

“There Be Dragons There!”

Delivered by Howell Lind, Interim Senior Minister

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READING

“Our Deepest Fear”

Often mis-attributed to Nelson Mandela’s inaugural address, the reading for this morning – “Our Deepest Fear” – is from Marianne Williamson’s book *Return to Love*.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talents, and fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.
Your playing small doesn’t serve the world.
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people will not feel insecure around you.
We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.
It is not in just some of us; it is in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give people permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

SERMON

Long ago I came across the poem “Armful” by Robert Frost. I return to it continually because, for me, the poem says something about the human condition in a manner that is neither pessimistic nor unrealistically euphoric. Robert Frost’s poem “Armful” goes like this:

“For every parcel I stoop down to seize
I lose some other off my arms and knees,
And the whole pile is slipping, bottles, buns, –
Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,
Yet nothing I should care to leave behind.
With all I have to hold with, hand and mind

And heart, if need be, I will do my best
To keep their building balanced on my breast.
I crouch down to prevent them as they fall;
Then sit down in the middle of them all.
I had to drop the armful in the road
And try to stack them in a better load.”

The idea of life as a balancing act that Robert Frost presents in his poem “Armful” fits in rather nicely with what I would like to speak about this Sunday.

Today I hope to share a most powerful secret of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition.

Along the way I am going to speak about several other practical things as well – things like complex systems, religious experience, water vapor, dragons, fear as a conditioned response and the constancy of change.

In his book, The Lost World, the sequel to the widely popular Jurassic Park, Michael Crichton wrote the following:

“The Sante Fe Institute had explored the behavior of a great variety of complex systems – corporations in the marketplace, neurons in the human body, enzyme cascades within a single cell, the group behavior of migratory birds, systems so complex that it had not been possible to study them before the advent of the computer.

It did not take long before the scientists began to notice that complex systems showed certain common behaviors. They started to think of these behaviors as characteristic of all complex systems. They realized that these behaviors could not be explained by analyzing the components of the systems. The time-honored scientific approach of reductionism – taking the watch apart to see how it worked – didn’t get you anywhere with complex systems, because the interesting behavior seemed to arise from the spontaneous interaction of the components. The behavior wasn’t planned or directed; it just happened. Such behavior was therefore called ‘self organizing.’

Of the self-organizing behaviors two are of particular interest to the study of evolution. One is adaptation. We see it everywhere. Corporations adapt to the marketplace, brain cells adapt to signal traffic, the immune system adapts to infection, animals adapt to their food supply. We have come to think that the ability to adapt is characteristic of complex systems – and may be one reason why evolution seems to lead toward more complex organisms.

But even more important is the way complex systems seem to strike a balance between the need for order and the imperative to change. Complex

systems tend to locate themselves at a place we call the edge of chaos. We imagine the edge of chaos as a place where there is enough innovation to keep a living system vibrant, and enough stability to keep it from collapsing into anarchy. Finding the balance point is a delicate matter – if a living system drifts too close, it risks falling over into incoherence and dissolution; but if the system moves too far away from the edge, it become rigid, frozen, totalitarian. Both conditions lead to extinction. Only at the edge of chaos can complex systems flourish. ”

. . . Only at the edge of chaos can complex systems flourish.

I cannot conjure any other image that more aptly summarizes the human condition. I would venture to guess that many – if not most of us here this morning – feel as if the edge of chaos is often just a few steps away much of the time.

Yet, as Lewis Thomas noted, in his The Lives Of A Cell – Notes Of A Biology Watcher, each one of us – each unique human individual – is a four billion-to-one long shot. Thomas suggests that we – each and every complex living system – are so statistically improbable that we should be dancing for the sheer joy that we are here . . . and living.

Yet chaos and fear can often dominate our living days, cementing our feet to the floor, making us unable to dance. The need is powerful to have some sense of control over the chaos.

Recall the famous tale of the drunk who boarded a bus carrying a large cage covered with brown paper. As he sat down, holding on his lap this large cage covered with brown paper, the rest of the passengers on the bus stared at him. Pretty soon one of the passengers sitting nearby mustered the courage to ask the inebriated man what was in the cage. “A mongoose,” the drunk replied. “But what do you need a mongoose for?” asked the other passenger. “To frighten off the snakes of the delirium tremens,” answered this most articulate alcoholic. “But those are not real snakes,” said the passenger. “I know,” said the drunk, “But, you see, it’s not a real mongoose either.”

One of the functions of religion is to ward off life’s snakes – be they real or imagined – to serve as a palliative for the pain, stress, and fears that accompanies being human. Until recently, Unitarian Universalism has not always performed this function very well. One of the reasons is that liberal religion in the past has devoted considerable energy to pointing our fingers at

other religions and shouting, “It’s not a real mongoose! It’s not a real mongoose! Or, it isn’t my mongoose.”

The operative question with which Unitarian Universalism has approached religion has been the query: “Is it true?” Are the beliefs of various religious faiths defensible before the bar of empirical inquiry?

Yet I would suggest that the far more important questions are: “Does it work? Is it helpful? Whether or not the mongoose is real, does it help to ward off the snake?”

I want to posit, in other words, that religious experience is at least as important as religious knowledge.

Now if there is any validity at all to my contention, then we, as religious liberals, must adjust our posture toward religious faith. And we must begin by adjusting our perspective toward the world.

If I were to ask you to hold up your hand in front of you and have you tell me what you see, you will likely say that you see five fingers attached to a palm. But you might just as readily say that you see four spaces separating five digits. The reason we glom onto the fingers rather than the relationships between the fingers is because we have been taught to see the world as made up of a conglomeration of separate and distinct entities. But it is just as legitimate – indeed, even more so – to recognize reality and to see the world in relational or connective terms.

– Or, consider the person sitting beside you. Regardless of how emotionally connected you may feel toward that person, you still regard her or his body as physically distinct from your own. And yet, how do we account for the fact that, within five minutes of sitting down beside one another, both of you began to exchange water vapor?

Every breath we take contains at least one atom breathed by every person who has ever lived. Further, our entire bodies undergo full replacement every ten years. There is not a single molecule in any one of us today that was there a decade ago. No wonder so many of us struggle with the perennial question: “Who am I?”

Truly, we human beings are made of stardust. Like all other matter in the universe, we are the residuum of the primeval fireball, the so-called “Big Bang.”

We know that the energy released by that original cosmic event still flows through our veins. In a very real sense, it is literally true that we are sister and brother to everything that is. This is what our Unitarian Universalist Purposes and Principles are talking about when they refer to our “respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.”

The concept of an interdependent cosmos is an appealing one. A significant part of that appeal is its emphasis upon the “relationality of being” which asks us to focus our attention on our experience of the world around us, not just on our knowledge of it. It asks us not just to learn about the world but to live it, love it and tend it.

Cartographers of the old world, when they drew their maps and came to the edges of their maps – to the territories that were unexplored and therefore unchartable – commonly filled in these spaces with the words: “There be dragons there! . . . Beyond this place, there be dragons!

What a telling allegory for the way in which we human beings so often face the unknowns of life. “There be dragons there!” To be confronted with the mystery, the unknown, the uncontrollable is to be pulled into the world of fear.

The study of human behavior is a discipline which is not easily subject to proofs and hard evidence, but it has been theorized and generally accepted that fear stems from our most basic survival instincts. Just like any other animal on the planet, we human beings keep our distance from some things in order to protect ourselves, in order to keep from being harmed by them.

Fear is a conditioned response. We learn to be afraid through experience. Thrust your hand into a burning fire just once and I can pretty much guarantee what your attitude towards flames will be. We learn to be afraid through experience.

I would guess it is the same kind of innate fear that caused the people of the ancient world to believe that the unknown areas of the earth were populated by dragons. They didn’t know what was out there and so they endowed it with the wildest creatures of their imaginations. There be dragons there!

In a letter dated January 21, 1829, President Andrew Jackson received the following plea: “The canal system of this country is being threatened by the spread of a new form of transportation known as ‘railroads’ and the federal government must preserve the canals....If canal boats are supplanted by ‘railroads,’ serious unemployment will result. Captains, cooks, drivers, hostlers,

repairman and lock tenders will be left without means of livelihood, not to mention the numerous farmers now employed growing hay for the horses....As you may well know, Mr. President, 'railroad' carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of 15 miles per hour by 'engines' which, in addition to endangering life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside, setting fire to crops, scaring the livestock and frightening women and children. The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed."

This letter was signed by the then Governor of New York, Martin Van Buren – who, nine years later, would become the eighth President of the United States and then he himself, as the country's leader, had to deal with the changes of a growing nation.

One doesn't have to go that far back in history to find the fear and resistance to change accompanied by shortsightedness. In 1949, *Popular Mechanics* magazine, forecasting the relentless march of science, announced to a stunned and amazed readership: "Computers in the future may weigh no more than one and a-half tons." – Now, that's some laptop!

Just six years earlier, in 1943, Thomas Watson, the chairman of IBM stated: "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers." As late as 1977, Ken Olson, former president, chairman and founder of Digital Equipment Corporation asserted, "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home."

If you will – recall the Beloit College's Mindset List for the incoming college class of 2010 which I shared as the reading as part of our Homecoming Sunday last month. For those of us born before 1988, the list helps us recognize a small part of the constant stream of changes that we have undergone – at least in the last twenty years. The mind boggles at the thought of how much has progressed and changed in our world in our lifetimes.

Still, it is change that is the constant, confronting us daily as we attempt to live our complex lives balancing on the edge between chaos and order. Change has always been a part of the human condition. What is different now is the pace of change, and the prospect that it will come faster and faster, affecting every part of life. The age in which we live is changing so fast that we often feel that we do not have time to adjust before more change takes place.

Change can be defined as any planned or unplanned alteration in the status quo of an organism, situation, or process. Change may happen through transmission – without deliberate or conscious social actions or thought.

Planned change is an intended, designed, or purposeful attempt by an individual, group, organization or larger social system to influence directly the status quo of itself, another organism or a situation.

The truth is that change will occur. Yet we can choose to be active participants and go purposely ahead with the flow. We are all on a journey forward and what provides some balance to the edge of chaos is vision and overall perspective. We need to be engaged and involved in the process itself rather than feel imprisoned by our environment or our fears. “As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others” – to repeat Marianne Williamson’s closing words from this Sunday’s reading.

Earlier, I promised to share the secret of our Unitarian Universalist faith stance.

. . . Well, I think that I have hinted at it at several points so far.

Since 1841 – for over one hundred and sixty-five years – individuals who have sought answers, understandings, and a faith stance that feels reasonable and makes sense for their lives have found the liberal religious perspective of Unitarian Universalism here in this northwest corner of Illinois. Through its different iterations and metamorphoses, the Unitarian Universalist Church here in Rockford has been a place that deals with the fears and insecurities of our shared human existence. This particular religious community has existed to help individuals reach some level of religious maturity, to learn that the world we yearn for and the meanings we seek will not be for ourselves alone.

This congregation exists – and has existed from its very beginnings – to help folks add some grace and beauty and justice to the world in ways we cannot do alone, to help chart the unknown, to push back the spaces where there are dragons.

In a world of constant changes, where fears and chaos often seem to have the upper hand, it is the religious community that becomes our anchor – our foundation – our stepping stone for achieving a balance on that edge of chaos.

Here, in the rich and rewarding diversity of our individual unique personalities, we grow and prosper in community with one another.

It is here that we together find the courage and the strength to embrace the growing future.

It is here that the dragons of fear and insecurity are exposed by the light of shared inquiry and exploration, by reasoned thought and a commonality of shared values.

Ours is a faith that seeks a world transformed – a world transformed by each one of us being in gracious relationship with ourselves, with others, and with our world. Our Unitarian Universalist faith stance calls upon us to meet the chaos of the world with an openness of possibility, to utilize the strength of our religious experiencing of life to ward off the fears of the world with moments of healing graciousness.

In our living on the edge of chaos – in a world of constant change and progress forward, our liberal religious faith seeks to find meaning and significance in relationship – in an interdependent connectedness with one another – as we engage in the process of living with one another.

This powerful secret of our Unitarian Universalist faith is that it calls upon us not merely to exist or survive but to joyously celebrate and embrace the process of growth and change through productive living. And, when we do, we behold a glimpse of what Tennessee Williams saw as our effort to “snatch the eternal from the desperately fleeting.”

Ours is a faith that encourages a joyous hope for the future, exalts the precious moments of graciousness, and rejoices in the connectedness of people one with each other. We are called upon to invite others into sharing this exciting adventure with us.

The amazing part is that when we do move forward together, there is truly nothing that we, in our shared faith commitment, cannot do or accomplish. In the promise of our shared Unitarian Universalist faith, I invite you to live an intentional covenant of gracious relationship with each other that will enable each one of us to find a place of balance on the edge of chaos, transforming the world through our joyous celebration of living life purposely, intentionally, fully and well.

So May It Always Be
Shalom
and Amen.

Howell K. Lind
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