

Epiphany: The Practice of Discovery

Say!

*I like green eggs and ham!
I do! I like them, Sam-I-am!*

Once you've tasted green eggs and ham, can you ever go back? Can you ever honestly say that you would not eat them in the rain or in the dark...or even with a goat?

An epiphany is a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience. Epiphanies can be transformational. Indeed, our Unitarian Universalist faith affirms the role of seeking and discovery in developing a mature faith. Faith is not fixed for us, revelation is not sealed, truth grows and changes. Or as we say in our covenant every Sunday: "This we covenant...to seek truth in love."

There are times in our life when new insights come our way, whether we are seeking them out or they are just thrust upon us. The Christian tradition celebrates Epiphany on January 6, which is held as the date when the magi (or wise men) saw the baby Jesus and recognized him as the son of God. We speak also of the Buddha's enlightenment (the word comes from the Middle or Old English – to make fast or fasten, and many other languages which come down to "bright" or "white") when after 49 days of meditation he is said to attained it.

Thoughts/questions for discussion and discernment on your own, around that table, or with each other:

Is enlightenment a state of being? Does enlightenment follow epiphany?

Once we have these deep insights, our lives can be affected in large or small ways. Is it possible to "un-have" an epiphany?

One of the resources for this month is an interview with the physicist Arthur Zajonc, who talks about science as born from epiphany—a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something. One of the most famous scientific epiphanies is Sir Isaac Newton's sudden insight that a falling apple is no different from the Moon's orbit around the earth. As students studying the effects of gravity, we are taught all the pieces leading to the theory. But, once we understand the theory can we say that we have had an epiphany of our own? Can an epiphany be reproduced or shared? Is there a recipe for epiphany?

People who have found a calling or vocation frequently claim to have had an epiphany that led them to it. Their epiphany returns again and again until they acknowledge it. Similarly, when we go through something difficult, (whether it's the death of a loved one, divorce, loss of a job) we find ourselves sometimes unable to escape painful insights. Epiphanies that uncover the fragility of life or reveal how little we really do control can pierce our view of the world, and can bring us a deeper appreciation for what we have.

This month, as you explore your new year, you might want to consider some of these questions and keep yourself open to epiphany. It may come from anything, even Dr. Seuss.

Additional questions on the theme of epiphany and discovery:

- Have you had an epiphany? Can you describe it? How did it make you feel?
- If you have had an epiphany, did it change your life? For the experience to be an epiphany, must it be life-changing?
- Are there epiphanies you are missing? Is there an area in your life where you wish you could have an epiphany? Could you force that (or any) epiphany to occur?
- Are epiphanies permanent? Once you've had an epiphany, can you go back to the way things were?
- Can you have the same epiphany twice?
- Have you had an epiphany that called you to do or be something? Is a calling different from an epiphany? If so, how?
- After an epiphany, did you learn or realize something true about the world or was it just a private change in your point of view or perspective?
- When you've had an epiphany, did it just come to you or were you seeking it out?

Suggested Readings:

<http://ourtakeonfreedom.wordpress.com/2011/04/28/an-epiphany-moving-beyond-my-invisible-walls/>

Tonight I attended an Anusara yoga class and left the room floating. I felt connected with my body and – though my outer skeleton felt strong – I was so light that I almost felt hollow inside.

I have practiced “power” and flow styles of yoga before, but always shied away from the more spiritual and meditative practices. My main focus was always getting a strong workout so I perhaps too soon dismissed other styles as not being a good fit.

At the start of tonight’s class, the group breathed together three times, exhaling “Om” and chanting in Sanscrit. I didn’t partake in the chant, both because I didn’t know the words and because my entire body was on edge. The chanting seemed eerily cultlike. As my Dad would say, the whole group gave themselves over to “California hippie spirituality” and what did I need that for? Most strongly, my gut reaction was “this could be avoda zara (foreign worship) and halacha (traditional Jewish law) would never allow me to participate.” While I have often and even recently viewed halacha as a guideline for living my life, I have long ago stopped viewing it as an obligatory code, which made my level of discomfort of being in that room interesting.

The first time that you do anything “wrong” or “different” or however you’d like to describe it, it feels weird. And then it becomes more normative. I have had my share of what would be traditionally perceived as “transgressions” like not eating strictly kosher, but I have never dabbled in the spiritual practices of any other faith.

On my walk home, this question popped into my head: When was the last time that my Judaism fulfilled me? I love my faith, my culture, my family, my people. I love Jewish community, Jewish history and gatherings. I have no interest in letting them go. But there are two main reasons to practice religion: To serve a G-d because he requires it and wants it, or to enrich your life and give you meaning, purpose and fulfillment.

My epiphany: While Judaism is still meaningful and important in my life, it has not been spiritually relevant or fulfilling in a very long time. What has been filling that void and mentoring me? What has been feeding my soul and nurturing me to work on my middot (personality traits) and become a better person? Not much.

This time period is about opening myself up to other paths, peoples and places but – though I value my Jewish upbringing and background – Judaism also inhibits and colors my exploration in so many ways. How will I know what to teach my child if I haven’t learned the world for myself?

Perhaps our children will rise to Modeh Ani (the Jewish morning prayer thanking G-d for the restoration of the soul), followed by a morning stretch, ancient chant and family snuggle. But in order to get there, I need to truly be present in this world as an open vessel and tonight for the first time in a long time, I feel a lightness and a happiness within.

An interesting tidbit: I later learned that the yoga chant spoke of respect to one’s self and one’s inner and outer teachers – not to deities at all. Also, ironically, the person who introduced me to this practice and brought me to the class is a Modern Orthodox Sabbath-observant Jewish woman who founded many of Phoenix’s Jewish institutions.

Epiphany
by T. S. Elliot

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

-- Section V of Quartet No. 4 "Little Gidding"
from Four Quartets

<http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets/gidding.html>

"Tintern Abbey"
by William Wordsworth

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, ...And I have felt...a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

First Snow in Alsace
by Richard Wilbur

The snow came down last night like moths
Burned on the moon; it fell till dawn,
Covered the town with simple cloths.

Absolute snow lies rumped on
What shellbursts scattered and deranged,
Entangled railings, crevassed lawn.

As if it did not know they'd changed,
Snow smoothly clasps the roofs of homes
Fear-gutted, trustless and estranged.

The ration stacks are milky domes;
Across the ammunition pile
The snow has climbed in sparkling combs.

You think: beyond the town a mile
Or two, this snowfall fills the eyes
Of soldiers dead a little while.

Persons and persons in disguise,
Walking the new air white and fine,
Trade glances quick with shared surprise.

At children's windows, heaped, benign,
As always, winter shines the most,
And frost makes marvelous designs.

The night guard coming from his post,
Ten first-snows back in thought, walks slow
And warms him with a boyish boast:

He was the first to see the snow.

The Cathedral
by Raymond Carver.

This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night. His wife had died. So he was visiting the dead wife's relatives in Connecticut. He called my wife from his in-law's. Arrangements were made. He would come by train, a five-hour trip, and my wife would meet him at the station. She hadn't seen him since she worked for him one summer in Seattle ten years ago. But she and the blind man had kept in touch. They made tapes and mailed them back and forth. I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to....

Continue reading at:
<http://misanthropytoday.com/cathedral-by-raymond-carver-weekend-short-story>

"Great doubt, great enlightenment. Little doubt, little enlightenment. No doubt, no enlightenment." - Buddhist adage

Knowledge is not an object that you acquire. It's not a mechanism that somehow you provide to the human mind. It's actually an epiphanal moment. And I think this is true of the arts, poetry, painting, music, and I would say also to spiritual understanding.
-Arthur Zajonc interviewed on [On Being](#)

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