

Doubt, Faith and Transformation.

Sermon by the Reverend Lone Jensen, Sunday September 30, 2007.

Well, it may not be as much of a surprise as you had hoped for. After all aren't those the kind of words you expect a minister to talk about? Doubt, faith and transformation are stock in trade, magical words to pull out of the theological hat for any aspiring holy woman or man. And yes I could have put on a cowboy hat, as I did one year, for my minister's surprise sermon or given this sermon in a novel way, perhaps flying in on a trapeze, which I never plan to do, and that would be a surprise. But that kind of spectacle or shaking folks up a bit, is not where my heart is this year. I have been shook up plenty myself and as far as this congregation, this beloved community is concerned I think we need, instead of more shaking up, loving reminders of why we are here in the first place. We live in what is often a mean spirited society and some of us come here hoping to find a different place, an oasis of celebration and peace. Some of us are hurting and have been told in so many ways that we fall short, that we are not important and to be worthy we must do more, work harder, be more beautiful, be much richer, be someone we are definitely not or believe something we absolutely cannot. The gift of acceptance of your true self is often hard to come by. At our best we as Unitarian Universalists offer that. No pretense here and doubters are more than welcome. In fact we treasure our doubts. To

take anything on faith alone is not in our vocabulary. I found this story on the web. *On her way to church one Sunday morning, the UU minister noticed a young child in the parking lot of the nearby Catholic church, with a box and a sign: "Free kittens, from a good Catholic family!" She smiled to herself, mentally wished the child good luck, and went on her way. About the middle of the week, she saw the same child, with the same box, outside the Methodist church, this time with a sign that said, "Good Methodist kittens! Absolutely free!" Impressed with the child's tenacity, she went on into her board meeting. Finally, the next Sunday, the child was in her Church's parking lot, with a new sign reading: "Unitarian Universalist kittens! Free to a good home!" This time she stopped to chat. "Weren't you outside the Catholic church last Sunday?" "Yes." "And on Wednesday, weren't these Methodist kittens?" "They sure were." "Well, how come they're Unitarian Universalist kittens now?" "Cause today their eyes are open!"*

Yet doubt alone gets us nowhere. We also need faith. Because our eyes are open and we have no dogma or fixed creed we need faith in each other, faith in our good intentions and a deep faith in the values we claim as well as a willingness to practice them.

Living in the paradox is not always easy. Yes, even a Unitarian Universalist minister gets the blues and lately I have been wrestling with my own faith and calling. The question I have been asking is what

keeps us going when our faith is shaken? You might ask yourself that question as well.

On Dec. 11, 1979, Mother Teresa, the "Saint of the Gutters," went to Oslo. Dressed in her signature blue-bordered sari and shod in sandals despite below-zero temperatures, the former Agnes Bojaxhiu received that ultimate worldly accolade, the Nobel Peace Prize. She said the things expected of her some, of which I would not agree with. She condemned abortion and bemoaned youthful drug addiction in the West. Finally, she suggested that the upcoming Christmas holiday should remind the world "that radiating joy is real" because Christ is everywhere — "Christ in our hearts, Christ in the poor we meet, Christ in the smile we give and in the smile that we receive."

(David Van Biema, **Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith** Thursday, Aug. 23, 2007, TIME)

But in her heart, this woman did not feel this divine presence she spoke so eloquently about and offered so freely to others. As David Van Biema writes her public and private self "*suggest a startling portrait in self-contradiction — that one of the great human icons of the past 100 years, whose remarkable deeds seemed inextricably connected to her closeness to God and who was routinely observed in silent and seemingly peaceful prayer by her associates as well as the television camera, was living out a very different spiritual reality privately, an arid*

landscape from which the deity had disappeared. “ (TIME) What she felt for half a century was instead a great absence and an utter emptiness. We know this now from her private letters, letters that she wanted burned after her death but they were instead collected and published in a book titled: ***Come Be My Light***. She wrote: *As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.* (Mother Teresa to the Rev. Michael Van Der Peet, September 1979.) Her words are like midnight musings, the kind of journal writing you may do at three o'clock in the morning when your heart is in a dark place. *“I call, I cling, I want — and there is no One to answer — no One on Whom I can cling — no, No One. — Alone ... Where is my Faith — even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness & darkness — My God — how painful is this unknown pain — I have no Faith — I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart — & make me suffer untold agony. I am told God loves me — and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.* (TIME)

With this deep doubt at the center of her heart Mother Teresa still continued her work for half a century, continued to smile, continued to hold the dying and work among the poor in Calcutta. I find amazing hope and comfort in this. Suddenly this saintly figure, this larger than life, Jesus follower who actually did stay poor and give up all she had is

utterly human. Her early vision, her “follow me” mystical experience of Jesus on a train to a retreat in India, on orders to take some rest from her teaching, gave her the courage to go to Calcutta with neither funding nor church support. But once she was there doing the hard work, this presence and voice was followed by silence. Atheists may take this as confirmation of their faith in the absence of God and I have had conversations with some UU’s who said: well, she is one of us! But I think that misses an important point. Mother Theresa was and remained within her tradition. Her values were not exactly ours. But though she despaired inwardly she kept on going, day after day. What do you do when you lose your faith? One answer is you keep going because you know it makes sense and what you are doing matters. Because this is what you promised and it is your way of loving.

One of the joys of ministry is that you get to hear people’s stories. Again and again I am touched deeply when I see or hear of husbands or wives, mothers or fathers who love so constantly even when the one they love is no longer able to respond. It may be because of an illness, an accident, brain injury, Alzheimers, Dementia, a stroke or for any number of reasons but they live with the absence and keep on caring because it makes sense. It is a holy thing to love. And sometimes it is the hardest thing in the world to do.

It takes faith to love. Yes, I know faith is a word that is loaded with heavy baggage for some of us. If you were asked to put your blind faith in something you would likely rebel. But I tell you I need faith in something to go on. Maybe trust is a better word. Even if it is simply to trust the mystery! My heart resonates with the longing I find in Mother Theresa's letters. I would not use her language but I understand her longing. Standing at the edge of a cliff and looking into the sky I want to myself to feel that connectedness, that one-ness with the Universe, that sense of peace and belonging, and yes love that I have been blessed with at times in my life. But something is getting in the way. The spirit won't be forced. It can't get through. I do know that the way back to that holy place in the heart for me begins with looking at that emptiness, without running away. In the absence is there a presence? Where do you find the ultimate? What keeps you going?

Those are good questions. But maybe there are others. We live in a society that rewards striving and competing to the point of self destruction. The other day I was reading a story by a colleague of mine Meg Barnhouse, trying to find just the right reading for our Board Retreat. Her story *Swan on a Stretcher* shocked me into awareness. Meg wrote of driving by an accident, not a very serious one it seemed, but the person involved was being taken away on a stretcher into an ambulance. Oh, she thought, watching the efficient emergency workers,

how nice to be taken care of. She felt slightly envious and imagined it as something nice, to be fed Jello and warm milk, to rest and let others be responsible. Later she shared her reactions with a friend who happened to be a nurse. Her friend told Meg what really happens in an emergency room, how they cut away your clothes and put all kinds of machines on you and there is nothing restful about it. How about you take a day at the spa instead her friend suggested. You can pay someone to take care of you. Or maybe you do not have to work so hard, you can rest once in a while.

How about it? I call it failure to love, yourself that is. Or maybe failure to be open to the idea that you are worthy of any number of things: rest, care, health, joy, reflection and transformation. I have been guilty of this kind of failure to love. I bet some of you have too. Love can be elusive, seem fragile or impossible especially when it means not doing more but being present. Being present to others is only possible if we are also present to ourselves. There must be space for the spirit to enter.

Love can transform us. It is the most powerful force I know. Even in its absence. There is a reason we call a congregation a beloved community. It is harder to love when we do not feel loved ourselves, when we feel wounded and it may seem easier to withdraw from the conversation. We each see love as manifested in different ways and

what feels like being loving to one person may not seem so to another. That is why conversations are so important and why working through differences is an act of faith.

I remain optimistic and wait for a miracle though I am now of the opinion that miracles happen every single day around us. Sunsets and sunrises, cooling air, birds, a baby's soft hands, rain in the desert, one does not have to label the ultimate to find it. As expressed in this joke: *What is a Unitarian Universalist? Someone who believes in life before death. (UU joke website)*
