everything that happens is the will of God; nobody is courageous enough to believe this.”

“Don’t try to preach this,” he said to me, “people won’t understand.”

“You wrote it,” I said, “why can’t I preach it?”

“Because it’s unlivable. It takes you out of a human life. If you would accord with Reality, you could not live a human life. That’s why the Buddha appears so inhuman.”
“The best is to be aware of what you’re doing” – that is, to be aware of you ego attachments, to watch them as they unfold.

The approach of Eckhart Tolle

Though Robert warns against trying to preach this, if there are those of you who are interested in exploring more deeply this second perspective on taking things personally, I would like recommend the writings of a person who is teaching what Robert is talking about, namely, Eckhart Tolle. There are many other teachers as well, but in the last couple of years, I have become acquainted with his work, and, to me, Tolle is a master at uncovering the tricks of the ego and its tendency toward egoism, as well as providing practical suggestions for how to take yourself less personally.

I have with me three very readable books that I believe are getting at the same thing that Robert Johnson is. These books are: The Power of Now, A New Earth, and Stillness Speaks.

And I’d like to conclude my reflections this morning with a few quotations from Stillness Speaks.

“Whenever you deeply accept this moment as it is – no matter what form it takes – you are still, you are at peace.” (p. 6)

“Look at a tree, a flower, a plant. Let your awareness rest upon it. How still they are, how deeply rooted in Being. Allow nature to teach you stillness.” (p. 5)

“Taking responsibility for this moment means not to oppose internally the “suchness” of Now, not to argue with what is. It means to be in alignment with life.” (p. 43)

“I am not my thoughts, emotions, sense perceptions, and experiences. I am not the content of my life. I am Life. I am the space in which all things happen. I am consciousness. I am the Now. I Am.” (p. 47)

“Do you know someone whose main function in life seems to be to make themselves and others miserable, to spread unhappiness? Forgive them, for they too are part of the awakening of humanity. The role they play represents an intensification of the nightmare of egoic consciousness, the state of non-surrender. There is nothing personal in all this. It is not who they are.” (p. 72)

“Surrender is surrender to *this moment*, not to a story through which you *interpret* this moment and then try to resign to it.

For instance, you may have a disability and can't walk anymore. The condition is as it is.

Perhaps your mind is now creating a story that says, “This is what my life has come to. I have ended up in a wheelchair. Life has treated me harshly and unfairly. I don't deserve this.”

Can you accept the *isness* of this moment and not confuse it with a story the mind has created around it?” (pp. 69-70)

And, finally:

“Watch what happens when you don't name an experience as “bad” and instead bring an inner acceptance, an inner “yes” to it, and so let it be as it is.” (p. 123)

Conclusion

I feel like I've just touched the surface of these matters this morning. If you would like to go further, I would recommend, as I said, these books by Eckhart Tolle. And also Robert Johnson's autobiography, Balancing Heaven and Earth.

And, if you want to catch Robert's thoughts and the manner in which they are expressed as I know them, I would recommend a six-part CD series that recently came out, recordings made just a couple of years ago when he was 86 years old. Flossie and I listened to them coming back from San Diego, and it was like being in his living room, which, indeed, is where the recordings were made.

Benediction

Now may peace be in our hearts,
and understanding in our minds,
may courage steel our wills,
and the love of truth forever guide us. Amen.

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 at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on January 24, 2010. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)