Emergence of Hope

preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver (WA)
by the Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
December 2, 2018

Advent means “coming” and this is the season of Advent in the Christian calendar. The coming of the Christ, originally. I like the language of retired colleague the Rev. Richard Gilbert. He calls it “a mood of expectancy.” Or, the musical, West Side Story

*Something's coming,*

*don't know when,*

*But it's soon,*

*Catch the moon--*

*One-handed catch!*

(Sondheim lyrics from West Side Story.)

The truth is, we don’t know what’s coming: “what we are to expect, we do not know.” As Tony learns in West Side Story, or if you prefer the classical to the musical, think Romeo in Romeo and Juliet. As Romeo and Tony learn, what’s waiting is not always a happy ending.

That’s the dilemma of a liberal religious faith. We lack the certainty of more orthodox religion. We embrace an ambiguity that is often personally uncomfortable. Hope is not a given, it is a practice.

This season can be uncomfortable – whether you are uncomfortable with the narrow expressions of Christian theologies or the commercialism and the frenzy of December, or because you don’t feel quite as happy as we somehow expect or project or want to feel at this time of year. If you experience Seasonal Affective Disorder, this can be an uncomfortable time.

For those who find this season uncomfortable and those who embrace it full force, I think we should take a closer look at the season of advent, the season of waiting, the mood of expectancy.... And despite the ambiguity and the knowledge that there is not always a happy ending, turn it into a practice of hope, letting hope emerge.

Contrary to popular culture, the season of advent in a religious context is not one big festival of buying, lights and cheer leading up to the Celebration of Opening Packages on Christmas morning. In its traditional religious intent, it is a season of fasting, introspection, prayer and preparation.
I think of our painted turtle in the reading. She is not just fasting, but has actually slowed her breath, “she slows herself beyond breath in a place where breath is not possible. And waits.” This mystery of nature, the fact that the turtle does this, instinctively, that our bodies at this very moment are automatically engaged in a myriad of life-sustaining activities, gives me hope. I find hope in the fact that I do not have to, in fact, cannot, control all that surrounds me. I also find hope in the fact that some of these unconscious activities, such as breathing, can be made conscious – and that by so doing, we can collude with Nature in shaping our realities. Our slowed breath lowers anxiety and calms minds so that we are clearer in our thinking. Nonanxious people, writes Arthur Paul Boers, “know how to ask questions, tolerate ambiguity, encourage creativity, and decline to settle for quick fixes.”

Understanding the spiritual grounding of advent is something this liberal religious church has in common with more orthodox interpretations – a sense that the waiting of advent is not preparation for what I’m going to get on Christmas morning, or even what I’m going to give, but rather the relationships symbolized by the gifts. Not the gifts themselves.

Even Charlie Brown says it in a Charlie Brown Christmas. If you don’t remember this 1965 cartoon, played each year on TV around this time of year, our main character, Charlie Brown complains about the overwhelming consumerism during the Christmas season, and so Lucy suggests that he become director of the school Christmas pageant. Charlie Brown accepts, but it proves to be frustrating, to say the least. When an attempt to restore the proper spirit with a sad and droopy little fir Christmas tree fails, he needs Linus’ help to learn what the real meaning of Christmas is. You may remember Linus, with his blanky and impassioned speech about the true meaning of Christmas.

Even if the real meaning of Christmas for you isn’t the birth of a savior, Jesus, as it is for Linus, you may agree that the meaning is fundamentally about relationships – family and friends, loved ones, and all those who give our lives meaning. Gerardo’s sister, Sandra, with whom he shared his hopes, his esperanza. His sister and friends helped him prepare and stay centered so he could return someday to a relationship with his boys. They helped him maintain hope when fears could have easily overwhelmed him.

As he explains it to the anxious Charlie Brown, Linus recites scripture, the King James Version of Luke telling of the angel of the lord announcing the birth of a savior. They angel comes and they were afraid and the angel said, “Fear not.” Educator and activist, Parker Palmer, writes that “fear is so fundamental to the human condition that all the great spiritual traditions originate in an effort to overcome its effects on our lives. With different words, they all proclaim the same message: ‘Be not afraid.’ Though the traditions vary widely in the ways they propose to take us beyond fear, all hold out the same hope: we can escape fear’s paralysis and enter a state of grace where encounters with otherness will not threaten us but enrich our work and our lives.”
Hope emerges when we practice the discipline of fasting, introspection, prayer and preparation. Or for the turtle, when every stressed particle of her stays focused on the silver bead of utter quietude. Advent offers us a chance to reflect. Since ours is a free faith, of course, you needn’t do any of it. But I think there is something to be gained by renewing whatever reflective practices nourish you. And as the Zen proverb reminds us, if you don’t have time to meditate for an hour, meditate for two. In this busy season of holiday cheer, it could be easiest to distract ourselves with the business of shopping or celebration, when a more centered approach could lend itself to even more meaning. It could be reading, meditating, yoga, running, skiing, making or listening to music. We reflect in all kinds of ways that could be called spiritual – and I want to listen to my impulse to tell you what I mean by spiritual because I find the term confusing.

Sometimes the term spiritual is used to mean “not physical” – implying that there are more important things than the physical world – presumably, love, compassion, truth, justice – those things we cannot measure nor prove. While I think I understand that definition, it is not what I generally mean by the term spiritual.

Spiritual, for me, is not the absence of the physical, but rather the means of integration of body and mind, soma and psyche, physical and mental.

It is important to me because my faith tradition has always emphasized actions above belief. “We need not think alike to love alike” we attribute to Francis David, 16th century court preacher to the only Unitarian King in history (John Sigismund of Transylvania). One reason it is hard to explain Unitarian Universalism to outsiders is that the question is often framed, “what do you believe?” and there is no church creed or single answer to that question. We are not tied together by common belief. Rather, we have maintained since early in our history, that actions speak louder than words, and that the physical – the actions we take in the world demonstrate love, compassion, truth and justice better than any creed or confession of faith can.

So, I struggle with the term “spiritual” when it means “not physical” – I fail to understand the importance, given I live in a body in a world of bodies and physical things. Instead, I return to the meaning of spirit as breath – breath of life, the connecting link between body and mind. Conscious breathing helps me unite my thoughts, feelings, and actions in such a way that I am more likely to respond fully and better than I do when I am torn – when my heart tells me to do x and my mind says y and I am flustered and confused and pressured and anxious and I act precipitously.

Spiritual practices don’t have to be those taught by traditional religions – it doesn’t have to be prayer or yoga or fasting. Though perhaps fasting would be radically counter-cultural to the binge eating encouraged by the sale of Halloween candy and then turkey and stuffing and culturally doesn’t end until new year’s resolutions and ads for the latest fad diet. It doesn’t have to be prayer or yoga or fasting. Though, it has helped me to practice meditation as a discipline, as a means of centering myself and integrating my thoughts, feelings, and actions. But I can also get a centering experience from walking my dog, Nutmeg. And there may be things you do, that offer that experience of reflection and centering and integration, that don’t seem like traditional spiritual practice, but serve as practical reflective practice, out of which hope can emerge. Hope or something we might call trust: that one day, yes, the world will warm again, and with it, our lives.

A mood of expectancy, writes Richard Gilbert.
“The earth has turned once more in its accustomed way.
And again our footsteps quicken,
Our voices are raised in familiar chorus:
the sights and sounds of Christmas
Greet our eyes and ears.
Almost as if we had never seen or heard them before.
“There is a mood of expectancy,
what we are to expect, we do not know.
The least surprises are hidden beneath bright paper
and graceful ribbon.
the great surprises are the magic that happens
whether we will it or not
“There is a mood of expectancy.
and the beauty is we do not know what to expect.
tomorrow is an open door.
an untraveled journey.
an untouched feast.
“Christmas is like that – it is a mood of expectancy.
for out of the birth of the humblest babe
may come one of the great prophets of the human spirit
and out of each of us, proud or humble,
may yet come truth and beauty and goodness we
cannot now imagine.
Christmas is a mood of expectancy.”
Says Richard Gilbert. Advent calls out for us to return to reflective practices, to embrace a mood of expectancy, to invite hope into our lives, to let it emerge, to allow the thawing of our hearts as the outside temperature drops. What are we waiting for? Surely it is not more glitz, traffic, commercials or rain. It’s more likely to be music or quiet reading or deep conversation with another.

I know there’s a logical contradiction and conundrum with my turtle metaphor for advent. For the turtle, as far as we know, is not conscious of her actions. “One day in the fall, as water and air cooled, at some precise temperature an ancient bell sounded in the turtle brain. A signal: Take a deep breath.” But that’s the dilemma of a liberal religious faith. We embrace an ambiguity that is often personally uncomfortable. I find hope in the mystery of nature and the imperfect understanding of that mystery in my life. Though I can bring my breath to consciousness, I breathe regardless. And my heart beats. And the systems in my body do amazing things to keep me alive in this moment. And the turtle does not fear. The turtle trusts.

May we be like the turtle. Trusting that one day, yes, the world will warm again, and with it, our lives. Hope is a practice, not a given. May we engage the spiritual practice of hope in this season of contradictions and mixed metaphors, this winter of discontent and disruption. Practice it consistently so that we become more conscious, less anxious, tolerate ambiguity and encourage creativity.

“There is a mood of expectancy.

and the beauty is we do not know what to expect.

tomorrow is an open door.

an untraveled journey.

an untouched feast.”

“Something’s coming,

don’t know when,

But it’s soon,

Catch the moon--

One-handed catch!

Benediction

With a mood of expectancy, we leave this place, ever practicing hope, that its note might sustain us all. Be not afraid, for we know how to ask questions, tolerate ambiguity and encourage creativity. Let that promise through the ages ring.

*Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.