

## IN ANDY'S GARDEN

Rev. Kit Ketcham, Mar. 2, 2008

Bear with me for a moment, set aside any theological reservations you might have, and sing with me, if you know this old hymn, and if you don't, just let us sing it to you.

I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses,  
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses,  
And he walks with me, Andy talks with me, Andy tells me I am his own,  
And the joy we share as we tarry there none other has ever known.

My best friend in high school once told me, when we were girls sitting in the front row of the First Baptist Church of Athena, Oregon, where my dad was the minister, that she used to think God's name was Andy, because of the old hymn we just sang. I have since heard of children who thought otherwise: Our father who art in heaven, Howard be thy name.

Most of us have updated our concepts of God by now but many of us still remember our old ideas and the old songs with a nostalgic smile. If you're a Unitarian Universalist, of course, it isn't too cool to cling to old words and songs and rituals which are politically incorrect and theologically out of date. When I became a UU, I gave up that old-time religion in favor of a more pluralistic, interfaith tradition.

But I've come to realize, after several years of study and ministry experience, that you may take the girl out of the Baptists, but you can't take the Baptist out of the girl. I'm a Unitarian Universalist to the core, but my core remains Baptist. I think it's in my DNA.

I come by my UUism honestly through the time-honored route of youthful rebellion. One of my ancestors was BlackJack Ketcham, a New Mexican gunfighter in the 1800s, and my granddad was a bootlegger in Missouri during Prohibition, so of course, my dad became a Baptist minister and thereby set the stage for me and my rebellion.

I was a good girl, growing up, and in 1965, went to Denver, Colorado, as an American Baptist Home Missionary. My mission field was the Denver Christian Center in the inner city. A couple of years later, I married a UU man and began to explore the wider horizons of a noncredal religious faith.

But sometimes when I was alone, I'd sit down at the piano and plunk out the old hymns--Great is thy Faithfulness, O God My Father, Wonderful Grace of Jesus, Out of the Ivory Palaces-- the hymns which didn't appear in the UU hymnbook but occupied a prominent place in the hymnal of the First Baptist Church.

I did this surreptitiously and with many a caveat; I didn't want anyone to think I wasn't a devout UU, but those old hymns spoke to me in ways that no other songs did. I couldn't figure it out. Was it just nostalgia for a simpler faith? Did they speak a subconscious message? I had long ago moved beyond a theology of Jesus as bloody sacrifice, God as a white male, heaven as a place with golden streets.

In any case, it was interesting to have my poor mother accusing me of having lost my childhood faith by joining a UU church, on the one hand, and, on the other, to find such power (unidentified as it was) in the old songs.

I struggled with reconciliation for many years, reconciliation between me and my horrified family members, and reconciliation between my Baptist DNA and my UU beliefs.

And now, thirty years later, I'm making some headway. As I explore my own theology and its foundations more deeply, I am beginning to understand the contribution that being a Baptist preachers kid has made to my spiritual life.

I'd like to try an experiment here. I recognize that we all come from differing backgrounds; we may have grown up Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Mormon, Jewish, you name it. Some of us grew up as Unitarian Universalists. Others may have no formal religious background. But we all have a spiritual history. For many, it was specific church doctrines; for others, values imparted by family or culture. No matter what, we all bring to our present religious experience the accumulation of years of values teaching.

So I ask you to delve into that experience and consider your responses to a few questions. I'll ask some of you to share your answers, if you're willing.

Question 1: think of a favorite old hymn or song, whose words no longer fit for you but which you still enjoy hearing or singing. Is there anyone who would be willing to share the name of the song?

Question 2: think of a present-day religious value that is a holdover from your early learnings. (

Question 3: think of a religious value that you have added to that early value which makes you the unique person of faith you are today.

To return for a moment to the old hymn with which we began a few minutes ago: Andy walks with me, Andy talks with me, Andy tells me I am his own. I no longer think of God as a white male on a throne, but this song still expresses for me the very close connection I feel to the Divine, to Higher Power, to the Ultimate in the Universe.

When I am in Andy's garden, whether on a high pass in the mountains or along a foggy Whidbey beach, I am very aware of Divine Presence and my connection to the Universe, to God as I understand God. And the joy we share as we tarry there...is overwhelming.

The great challenge of our religious journey, I believe, may be to take what we know, our earliest values and religious instruction, and go deeper with it, beyond the literal, beyond the familiar, looking for ways to expand our understanding of what it means to be a human being in relationship with the Cosmos, with one another, with ourselves.

Most of us live and work in a community where people's creeds and beliefs are different from our own. We are surrounded daily by people who are conservative Christian, Catholic, Jewish, or adamantly anti-religious. In our own congregations, we worship with folks whose theology is different from ours--pagans, Buddhists, humanists, theists, nontheists.

To be in religious dialogue with all, we must be able to articulate our faith in common terms, so that all feel welcome at the table of religious community.

Beneath the surface of most religious traditions, there is a depth of common human experience that transcends orthodox doctrine and dogma. When we explore those depths, both in our own religious past and in the traditions of others, we find common ground.

We learn to interpret legends as metaphors, not as literal fact, to find the deeper, more universal meanings beneath the fantastic stories and myths.

This is one of the challenges of Unitarian Universalism. As a Unitarian Universalist minister, I preach to good people, folks who are theists, nontheists, Jews, Christians, pagans, humanists, Buddhists and combinations of all of the above.

I must present my thinking in terms which go deeper than the traditional language of Christianity, which is my native tongue.

To do this, I have learned to use my intuitive understandings of life, my mystical experiences, my dreams, my relationships with others, with the spirit I call God, and with myself, to glean what is common to the human experience and express it in terms which are understandable by others whose religious thinking is widely varied.

I remember as a Preacher's kid thinking to myself that there had to be a bottom line to religion, principles of behavior toward other people and toward God that would work no matter what. I remember feeling concerned that I was expected to base my behavior and beliefs on supernatural events which I sensed were hard to prove.

So I began to look for that bottom line. I didn't want my religious faith falling apart if somebody proved that Jesus didn't rise from the dead. I wanted it based on something that I understood and knew to be true.

I looked for permanent, not transient, values: Love. Forgiveness. Service to others. Acceptance of others, no matter how different from me they might seem. In the Bible, the words of the prophet Micah particularly resonated for me: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with my God. These were the values that seemed most important to me as a youngster, and they still do.

Take what you know and go deeper has become my guide to developing my theology, my personal creed, my own spirituality. It is important for three reasons:

1. When I take a familiar idea from the Bible stories I learned as a child and go deeper, I discover meaning that goes far beyond the literal story. One example of this is the idea of Jesus as my personal savior, which we hear quite a bit from more traditional Christians. I understand Jesus' death on the cross as an example of unconditional love, one man's willingness to die for his friends and his beliefs. I do NOT see it as a sacrifice for my sins. I consider Jesus a human who was deified by history and the love of his followers. I am a heretic, a non-trinitarian. But Love is my personal savior. What Jesus represents to me is my salvation, my way of finding wholeness in a broken world.

Jesus' words in the Christian Scriptures, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to God but by me" say to me, Love is the way, the truth, the life; no one finds a relationship with life and living things without learning to love.

2. When I take what I know and go deeper, I find language with which I can talk with others of differing faiths. A non-theist may find the words God and Christian and salvation uncomfortable, even offensive. But most non-theists, however secular they may be, find the word and the concept of Love to be deeply meaningful. And Love does what Jesus and Gandhi and other heroes of faith came to do--it reclaims, redeems, reconciles all beings.

3. When I take what I know and go deeper, talking with those of other faiths about the inherent meanings of human experience, my understanding increases and deepens, joining me in religious community with women and men who are radically different. I am graced by this new community, and I have learned that it's not the story that is so important; its the meaning of the story.

This is, of course, not a bit easy. It's hard to listen and talk calmly about issues which are so important to us, especially when we feel we have the Truth. But we must learn to do it, both for the sake of community within our own congregations and a shared dream of peace in our larger world.

Martin Luther King Jr. did it when he, a Baptist minister himself, proclaimed love and justice with nonviolence to be the prophet Jesus' essential message from God. Mahatma Gandhi did it when he, a devout Hindu, used non-violent protest to reclaim his country's independence. Countless others have done it in the name of freedom, in the name of hope, in the name of justice.

This is the meaning of our UU principle “free and responsible search for truth and meaning”. Whenever we look for meaning beneath the surface of orthodoxy, we are following in the large footsteps of Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Jesus, LaoTse, the Buddha and other prophetic men and women. When we take what we know and go deeper, we grow.

You and I bring to our Unitarian Universalism all the meaning of our early lives. We bring our ability to be faithful. We bring our ability to love. We come wanting to know more about the Divine. We know that our children need instruction. We come trusting our own experiences and our own minds. We want to be accepted for ourselves. We believe that in community we will find spiritual sustenance.

We crave beauty and find it in many settings, in nature, in art of all kinds, in a human face, in deeds of love and kindness. We want to give nurture, to reach beyond ourselves into the larger community, to bring justice to a world in pain. And we want a safe place to experience grief and joy. All these are the roots we bring to our religious journey.

And we also have wings. As our hymn Spirit of Life says, roots hold me close, wings set me free. Wings symbolize for us our religious freedom, that search for personal truth and meaning that directs our path. Our wings enable us to put our new insights into action.

My wings have enabled me to fly from a belief in a white male God to the conviction that the interdependent web of the universe connects all beings; I have leapt from the slogan "Jesus loves me" to a recognition that unconditional Love speaks to the inherent worth and dignity of every person; I have rejected supernatural events as doctrine and have accepted a free and responsible search for meaning instead. I have taken what I know and have gone deeper.

But anything that keeps me from growing, from using my wings, is not a root, it's a tether. It is imperative that I look courageously at my faith, opening myself to new insight, eagerly joining others of differing faiths in dialogue which goes beyond doctrine, and learning the deep language which can bring us that shining goal which is another of our UU principles, that goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Hymn #123, Spirit of Life

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place.

Let us go in peace, remembering that our whole lives have brought us to this place in time and that our earliest learnings are valuable to us, if we can use them as starting points for our searchings. May we live out our faith in our daily lives, taking what we know and going deeper. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.