

Living the Spirit
a sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Cohen
at Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church
Sunday, January 30, 2005

READINGS by Rachel Naomi Remen from *Kitchen Table Wisdom*

I want to share with you this morning two stories told in Rachel Naomi Remen's book Kitchen Table Wisdom, followed by a few of Remen's reflections. A first story:

Harry, an emergency physician, tells this story. One evening on his shift in a busy emergency room, a woman was brought in about to give birth. The nurses rapidly wheeled her into a room and paged him immediately. He had been in the room next store. As he entered, they rushed out past him to call her obstetrician. One look and Harry realized that their call was probably too late. If her obstetrician wasn't already somewhere in the building, Harry was going to get to deliver this baby himself. He liked delivering babies, and he was pleased. The nurses had returned and were hastily opening the delivery packs. The woman's husband had also arrived and the nurses seated him by his wife's head. They stood on either side of Harry, supporting her legs. The baby was born almost immediately.

While the little girl was still attached to her mother, Harry laid her along his left forearm. Holding the back of her head in his left hand, he took a suction bulb in his right and began to clear her mouth and nose of mucus. Suddenly, the baby opened her eyes and looked directly at him. In that moment, Harry stepped passed his technical role and realized a very simple thing: that he was the first human being this baby girl had ever seen. He felt his heart go out to her in welcome from all people everywhere and tears came into his eyes.

Harry has delivered hundreds of babies. He has always enjoyed the challenges of delivery, the excitement of making rapid decisions and feeling his own competency, but he says he had never let himself experience the meaning of what he was doing before. He feels that in a certain sense this was the first baby that he had ever delivered. He says that in the past he would have been so preoccupied with the technical aspects of the delivery, assessing and responding to the needs and dangers, that he doubts he would have noticed the baby open her eyes or have registered what her look meant. He would have been there as a physician, but not as a human being. It was possible, now, to be both. He wonders how many other such moments of connection he has missed. He suspects there may have been many. (p. 159-160)

A second story:

A young patient, newly recovered from surgery, told me this story of preparing food to celebrate the holiday of Passover for her Orthodox Jewish sweetheart and forty of their friends. One of the basic beliefs in Judaism is that the home is sacred ground, a place of religious ceremony and ritual...My patient, who was Jewish by background, was raised by people who had lapsed in their observation of the religion and she had never participated in the preparation of the Passover dinner before. Her young man, however, had celebrated the holiday yearly since infancy and had

helped his mother make the same preparations year after year. He knew them by heart and he taught her.

The kosher law prohibits eating milk products with meat products. She was surprised to discover that a traditional Jewish kitchen has four complete sets of dishes, pots, silverware, and cooking tools. One set is used daily for food containing milk, and a complete second set is for foods that contain meat...In addition... there are two more sets, one for milk and one for meat, which are only used at...Passover. Tradition decrees that at this time the daily dishes and utensils are put away in cabinets and sealed shut and the holiday dishes are then brought out to prepare the Passover dinner...

All this almost overwhelmed her. "Rachel," she said, "you have never seen so many dishes, pots, knives, and forks, and pancake turners. It all seemed really pointless to me, but it was so terribly important to Herbert and I was terrified of making a mistake and ruining things for him. But a really strange thing happened. Sometime in the middle of setting up things, I was standing by myself in the kitchen with my arms filled with the everyday milk dishes, looking around me desperately for some shelf room to be able to seal them away. Every shelf was full. I remember thinking, 'Where am I going to put these daily milk dishes?' and suddenly I was not alone. I had a very real sense of the presence of the many women who had ever asked themselves this very ordinary question, thousands and thousands of them...Among them were my own grandmothers who had lived and died in Warsaw before I was born...

"In the blink of an eye, alone in Herbert's kitchen, I was in the company of woman across more than five thousand years. And too, at that very moment all over the world there were women asking themselves this very question in every human language, 'Where do I put these daily milk dishes?'"

"...I was so surprised. And it is hard to put into words, but this was not just an idea, it was more like a happening. I had this vast perspective. I knew myself to be a thread in a great tapestry woven by women in the name of God since the beginning. You would think this would make me feel small, but it didn't. I was a single thread, but I *belonged*, something I had never experienced before. For a few seconds I had a glimpse of something larger, not only of who I am but Whose I am..." (p. 266-268)

Remen reflects:

Perhaps the wisdom lies not in the constant struggle to bring the sacred into daily life but in recognition that there may be no daily life, that life is committed and whole and, despite appearances, we are always on sacred ground. (p. 266)

I am not much of a meditator. No matter. I have come to suspect that life itself may be a spiritual practice. The process of daily living seems able to refine the quality of our humanity over time. There are many people whose awakening to larger realities comes through the experiences of ordinary life, through parenting, through work, through friendship, through illness, or just in some elevator somewhere. (p. 288)

SERMON

Let me say, first of all, how good it is to be here with you this morning. The weather is not good and I am so glad to see those of you who made it here this morning. I am grateful that you made the effort to be here, that you made it safely, and I wish you all safe travels home as well.

It is hard for me that this morning's weather is so bad when it is my last Sunday before my sabbatical leave. This is particularly true since I was not here last week. It was odd and difficult to make the decision last Sunday that I was too sick to be with you. I am deeply grateful to Anna Cochrane and Phil Runge and everyone else who stepped in to help out in my absence. It is strange to think that you all heard the sermon that I wrote, but I wasn't here to share in the experience with you.

That is especially true since this Sunday's sermon is something like the flip side of last Sunday's. What I wrote about for last week was the interconnection between developing a religious faith and belief system and living life well, and about the important role this religious community can play in helping us all do this better. This morning's sermon follows both that one as well as being connected to the two sermons about the Spirit that I preached in the fall and winter.

This morning I want to take last week's message one step farther. Last week I wrote about the importance of carrying our beliefs about the world and our place in it, and the ethical system that arises from those beliefs, into the everyday actions of our everyday lives.

This week I want to talk about living in touch not only with our beliefs and ideas, but with the *felt* experience of the Spirit, the sacred, something larger and deeper than ourselves.

The two stories I shared earlier are, for me, wonderful illustrations of this. One of the challenges of this kind of sermon in a Unitarian Universalist congregation is that a lot of us get a little antsy when anyone begins talking about the Spirit, God, the sacred. I understand that, but I hope that these stories help show that what I am talking about does not require belief in a supernatural being or anything beyond common, everyday human experience. Or at least, experiences that could become common if we live with our eyes and our hearts open.

How many other versions of these kind of stories have we heard? The little girl who looks up at the night sky and sees it fully for the first time, feeling both overwhelmingly tiny yet also a real part of something beyond explanation, beyond human knowledge and understanding. A man sitting by the bedside of his dying mother, holding her hand, somehow knowing the moment when life leaves her body by the sudden emptiness in the room. Lovers who find in each other moments of feeling completely at home, completely known and loved. Reading words, either poetry or prose, written hundreds of years ago which touch something true and real in our own hearts. Teaching something to a child and watching his eyes light up as he understands something new about his world. Being trusted with the secret yearnings or secret sorrows of a friend.

These things happen to people all over the world, they happen to us, day after day after day. They are not experiences outside of normal life. Like the experience of being a doctor who has the privilege of helping bring babies into the world, all these things are miracles that we often overlook because most of them *are* a part of everyday life. Like Harry, the emergency room physician, most of us put a tremendous amount of energy into keeping ourselves and things around us moving forward, in being competent, sometimes in simply surviving. Life demands this of us and we respond as best we can.

At the same time, life offers us miracle after miracle, gifts of meaning and connection and wonder that surround us every day if we can but see them. Sometimes these miracles are so big, so grand that we cannot help but stop whatever we are doing and take notice. But much more often they are small, subtle, hidden in the ordinary. And these wonders are not only around us but also within us—in our ability to love, to offer each other compassion and understanding, to learn and grow through all the years of our lives.

I believe that as we increase our awareness of these gifts, as we notice more and more of them through the haze of everyday life and our own humanness, our lives will become richer, deeper, and more ultimately connected.

As most of you know, I have been thinking about all of this in broad terms, of course, but also in very specific ways, as I prepare for my sabbatical which begins on Tuesday. As I talked about from here in the pulpit a few weeks ago, I have come to the realization that I have not yet learned well enough *myself* how to live more consistently with this deeper awareness, deeper connection, particularly in my ministry. I have also come to understand that for my ministry to be what I want it to be, I need to learn how better and more fully to do this.

The story of the emergency room doctor could, in many ways, be my story. Ministry is one of the most wondrous, and occasionally strange, vocations there are. Think about it. It is a minister's job to attend to those levels of meaning and connection that are the foundation of who we are. It is a minister's job to take a step back and in doing so help others to take a step back from the busyness and distractions that surround us to try to glimpse the bigger picture, if only for a moment. It is a minister's job to point out those times when holiness is visible in the ordinary, when the Spirit is among us, when, in the simplest and most basic things we do, the sacred is with us and within us.

But, like Harry, I have spent the last four and a half years focused almost exclusively on competency, on what you might call the technical aspects of ministry. I have too rarely seen and felt the deeper meaning. There have been moments. Moments when the Spirit has broken through even though my attention was elsewhere. But those moments have not been enough to refocus me in the way I need to be refocused.

You may wonder just what it is I am hoping for. I am hoping that, when I sit with one of you who is suffering, I will be more aware of the possibility for hope and love than I am worried about whether or not I will say just the right thing. I am hoping that, when the Board is wrestling with a difficult policy issue for the church, I will be able to see and then share with you how that issue speaks to our deeper religious mission and how we might respond with faith and integrity, that I will feel and help you feel that even when we are in conflict we are still very much in community. I am hoping that I will better learn to trust what happens in worship, (for instance, not worrying about a snowstorm on my last Sunday before sabbatical) and relax enough to let grace make an appearance (which it most certainly has). I am hoping that, when I am sitting in the office on a Wednesday morning with fifteen phone calls to make, I will see each of them as a chance to connect with a human being rather than a bunch of names to be crossed off a list. This is what I hope for, what I imagine it might look like to live the deeper meaning of ministry among you.

My job as a minister may not be to midwife new life into this world, but there are births and rebirths happening here all the time. The birth of hope, of love, of faith, of community, of

conviction, of intention, of action. The rebirth of hope after despair, or joy after sorrow. I want to be present to these new things and to what they mean for you, for us. I want to remember that the holy does not come only in grand miracles and magic, but also in every time we choose hope in the face of despair, every time we choose love in the face of indifference, and every time we choose life in the face of death. This is what we are about, even when it looks like we are simply attending meetings or making coffee. I want not only to believe this, but to *live* it, and to help you live it as well.

In the past couple of years, I have had the honor of offering the Right Hand of Fellowship twice—once at an installation, once at an ordination. This is the element of the service where a supposedly more senior colleague welcomes the newer colleague into the fellowship of ordained ministry. Both times I have used an imagine much like the one from the second story I shared with you this morning. I have talked about how the pulpit can be a lonely place as we ministers stand up here facing our congregations, hoping to offer you something of meaning and value. But in truth, like the young Jewish woman in the kitchen, we are most definitely not alone. A long heritage of Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist ministers stands with us, as well as all the ministers yet to come. The congregations, you, too, stand with us, in dialogue, in love, in trust. The trick is to know you are there. To feel your presence, to believe in you and find strength, comfort, and company in you.

I know from experience that if I focus too much of my attention on not making mistakes, on worrying about whether everyone is going to pick up on their cue, on whether the silly candle lighter thing is going to work, I will miss entirely the company I am in and the meaning of what I am doing.

Missing the meaning and value of what we are doing is not only all too possible for us as individuals but it is even more likely for us as a community. After all, we have even more business to do—a budget to manage, a building to keep up, staff to work with, programs to plan, meetings to attend, goals to set and work toward. I have become more and more aware of the ways we together miss the holy present in our midst. I am hoping that as I better learn how to be present in this way as both a person and as a minister, I will be better able to help us do this together as a community.

What might this look like? you ask. Well, I have only a limited view, but again, there are things I hope for. I hope that people will experience serving on the Board of Trustees and in other leadership positions as an opportunity for spiritual growth and discovery. I hope that, when we make decisions, we are always asking ourselves and each other how the choices we make reflect our deepest values, and not just the goals of expediency and good management. I hope that we come to fully feel our interdependence and, even when we disagree, always give one another the benefit of the doubt, speak respectfully to and about each other, and appreciate more the differences as well as the similarities between us.

I am not saying these things never happen. They most certainly do. But just as with my own ability to be present to the deeper meaning of what I do, I believe our ability to live at this deeper level comes only in brief flashes and that we have not yet learned how to make it happen for ourselves and each other.

We all have within us the ability to see and experience the meaning, the connection, the sacredness that is a part of our every day lives.

Mark Nepo writes:

Each person is born with an unencumbered spot, free of expectation and regret, free of ambition and embarrassment, free of fear and worry, an umbilical spot of grace where we were each first touched by God. It is this spot of grace that issues peace. Psychologists call this spot the Psyche, Theologians call it the Soul, Jung calls it The Seat of the unconscious, Hindu masters call it Atman, Buddhists call it the Dharma, Rilke calls it Inwardness, Sufis call it Qualb, and Jesus calls it The Center of Our Love.

To know this spot of inwardness is to know who we are, not by surface markers of identity, not by where we work or what we wear or how we like to be addressed but by feeling our place in relation to the Infinite and by inhabiting it. This is a hard lifelong task, for the nature of becoming is a constant filming over of where we begin while the nature of being is a constant erosion of what is not essential. We each live in the midst of this ongoing tension, growing tarnished or covered over only to be worn back to that incorruptible spot of grace.

This, to me, is living the Spirit. Looking always for what is most essential, most true in ourselves, in each other, and in this community and learning, then, to live there.

This is not just a matter of self-fulfillment, of feeling at peace within ourselves. It is also in this way that we will grow to be more compassionate, more committed, more loving. Remen tells a story of another person, a successful CEO recovering from prostate cancer. He tells Remen:

“I am shocked to have discovered this morning that I am the only me there is. I think this is the key to everything—compassion, kindness, trust of life, mystery. A genuine and not inflated sense of importance and self-value. I’ve spent most of my life comparing myself to other men. Are they ahead of me in Forbes? Do they sit on more powerful boards? Are they smarter? Sexier? Do they have more hair? And all the time there is this other way of seeing things. I am not one of the motors my company produces by the hundreds of thousands. I am handmade. Less than perfect but more a work of creation than a product of technology. And I am not alone in this. Everyone is the only ‘me’ there is.”

Remen reflects:

Some insights are visceral. They can change us as profoundly as experience does. Months later this man finds he looks at others differently, listens to them with a new and effortless respect, wants to know the ways in which they are unique. What he used to perceive as differences to be judged and possibly dismissed he now sees as uniqueness to be appreciated and understood. He has learned a great deal of value from people whom he would barely have noticed before. He makes fewer comparisons. And people talk to him differently as well. (p.286)

It is this kind of change, this kind of insight, this kind of experience that I hope for, as a minister, as a part of this religious community, and as a human being. I look forward to the journey we will take, both on our own and with one another. May our travels be blessed and may we find on our way gifts of meaning and connection we cannot even begin to imagine.

Amen.