

## TWELFTH NIGHT EPIPHANIES

By Rev. Kit Ketcham

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On the morning I had set for myself to begin working on today's sermon, I woke up singing an old song I'd learned in my dad's church many years ago. And I'd like to invite you to sing it with me, as a starting point for our thoughts today. It's an insert in the O/S and I expect that some of you know it as well.

“Work for the night is coming...”

Anna Coghill, who wrote this old hymn in 1854, doubtless had a different take on work than most of us do today. Not only was the work she had in mind of the sort that brings folks to Jesus, but work generally in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was different.

There were no computers to program, no McDonald's burgers to flip, no open-heart surgery to perform, no video games to invent, few of the spectrum of job opportunities open to human beings today. Work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was mostly grueling physical work: farming, mining, logging, housekeeping, all were even harder than they are today. The Industrial Revolution was just beginning and most people did not have the resources to purchase the few labor-saving devices coming onto the market.

Our grandparents and great-grandparents lived in an age when heavy physical labor was what most breadwinners did to support their families. Many of them were also subservient to bosses or overseers whose demands were constant and often heartless; their jobs were in jeopardy much of the time and wages were scant.

Factory work was grueling but it was where people worked when they left the farm and its insecurities for so-called greater opportunities in the city. And people did work through all hours of the bright day, for the night was their only respite---unless, of course, they were on the night shift at some factory or birthing baby animals on a farm.

Since that time, the work scene has changed considerably. Unions have changed working conditions in many heavy physical jobs and also in white-collar workplaces. Educational opportunities are greater and an emphasis on education and training for all has changed what young people expect to do to win their “bread”.

I often recall my own early work experiences when I think about how much times have changed. My earliest jobs were physically hard. As a teenager, I was one of the many girls in Umatilla County who drove a truck during harvest season, a job which paid 85 cents all the way up to a dollar an hour for twelve hours a day of work, in the hot, dusty pea and wheat fields of northeastern Oregon.

I’ll bet you have your own hard physical jobs to recount. What are some of those?

Today, January 6, marks the holiday celebrated as Twelfth Night in some cultures and known in many Christian denominations as the Feast of the Epiphany, which celebrates the arrival of the three kings in the nativity story and the proclamation by the early church that Jesus was a divine being, one with God. Unitarians had their own epiphany about that decision for it caused our spiritual ancestors to declare the heresy that God was one and that Jesus was a prophet and teacher and NOT God!

Twelfth Night, however, had less doctrinal, more pagan connotations. In Tudor England, the Twelfth Night marked the end of an autumn into winter festival that started on All Hallows Eve, which we now call Halloween, and is the twelfth day after Christmas. In Twelfth Night festivities, The Lord of Misrule, a character prominent in this gala event, symbolized the world turning upside down. And you may remember in Shakespeare's play "Twelfth Night" that its theme is mistaken identity and confusion leading to erroneous assumptions and hilarious situations.

On January 6, the date of Twelfth Night, the king and all those who were in high places would become the peasants and the peasants would temporarily take their places. At the beginning of the Twelfth Night festival, a special cake was served and eaten, a cake which contained a bean.

The person who found the bean became the ruler of the festival and would rule over the feast. Midnight signaled the end of that upside down rule and the world would return to normal. The common theme was that the normal order of things was reversed.

In Ireland, January 6 is also known as Women's Christmas, so called because of the tradition of Irish men (at least in Cork) taking on all the household duties on that day and giving their spouses a day off. Most women either hold parties or go out to celebrate the day with other women. Bars and restaurants have a near 100 percent female clientele on this night, as women celebrate this upside-down day.

So what does any of this have to do with us as Unitarian Universalists? Let's see how we can tie some of these threads together. One of my favorite challenges in life is looking for patterns, finding connections between seemingly disparate things, finding sense in the apparently nonsensical.

Twelfth Night is a perfect time to do that! So let Misrule reign and let's look for the patterns, the connections, the meanings in a collection of disparate bits of trivia about January 6.

Let's let Twelfth Night and its epiphanies set the pace, with the idea of trading places, doing things differently from what we're used to, allowing unexpected insights to change our thinking and our lives.

What if we suddenly found ourselves as individuals involuntarily placed in a position that we did not choose, did not prepare for, did not want! How would we respond to the insights that such a situation brought?

In our story for all ages, we laughed as we watched a band of tough old cowpokes be changed by the presence of Foofy, the toy poodle. They learned to appreciate things they had never thought important in the past. They learned to do things they had previously thought of as wimpy. They learned that they could change without losing themselves in the process.

In our true story, the one going on around us right now, we may someday be faced with the prospect of living conditions much changed from what we're used to, by the lack of petroleum products or building materials or by flood or earthquake or accident or other natural disaster. Our lives can change in a flash, through seemingly random events.

What would that mean to us? How would it test us? Would we survive such a shift in our lives or would we buckle under its strain? We can't know just how or when or why another kind of life might overtake us. We can only be vigilant and do what we may to prepare.

I remember as a little kid, lying on my back in bed staring up at the ceiling and wondering what it would be like to live on the ceiling, stepping over doorway lintels, walking around light fixtures, stooping down to look out of windows.

I could see that my whole perspective on my life would change if I lived on the ceiling. How would I sit to eat? How would I read my book? (Gravity didn't seem to figure into this imaginative scenario!)

Now, of course, astronauts do this all the time in their zero-gravity environments. It was something I could not foretell with my limited experience but I could tell that life would be much different and would require a great deal of adaptation.

So one thing that topsy-turvy Twelfth Night might offer us is the knowledge that change, even drastic change, can happen suddenly and without notice and that we can survive it, even thrive with it. No matter what the change, if we can find a measure of dignity, we can survive a topsy-turvy world. And that's a heck of an epiphany!

A epiphany, as you probably know, is a realization of the meaning and importance of something or someone, an inspired understanding arising from discovering some profound insight, awareness, or truth.

A friend of mine in Portland, a PhD clinical psychologist with many credits to his name, once found himself so depressed by life's events that he felt unable to work as a psychologist. He had experienced an unexpected divorce, his son had committed suicide, and he was having flashbacks to having been the victim, as a child, of sexual assault. He was desperate to support himself and took a job as a temporary laborer at a construction site. The only skill he had to offer in that arena was wielding a broom as the cleaner-upper behind the skilled craftsmen.

Initially, he was ashamed at how low he felt he'd fallen. Sweeping up construction debris at a condo project was a far cry from sitting at a desk counseling patients. But one day, after a conversation with the foreman, he gradually began to find his work meaningful.

It wasn't just the gratitude of the foreman for his help, or the appreciation of the craftsmen or other laborers, it was the epiphany that honest work, no matter how lowly, is valuable. This friend found dignity in seeing his work as honest and valuable and that dignity enabled him to survive a blow to his circumstances.

We have all worked at a wide variety of jobs, I'm guessing, some easy, some hard and physical, some mentally challenging, some mind-numbingly boring. We know what it means to work hard, day in and day out.

What is the work we are doing now, today? For we are all still working, even though many of us may be retired. And I'm not talking about income-producing labor. I'm talking about the places we put our energy, our time, our hearts. In other words, I'm not talking about employment necessarily, but the service we offer to each other and the larger community because of our commitments to peace, to justice, and to inclusiveness.

This is our work, as people of liberal religious faith, as Unitarian Universalists.

During 2007, we as a congregation experienced a huge epiphany of our own, when we came together on Sept. 9 to mark the official start of our building project. When so many from the larger community came to celebrate with us, when our friend Pastor Jim Lindus from Trinity said to us, in essence, "it's time for you to be in your own home, offering your unique message of hope and faith to Whidbey Island from this place which you are creating", when this happened, we were collectively jolted into realizing how important our effort is in this community.

And when the foundation was poured and the first work parties began, as the sanding and varnishing of trusses progressed, as the windows and framing took shape, as we poured our time and energy into our home, we all grew, just as the building grew. Carpentry and cleanup were equally valued as we worked together on our common cause. That was another great epiphany!

The crisis of climate change, as it became more and more evident that our lives would be drastically altered by the effects of global warming, has caused a huge shift in consciousness across the planet. And we realized that we are not alone in honoring and protecting the earth, that disparate faith communities, big business, political entities all have a stake and an interest in dealing with this crisis. The human community is waking up to one of our UU principles and sources, which is the need to respect and live in harmony with the earth. Another remarkable epiphany!

So just in this past several months, we as a community of Unitarian Universalists have been jolted into the recognition that we are important on Whidbey Island, that we are capable of building a home for ourselves, that we have a message to offer to people on the island who are not served well by traditional religion, that we are expected to step up to the plate and serve not only ourselves but the entire community.

How will we choose to do that?

As I've helped in my small ways to make our sacred home a reality, I can't help but look forward in my mind to the day we get ready to move into our new home.

And I have dreamed something like this. I have dreamed of a long procession of vehicles, bicycles, motorcycles, with banners and flags waving from every antenna and open window, escorted by the Island County sheriff's department, departing from the Trinity parking lot with great ceremony, driving in a long caravan of singing, rejoicing, flag-waving humanity, carrying our chalice and proceeding together to 20103 State Route 525, where we will enter our building, our new home, for our first worship service together in that space.

And I've continued to dream. I have dreamed of rooms filled with children, rooms filled with community leaders working on civic matters, rooms filled with support groups helping people make changes in their lives.

I've dreamed of teachers teaching classes in our building. I've dreamed of concerts in our sanctuary. I've dreamed of banners and weavings and artwork beautifying our halls. I've dreamed of music in every corner, a family band that performs for us on special occasions, a choir that fills the sanctuary with soaring harmonies and poetic lyrics.

And I've dreamed of worship services in a sanctuary that we can call our own, where our chalice is always in the center of our sacred space, where seats are filled with spiritual seekers, where every Sunday morning hearts are nourished by the wisdom of those who speak here. I've dreamed of joy reverberating around the room and enlivening all those present.

And I've dreamed of reaching out into the larger community, of offering space to our Quaker friends, to our Jewish friends, sharing our building with compatible people of faith. I have dreamed of sponsoring a scout troop that welcomes all youths, regardless of their beliefs or sexual orientation. I have dreamed of becoming a gathering place for people eager to promote peace and peacemaking in our world.

I've dreamed of a renewed spirit among us as a congregation. I've dreamed of an awareness in our midst of the value and the joy of being of service to this congregation. I've dreamed that we have all the volunteer ushers and refreshment providers that we can possibly use. I've dreamed that an atmosphere of bounteous generosity pervades our congregation so that we have the resources to do all that we can to live out our Unitarian Universalist ideals and principles.

And I've dreamed of a sanctuary where all those who are members and friends of this congregation make it their first priority to come together on Sundays, bringing their friends, their relatives, their neighbors. I've dreamed that every Sunday our sanctuary is full, full of seekers, full of children and parents, full of people who belong to this community, whose faces and forms are as dear to us as our own.

But that's not all I dream about.

On Friday, the South End ministers met at my house for our weekly Bible study, and over coffee and cookies we got to talking about civic affairs on the island----affordable housing, ministry to prisoners, our homeless population. One pastor talked eloquently about the ways he is encouraging his congregation to be more active in community outreach. His congregation had invited the Wellington school to set up shop in their facility, when Wellington was flooded out in December, and he wanted his congregants to continue to reach out in the community.

As he was talking, I started dreaming again. Would it be possible to work with other congregations on the South End to develop projects that would improve conditions for the island's low-income folks? Affordable rental units supervised and underwritten by a coalition of congregations?

A homeless shelter? A ministry to prisoners in our county jail? Help for families in transition, for victims of domestic violence?

Because our work as a congregation is to serve not only ourselves but the larger community. And therefore we must look beyond the walls of our shiny new home to find ways of using our home as a springboard for community outreach. If we only use our building to make ourselves happy, we will have a shallow happiness indeed. It is when we use our new resources to reach out to others that we will find a deep and abiding happiness that will enrich not only our lives but the lives around us.

What are your epiphanies on this Twelfth Night, at the end of the year 2007? I hope you'll share them with us as we look ahead to the coming year of 2008.

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

HYMN# 55 "DARK OF WINTER"

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 the epiphanies and insights of these past months can inform our future together as a congregation. May we take what we have learned from these moments and use their energy and strength to help us make a real difference in people's lives, here on Whidbey Island. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.