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WHAT ARE WE SEEKING WHEN WE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE'RE SEEKING?

Happy Mother's Day to all you women who have borne or adopted, reared or helped to rear children. It is to our birth mothers, however skilled or inept, or even dangerous that we owe our first experiences of seeking, even in utero, the sundered cord bringing our first experience of separation—our first pangs of longing, thus the first primal call of our lifetime spiritual quest.

I'm going to be leading an adult education course one Sunday afternoon a month for a year at the UU Church in York, starting in September, and some of what I say here may help you know if you would like to join me.

A few weeks ago I was asked for my sermon title so it could be put in the newsletter. My brain scrambled for a bit and came up with what you see, WHAT ARE WE SEEKING WHEN WE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE'RE SEEKING? So after that, stuck with it, I began seriously mulling what I wanted to say.

From conception to birth through years of living—all the conceptions, births through living and dying again in a thousand ways—over and over all our lives and then, through our physical dying and beyond, we are on a spiritual journey. It doesn't even have to be conscious, but it's there and it's going to sweep us along, resistant or oblivious we may be, throwing in our paths all the impediments in which are imbedded all the teachings needed to awaken us. That means the journey itself bears, intrinsic to its purpose, the challenges that rouse and hone our consciousness. And our rising consciousness is borne on questions, the silvery glimpses of knowing that come like the lightning flash of a fish you see, maybe, was it really there?!, and then it's gone back into the deep...our consciousness borne on questions cast from those glimmers-- and in the not-knowing where we are tempered. The inky void of not-knowing that smothers us mute.

It is in this state of prickly bewilderment that many of my spiritual direction clients arrive at my door. The not knowing what they are seeking, but knowing there must be something more, something they are missing, something beyond the fog that envelops them or the insurmountable wall they've stumbled upon. They come in the queasy wondering whether there is something more they might be doing, in the tentative reaching for some intangible, filmy essence in the fog. And it is my job to stand with them at the wall, helping them find crevices or doorways, and then to cross the thresholds; or to companion them in the mists to help them feel the form and texture of a spiritual reality that makes sense to them.

It has been said, as the conundrum of Schrodinger's cat is to physics, that theology is like the blind man looking in a dark room for a black cat that isn't there. And the spiritual director helps the seeker find the cat anyhow. Why is it we feel so compelled to follow this quest, what is the urgency, and what lies at the core of our search? That quintessential search, based on the deepest questions of life, that I believe is the spark of the human experience. Who am I? Where did we come from? How do I be in relationship? What have I come here to do?

Teilhard de Chardin said that we are spiritual beings having a human experience. If we really wrap ourselves in that notion, pulling it around us like a sheltering woolen cloak, we begin to bring a whole new sensory awareness to all our perceptions. I am a spiritual being, sipping my tea, letting its coppery warmth, tinged with lemon swirl around my tongue as I gaze across the patio watching a flurry of birds gather seeds—crimson cardinals, dazzling goldfinches, a pert brown Carolina Wren, sparrows of every ilk, house, chipping, song, white throated-- then these things to which I bring full consciousness make my life a sacrament, envelop me with spiritual wonder and quiet ineffable joy—the rapture of being alive!

For UU's the questions, the lofty search, may begin with questions forged in a humanist perspective.

A phrase Rev Bob used in a service several months ago has stuck with me—I don't recall its source, but he may have gotten it from an article in the UU World. The

phrase speaks of the reason we come to church—to move into our highest humanity, and from that to transform the world.

What is that, “highest humanity”? How do we, who are hardly ever living out of our highest humanity, have a clue what that is? Is it like pornography was to Justice Potter Stewart—we can’t define it but we know it if we see it? Is our highest humanity the same as our highest potential? And what does that mean? Highest potential. Does anyone, even a saint, ever live out her highest potential? Can one be fully human and live out her highest potential? Or does being fully human, as Teilhard believes, require us to know ourselves as deeply spiritual? Or is this all some gimmick to keep us dissatisfied with our lives so we once again feel as if we’re floundering and failing, so what the hell we might as well go out and shop till we drop; drink ourselves into oblivion; shoot up a college campus?

Highest humanity. Highest potential. Who sets the bar? Is it a question of genes - of DNA? Of good or bad parenting? Of fate? Or is it a question of faith?

What do you think of when you think of your highest humanity? What images emerge with that phrase, highest humanity—for images and symbols are the language of the soul, and that’s what I’m interested in here—not in your intellect, your mental strategies, however blindingly brilliant. Our minds may be our worst enemies when we desire to plumb the depths of experience, of wisdom, of soul. I want to know your soul. More than that, I want YOU to know your soul. Part of Einstein’s brilliance when he said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge,” didn’t lie in his scientific and analytic abilities, no. He recognized that it lay in the realm of the soul—in imagination—in imaging something that hasn’t before existed. Indeed, in bringing into existence that which moves through us in imagination. So. What do you imagine highest humanity looks like? Really looks like. Give me details. I’m not interested in “world peace” and “freedom from hunger”. What would your highest humanity look like to me? To others you encounter? How would we recognize that you are living out of your highest humanity? When did you last perform an act of high humanity? Ever? Jean Houston, one of the shining spiritual and intellectual lights of our time, says those who are our heroes show us our soul projections. They help us define, and

if we step into our soul's alluring call, live out our spiritual purpose. The miracle is that we can image countless authentic examples of highest humanity, and these acts do transform society. That which we love and admire and dream are guideposts and talismans on our pilgrimage through life. The wise admonition to the medieval pilgrim on her journey to Rome, or Canterbury, or Jerusalem, "Pass by what you cannot love." Pass by what you cannot love....

Philip Cousineau speaks of pilgrimage for those in our day and age—the sacred travel to a place of our soul's longing; making the journey to a physical place sanctifies our innerscapes: Quote: ...the gap between ecstasy and irony in the realm of travel is a reflection of the abyss of experience in modern life....I don't believe that the problem is in the sites as it is in the sighting, the way we *see*. It's not simply in the images that lured us there and let us down, as in the *imagining* that is required of us. Nor does the blame lie in the faiths that inspire throngs to visit religious, artistic, and cultural monuments, as much as in our own lack of faith that we can experience anything authentic anymore.

...we look more and more, but see less and less. But we don't need more gimmicks and gadgets; all we need do is *reimagine* the way we travel. If we truly want to know the secret of soulful travel, we need to believe that there is something sacred waiting to be discovered in virtually every journey. Endquote.

It is the same with the inward journey as with a spiritual pilgrimage—we must be open and fluid, not nailed to an itinerary as to a dogmatic cross; we must allow the winds of spontaneity and magic to propel and guide us on our way. I took a two week solitary sojourn in England and Wales in 2000, having no daily plan but to wander from one holy site to another as the way opened. And indeed, magic unfolded—keys to ancient tombs pressed into my palm; meeting a blithe boy, spirit of Merlin, who led me to dreamy Cornwall heights and spun sacred tales—a boy now man with whom I still keep in touch--; timelessness and enchantment all around me because I welcomed serendipity. It is the way I always travel and I am never disappointed! By ordinary reality or in spiritual experience. There are a thousand more dimensions to reality than we can ever know....but we can be shown the wonders of some if we but open our souls....

Quantum physics informs us the observed object morphs by the act of the observer's witness. Further, we are told imagined realities are as real to the human mind, and by extension to the cosmos—we are one, after all, living in a holographic universe--these imagined realities are as real as ordinary reality. As a hypnotherapist I can assure you this is true! A subject under hypnosis can be told a lighted candle sits on a table before him and this becomes an absolute reality to him though there is no table, no candle and no flame. He is told to put his hand over the nonexistent candle and that he will feel no pain. His palm will actually burn and blister—*because he believes a flame is there!* The hypnotist then “heals” the burns by giving the suggestion that the blistered flesh return to normal. Imaginal reality indeed.

The spiritual mystic imagines—and literally creates-- mundane reality as sweetly sacred, and this becomes her sovereign realm. The coppery tea within the china cup of monet design becomes a spiritual enchantment.... The sensory absorption of all that beauty a reason for living.

Dag Hammarskjold said, “I don't know who—or what—put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.” Endquote. From unconsciousness we answer Yes and move into spiritual, humane, essential consciousness.

What is the core of our search? Where do we even begin? If we are floundering, know nothing, are surrounded by cloying fog, how can we even know we are not moving in endless circles? How do we turn our circling into a spiral? The spiral of the labyrinth—into center and back out again? In the field of spiritual development Evelyn Underwood's book MYSTICISM is a classic. The stages of mystical development flow like an expanding spiral, paradoxically carrying us more deeply inward as our consciousness swirls outward, we come to endings and then we begin again on a farther shore or deeper fathom of experience. In my extensive shamanic work I know the spiral of the Shaman's Ladder loops me to greater levels of experience and then a new beginning where all that has come

before must fall away and I enter the unknown again. A novice. And along the spiraling path I both hold the lamp for other pilgrims, and am guided by ones who hold the lamp for me. For one finds the luminous glory of celestial planes only to be heaved back into the black waters of the Dark Loch before a new surrender might bring salvation. Such is the nature of the journey, and the necessity, if one would surmount the roughest terrain, for guidance and direction in the spiritual realm.

One of my favorite poems, which I have shared with you before, bears repeating, and in its words lie some guidance. Rilke writes, and this is my favorite translation from Joanna Macy:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us//then walks with us silently out of the night.//These are the words we dimly hear://You, sent out beyond your recall,//go to the limits of your longing.//Embody me.

Flare like a flame//and make big shadows I can move in.//Let everything happen to you,//beauty and terror.//Just keep going, no feeling is final.//Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is a country they call life.//You will know it by its seriousness.//Give me your hand.

The key to finding your way along the spiritual journey is to be in touch with your soul's longing. Go to the limits of your longing, Rilke says. To understand our inner longing we must be open to feeling the searing razor cut of separation. We must step into the anguish of our existential loneliness—that which, if tended can bring us to our bliss. Become intimate with your longings, know them, feel them, clasp them delicately to you like the tenderest tendrils to Spirit that they are. God whispers in your longing, that you might know the healing embrace of oneness, and from that live out god's dream of you in the world. As Dag Hammarskjold has done....

Flare like and flame and make big shadows I can move in, says god in Rilke's poem. Flare up like a flame, people!! What would happen in UU churches if we each in his or her own magnificent spiritual way flared like a flame?! Viktor

Frankl said, “That which gives light must endure the burning.” How shall you burn?! What might be enraptured in your life if you risked burning brightly, if you risked seeing your shadows, the dark places where god most strangely appears, shining, inspiring, revealing and emboldening? CG Jung in his brilliance knew the power of god—of the gold—in our psychological shadows. Spiritual deepening is also an invitation to become conscious of our darkest selves, and to find god there. To enter the dark room seeking the black cat that isn’t there and finding her anyway. Spiritual work, spiritual deepening isn’t for sissies. But there’s no way to get to any sort of illuminated life other than by traversing the dark, dank caverns of self. The current trendy Spirituality Lite is a siren seduction, myth, a mirage. There are no shortcuts to any spiritual life worth living. None. And there is nothing more glorious than living every day buoyed by the Presence of the Divine, basking in amazement every moment in the radiance of Theillard’s infinite God: the diaphany of the divine at the heart of the universe on fire. Remember!—in our physical quantum universe each of us is that heart of the universe, each splendid in our divine diaphany!

And on this spiritual journey, this path to transformation, there is a requirement: it is the practice of Silence. Every great teacher of every faith speaks of the need for solitude and silence if one seeks to walk the pilgrim path of life with spiritual intention. The diaphany of the divine can only be felt in awakenings and by those who cultivate the experience of contemplative silence. We in modern America are assaulted at every turn by noise that deadens our sensitivity to deep listening and horrific visual bludgeons that shatter our mind’s serenity. I don’t know if anyone else has noticed an exponential increase in ads for TV shows that are more gruesomely and gratuitously violent than ever before, but that which used to be seen by humans only in the most brutal, traumatic situations is now available hour after hour on nighttime television. And it is contributing to rampant paranoia, narcissism and lack of empathy among our young people, all of which lead to gratuitous violence in the real world. The balm of silence and the quiet of not doing heal the mind and nourish the soul. Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and past president of Spiritual Directors International, a professional organization to which I belong, writes in his book, SILENT COMPASSION: We need

to try to see silence as a living presence of itself, which is primordial and primal, and then see all other things—now experienced deeply—inside of that container. It is not just an absence, but also by that very fact, a *presence*. Silence surrounds every “I know” event with a humble and patient “I don’t know.” It protects the autonomy and dignity of events, persons, animals, and all things.// We must find a way to return to this place, to live in this place, to abide in this place of inner silence. Endquote.

Think about our first UU principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and then ask yourself whether or how you can live that principle, cultivate that principle in your life, without silence. And I particularly love Richard Rohr’s inclusion of “animals and all things”. Silence glistening along the iridescent threads of the interconnected web of all existence—our seventh principle strengthened by silence, and if we but listen from that silence, awareness of the teachings of the silence of owls, of cougars, of foxes, of rabbits, of hawks—the great, winter silence of bears, the enormity of the silence of stones... I have walked to the rim of the Grand Canyon in the utter darkness of midnight, the vast void ringing with epiphanous silence! Oh we have so very much to learn!! And it will never be available to us without the grace of humility and silence.

So, yes, we are in the country called life. Serious, yes, the world needs serious people, some of whom, just as it was in the time of jesters and kings, are our most articulate and outrageous comedians. So this country of life is serious, and full of mirth and joy and abundant wonders. And we can all help each other understand our deepest longings and in bringing them into consciousness enrich and enliven our spiritual community. Angeles Arrien said, when asked how one knows her life purpose, “ We are here to help deliver each other into our essential selves. We never know who our angels may be.” Indeed part of our purpose is to be angels to one another in helping deliver us into our longing. Such is our sacred contract for being human, our spiritual delegation. I received an email this week from a young friend, a man in his early thirties I’ve not seen in several years. He told me he had finally found the graduate program that leads to his sacred Call—and that I had led him there! Who knew?! I had no idea that in our hours of conversation

walking the beach in Maine something I said would guide him to his life work. And at that time, neither did he.

What ARE we seeking when we don't know what we are seeking? Some have said our greatest human need is for understanding. Others believe our greatest human need is to be seen. It is my belief that our need, even greater than those, though those needs are intrinsic to the one most dearly felt—our greatest need, that searing need felt by the Ugly Duckling, is to belong. To know we have found our people, our place, our home of the heart. We get there, to that cherished sense of belonging, by dwelling in the answers to our longing—with guidance, the voice of Angels, and deep inner silence, we arrive at the safety of be-longing by following the shimmering, will o' the wisp lure of our longing, and inhabiting what we find there.