

***“A Leap of Faith”***

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presented February 29, 2004

Some of you already know that this is a difficult time of year for me. The sky is overcast, usually. The landscape is barren. We stand, it seems, between the season of frost and of morning dew. Now experience will tell me that this is all part of a natural process. And wisdom will whisper, “Wait. Just wait. Spring must come!” And wisdom will further suggest, “who can resist nature in the meanwhile?” But experience and wisdom do not keep the chill at bay. And so I, and perhaps many others, bundle ourselves in warm clothes and we bide our time.

Like nature, a living spirituality passes through many seasons. Some are vibrant and lush, like the spring. They’re characterized by joy. Others are cold and dark and stark as winter, characterized by dread and perhaps devoid of living color. And yet the seasons of spirituality differ from those of Nature, in that they are much more unpredictable, both in their duration and the actual sequence. They seem to follow their own rhythm.

At certain times of the year, though, the seasons of Nature and of spiritual growth do seem to coincide well. And sometimes the liturgical calendars of various faith traditions will reflect this natural concurrence. At such moments, spirituality becomes, it seems, an extension of Nature. As it is, we have entered one such period.

I refer to the season of Lent, which is Christian specific. You may know that “lent” is actually an old English word that means simply, “spring.” In other parts of the world, the season is better known in various tongues, as “the forty days”. However we call it, as of last Wednesday, millions upon millions, if not billions, of our neighbors across the globe began to observe forty days of fasting and reflection in accordance with the tradition that Jesus had retired into the wilderness for the same number of days and nights, forty, where he fasted and prayed, shortly before his arrest and execution. And thus while the skies brood overhead, the Christian faithful reflect on their own limitations, both physical and spiritual.

And the goal of this process is really twofold. First, to bring home the shortcomings of one’s own nature, and secondly, to prepare the way for faith in a higher, saving power. Now depending upon a person’s theology, some traditions have emphasized the depravity, the fallen-ness of human nature, while others have been more optimistic and emphasized instead the grace and goodness of the Savior. Usually one will find a combination of these two themes. But even if you do not subscribe to this theology, you must admit that its legacy has much power.

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I think it's worth noting that many of our Unitarian and Universalist forebears in the not so distant past observed this season of Lent. As you may be aware, as these movements evolved and began to admit a plurality of different theologies, this particular season lost much of its flavor and its appeal. Today if we do remember Lent, it's usually a memory, a distant memory. Now this year, of course, the season has much hype, in particular because of the release of the movie, "The Passion of the Christ". You have heard of this movie, I trust (*laughter*). Many devout people, Christian, Jewish and others, have been discussing, debating this film for months. I myself must admit that I am reluctant to see it, partly because of the level of violence which has been advertised. But also because I no longer subscribe to much of the theology to which that movie speaks.

For our purposes today, I'm going to speak a mild heresy. I will propose that there is much value in this season of Lent, much that this season would seek to incarnate, insofar as it calls us to consider both our spiritual and our physical limitations. I say this because I believe that it is when we come to consider those limitations, it follows that we also begin to explore our potential. That's on the table.

First question: what are our limitations? I think a brief mention of a few would suffice. Most of us, I believe, would agree that the world is a difficult place, and that we, people of flesh and blood, have very real physical challenges. These vary from person to person, and in anyone's lifetime, these will change. But speaking broadly, we know that we are not self-sufficient. We all require food and sleep on a regular basis. Most would also say that we require companionship; it is no good to be alone. I think it's fair to say that not all of us are great athletes and are not prepared to compete at an Olympic level. And with the advance of years, we become more and more aware of the affects of illness and aging. The affects of aging was brought home vividly to me in this past week. As you are aware, in the, uh, hallway, we have photographs from the seventies. (*congregational laughter*) My photograph is among them, and I cannot tell you how many people have commented to me: "You used to be so young and good looking!" (*congregational laughter*) Ah, limitations! (*laughter*) For the rest of us, we know that we cannot run as fast as we used to; perhaps walking takes more effort. We slow down with age. We begin to pay more attention to aches and spots that were not there the day before. Today I've been considering my eyesight: it's time for a new set of glasses. And sooner or later we will begin to consider the fact of death.

Often when we speak of death, it's relatively abstract. It's one thing to say that death comes to all people. It's another thing to say death will come to each and everyone of us. Death will come to me. I'm reminded of how I felt as a youth at this time of year. I would attend the Mass and have ashes put on my forehead by the priest. "Ashes to ashes; dust to dust": a very vivid moment. And I vaguely began to perceive that everyone I knew was going to die; everyone I loved and

cared for. This was knowledge on one level. Later, when I would go home and look in the mirror, the ashes would still be on my forehead. And the message was clear: Death was coming to me as well.

I think that such basic knowledge is crucial to anyone's spiritual journey. If you ask yourself, what separates you most from the Divine? Most people would probably describe the physical gulf between what they describe as eternal – that which has no beginning and no end, and one's self. There is a very real limit in our lives: the parameter of Death. To put it another way, I'm reasonably sure that if we are not aware of our own mortality, even if we were self-aware of many other respects, we probably would not have a word for spirituality, let alone much reason to pursue it.

But Death of course does come, and we do have a need for spirituality to respond to that event. The fact that we all become – or that we all come in to the knowledge that we shall all pass away, puts us squarely at the most important crossroads in our lives, in terms of our own faith. Now for many people, this is the essential difference between what does it to mean to be human and what does it mean to be divine. How to respond?

There are several principle paths that most people follow. One, the road less traveled, at least in Western civilization, embraces the notion that I mentioned earlier: that reality is a house divided between the natural and the supernatural, and that only the intervention of something godlike can give us salvation. But there is another, classic response, one that requires, if you will, a tremendous leap of faith. Perhaps the most famous expression of this other path was by none other than William Ellery Channing, who was one of the first, and perhaps the greatest, Unitarian preacher on this continent. Most people, if they know anything about Channing, know that he gave the first open defense of what it meant to be a Unitarian. In his own era, though, Channing's reputation did not rest so much on that early sermon, but on one a decade later, called "Likeness to God." I'd like to share several excerpts:

"I affirm, and would maintain, that true religion consists in proposing as our great end, a growing likeness to the Supreme Being. Its noblest influence consists in making us more and more partakers of that divinity. I begin with observing what all in deed will understand, that the likeness of God, of which I propose to speak, belongs to our higher or spiritual nature. It has its foundations in the original and essential capacities of the mind. In proportion, as these are unfolded by right and vigorous exertion, it is extended and brightened. In proportion as these lie dormant, it is obscured. In proportion as they are perverted and overpowered by the appetites and passions, it is blotted out. In truth, moral evil, if unresisted and habitual, may so blight and lay waste these capacities that the image of God in humankind may seem to be wholly destroyed. It is only in proportion to this likeness that we can enjoy either God or the Universe. In proportion as we approach and resemble the mind of God, we are

brought into harmony with the creation. For, in that proportion, we possess the principles from which the universe sprung. We carry within ourselves the perfections of which its beauty, magnificence, order, benevolent aspirations, and foulness purposes are the results in manifestations. We discern more and more of God in everything, from the frail flower to the everlasting stars. Even in evil, that dark cloud which hangs over the Creation, we discern rays of light and hope, and gradually come to see, in suffering and temptation, proofs and instruments of the sublimest purposes of wisdom and love.”

Channing’s approach was soft spoken and incredibly radical in his day. Rather than focus on the gulf, that divided women and men from their Creator, Channing sought to name the similarities between humankind and the divine. In his view, in his language, God’s most compelling attribute was neither infinite life, nor power, nor knowledge, but infinite goodness. In his analysis, we are most like the divine when we partake of the seed of its own divinity; planted in ourselves, by what he would have called “the eternal parent”. According to Channing, in proportion to how we respond to that seed, how well we cultivate that seed into something which flowers, the more we approach a true likeness to God. And this, said Channing, is the only true, authentic path to joy.

One corollary is that women and men do not need a bloody sacrifice for their salvation. On the other hand, salvation must be something that you actively seek as an individual. You must pursue moral and ethical excellence.

Now, all of this is well and good, but the fact remains that our spirituality passes through different seasons. One might say it’s very easy to embrace such an optimistic notion of human nature and the divine nature and the universe if your life is going well: if you are employed; if you are in good health; if you are happy. But what about the times when the going gets tough? Actually, Channing and those early ministers were no strangers to hardship. They knew about the world of evil. They saw firsthand, and felt how brutal life and even their fellow human beings could be. They did not have to go see a movie about the execution of Jesus to realize how terrible something like that might be. In their own day, they endured wars, power politics, poverty, slavery and their response was that they were revolted by what they saw. But they did not see that these came from God: they saw that these were human inventions. And if people had invented those conditions, than perhaps people could also create new solutions to ease those horrors. And perhaps, just perhaps, end them. In so doing, he said, we follow our own nature and in the process, not only do we do the will of the divine, but we become more like the divine ourselves.

Among the liberals of his own day, and among those who followed, Channing’s words were like that of a prophet in the wilderness. This more optimistic view of nature, of mortal beings and of the divinity, sparked many innovations, many reform movements. And people began to challenge many

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institutions and assumptions of their day and to work towards a better day. Sometimes people referred to their view as “salvation by character”.

If you subscribe to that notion, one’s view of natural limitations also changes. Limitations, whether we’re speaking about physical limitations, the fact of illness or even death, become not a curse, but a veiled blessing. Rather than fearing nature and our neighbors, we should embrace nature and our neighbors as friends. When we do this, it transforms fear into joy, and transforms resignation into acceptance. And this in turn will transform life from a journey focused on suffering into one that looks forward to hope and alternate meaning.

I myself do subscribe to the notion that we as human beings do fashion meaning. We are the makers of meaning. The number of our days may be limited, as is the fact that we cannot control many of the events that affect our lives. Nonetheless, we can choose how we will meet those changes and the chances that befall us. And I use this knowledge to live it as fully as I can. If joy and meaning are to be found, they must first be found within one’s own self. But this implies taking some risks, a leap of faith, if you will. One wise man I know, or knew: he’s dead now, once told me most people choose familiar pain over unknown happiness. Let me repeat that: most people choose familiar pain over unknown happiness. Reflecting upon my own life and listening to many of the sorrows that have been shared with me, this seems to be a recurring theme. Many people, it seems, will choose something which is familiar, even if it’s painful, than taking the risk to do something extraordinary to change their life, and perhaps experience joy.

Why should people choose familiar pain over an unknown joy? In a word? Fear. Fear of change. Fear of being hurt, perhaps. At such times, we would do well to remember Channing’s insights into human nature, and also the potential to which we might aspire. We also do well to remember that we are not alone; there are many fellow travelers with us on this route. We need to risk being hurt. We need to risk our hearts. We must learn to incarnate the good, and covenant with one another to do our humanly best.

As we go forth from this place, we will see a barren landscape. But remember, there are seeds germinating in the fields. When the sky is overcast, know that the sun is still there, however obscured it may be at the moment. Remember, the seeds will sprout and the sun will shine. Spring, Lent, will come. So it is with our leaps of faith. And taking those leaps makes all the difference.