

Sermon 10/31/2010- Sherborn. Taking off the Scary Mask

Once, not too long ago, in a land not too far away, the Great Spirit walked among us humans for a brief time. You see, the Great Spirit was curious about us. She had formed our blue and green planet, rolling the wet mass between her own two hands. She separated the light from the dark and pulled the water out of the dusty land. Then, just to see what would happen, the Great Spirit threw in some amino acids, some simple elements that would later become what we now call life. She tossed the amino acids in the water and, realizing she was late for an appointment, dashed off. The Great Spirit had been wondering about her little blue-green planet for some time- how had it faired?

When the Great Spirit got to Earth she quickly realized she needed some kind of a disguise. The sight of so much Divinity would kill any creature that saw her. So she donned a simple mask, like a Venetian carnival mask, fixing it to her face with long ribbons that she tied behind her hair. Thus concealed, she began to inspect the planet she had created so long ago.

The thing is, it is hard to stay disguised when you are Divine. Everywhere the Great Spirit walked flowers sprung from the ground. A gentle, joyful glow poured out from behind her mask. She gave off an amazing fragrance- the combined smell of summer sunflowers, spicy fall leaves, Christmas cookies, and clean Spring rain. She was so incredibly magical that every creature knew at once that she was the Great Spirit, and animals and reptiles and birds and people gathered around her everywhere she went, excited to be in the presence of so much love. The Great Spirit walked across the whole Earth and, pleased with her creation, took her leave, returning home- because while she loved the Grand Canyon and the Egyptian Pyramids and the fjords of Scandinavia and the golden Saharan dessert, she didn't have much patience for the dirty air and the vicious campaign advertising and the disrespect shown to the ocean creatures. So off went the Great Spirit, leaving all the creatures of the Earth to rejoice in their sacred visitor.

The funny thing was, as the humans swapped stories about the Great Spirits' visit, they realized they remembered very

different things. Everyone remembered the Great Spirits long flowing hair, the color of a strawberry. Everyone remembered the gentle creases that surrounded her mouth. And there was no doubt as to the magical warmth they felt in her presence. But after that, their memories differed. Some people remembered a great stomping warrior, with sturdy boots and a mask painted to look like a reptilian monster, with a great rhinoceros horn poking out above each eye. Some remembered a gentle step and a mask covered with flowers, flowers from every season and every part of the world, orchids twinning with daisies, topped with a lotus blossom. Others remembered a purple silk mask with a jeweled crown above, a regal queen greeting her subjects. Some people remembered the Great Spirit as a animal, a deer or a lion or a slinking cat. Some remembered her as a humble child, poor and barefoot, clearly in need of a good meal.

Many people remembered the Great Spirit as looking almost exactly like them, with their skin color and their gender and their build. The only thing people could actually agree on was that their

memory of the Great Spirit was the right one, and everyone else's was wrong. But how could everyone have seen the same Great Spirit, and remembered her so differently?

My beloved spiritual community, happy Samhain (said Sew-in). Samhain is the ancient Gaelic festival that has inspired so much of our Halloween tradition. The Gaels believed that the year was divided into two half's, the light half- Spring and Summer- and the dark half- Autumn and Winter. Samhain is the end of the light season and the start of the dark. Even more interestingly, the Gaels believed that since so many things were dying around Samhain- plants, leaves, animals- that the veil between the living and the dead was especially thin- thin enough that some spirits of the dead could pass through. People wore costumes to scare off the spirits, and they told stories. Stories to scare off demons, and stories to teach a lesson.

This Samhain I have told you a story, a story that helps me to understand the divisions between humans when it comes to understanding the Divine. We all see the Great Mystery so

differently, and usually that is something that I applaud- the Divine is certainly too big for one human's definition. The problem isn't our diversity of thought about God, the problem is that one image of the Sacred is holding sway in our nation. The problem is that the warrior God, angry deity, seems to be the only one who affects the political and social climate in our land.

We live in a country where religious conservatives have claimed the Sacred as belonging to them alone, and defined who belongs and doesn't belong in the blessed community. They are influencing and even creating legislation that affects or obliterates the teaching of sex education in schools, the teaching of evolution, preventing the scientific discovery that could result from stem cell research, and obstructing access to abortion and birth control. They have turned the loving act of devotion that is marriage into a way to control who is allowed to publicly love who. Religious conservatives have commandeered the great mystery that some call God- they have defined who God is and who God loves and doesn't love. The Biblical narrative of the man Jesus, a story of

justice, equality, and most importantly love has been corrupted, so that now those who publicly proclaim to follow Jesus sometimes use their religion as a weapon of hate.

And where are religious liberals? Why are we too afraid to stand up and announce that we think they are misrepresenting Divine Love? Why can't we announce that we believe that the Spirit of Life wants same-sex couples to marry, that children should be taught facts and not fear about sex? Somehow a conservative view of religion won out in this country, and now faith has a narrow and love-less definition.

I imagine none of this is new to you. However, it is said that at Samhain the veil between the living and the dead is so thin that our ancestors can speak to us. Can you hear them? As the religious descendants of two radically liberal faiths, what would our ancestors think of the world we inhabit now?

I'm afraid they wouldn't be too pleased. The dead are speaking and they are disappointed that we seem to be giving up the Divine without a fight. After all Universalism began as a

evangelical protest movement. Settlers from all over Europe were arriving in the United States and beginning new churches in new towns. The popular gospel of the day was Calvinist- a belief that, aside from a few select souls who were chosen long before their birth, everyone was going to hell. And not just any hell, but a hell of fiery furnaces and eternal pain, where, regardless of your good works on earth, you would writhe in misery for eternity. The Calvinist God wore an angry demon mask and hated nearly all of us. The foremost preacher of the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards, said that God was furious with us for the disgustingly sinful nature we were born with, and was dangling each of us over a pit of fire, with only his (and it was always a He), with only his divine mercy staying his hand as he decided who would burn and who would be spared. All we could do was cower and beg for mercy. We were sinners in the hands of an angry God.

The popular theology of the time was simple and terrifying. God was angry and we'd better repent.

But the Universalists begged to differ. The Universalists said

that God was love, pure love, too kind to damn any of the children of creation. It was a radical message.

As a child Hosea Ballou snuck out behind his father's barn to pour over the Bible, looking for the angry God that he heard his minister father preach about in Sunday services. He couldn't find that God, and neither can I. But Ballou did find a lot of passages about love, about the Divine's love for us and how we should never fail to love each other. Ballou became a preacher and taught good, radical Universalism- that God was an infinite mystery who didn't need Jesus to die to atone for human sin- God was too big to be offended by our little misdeeds. Ballou spoke of an Infinite Love who was the opposite of the angry and unforgiving parent that Calvinist ministers spoke of.

The early Universalists worked hard to make sure that the Divine Mystery wasn't defined in exclusively hateful terms. Preachers like Ballou taught the radical message of God's love, with no backing from a denominational body or even guarantee of a place to sleep or a meal to eat. Historian and minister Carl

Seaburg writes that Universalist circuit ministers rode on horseback from town to town, across the sparsely settled new country, preaching in theaters, barns, forest clearings, in people's homes, even in the churches if the Calvinist pastor would let them in. The early Universalists traveled despite discomfort and a lack of security, because they felt their message was essential- they had to let people know not to fear the fires of hell. They had to take the scary mask off of God that the Calvinists were holding onto so firmly.

Imagine this with me. Imagine being a settler on the open plain, sitting in a revival tent, the night dark as pitch all around you, and who knows what is out there. Sitting on a hard wooden chair while a preacher railed at you, railed, saying that you were most likely damned, that the elect were chosen before birth and the rest of us were hopeless, that when our sin-filled souls left our bodies we would burn in torment for eternity. Can you feel that terror in your heart? Would you start to believe that you were sinful, defiled, deserving of a punishment chosen before you were

even alive?

And imagine the Universalist circuit rider coming into town on horseback. Your Calvinist preacher tells you to stay away from his heathen talk but you sneak over to the clearing where he is preaching and you hear that God is love. You hear that the Divine loves us and that there is no hell, not in the Bible, not anywhere, that hell is the creation of human's dark imagination. And the terrifying mask fall off of the Great Spirit and you feel God's love like cool water soothing your anxiety. You are loved. Whoever you are, you are loved.

This is the power of Universalism. This is my amazing grace- Universal love. The early Universalists were so passionate about this love, about using this love to overcome fear, that they risked their lives to tell people about it.

So why are we religious liberals having such a hard time wrestling the mask off God? Why do conservatives have a monopoly on God talk in the political and social sphere? We have amazing grace- we have the message of love.

As a member of the UU young adult network I meet a lot of remarkable people, young people who were born into other faith traditions and came to us. Cathy was raised in a conservative household and cherished her faith deeply. But when she came out as a lesbian she was removed from leadership in her Christian student group, shunned by her friends, and encouraged to get therapy that would ‘make her right again.’ She considered suicide, before choosing instead to live- but to live a life without God, a life without any part or parcel of sacredness. And then she found liberal religion. She found a religious tradition that takes the sacred seriously without assigning Divinity a scary, judgmental mask. She found Unitarian Universalism, and she found that the Great Mystery loved her just as she was.

Another friend thought that God couldn’t love her after she had an abortion- that’s what her faith tradition told her. So she slunk away from church, full of guilt and self-hatred. Imagine her surprise when, at a rally for abortion rights, she met Unitarian Universalists marching with the Religious Coalition for

Reproductive Choice. She too belonged in the beloved community- she too was a part of universal love.

I am not telling you these stories so we can pat ourselves on the back. Yes, I am proud to be a Unitarian Universalist, and proud to take the scary mask off of the Great Mystery. But it is Samhain and our religious ancestors are not happy. We have hidden our light, our saving grace, and become an insular religious body.

As Unitarian Universalist minister Harvey Joyner writes “We have a vision for creating a more loveable and livable world...why are we not out there telling any and everyone in our community about it? Instead of ridiculing fundamentalists for their seemingly boundless zeal and overly simplistic answers, why are we smugly content with our self description as ‘the best kept secret in town?’ .. Our cause is for the enhancement of human dignity and for creating inclusive circles of love. That is our gospel. That is our good news. Isn’t it about time we go tell it on the mountain.?”

Isn’t it about time we go tell it on the mountain? Isn’t it about time we let the world know that our truth is love, and that our love

is inclusive. Every week in this very congregation we say some version of the following: Whoever you are, whoever you love, wherever you came from, you are welcome here. Because we know that God does not wear a scary mask. Because we know that the Divine Mystery has enough love for everyone.

We have a message of love that could change the world, if only we would pass along that message. I know-evangelism is scary. Telling our story is scary, when nearly all the other people talking about faith are also talking about an angry God. But it is time to dismantle the monopoly- take it from those who confuse God with hate and exclusion. It is time to stand up as religious liberals and tell the people in our lives that we bear sacred witness to the power of love. What if we told every politician, every newspaper editorial page, every co worker and friend, that the Love that we worship wants every person to have equal rights. That our God says everyone should be allowed to marry, to choose whether or not to bear children, to seek scientific discoveries. When we reclaim the Divine we stand on the side of love. And we

strip the scary mask from the face of the Divine, so that all can see her light.

Happy Samhain. Our ancestors are speaking- can you hear them? Universalist John Murray has a message for you, for me, for everyone in our liberal faith community. 18th century Universalist John Murray is saying: Go out into the highways and byways. Give the people something of your new vision. You possess only a small light, but uncover it! Let it shine! Use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them, not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.”

Prayer from 10/17/2010

We hike up and up, toward a summit that is always just around the next bend, using our hands to grip rough rock edges, our legs strain to pull us up, our knees scratched, elbows bandaged, faces sweaty. Our feet blister in worn hiking boots, our socks never stay up, sliding beneath our heels the second we have forgotten about them. The summit is

always just a few steps further- we are so close!- we look at the ground ahead of us, not up, not stopping to catch our breath, one foot in front of the other in an eternal march upward But today, **Today we stop**. We catch our breath, we wipe our sweaty faces on our shirtsleeves. We look out. eyes softening as we gaze out over the tops of the trees we passed hours ago, the sun catching the light on the leaves, making them shine an thousand different greens. We notice the sun reflecting on the pond near where we camped last night, and realize- wow. We have come so far. What great heights we have hiked to. Who knew we could come so far? We congratulate each other- I am so proud of you! I am so proud of me! We embrace, laughing at how a hug can stretch sore muscles, laughing at how our packs seem lighter when we are in each other's arms. The breeze refreshes and we make a mental note to stop more often, to look out over the treetops more often. But even if we forget, even if for the next six days we slog up the mountain with our gaze cast low, at least today we stop. And we marvel.

Today we marvel not just at our own journey, but that of our world family. This week in Chile the miners were freed, from 2000 feet below the earth they were raised. Thank God. From the darkness as black as pitch, they were raised. Thank God. As they were embraced by family we saw tears stream down their dusty cheeks, and felt tears stream down our faces as well. We looked in their eyes and saw the divinity in them, and saw that it matched our own godliness. Our hearts soared together as life won out over death. One minor said that under the ground, his heart was a battleground between God and the devil. And that God had won, God had won long before rescue pods were lowered, God won because hope beat out despair. In the deepest darkness love blotted out fear.

Oh eternal mystery, who holds us with hands invisible, let us choose God over the devil. Let us choose hope over despair. Sometimes the darkness is all around us and we pray, we pray so fervently, that the light will blot out our darkness. Let there be light, God said, and there was- and Great Mystery who goes by so many names, let that light fill us, blotting out the darkness. Let your light shine in our deepest heart of hearts, and from the eyes of those we encounter everyday.

Today we celebrate with our brothers and sisters in Chile- the miners are home! As the world held it's breath engineers and scientists and experts of every kind and every color worried over diagrams and models, trying to free the souls trapped 2000 feet below our fair green grass. And wasn't it terrifying, a little bit- to see the pictures, the man who looked just like my dad, the man who could have lived down the street- trapped so far away. Today we stand with our world family and celebrate their safety, their return to the sunlight. May all who are so oppressed be freed. May everyone have a chance to bask in the light of day, then return home to sleep, fresh night breezes caressing their face. May all be so free.

Prayer for 10/24/2010

Out of the cacophony of voices that trouble our busy minds, we seek you, oh Great Mystery. We seek the wisdom that lies deeply buried inside of us, waiting to be uncovered, if only we had time to listen. The leaves lie in colorful piles, obscuring the grass sleeping beneath. We take crunchy footsteps over them, knowing that before the earth is unburied the snow will come to cover it in another soft layer. So it is with our minds, our internal wisdom covered with worry and business. Help us to uncover that wisdom today, so that we can guide our lives according to the principles we hold dear, so that we may live with virtue and with vigor. Let us uncover our truest heart so that we can say a resounding yes to life.

Spirit of Life we come to you today surrounded by the majesty of autumn. Thank you for the leaves, burning with light on their way back to the earth. Thank you for the light that slants through windows in soft golden sheets. As the earth prepares for the slumber of winter let us also respect the seasonal rhythms of our days. Great Spirit, remind us to rest. Remind us that like all creatures we cannot constantly move- we need to take time to recover, to renew. We must give ourselves some Sabbath, just as our Earth takes the winter as her Sabbath. Without the quiet snow-covered slumber of winter, there would be no bursting forth of color, of birdsong, in the Spring.

We too cannot blossom without a time of ease, ease of movement and of mind. The ease of rest. As the Earth prepares for her rest, let us find time for our rest as well.

Remind us to be gentle, Spirit that unites us, gentle toward ourselves, toward each other, and toward the spinning island that we inhabit. May gentleness in all things be our mantra as we allow the compassion we feel for those we love to well up and overflow, spilling out, causing us to feel compassion for all our fellow inhabitants of this island planet. As we sit in this beautiful, historic sanctuary, we ask that all who are suffering, all who are in pain or in fear, find peace.

As elections nears let our overflowing compassion help us to resist the boundaries that artificially divide us, as we remember that all we want, all that any of us want, is happiness for those we love, for an end to suffering and to worry, for a world that is more just, more fair. We ask for wisdom for our leaders, that they to abandon the petty squabbling that scars our nation's conscious, and work for a world where justice will flow down like water, and peace like an ever flowing stream. May all of this earth's creatures enjoy that justice, and that peace.

