

Thank you, Way, for introducing me.

~~Season Homily~~ I gave August 9, 2009

I am so blessed to have Joyce Poley and Joy Thorne accept my request for them to participate in today's music and readings. My many, many thanks to both of you.

And many thanks to our pianist, Leah Hokanson, who also agreed to sing words which compliment the theme of my homily...

SEARCHINGS

If You Cannot Find it in Yourself Where Will You look For It?

“Searchings” - and - a seemingly unrelated subtitle ,
“If you cannot find it in yourself where will you look for it?”

Who are we? Why are we here? And what is the meaning of life? The search for answers to these questions has been a search from time immemorial. It is a never-ending search.

What has been the basis from which my own searchings began? Where have they led me? Where am I going?

Which paths have I taken up that mountain we are climbing? Which ones am I currently embarked on? And who knows which paths I may take in the future?

I grew up on a Saskatchewan farm six miles west of the town of Battleford where my mother's sister and brother-in-law, Ann and Sidney Law lived. I was brought up as an Anglican. But even as a child I knew that the religious beliefs of my mother and my aunt somehow differed. Not until many years later did I discover why.

What beliefs DID I grow up with? We went to the Anglican church regularly and when I was twelve I received instructions for confirmation and thence to receive Holy Communion.

We were taught to work and to play hard;

- to be kind to others;

- to be thankful for what we DID have in those depression years and to be confident that there were better days ahead.

Though there was that background, never was there a suggestion that if we misbehaved, God would punish us or that there was a hell to be avoided. In fact it was accepted that we would all go to heaven and that eventually we would all be there together.

Now I realize that the prayer we said kneeling by the bedside was a horrible one. “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

What a message to go to sleep on!!

But medical school and medical practice made me question the validity of the content of the Anglican Common Book of Prayer including the Apostles Creed:

-discovering how a fertilized egg progresses through to maturity;

- learning of the myriad of things that could go wrong in that process but how amazingly few actually do occur;

- learning about the intricacies of the human body;

- learning how harmoniously the various systems communicate with one another - well I guess the Good Lord could be responsible for all that - but doubt began to creep in.

A more-defining question appeared when I lived in Kansas for three years and I took my 3 small children to Sunday School. I agreed to teach a class. Material was well laid out and things went well until it came time to teach the coming of the Holy Ghost. Jeepers! I just can't go along with that! How can I possibly teach something I don't really believe? And so I quit.

But life moved along down there in Kansas. A friend and I audited lectures in religion at the university. It was a three-year course. The first year was on the Old Testament and the second year was on the New Testament. However, those classes did not deal with theology or traditional religious teachings. Instead, we learned about the historical period in which the books were written and how that might shape the nature of each book. In addition we were taught the literary form of the book.

For instance should a particular section of the bible be taken literally or might it be an allegory?

The Song of Solomon is an example of its use as an allegory or of it being literally interpreted. Taken theologically and allegorically the bridegroom is Christ and the bride is the Church.

Historically, when *The Song of Solomon* was written it was totally accepted to speak freely about the human body. In addition poets and musicians came to a village to celebrate in poetry and in song the marriage of a couple - the bride and groom. The words referring to a woman's body were meant quite literally: "Thy breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies." and, "Thy navel is like a round goblet."

For the first time the bible began to make sense to me. At the same time I experienced anger. Surely ministers in their training would somewhere have been exposed to similar approaches to the bible. Why, why did they never reveal such things to their congregations?

And the third year of the course? It was on world religions - and there I was to discover threads common to many of those religions - threads that made me question my belief that Christianity provided the only path up that mountain.

I shared this in letters with Aunt Ann who was now living in Vancouver. She eventually wrote back saying, "You might be interested in going to the Unitarian Church" And she told me that mother's older siblings and their father, my grandfather, were Unitarian.

When the family had emigrated from England mother, the youngest, was only fourteen years old so when she married an Anglican we were raised in the Anglican faith. Mystery solved!

Fairly early in my Unitarian church life under the Reverend Phillip Hewett I registered in a Credo Series that was attended by 70 or 80 others. Together we explored our beliefs and their origins. A few years later Phillip offered the course again and encouraged members to take it a second time. He suggested that if we believed exactly the same things as previously, we had failed to grow.

Aunt Ann had voiced the same truth to me. Meeting her in Vancouver, she seemed so settled that I said to her one day, "Auntie, it must be wonderful to reach that point in life when you feel assured of your beliefs and you don't worry about the need to change." Her emphatic response was, "If that ever happens for me I'll be dead!"

And indeed I found in the Credo series that some of my beliefs had changed. The idea of mysticism was now within my acceptance.

Some things cannot be put into words but we have an unfailing need to do just that. Mysticism is surely one of those things. One definition of mysticism is: "a belief in, or an experience of a reality beyond normal human understanding or experience." - a belief in, or an experience of a reality beyond normal human understanding or experience.

Many of us have had such experiences. One of mine is related to the death of my mother. Five days after her death and burial in Victoria I returned to Vancouver and attended church. Phillip, when addressing the children, spoke about an underground source of water and how each of us can dip down into that common source.

Then followed the period of meditation. Never before nor since have I entered such a deep meditative state but at the same time have I been so hyper-alert. I sensed that mother was behind me and that her arm reached around to hold a glass of water before me. I knew I could touch neither her body nor her arm but I also knew that she was offering me - The Gift of Life.

It's quite impossible to enumerate all the courses and events I have enjoyed over the years in this church. Memorable ones were an ongoing *Dream Group* and another called *Early Morning Consciousness Raising*, under the direction of Reverend John Quirk. Several of us used to gather in the sanctuary for meditation prior to meeting in the hall. One morning I was alone in the sanctuary and the thought spontaneously came to me, "Here am I gathered together!" It was no doubt elicited by my recalling the biblical words, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

(Mathew 18, 20)

Those meetings were unique. The topics John assigned usually opened us up to personal problems. When someone voiced their situation, responses were in the nature of - "I recall a time when something like that happened to me and I remember it helped when I did this and this." and - our response had to be an authentic one. In other words we were not to tell the person who initiated the conversation to use a specific approach, but experiences of we others might allow him to find his own solution. Silences were accepted when nothing spontaneously happened. No 'idle chatter' was allowed to intervene.

This was at a time of several problems in my life and the support I received there was of tremendous value.

What about the subtitle to this homily? "If you cannot find it in yourself where will you look for it?"

An experience came when I was deeply distressed during my children's teen years and the drug scene. I was determined not to seek drugs as a relief from that distress and so I turned to a book which had long lain unread on my shelves. It was "The Secret of the Golden Flower".* I leafed through its pages until I found instructions for meditating, something I had not previously done. I earnestly followed those instructions and gradually, gradually, the turmoil and anxiety disappeared to be replaced with a sense of calm and security. I had indeed "found it in myself".

Among other sources furthering my spiritual growth are the writings of Eknath Easwaran

I have read and reread major portions of Easwaran's three books which are translations of India's best-known scripture, the Bhagavad Gita. Two brief passages from those translations - and I quote:

"I am the sweet fragrance in the earth and the heat in fire. I am the life in every creature." And -

"We should remember that there is no impassable barrier between the world outside and the world of thoughts and feelings within. The same unity that keeps the outer world in harmony governs the world within as well. Whenever we harm each other we violate this unity. Whenever we cause suffering to others, we sow the seeds of suffering for ourselves."

Those scriptures not only have these beautiful passages but some instructions on 'right living' are accompanied by humorous accounts. Please listen to one of those being read by Joy Thorne

* Footnote

In the Hindu tradition we have a story about a man who was the perfect model of respectability, who always did what the letter of the law commanded of him. He never offended anybody, or injured anybody. When the time came for him to pay his final bill, he was taken before Chitragupta, a kind of cosmic auditor in the Hindu scriptures. Chitragupta looked up the man's record and there it was, not a single entry on the debit page. Now even the great mystics have debit entries, sometimes rather a lot of them.

"Wow", Chitragupta said, "I've never seen anyone like you." Then he turned to the credit page and stared in astonishment, because that page was completely blank, too. The man had never let anybody down, never helped anybody, never offended anybody, never loved anybody. He couldn't be sent to heaven but on the other hand he couldn't be sent anywhere else, either.

Finally Chitragupta took the man to Brahma, the god of creation. "You made this guy", he said, "what shall I do with him?" Brahma looked at the statute books and not finding anything to cover the case, sent him to Krishna. Sri Krishna examined the record very carefully and there, almost illegible, was an ancient credit entry. "Gave two cents to a beggar at the age of six." "There," said Krishna, "return his two cents and send him back to try again"!

Another guide for "finding it in myself" is Deepak Chopra. The title of Deepak Chopra's book, *The Spontaneous Fulfillment of Desire* continues to annoy me and, as with many books, I reject much of it. Never-the-less it is another source of inspiration for me.

I found it difficult to incorporate some of its contents. For instance the word 'mantra', that has its origins in India. It is defined as: a sound capable of creating spiritual transformation. And sutra is a mantra that has a specific meaning. Chopra suggests a different sutra for each day of the week. An example is 'Tat Tvam Asi' that translates as, "I see the other in myself and myself in the other." These sutras are used daily for meditation.

Among the many things I receive as a Unitarian member is an ongoing spiritual support, not only during worship services but also during exchanges with other members. Where else might I find the opinions, the openness, the challenges to explore that I find here?

I posed three questions at the beginning. Re-phrased in the first person and my responses:

Who am I? I am someone connected to everyone & to everything.

Why am I here? I am here to serve. And -

What is the meaning of life? That is still an ongoing search.

One response to that search are words written by Seneca, a Roman philosopher who lived from about 4B.C. to A.D. 65

His words will end this presentation.

"For who listens to us in all the world, whether he be friend or teacher, brother or father or mother, sister or neighbor, son or ruler or servant. Does he listen - our advocate, or our husbands or wives, those who are dearest to us?

Do the stars listen, when we turn away from man; or the great winds, or the seas or the mountains? To whom can any man say, "Here I am! Behold me in my nakedness, my wounds, my secret grief, my despair, my betrayal, my pain, my tongue which cannot express my sorrow, my terror, my abandonment"

Listen to me for a day - an hour - a moment, lest I expire in my terrible wilderness, my lonely silence! O God, is there no one there who listens?

"Is there no one to listen? you ask." Ah yes, there is one who listens, who will always listen. Hasten to him, my friend. He waits on the hill for you."

* Footnote

The Secret of the Golden Flower ("Tai Yi Jin Hua Zong Zhi", 《太乙金華宗旨》), a Chinese Taoist book about meditation, was translated by Richard Wilhelm (also translator, in the 1920s, of the Chinese philosophical classic the I Ching). Wilhelm, a friend of Carl Jung, was German, and his translations from Chinese to German were later translated to English by Cary F. Baynes. According to Wilhelm, Lü Dongbin was the main originator of the material presented in the book. More recently (1991), the same work has been translated by Thomas Cleary, a scholar of Eastern studies.