

Poems in the Lap of Death

WELCOME

Good morning and welcome to the First Unitarian Church of South Bend.

Yesterday was the 62nd anniversary of this congregation becoming an official member of the American Unitarian Association (which became our Unitarian Universalist Association not quite a decade later). Let the congregation say, “Happy Birthday, First Unitarian!”

If you are happy this morning, or if you recently had a birthday, welcome!

If you are less happy—if you are grieving a loss, we wish you peace, and we welcome you in. If you are angry, or anxious, we acknowledge your human emotions and we bid you welcome.

If you arrive drained, or numb from the slings and arrows of contemporary life, we offer you rest, and a community of meaning. We are glad you are here.

We *are* glad that you are here, *and* we don’t necessarily want to know that your phone is here. Please make sure that your devices are in silent mode. If you hear something this morning that you want to share with the glorious and suffering world outside these walls, I encourage you to tweet or text anything you find meaningful. You might use the hashtag “1USB” if you like. If you do send some messages out to our human cousins elsewhere, please do so quietly, so as not to distract those around you. Thank you.

OPENING WORDS

In 2011, an Associated Press poll found that 8 in 10 Americans believed in angels — even many who never went to church. In 2009 the Pew Research Center reported that 1 in 5 Americans experienced ghosts—that’s 20% of us that not only believe in ghosts, but have *experienced* them! In 2005, Gallup found that 3 out of 4 Americans believed in something paranormal.

I know there are some people in this room who do believe in angels, and some who do not. There are some here who have felt the presence of a ghost; some haven’t experienced it, but believe in the possibility; and others of us flatly deny them. Whatever you believe, may it be present and alive in you, for the next sixty minutes, and for every minute of your life.

So may we be.

Story for All Ages

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Beckett. Beckett and her father, Kyle, lived on a nice street, in a nice town, with very nice neighbors. The nicest neighbors lived right next door, including Beckett’s best friend, Max. They played together every day, even on days with bad weather.

Sometimes, when Kyle had to work, Beckett got to stay with Max and his parents. Once, Max got to stay overnight with Beckett and Kyle. Beckett and Max were best friends.

Then, one day Max came over crying. Beckett rushed to comfort her friend, but when she heard his news, she began to cry, too. Max and his family were moving away. Max’s mother had to move for work, all the way to Arkansas.

Their parents tried to comfort them, but Max and Beckett were sad for days. Finally, they realized they were still together for a few more weeks, so they should make the most of it. For the entire next two weeks, they were together almost all the time, and they each stayed over at the other’s house *twice*.

Finally, Max moved away, with many tears and hugs. Beckett would not get out of bed the next morning, because she was too sad.

Finally, Kyle brought her a picture of her and Max, and suggested that every morning, she could look at that picture, and remember a fun thing they had done together, or a place they had visited, or a joke they told. And that way, she could keep Max alive in her heart.

Beckett was not sure it would work, but Kyle helped her remember, and in fact, she did feel a little better. The next day, she tried it again, and soon it became her favorite moment of the morning.

In fact, once Beckett saw a picture of all five of them on her father’s desk. When she asked him about it, Kyle told her that he was using the same memory trick to remember the good times that the two families had had.

Then another disaster struck. The snow and ice on the roof caused a leak, which became a flood, and the water ruined Beckett’s picture of Max. Her father offered her the picture he had been using, but you could barely see Max’s face, so it just made Beckett more sad.

Kyle gave her a big hug, then asked her if she could describe Max’s face. She did, and her father kept asking about more details, and Beckett kept answering them. Then Kyle told her that she always had a picture of Max with her, inside her head. She did not need a photograph of Max to do her morning memory ritual. She had a picture in her head she could use—and that picture could never be ruined by a flood!

Beckett tried it, and it did work pretty well, so she was less sad that day, and agreed to go grocery shopping with Kyle.

The next morning, after breakfast, Beckett went running to the back yard, calling to her father, “Max and I are going out to play...”

FIRST READING

Mary Jean Irion was born in Kentucky, in 1922

“Faith is not being sure. It is not being sure, but betting with your last cent...Faith is thinking thoughts and singing songs and making poems in the lap of death.”

[excerpted from a longer reading to avoid copyright issues]

SECOND READING

Antoine Marie Jean-Baptiste Roger, comte de Saint Exupéry was born in France, in 1900.
This is in his original, gendered, language:

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the wood and [then] give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."

SERMON

How many of you talk to your plants? How many have ever talked to a car, computer or other inanimate object? without curse words? How many talk to friends or family members who have already passed away?

In the summer of 2003, the Lincoln Center Festival offered guided tours around New York City. Participants were advised to watch for angels—and they saw some, because the organizers had paid actors, some with wings, some without, to sit in various corners, gazing into the distance, as if watching over the city.

British theatre director Deborah Warner invented the angel project. She had created similar ventures in London and Perth, Australia. Some people appreciated the angels, and reported it made them see the city differently. Others called it “Disneyfication” and exploitation. Some viewers were deeply moved, and wept openly upon glimpsing the angels.

--from a review by J.M.Coetzee in New York Review of Books (of "Lost Paradise" by Cees Nooteboom)

The Angel Project seems in agreement with the statistics from Professor T. M. Luhrmann’s article, “Conjuring Up Our Own Gods,” that 80% of Americans believe in angels. Luhrmann reports that some scholars think such beliefs are the result of evolution.

Pascal Boyer, author of “Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origin of Religious Thought,” believes that such beliefs—including a belief in God—are merely an artifact of “survival of the fittest.” 100,000 years ago, not every noise in the night was something dangerous. But those who got up to investigate anyway had a higher survival rate. Thus, we evolved to imagine there is always a cause behind every noise or event.

According to Boyer, we evolved to think that a ghost is causing that noise in the night; and we evolved to think that a deity is causing that disease, or that recovery, or any other even in our life.

Luhrmann points out that the same evidence is used by theists to *support* their belief system. For example, Justin L. Barrett believes in evolution—and he believes that almighty God is *directing* that evolution.

Luhrmann goes on to explore how some people “attempt to make what can only be imagined feel real.”

She explores the phenomenon of “tulpas”—thought forms that are imagined so vividly that they speak and move and take on their own independent existence. Tulpas were originally found in Tibetan Buddhism, although there are now dozens of websites explaining how to create a tulpa of your own.

Luhrmann interviewed one young man who spent 90 minutes every day meditating and focusing his mental energy on visualizing a fox. After a month of doing this, he began to feel the fox’s presence. Eventually, after taking a chemistry test, he heard the fox ask him, “so, how’d you do?”

The young man and his fox were intimately connected for a while; but as the man ceased to meditate so often, his fox began to fade. These days, if he keeps up his meditation practice, the fox sometimes returns.

Luhrmann contrasts that young man's outpouring of emotional energy with the prayers of some Christian evangelicals. Evangelical preachers urge their followers to keep up a personal relationship with God. They are to pray every day, and to feel God's presence in their lives.

Luhrmann notes that mainline Protestant traditions, which do *not* focus so much on maintaining a personal relationship with God, have been shrinking for decades. Evangelical traditions, with their intensely personal relationships, have been growing.

As her last paragraph, Professor Luhrmann writes, "Secular liberals sometimes take evolutionary psychology to mean that believing in God is the lazy option. But many churchgoers will tell you that keeping God real is what's hard."

In another New York Times article, (nytimes.com/2014/01/18/opinion/workers-of-the-world-faint.html), Julia Wallace wrote about 250 factory workers in Cambodia, who fainted simultaneously, shutting down the production line.

Wallace writes: "Two days later, the factory was back up, and the mass faintings struck again. [Then a] worker started barking commands in a language that sounded like Chinese and, claiming to speak in the name of an ancestral spirit, demanded offerings of raw chicken. None were forthcoming, and more workers fell down. Peace, and production, resumed only after factory owners staged an elaborate ceremony, offering up copious amounts of food, cigarettes and Coca-Cola to the spirit."

Such occurrences have become relatively common in Cambodia. Many claim that the workers become possessed by local guardian spirits, called *neak ta*. Others say it is due to a psychological and bodily rejection to the difficult conditions in which the workers must toil. At least a few claim it is both.

Here is one last illustration: (<http://www.radiolab.org/story/117294-me-myself-and-muse/>)

In a Radiolab podcast, the author of the book, *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert, spoke about how difficult it was for her to find the right title for her book. The book had already been sold to a publisher, and her first draft was finished; yet still she could not come up with a title.

The day before she was to mail her manuscript to the publisher, she emailed dozens of her friends, asking their help in finding the name of the "bleepity-bleeping" "expletive deleted" book. Some friends gave her suggestions, but one replied, "you cannot expect it to tell you its title when you refer to it with such mean language. You have to treat it more nicely."

Ms. Gilbert took that advice to heart, and reached out to mentally apologize; and soon she had the iconic title which helped her book stay on the best-seller list for 187 weeks.

Now, one of my roles as preacher is to be as clear as possible about my beliefs and opinions, so that you can get more clear about your own. The freedom of the pulpit gives me the right to say anything which I believe to be true; the freedom of the pew gives you the right to weigh my words against your own experience.

That said, I absolutely believe that how we think about things can affect our relationships. I do not believe that the book gave Ms. Gilbert its title, but thinking differently may have opened her to a different part of her mind. I am generally agnostic about the existence of angels, *neak ta*, tulpas, and other paranormal phenomena. I haven't experienced such things, but one thing I do believe is that the universe is not only stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we *can* imagine.

I have friends who are amateur ghost hunters. They say there are a lot of hoaxes and fake stories, and they claim there is reproducible, scientific evidence for some ghosts. I haven't seen it, but I am unwilling to condemn it outright.

None of which answers the central question: do I believe that God and religion are artifacts of the way that our bodies and brains evolved?

The shortest answer is “no and yes.” A longer answer will require a bit about the work of James W. Fowler, a developmental psychologist who published the book *Stages of Faith* in 1981.

Fowler studied how we relate to our world, and how those relationships may change over the entire span of our lives. From infancy through late adulthood, Fowler identified seven general stages that characterize how many human beings understand their universe.

Fowler came up with names for these stages, such as “Intuitive-Projective” and “Synthetic-Conventional.” I am not going to trouble you with those titles. If you really want to, you can find them in many books, and online.

I am more concerned with the content, or approach, at each stage. Not *every* human being goes through every one of these stages in exactly the same way, or at the same pace. Some of us may skip a stage, once in a while; and others will move through several, and then stop, remaining in a particular stage for most of the rest of their lives.

In general, Fowler's model shows how most human beings move from a rigid belief in justice and reciprocity—from a literal belief in anthropomorphic deities—through conformity, and struggle, to a gradual acceptance of complexity, and a deeper appreciation of metaphor and paradox.

Very few of us will reach the final stage of Fowler's model—which some might refer to as “enlightenment,” where we treat every person as a member of our close community, and serve the world with little thought for our own desires.

The good news is that most of us in this room *can* get to the next-higher stage. M.Scott Peck writes that people at these higher stages, “realize that there is truth to be found in [all] the previous...stages and that life can be paradoxical and full of mystery. Emphasis is placed more on community than on individual concerns.”

A little more pointedly, (usefulcharts.com/psychology/james-fowler-stages-of-faith.html) Matt Baker writes: “It is rare for people to reach this stage before mid-life. This is the point when people begin to realize the limits of logic and start to accept the paradoxes in life. They begin to see life as a mystery and [may] return to sacred stories and symbols but this time without being stuck in [any one] theological box.”

Fowler's model is not perfect, but it does help us understand some very important aspects of human life. First, everybody starts at zero. We all have to work our way through these stages. There will always be more people at the lower stages than there are at the higher stages because more people are being born all the time.

And that means that we can help people move through the stages more rapidly. We cannot—and probably should not—try to *force* our human cousins to evolve. We can create stories and systems and metaphorical bridges that will help people move through the usual struggles and challenges more safely, more quickly and more completely.

In fact, this is already happening. There are many theologians creating a “better” Christianity, with concrete answers for people at lower stages and powerful, effective ways of expanding those beliefs into less-rigid metaphors and stories to help people evolve more easily.

The same goes for Buddhism. Some of the founding texts of many flavors of Buddhism are every bit as rigid and concrete as are found in fundamentalist understandings of the monotheistic religions. Ken Wilber and some of his associates are creating what they call the “Fourth Turning” of Buddhism which will act, they say, as a “conveyor belt” supporting each person at every stage of development *and* easing their way to the next stage, and the next, and the next.

The other aspect of human life that this model helps us understand is that our human *societies* also have identifiable stages of development. If the leaders of a particular group all believe in a literal deity, then the group is going to behave mostly in ways that match that developmental stage.

As more and more people evolve into higher stages, then their leaders and their culture will show a similar evolution. As the people get less rigid, their governments will become less rigid, and more open.

Obviously, it is not as simple as I am making it sound, and there are always people being born at stage 0 who will not understand and who will resist the movement of the culture toward higher stages. If we figure out how to honor their beliefs and provide ways for pockets of more literal beliefs to coexist within a larger, less-literal culture, then we will be on our way to a much more peaceful, harmonious future.

How many of you feel that you have been patient enough, and you would really like me to finally answer the “God” question?

I do not believe in literal guardian spirits like the Cambodian *neak ta*, but I do believe that complex interactions of physical and psychological wellbeing, with cultural and religious norms, might well create surprisingly powerful occurrences.

I do not believe in a white-bearded old man who lives in the sky and throws lightning bolts while meddling in the lives of the beings he created.

Not only do I not believe in that literal version of the monotheistic God, I have very little interest in trying to prove or disprove its existence. It is not a very nuanced understanding; I want us to deepen our appreciation of the complexities and paradoxes of life.

I do not care if you talk to your plants, or not. I don't care if cursing at your computer actually makes the internet work faster. If you believe in angels, or ghosts, or tulpas—as long as it makes your life better, more rich, more fulfilling, more compassionate, then I am happy for you. If your beliefs help you to think thoughts and sing songs and make poems in the lap of death then I celebrate with you.

As long as your beliefs and opinions do not lead you to harm other people—if you do not allow your children to die, while praying over their collapsing bodies; if you do not oppress or discriminate against people you do not like; if you do not use ancient laws to demonize women, and try to control their bodies—then I support your right to believe what you do. If your acceptance—or your rejection—of some literal God helps you to live your life with compassion, if it helps you cope with the all the crap that life throws at us, then good for you.

The thing I find most interesting about Prof. Luhrmann's article is our human need for daily connection to something larger than ourselves. Given pollution, and war, and global climate change, and racism and homophobia and gun violence and an increasing wage gap and about a hundred other weighty issues, I myself want a way to feel a real, vital connection to what grounds and sustains me.

And it cannot be simple platitudes, either. I am simply not satisfied by “religious-sounding noises in the daytime.” I need a robust, complex, experientially-valid relationship with the universe. As the evangelical preachers in Professor Luhrmann's article might say, I need a daily practice to keep God real. Or, in slightly different language, I need a practice that will ground me, will remind me of my highest values, and will act as source of comfort and resilience.

I do have a practice now. I meditate virtually every morning. I perform what many might call prayer, expressing my deepest fears, desires, hopes and intentions. I do some physical exercise most mornings. All that is great, and I know my life is better because I do it.

And, lately, staring at seventy miles of North Carolina's Dan River destroyed by coal ash, seeing the dead turtles floating in the dying river, knowing that nobody—not the company that caused the spill, not the so-called regulators who were supposed to prevent this tragedy, nor the politicians who appointed the regulators and passed the regulations *as written by the polluting companies*—none of them will be held accountable.

Ditto the three different spills in West Virginia. Ditto the dense fog of pollution choking the citizens of Beijing.

Ditto the new wave of radiation poisoning the waters around Fukushima, Japan.

Hearing how we are devastating our own planet, and knowing how we are planning to do even more harm, transporting and burning tar sands oil and drilling in the arctic... as you can probably tell, all of this concerns me. I need to step up my meditation practice.

Watching women's rights under assault, in a concentrated, coordinated fashion; watching our voting rights disappear almost as rapidly; seeing laws legalizing discrimination against GLBT persons being discussed in Indiana *and passed* in legislatures around the country... I want to connect my own practice more deeply and more effectively with the beautiful, aching world outside, to make it more real in my heart.

And then witnessing yet another young black man shot down in Florida while his murderer is not convicted due to these ridiculous so-called “Stand Your Ground” ideas... watching as one more innocent young man

is treated as dangerous by our culture and disposable by our legal system due only to the color of his skin... I will, from now on, explicitly link my practice to the events around my life.

I will dedicate what I do in the morning to what's going on in the world. I don't believe that this will change things, necessarily, but it will keep it real in me, and make me more able to cope and more likely to do the work that *will* change things.

From now on, I will explicitly dedicate my meditation time to creating peace within myself *and* peace in the world.

From now on, as I sit down to a meal, I will not only remind myself to not overeat for my own health; I will also dedicate that action to reducing the obese wage gap between the rich and poor in our culture.

By taking these small actions, I hope to create more hope in myself.

My physical exercise each day will be dedicated to my own health and to all women's health.

Choosing to eat less fast food will be dedicated to the cause of less pollution in our biosphere.

Of course, I will continue to do other work, directly addressing these causes. My hope is that by making them more present in my life, I will find the strength and will to act more vigorously than ever before.

Finally, I will dedicate a portion of my morning practice to holding in my heart people with whom I disagree. I will endeavor to truly care for that person. As I deepen my own compassion, I will dedicate this practice to reducing racism and homophobia in the wider world.

If some people keep tulpas alive, and evangelicals keep God alive, then surely we can keep the Spirit of Justice alive, if we try hard enough.

So may we be.

CLOSING WORDS

Saint-Exupery advised us to teach ship builders to "yearn for the vast and endless sea." If we connect with our own deep yearning, giving it a voice, giving it action, then soon we, too, will be sailing into a more just future. So may we be.

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