

“On Being a Druid in Good Standing”
By Howell Lind, Interim Senior Minister
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READING:

From his book, Further Fables For Our Times, James Thurber provides this tale of "The Shore and The Sea."

A single excited lemming started the exodus, crying, "Fire!" and then running toward the sea. He may have seen the sunrise through the trees, or waked from a fiery nightmare, or struck his head against a stone producing stars. Whatever it was, he ran and ran, and as he ran, he was joined by others; a mother lemming and her young, a nightwatch lemming on his way home to bed, and assorted revelers and early risers.

"The world is coming to an end!" they shouted, and as the hurrying hundreds turned into thousands, the reasons for their headlong flight increased by leaps and bounds and hops and skips and jumps.

"The devil has come in a red chariot!" cried an elderly lemming male. "The sun is his torch! The world is on fire!"

"It's a pleasure jaunt," squeaked a young female lemming.

"A what?" she was asked.

"A treasure hunt!" cried a wild-eyed male lemming who had been up all night. "Full many a gem of purest ray serene the dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear."

"It's a bear!" shouted his daughter, "Go it!"

. . . And there were those among the fleeing thousands who shouted "Goats!" and "Ghosts!" until there were almost as many different alarms as there were fugitives.

One male lemming who had lived alone for many years refused to be drawn into the stampede that swept past his cave like a flood. He saw no flames in the forest, and no devil, or bear, or goat, or ghost.

He had long ago decided – since he was a serious scholar – that the caves of ocean bear no gems, but only soggy glub and great gobs of mucky gump. And so he watched the other lemmings leap into the sea and disappear beneath the waves. Some crying "We are saved!" and some crying "We are lost!"

The scholarly lemming shock his head sorrowfully, tore up what he had written through the years about his species and started all over again.

. . . James Thurber provides this moral to his fable of "The Shore and The Sea": "All individuals should strive to learn – before they die – what they are running from and to, and why."

SERMON:

I woke up with a start – I thought that I had heard voices downstairs – it sounded like the model Christie Brinkley and that 80's martial arts actor – I did not remember his name – still, I knew that this just wasn't possible! . . . As I play it back in my mind's eye, it was disconcerting – to say the least!

I looked at the bedside alarm clock and it read 3:20 am. I turned my head and glanced over to the clock on the bureau and the green digital numbers read 3:18 am.

. . . I wasn't sure which one had the correct time.

I made a mental note to synchronize the bedroom clocks at some point soon.

And then I heard the voices again . . . I couldn't hear distinctly but it sounded like "4 easy monthly something" and "Total Gym something or other." – I must be imagining this, I reasoned.

As I shook my head to get the vestige of sleep from my senses, it began to dawn on me that someone really was downstairs in my apartment.

I hastily did a mental inventory – had I locked the doors after Obie and I had taken our evening walk? . . . Yes, I was sure that I had.

Did I shut off the lights downstairs before going up to bed? . . . I was confident that I had.

Pulling back the bedcovers, I cautiously put my feet to the floor and began to walk downstairs to investigate.

As I approached the bottom of the staircase, I looked over at my loveable – though not-too-bright – chocolate Lab. He seemed to be asleep in his crate. . . . Actually, more than "seemed asleep," as he was sprawled out – in what charitably I can only describe as an uncomfortable position – snoring in short staccato bursts. I was fairly certain that he was not responsible for whatever sounds had awakened me.

I looked over into the living room and there, in my leather recliner – in my chair! – was the strangest sight that I think I have ever witnessed!

A tall man was sitting in my leather chair, holding the television remote in his right hand. As I stared, he turned his head and looked over at me.

"Hi there," he said, "I was waiting for you. . . . Nice jammies, by the way."

Reflexively, I looked down . . . and then looked back at him, mumbling something like "Thanks. They were a Christmas present from my wife."

Then this stranger-in-my-apartment-in-the-middle-of-the-night started to ease himself from the chair and, as he stood up, he pressed the button on the remote and the TV screen went blank.

"I was just channel surfing while I waited."

– While he waited? Waited for what? For me? What was he doing in my apartment in the first place? In MY black leather chair? Why didn't Obie bark or growl or do something when clearly someone had entered the apartment in the middle of the night?

. . . And then I found myself wondering just what WAS on TV at this hour?

As though he was reading my thoughts, this stranger said: "informercials."

"Oh," I said, without really thinking. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to see if you want to join with us. You see, I'm here as your Guide."

For really the first time since I had walked downstairs I began to take in the visage of the individual standing in front of me. He was very tall – extremely so – having an angular face, long white hair, and a full white beard. He was wearing a cloak or a coat of twigs, leaves, acorns, grassy stuff – it reminded me of the gilly suits worn by Marine snipers.

I had to admit that he was an imposing figure. It struck me that it was good that my Victorian duplex apartment had a high ceiling because otherwise he would be bent and stooped over. He was, oh, so tall.

Was I dreaming? Could this be real?

"21 hands," this stranger said.

"What?"

"21 hands," he repeated, "Everyone always wonders how tall I am. And no, you're not dreaming. Follow me," he said, "We need to talk."

Shades of Lewis Carroll and L. Frank Baum – what was going on?

As he opened the front door to the outside I found myself strangely drawn to him and willingly following, as his coat – or cloak or whatever his garment was – dropped a smattering of acorns, leaves, twigs and grassy stuff with each step he took as he lowered his head to pass through the door frame.

As the outside door opened wider – what my eyes beheld was simply unreal – truly unbelievable. There was no snow on the ground . . . it wasn't Rockford-like freezing cold! Instead, the air was pleasant – a little cool – but pleasant, nonetheless. I looked around me and saw that I had just entered a large open grassy area encircled by huge towering oak trees.

This very tall stranger – in the even stranger grassy cloak – motioned me to an oak stump as he himself lowered his elongated frame down to sit on another neighboring tree trunk.

"I'm here to talk to you about your joining us and becoming a Druid," he said.

"A Druid? Wait a minute!" I called out, "A Druid? What, like that ancient mysterious religious group that inhabited Scandinavia and northern Europe 300 years before the Common Era? Do you mean that group of ancient peoples that are said to have worshipped the goddesses, the moon and nature? The same ancient folks who created the megaliths at Stonehenge?"

"No, you're confusing us with the Celts and their practices, though you are correct on one point – Nature is an extremely important part of our belief system. And do watch your use of the term 'ancient' – some might find that term offensive. And regrettably 'No', we are not responsible for Stonehenge – though I wish we had been. It was built before we came onto the scene. Though, after it was abandoned, we have used it for our worship. It has such a good spiritual feel about it. It truly is great space!"

"What's does Druidism have to do with me? I'm a Unitarian Universalist – actually I'm a third generation Universalist – I was born into this faith tradition! It's what I believe in and give my life to!"

"Yes, I know all that. We just thought you might be at a place where you'd be ready to join us."

After a pregnant pause – I just sat there, not knowing if I was supposed to respond or not – but he continued, "You know, you might be a Druid and not even know it!"

– I felt a vague familiarity to his declaration yet, at that moment, I couldn't recall where I had previously heard it, or in what context.

Before I could think of anything to say, this very tall man said, "Okay, tell me what you believe as a Unitarian Universalist and then I'll let you know about what it means to me to be a Druid in good standing."

– I tried to gather my wits about me – but that didn't seem to be happening – so I just replied, "Alright, well, that sounds reasonable."

. . . I began slowly . . .

"For me, Unitarian Universalism is a faith tradition which welcomes all those who would believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. We encourage and accept one another in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

– I felt like I was getting in a groove now . . .

"We Unitarian Universalists hold differing theological perspectives – we are theists and humanists, earth-centered and agnostics, Christian and pagan, spiritualists and atheists – Yet even with these varying perspectives, we are united in our diversity and in the search to help create justice, equity and compassion in human relations, to respect the interdependent web of . . ."

"Whoa!" he said, cutting me off mid-sentence, "I am not asking you to recite some 'tried-and-true' stock statements. I'm not after your elevator speech. I want to know what you yourself believe. Give me your theology."

"I am a humanist," I replied. "And in saying 'humanist', I am referring to the affirmation of the significance of every individual, a commitment to human betterment, and the necessity for human beings to take responsibility for themselves and the world."

Actually, there are many kinds of humanism, each having an adjective that denotes its particularity: for example, the theistic designation of Jewish humanism and Christian or the nontheistic designation of secular humanism and religious humanism."

I took a breath, letting what I had just said sink in. He nodded toward me as though to say, 'Go on,' and the thought again reoccurred in my mind, "Boy, this guy is most definitely tall!" I continued to explain my faith.

"I consider myself a *humanistic religious naturalist*. What I mean by this is that I find religious meanings and values in nature. My naturalistic understanding enriches and deepens my humanist beliefs."

– In a moment of panic as to what to say next, I found my mind trying to recall how my colleagues, either Bill Murray, Davidson Loehr, John Ruskin Clark or my good friend, David Bumbaugh – how they, who are far more eloquent than I – would describe this particular faith stance that we share.

My mind suddenly went blank. And then I quickly remembered that Bill Murray once stated: "if religion is about affirming the sacred and encountering the holy, then, as a

humanistic religious naturalist, it is the universe and human life which is sacred and living humanly is holy.”

– I thought about how to put into order what needed to be said to explain my theological perspective . . .

A fully developed humanistic religious naturalism is, for me, a way of life that has a sense of meaningful depth and significance, encompassing a solid theoretical foundation and a great deal of experiential and practical wisdom. It is a way to live lives of significance and worth – a valid perspective that enables one to comprehend one’s place in society and in the universe. Being in respectful community with one another is an integrally important value for a humanistic religious naturalist.

Religious naturalism has adds a language of reverence, a deeper spiritual dimension and a rich and meaningful tradition to humanism.

Then I thought about such individuals like philosophers Spinoza, George Santayana and John Dewey, as well as theologians like Henry Nelson Wieman and Frederick May Eliot – all who have been proponents of religious naturalism.

For those of us who call ourselves naturalists, the natural universe is ultimate. It is the holy ground of our being in which we live and move and upon which we depend for our very existence.

Nature, then, refers to the totality of things in the universe.

. . . I was lost in my thoughts – trying to figure out what exactly to say that would help to explain my view of humanistic religious naturalism – when I was interrupted by the voice of the Guide.

“You do realize – I trust – that you have been using your out-loud voice?”

I hadn’t.

I truly believed I was just mulling all this over in my head.

The tall stranger – this Guide – lifted himself off of the stump on which he had been sitting and said, “Okay, here is why we would like you to consider joining with us and becoming a Druid. Your beliefs would fit right in with ours.

We Druids spend our time worshipping life in natural surroundings rather than in human-made structures. We find real ‘worth-ship’ experiences in communing with Life – finding it primarily in nature, especially in the sacred groves of oak trees.

We are extremely religious, believing literally that our human behavior and interactions became our expressions of religiosity. We believe that the way we act – day in and day out – is of ultimate importance. We Druids are one of the few peoples of human history who truly live lives of worth out of our religious precepts and beliefs.”

Looking directly at me, he continued, “It should not be difficult for you to recognize that there is a distinct parallel between Druidism and your humanistic religious naturalism and the Unitarian Universalist desire to have a religion that is carried into everyday life. This connection in holding a religious faith stance and theological grounding that is mirrored in one's everyday life should not be lost on you.”

He was either taking a breather or waiting for me to reply – I wasn't sure which – but then he continued:

“Theologically speaking, I would say that being a Druid is a much more demanding faith stance than any other theological perspective that you will ever encounter. We Druids – small in number, yet ardent in faith – believe in the inherent natural divinity of life itself. It means that we must be in reverent relationship with Nature and be as human as possible at all times.

Now, being human seems to many to be the easiest thing in the world, but that is a mere delusion, a trap of evil spirits. Pure, unadulterated humanity, living in harmonious relationship with nature, is about the hardest thing in the world to accomplish, and it often takes a lifetime of unceasing effort.

For centuries we Druids have tried to tell whoever we could get to listen of the destruction that humanity has done and continues to do by not living in harmony with Nature. Wasting life-given resources,” – gazing directly into my eye, he went on – “driving around in gas-guzzling cars and trucks that pollute the air . . .”

I held up my hand, interrupting him, “Don't go there! My truck, on its last two trips back to Colorado, averaged over 28 miles per gallon.”

He paused for a moment, and then continued, “Okay, partial credit for that. Yet, it is humanity, through its wanton disregard and selfishness, which is responsible for the devastating effects of global warming and the wholesale destruction of the natural environment. It is humanity – in not thinking about what it is doing – that is dooming itself and Nature.”

– I didn't argue that point as, sadly, I knew he was correct.

“To be a Druid in good standing, one must first of all understand the nature of humanity. One has to know and accept the fact that humanity was designed for something – just as an acorn is designed to become an oak tree.

Until filtered through human minds, beauty has no significance. Until filtered through the human soul, the spiritual experience of life has no meaningful reference point. The personal sees, appreciates, and interprets the natural.

Druidism maintains that we must translate our natural, daily experiences into worthwhile human behavior and actions. As Druids we appreciate the spiritual kinship with Nature, commit to being in relationship with other human beings, and exalt the inherent promise and potentiality in the gift of being human.

One has to recognize what it means to become as human as possible: how the reason and the will and the appetites work together, how humanity can live and control its humanity without falling into the error of angelism on the one hand, or bestiality on the other.

When an individual has mastered this knowledge – knowledge that involves retraining the emotions as much as the mind – then one is ready to do only those things which are of benefit to one's true self in harmony with all of life that exists around one.

Being a Druid is not easy. Not too many people accomplish it, but we think you are ready to join our ranks."

I then asked him, "Why me? Just what does this have to do with me?"

"Well, pshaw! It has everything to do with you! Your Scandinavian heritage, your humanistic religious naturalist theology, and do not forget how much you respect and love the mighty Oak trees."

– I had to give him that. I have always been partial to oak. It's my favorite wood.

. . . But who says "Pshaw!" anymore?

"You were using your out-loud voice again." He rejoined. "And, for the record, "Pshaw" is a perfectly valid exclamatory word. It should be used more often than it is!"

– I felt properly chastened and thought that he might just be correct – we probably should say "Pshaw" more often than we do.

Then, pulling back the sleeve of his coat or cloak – or whatever this unusual garment that he was wearing was – he looked at his wrist watch. – I couldn't help but notice that he had a Suunto X-Lander Expedition watch. I know that it is difficult to find. It's the Special Limited Edition model with the negative face display . . . how'd he get one?

As my covetous thoughts ranged, he announced: "It is time for me to go, but do think seriously about what I've said. We do believe that you'd make a good Druid. Do think about it. I'll be back in touch."

I rose from the stump I had been sitting on and, turning around, opened the door to my apartment. I went inside and saw Obie stretching in his crate – his expression having the “it’s time to feed me” face.

. . . Well, to be completely honest, he always has that “I could eat now” look.

I checked the clock on my desk and the one in the living room and they both read exactly the same time – 5:40 am. I went into the kitchen and both clocks there also read 5:40 am. Instantly, it came back to me that I needed to adjust or reset the clocks in my bedroom so that they would register the same time.

I proceeded to put dog food in Obie’s bowl and he rapidly engulfed his breakfast. I opened the door to the side yard and let him out to do his thing. I went upstairs to shave and shower. As I took a hot shower, my mind was racing – in an attempt to make rhyme or reason of what I believed had just transpired.

It had to be a dream! Yes, I must have been dreaming! That had to be it . . . even though so much of what had taken place seemed so real.

– Maybe it was something that I had eaten . . .

I thought back on what I had prepared for dinner the night before – a turkey casserole with a side of French-cut green beans topped by slivered almonds and a light cream sauce – yet, that didn’t seem like the kind of meal that would produce such a vivid fantasy.

Convinced it wasn’t the food, I found my thoughts drifting to what I felt that I had heard from this exceptionally tall stranger.

Though I am fairly confident that Camus would never have considered himself a Druid – his words immediately popped into my head:

“If we could only accept ourselves as what we should become, half of our battles would be over. The human being is the only creature that refuses to be what it is.”

. . . Ah, there’s truth there, to be sure.

No wonder that the Druids continue to be such a small theological group . . . maybe it explains the recruiting effort.

Ultimately, though, I recognized that I most definitely had been having a dream all along – albeit a disparate amalgamation of strangeness. Unfortunately, I just couldn’t figure out what caused the strange dream in the first place.

Yet, the one thing that I did know was that I needed to get on with my day. So, I finished getting dressed, tossed a dog biscuit to Obie – which he caught, because it’s food – and

went out, brushed the snow off of the truck and headed to the church to begin my work day.

Unfortunately, I had underestimated my timing for the morning and I got to the office later than I would have liked.

. . . It took me considerably more time than I had anticipated to sweep up all the twigs and acorns that were scattered on the floor around my favorite leather chair.

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