

Peeking Through the Veil

by Rev. Martin Woulfe

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As I have mentioned in the past weeks and seasons, we live in era that aches for absolutes. To define reality in terms that which is clear, that which is good, that which is evil, that which is hidden. In times such as this week, as certain political processes come to a head, we are very aware of how our culture is divided into those who would divide reality and define it, into clear cut, one way or the other.

As we live our lives, we seem to live in the shadow. There is much gray area that we must wade through. As you look at our civilization as a whole, not just the present moment, but past centuries, you begin to discern that the landscape which we call our civilization is littered with cultural artifacts, things which herald a previous age, a previous understanding. We find that in our language; in our concept of time; how we call the days of the week: Monday, the moon day; Sunday, the day of the Sun, Wednesday, Woden's day; in our customs, what we wear, what we don't wear; in our behavior; in our totems and our taboos; also - especially - in our holidays and our holy days. Here in these holidays we find much that is integrated from the past of different traditions. Sometimes it's woven fine. Sometimes there are glaring deficiencies and odd things, side by side. It is not always so clear where one thing begins and another thing ends. Just as you look out over a span of water, as far as the eye can see, you begin to ask yourself, "Where does the sky end and the water begin?" Sometimes there is a thin layer that seems to vaguely separate the two.

So it is with much of our reality. Today, of course, is Halloween. All Hallows Eve. Samhain. There are different names but the intent behind them points towards the same. We also will have tomorrow, All Saints Day, and then All Souls Day, also known as the Day of the Dead for Central and South America. I like Halloween. It's always been an intriguing holiday for me. Here on this day we are asked to consider what is real? What is false? What do we suppose is real? What do we suppose is false? And just as children will wear masks or costumes, we also look at the notion of what is that? What is a costume? That leads to the question of what is a veil and what is the concept of a veil on this day?

Children, of course, children of all ages, dress up on Halloween and they put on fantastic costumes. They test the frontiers of what is real and what they desire. We let their imaginations run rampant and so we have goblins and princesses who come and they shake their little pumpkins at our door. That too is a cultural artifact and it harks back to an era thousands of years ago when societies wrestled with the concept of the dead.

In many of our minds, it is very clear when someone or something is alive. Then after a passage of time, when the person expires, as they say in the hospital system, you say that that person has passed on and that person is clearly dead. But as a person lives so too does a person die. We who live are also in the process of aging and by

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definition, by setting up limits too are in the process of dying. So we learn what is life by studying death and we hope to learn about death by studying life.

In the eastern tradition, I'm told there are some Buddhist monks who, as part of their contemplation, will go into a room with a corpse, and it is their task to contemplate life and death, the rhythms of life and nature as the corpse decays. It's a lengthy process. It's a putrid process. But the monks walk away with a new understanding of life and death. In our western world I'm told of a story of a group of young medical students who stood before a body that was going to have an autopsy. The head doctor happened to be a Unitarian. To the dismay of his students, he said, "Now before we begin, I want you to consider that the breath of god used to dwell in this person."

It is not always clear where boundaries begin or where they end. But we are very clear that there are certain boundaries. We are talking about totems, taboos, where does life begin, where does life end. Where does the water in this cup begin? Where does the water end? There are many boundaries that we take for granted or we pay no attention to. But on a day such as today, we are asked to consider some of those boundaries.

If there is a boundary, be it between the air and the water in this cup, between life and death, between the known and the unknown, one of the metaphors we commonly use is a veil. Now a veil is something that which, dependent upon the culture, has many different understandings. Commonly, when we talk of a veil today, the first thought that comes into mind is of course, what? A bridal veil. Possibly, a Muslim veil.

Consider the uses of a veil. In the case of a bride, historically, anthropologists have suggested it may have had the original purpose of concealing the identity of the bride. There are stories from the Hebrew scriptures of a father-in-law bringing a young woman to be married. She is concealed. The husband marries the wrong person. In the days of mixed marriages, perhaps that was a common practice. Or if young people had been engaged when they were pre-teens, when the wedding day arrived you would bring the bride forward in a veil. So, there was an element of disguise and deceit, perhaps.

In our common understanding of the veil, both in the Muslim tradition and for the modern bride, a veil suggests something very different. Rather it provides a space for the person to be contemplative, a screen to hold off all the anxieties of the day, of life, and to allow the person to focus on what is happening inside her,

I have one friend. We went to seminary together. Her name is Luna Jensen. She's from Scandinavia. She's now a UU minister. Several decades ago, she was married to an Iraqi and they lived in Iraq. As a woman in Iraq, she wore a veil. As a westerner, she had certain conceptions about what that represented. For her, before she wore the veil, it was clearly a symbol of oppression. No doubt, in some instances of the world, it is an act of oppression. But she found that it gave her a certain sacred space

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to allow herself to think about herself, in life and in her family. It was an act of liberation, to a certain extent.

In terms of this day, though, when we talk about the veil that separates the here and now from the hereafter, a veil takes on a different significance. You can look to nature for some meaning. Animal embryos *in utero* have a protective membrane which is like a veil. Fluids can pass back and forth, oxygen, nutrition. It is a protective device.

So, too, there is in the theory of Halloween, a veil that separates our present existence, what we accept for granted and that which might be. We have all heard, read, seen ghost stories. We have all heard of hauntings. If ghosts only haunted each other, we wouldn't hear about it! It wouldn't be very novel. I can't imagine a ghost being too terribly scared of a phantasm.

Every culture of which I am aware does have it's ghost stories. Different people have explained them in different ways. I have to confess that I follow a path which some might call morbid, but I consider it more pensive. As I mentioned during the preface to the joys and concerns, there are 2 classic paths: those who focus on joys, and others on sorrows. Whether it's because of my disposition or my heritage, I've been more drawn towards focusing on transitions, in particular on death.

One of my earliest memories is when I was about 4 years old. I was in a play lot. Next to the play lot was an old cemetery. I scurried under the fence and wandered amongst tombstones from early settlers of the south side of Chicago. I remember being completely mesmerized and fascinated with the fact that underneath this plot of earth rested the bones of fellow human beings. I was also intrigued by the fact that eventually, I, too, would join them.

Much poetry, much mythology has dealt with the issue of whether the dead continue to exist within a different form. It's an intriguing concept. There are members in this congregation who have shared stories with me where, for lack of a better phrase, they have been able to communicate with those who have passed on. I have known ministers who have been drawn to the subject and have spent years studying near-death experiences, and also cases of people who have claimed that they have been visited by past ancestors. Nine months ago I shared the story of how a friend of mine in college had been visited by her grandmother in a dream, or in a vision, if you will, the day before she died to announce her death. In the Celtic tradition, that would be the arrival of the banshees.

I am a religious humanist. I place a lot of faith in what my senses tell me, and what the sciences tell me. But to be fully human, you have to be open to other sources of inspiration and reality. *"There are many things, in heaven and earth, Horatio, we are told, that your philosophy can never dream of."*

I believe in intuition. I believe in inspiration. I believe in psychic phenomena. That which we call magic among the pagans in my view, is another name for psychic

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phenomena. It may seem strange to hear someone who claims to be a religious humanist talking about psychic phenomena. Let me share with you a few thoughts from another humanist minister from 50+ years ago, a gentleman by the name of Charles Frances Potter. This is from his book, *The Preacher and I*, of 1951:

“Ten years later in my book with that title, I included a chapter: Religion and Telepathy, in which I expressed my regret that not only scientists, but religionists as well, have exhibited strange reluctance to examine and study the various phenomena, sometimes called psychic, telepathic or extrasensory. This field is not confined to card guessing or describing concealed objects. Properly understood, extrasensory perception often includes intuition and prophecy, creative art, business vision, and the feats of musical and mathematical prodigies. It may even include prayer and faith, when prayer is the dominant desire for good, and faith is confident, outreaching growth towards a better life and a better world for everybody.

The humanist should be neither creed-bound by supernatural theistic revelation, nor sense-bound by any materialism, though it be labeled scientific. The existence of telepathy seems to show personality to be occasionally unlimited by matter, time or space. It therefore challenges prolonged and careful investigation. Something very important to all humankind may await discovery there. I am no spiritualist, but I do believe that the future of religion, probably the distant future, will be intimately concerned with these natural forces, faculties and phenomena, which even humanists now avoid as they would the bubonic plague. Telepathy is not at all supernatural. It is an unexplored ability of human beings. Therefore, it is a prime concern to humanism, if humanism is to be the religion of the future, as I am confident it will be.”

Tellingly, this is the very close of his book, his final words.

Most of us are familiar with the concept of veil or costume as metaphor. When I prepare for my remarks on any given Sunday, I'm very careful to wear a robe. It's part of my ritual. It provides me a certain sense, much like a bridal veil might, it allows me a certain change of mind, change of attention, so I can focus on what I think is important. Many of us also perhaps have rituals that we practice throughout the day or at certain significant anniversaries, the death of a loved one, or some significant loss or transition in our life. Here on this day, All Hallows Eve, it is a cultural artifact, yes, but it also provides an opportunity for us to consider significant transitions in our own lives, and in our culture. It's an opportunity, I think, we would do well to engage with.

Is there truly life beyond the grave? Many people suppose so. I have a friend who is a Hindu. They take it for granted that there is reincarnation, not just for Hindus, but for all people. Those who don't accept are just oblivious to the fact, but that we have potential to learn and to appreciate. Also, in the west, I know of many people who taken it for granted that when a person dies, they fall asleep and will sleep until the

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final trumpet calls. Others take it for granted that when a person dies, all their energy, all their matter, returns to nature, from whence it came. Who is correct?

In this room, no doubt, we have many opinions. In this world, no doubt, many more opinions. I would suggest to you that a very useful concept to consider on a day like today happens to be the symbol of the yin and yang. There is reality, that which we encounter. There is also the unknown. There is that which is visible, that which is invisible. There are things which are solid matter; things which are permeable. We can use our attention to focus on those distinctions and not take everything for granted. How easy it is to say, for example, the sun rises and the sun sets, when we know for a fact the sun neither rises nor sets but is fixed. Rather, it is the rotation of the Earth that causes this seeming motion.

Yet, we can also be a poet and approach reality. This past week, on Monday following the class on paganism, Scott Wade and I were outside, and nature took our breath away, as we observed the moon with a huge circle around it. Moments can be poetic. They can be scientific. There is what we know; there is what we hope for and long for. There is the real. There is the possible. I would ask us on a day like today to be open to new revelations. Literally, revelation is a new unveiling of reality, a new understanding. If reality truly is like the symbol of yin and yang - symbols of opposites that are yoked together - then our path in the present is the thin line that separates those 2 paths. We walk in the shadow of those 2.

Psalm 23rd has a famous line familiar to many of us: *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.* I respectfully suggest to you that we all walk in the valley of the shadow of death. What counts is how we make use of our time as we walk this path. Let us be open to new revelations. Let us explore the possible. Let us appreciate reality. Let us not be small-minded. Let us be open-minded. Let us consider different paths, different ways of looking at the real.

This past year, there have been many significant milestones. One of the most significant, of course, is the passing of someone that we have loved, someone we have known. It is important to remember those who have passed on. Whether you believe that a person's life has been extinguished or that their candle continues to burn, I would ask you to remember on this day: Jarl Tremail, who passed away on March 22; Elizabeth Ann Stocking, who passed away April 10; John Erickson, who passed away on July 2; and Vernon Greening, who passed away on July 29. I ask you to consider others who have passed away at this time, those near and dear to you who have passed away in this last year.