

Seeing One's Shadows

Sermon delivered by Rev. Martin Woulfe

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If you were present here during December, you are aware that one of the recurring themes was that that month was a season of many lights. Today, I'd like to digress from that metaphor and explore a contrasting theme, that of shadows.

Shadows are neither static nor perpetual. They lack depth as well. They do not have their own independent existence; they can only be discovered when something of substance exists first. They come into being when one object enters a field of light. Also, there are no shadows at night; some are minute; others, like planetary eclipses, are shadows writ large.

In our own folklore, shadows will come to the fore next week, as we speak of Groundhog day. The day itself is a cultural relic of what formerly a bona fide holiday: in Europe, it was celebrated as "Candlemas Day." This was an occasion when clergy blessed candles & distributed them to the faithful. No doubt, you may think, an earlier pagan tradition preceded this. And you would be correct. In a previous time & place, the day was called Imbolc and marked the beginning of midwinter. Such a date carried much significance: it was, if you will, a threshold between the shadows of winter and the glint of spring. You will hear more on this, next Sunday.

For the moment, let us recognize that there is something in the human psyche that reacts to shadows. Not surprisingly, then, the metaphorical use of shadows transcend regional, even national consciousness. Some of the most striking religious metaphors have used the image of the shadow. Consider the Zoroastrians. Students of religion may recollect that this is religion of ancient Persia; you may not be aware that its practitioners flourish even to this day and number about 150,000 - roughly the same number of Unitarian Universalists! It was the ancient Zoroastrians who envisioned that the universe was divided into two realms, that of light and that of darkness. The forces of each were understood to be engaged in perpetual, if not eternal warfare. That religion influenced the Jewish religion during the period of the Babylonian captivity; some of the more striking notions, such as Lucifer, an angel of light who became the prince of darkness, can be linked. Thus it is that one is said to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thousands of years and thousands of miles distant from the original source material. Much of the association with white with good and of dark with evil is derived from there as well. We may not say, as did some of our ancestors that one is a sign of god's favor and the other a sign of god's curse, but there is still much residue that pollutes our language, and by extension, our thought processes. Today, for many, evil is still cast as a dark force, lurking in the night.

Contrast that with the use of the yin & yang elsewhere in the world. As most of you know, the yin & yang represent the two halves of being in the Taoist tradition. The yin is often described in terms of the following attributes: feminine; the earth; softness; darkness; passivity and the yang is described as being masculine; the sky; light; activity and so on. The richness of the symbol is derived by the fact that neither half is static; it is fluid, and an island of the one is understood to always be other. The curved line that differentiates these two selves might best be described as a shadow.

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As I mentioned earlier, shadows have no real existence independent of themselves. They do not have form; they follow the form of the other; they have no substance - they are as elusive as rumors, as intangible as a rainbow.

Ralph Waldo Emerson suggested that "Institutions are the lengthened shadows of an individual." If he was correct, then this particular congregation is the lengthened shadow of those few women and men who envisioned a liberal Sunday school program & church five decades ago. They cast a long shadow, and as ALUUC begins to celebrate its 2nd half-century here in Springfield, it is well to acknowledge their vision. But of course, visions themselves only go so far. It would be hyperbole to say that they built this church, any more than to say that Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem. Many hands were needed, and many responded.

Part of the challenge comes from the heritage itself. Form a mental picture of a typical Unitarian. I suspect that many's first impression is of an intellectual, sipping an approved brand of tea or coffee and spouting politically correct jargon. Too often is this close to the mark; you may have heard the joke that when Unitarians die they arrive at the afterworld and come to a fork in the road; one path leads to heaven; the other, leads to a discussion about heaven. You can guess where most Unitarians end up. Pundits of another age spoke of the "Boston Brahmins," the social elite, or spoke of those who were "God's frozen people." This is an unfair characterization, because in fact so many of those people fought the good fight for the poor, the oppressed, the disenfranchised. And yet, we can't seem to shake that image of being overly intellectual.

I mention this because movements have their shadow sides. I'm told that in Jungian psychology, there is a whole field of study devoted to probing the shadow side of one's own personality. Thus, shadows are really a window of opportunity. The purpose is to learn about the less obscure dimensions of one's being - not for the purpose of removing it, but for the purpose of making peace with the whole. This is a fruitful endeavor, one that can be employed equally well, I think, towards understanding institutions and movements.

Those of us who have been Unitarian Universalists for some time may forget how hard it was to find our way here. I hear quite a few stories to the effect that when the topic of religion comes up in conversation, and we share that we are UUs, more often than not one is asked, what is that? Is that a new religion? Or is that a cult? I remember the first time I heard of the Unitarians - I was in high school. Of all people, a Jesuit teacher of mine was speaking of Unitarians in glowing terms. That night, I asked my dad if he had ever heard of them. He thought for a moment, held his chin, and replied that he wasn't entirely sure, but that they were probably one of those groups fighting for a United Ireland and that I'd best not get mixed up with them. That's not an outrageous example. Even in Boston, I heard one minister share that he had taken the bus tour and as they passed by Beacon Street, the driver pointed out the headquarters of the Unification Church!

How has it happened, that a movement that was once predicted to sweep up all the nation's young minds by no less a light than Thomas Jefferson, has failed to live up to its promise? Why is it that so many are oblivious to our very existence and stumble upon us almost by accident?

Some will say that we don't advertise enough. Others will say that we by nature aren't evangelical. True - how often is it the case of someone finding UUism rather than UUism finding that

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someone! As you know, we consist of 85% of come outers - people who came from another tradition, and only 15% who were born and raised UUs, or "GrUUsps."

It may well be that we are overly concerned with numbers rather than influence. Some will argue that we cannot compete with those who peddle fire & brimstone with the full force of conviction. We are truly a voluntary association, and perhaps our greatest strength, our diversity is also our Achilles' heel. What exactly are we offering? How many times has someone asked you, well what do UUs believe, and we find ourselves fumbling for an answer.

I propose that part of the problem is in how the question is being asked. Most people, when they think of religion, invariably think of it in terms of belief formulas, the creeds. This is one way to approach religion, but in our mindset, this is rather limited. We can respond that ours is a creedless faith, but how far does that go? We can attest that we put our faith in deeds, but that too has its limits. Any living faith worth its salt is going to affirm that the faithful will act better in the here and now. On the other hand, if you measure a religious movement by its impact rather than by numbers, we belong to a powerful legacy. Man for man, woman for woman, our forebears have left an indelible imprint on the fabric of this nation, and by extension, upon the world. We are interconnected, after all.

Still, I would like to see a day when people by and large know who we are. They need not know the ins and outs of UUism, but they ought to know who we are and where we are. We are more than just a running joke in various episodes of the Simpsons.

If we are to endure, let alone thrive, one thing above all else is crucial: vision. It is written in the Hebrew Scriptures that without vision, the people perish. Perhaps the prophets of old meant this literally. We, naturally, are not so literal. All the same, we can see that people who lack a unifying vision lack cohesion. Their efforts are diluted, and their successes meager.

Many of us share a vision of a world that is whole. By this, we generally mean a world where human beings treat one another humanely, regardless of race, creed, color, gender, sexual orientation, etc. and are careful stewards of the earth. To be sure, there are often political and economic overtones to many of the proposed solutions.

To say that we want a world made whole is to recognize that there is much unnecessary suffering in the world. This recognition is typically the basis of one's religious nature. It is no accident that many of the great religious geniuses of history made the problem of suffering central to their missions. Buddha and Jesus, to name but two, launched their respective ministries with that explicit concern.

If we are to endure as a credible movement, we need to focus on the fundamentals of what it means to be religious. It means to love the world, for all its foibles and follies, and to commit to furthering what I like to call, the blessings of creation. If a faith is to be vital, it must transcend our behaviors on Sunday. A vital faith is what occurs the rest of the week.

We speak much of freedom. Freedom is, perhaps, one of the central pillars of our religious identity. Too often, though, our way is portrayed as freedom from religious doctrine, rather than freedom

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within religion. We are free from a binding creed, true, but faith calls us to act as caring and responsible members of a larger community.

And this is where again I invoke the image of shadows. Many live their faith as though it were best left to the shadows. This is, as I've mentioned, part of the legacy of our New England forebears. Times have changed, and this faith must evolve with those times. Mind you, I have no objection to the use of reason in religion; I am aware that this basic tenet of liberalism is not emphasized as much anymore. If we are to bring healing into the world, let it be a balanced faith - one that integrates reason with a sense of mystery, integrates love with justice, and instills a reverence for community as well as a reverence for individuality.

Let me add a final thought about shadows. Thus far, I have followed the usual metaphor that shadows are dark. I can offer one exception that I have seen.

I once observed a rainbow from high up: I was atop a round tower, in Oreland. My friend David and I had climbed to the top of this particular stone structure on a rainy afternoon, in the city of Kilkenny. We spied a rainbow in the distance, and to our astonishment, it was drifting with the wind, towards us. In the space of a few unbelievably intense minutes, the rainbow drifted within touch of our fingertips. Interestingly enough, we observed something curious about rainbows: they too have shadows; in the case of the one we saw, the shadow was not a swath of darkness, but an inverted rainbow of color, sweeping across the fields. This was an unexpected epiphany.

I mention this because the "shadow" of the rainbow defied my expectations. Granted, this may not be a perfect example, and some may well argue the point that the lower arc of the rainbow was not properly a shadow. I hope that I will be forgiven for using it metaphorically, then. When we step out of the shadows, we may well discover that what we thought was dark and obscure was translucent and bright. Our faith is something to be shared, not held close. We need not proselytize, at least not in the classic sense, but we could certainly be more evangelical.

The more we engage in outreach, the more we will hold high a beacon of hope that a more humane civilization is possible, and the more we will further the blessings of creation.