

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Plunging”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 17, 2008

Spoken Meditation

Take a moment
to check and see if you are actually here.

Before there is right and wrong,
we are just here.
Before there is good or bad, or unworthy,
and before there is the sinner and saint,
we are just here.

Just meet here, where silence is—
where the stillness inside dances.
Just here, before knowing something, or not knowing.
Just meet here where all points of view
merge into one point,
and the one point disappears.

Just see if you can meet right now
where you touch the eternal,
and feel the eternal living and dying at each moment.

Just to meet here—
before you were an expert,
before you were a beginner,
To just be here,
where you are, what you always will be,
where you will never add anything to this,
or subtract anything.

Meet here, where you want nothing,
and where you are nothing.
The here that is unspeakable.
Where we meet only mystery to mystery,
or we don't meet at all.
Meet here where you find yourself
By not finding yourself.
In this place where quietness is deafening,
and the stillness moves too fast to catch it.

Meet here, where you are what you want
 and you want what you are
 and everything falls away into radiant emptiness.
 - from *Emptiness Dancing* by Adyashanti

Sermon

A Reading from Philip Simmons book, *Learning to Fall*:

In the northern part of our town, there's a stream that comes down out of the mountains, and at one place, that we call Pothole, it makes a pool of emerald clear water, ten feet deep. Every summer from my boyhood until quite recently, I would climb the rocks high above that pool and fling my body into the air. A summer was not complete without the thrill of that rushing descent, the slap of the water, the shock of its icy embrace. I have a photograph, taken two years ago, of what would prove to be my last such jump. In the foreground, seen from the back, my wife stands waist-deep in water, shading her eyes with one hand, watching. She has never approved of this ritual, something most grown men leave behind with their teenage years, but there I am, halfway down, pale against the dark rocks that I rush past. You can see my wet footprints on the rock over my head that I've just left. My eyes are focused downward on the water rushing toward my feet, and I am happy, terrified, alive.

Simmons description of jumping into Pothole captures the allure and the terror of plunging. The benefit of overcoming the fear, is a sense of aliveness that points in the direction of human meaning and satisfaction.

The inspiration for my words this morning come from listening to Roshi Bernie Glassman and his wife Sensei Eve Marko use the term "plunging" during the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship Convocation held in Garrison, New York in April of 2007. A plunge, by their description, puts a person in a mind-state of "not-knowing." Not-knowing is more than forgetting where you put your keys or the last time you took your pills. Not-knowing is a heightened state of awareness that can arise in a moment of disorientation or encountering a new situation or experience. The moment feels unfamiliar, perhaps even uncomfortable, creating a tension that focuses the mind on the present moment.

Our minds resist the plunging experience because it may feel dangerous, even if there is no immediate physical threat. I watched Sue Walko plunge from a high rope swing into a stream near the Manning's cabin in the Adirondacks over Labor Day weekend in 2004, with respect and awe at her courage, more than I had that day!

Yes, jumping into a deep, cold pool has some risk but the felt sense of danger can be both intense and exhilarating.

We celebrate this kind of risk taking in the world of sports. Athletes who push themselves to excel beyond their internal mental barriers become heroes to young and old. Who doesn't praise the kind of fortitude it took for Lance Armstrong to return from cancer and win the Tour de France again and again. The Olympic stars who put aside their self-imposed limitations and reach for the gold will be inspiring us again this summer in Beijing.

But how many of us apply this kind of courage and fortitude to our spiritual lives, or our daily lives? How many of us are willing to reach for spiritual gold rather than a beer, bon-bons or potato chips and flip on the television to anesthetize our brains?

At the UUBF Convocation, Eve gave us a powerful illustration of the value of plunging into the world of not-knowing. She drew a circle in the air. A tiny slice of that circle is what we know we know, she said. I know, I know how to speak English, cook dinner and program computers. A little bigger slice of the circle is what we know we *don't know*. I know I don't know how to speak Urdu or Hungarian, cook a soufflé, or do java programming. I'm sure I could learn if I applied myself, but, today, I don't know how to do these things. The rest of the circle, better than 90% of it, is what I don't know that I don't know. This is the world one enters in a true plunge. This is also *where transforming learning* takes place.

Bernie and Eve are Zen Buddhists. Zen teachers specialize in creating plunging experiences for their students. They hope to throw them involuntarily into a plunge which will stimulate a satori experience, a moment of awakened, unconditioned consciousness. There are two competing schools of Buddhism when it comes to enlightenment. The first is the gradual approach. Learn how to do meditation. Practice different techniques to develop your skills at paying attention to the present moment. And gradually one becomes fully awake over time. The second is the sudden approach. Learn how to sit still in the correct posture, but don't think that a technique will awaken you gradually. Work with a teacher who will awaken you suddenly and thus transmit the experience of enlightenment directly to you. I'm of the opinion both schools are right. One benefits from the practice of meditation and one can't get enlightened without moving through the plunge experience.

Plunges need not be heroic nor dramatic. They need only move us out of our comfort zone and into new experience; the more unfamiliar, the better.

Bernie created a "street retreat" partly for this purpose. One leaves one's security and comfort behind and goes out onto the streets of an urban area. Bernie started doing these retreats in New York City, and now does them in Springfield, Massachusetts. The participants take no money or credit cards. They must get by on the street just like street people do, on the generosity of strangers. They sleep on the streets, under bridges or in

cardboard boxes. They talk to the poor and homeless people they meet sharing a common experience of deprivation. They also talk to the affluent, if they are willing to interrupt their busy, productive lives, and experience their pity, scorn, disgust and sometimes, kindness and generosity.

The point is not to celebrate the poor nor denigrate the rich. A poor person stepping into a limousine might experience his or her own kind of plunge. Crossing the social divide gives each person an experience of being in not-knowing consciousness, moving out of our conditioned lives into the unconditioned.

In April, Bernie referred to the struggle between Rabbi's Kook and Nachman. In the early decades of the 20th century, Abraham Isaac Kook reformulated Jewish mysticism in response to modern science and Zionism. Among other roles, he was Chief Rabbi of "Palestine" during the British Mandate period. Chasidic Rebbe Nachmun of Bratslav taught through tales and stories in the same period. Rabbi Kook believed in the goal of cultivating harmony among the plurality of values as the path to ecstasy with God, much as we Unitarian Universalists do. Rebbe Nachmun believed contradictions were the source of ecstasy with God. It is our struggle with contradictions that provide openings for the spirit, he believed, more along the lines of Zen Buddhism.

Both are dangerous paths to awakening as each has its pitfalls. Seeking harmony can sometimes lead to living simplistically and superficially. But wrestling with contradictions can exhaust one's mental energy. Plunges use both the awakening energy of the contradiction and the harmonizing energy of feeling with another to bring heart and mind together in an awakening moment of communion between them.

What is paradoxical, yet central, to the experience of a plunge is its effortlessness. The awakening moment of heart-mind communion cannot be staged or preplanned. It happens spontaneously. The immersion in not-knowing, leads to a moment of unconditioned witnessing and discovery. That moment of unmediated contact with reality connects the emotions to the senses and inspires the desire to respond with loving action.

Philomena had this experience on a trip to Buffalo to visit her mother in a nursing home. She feared having to deal with the nurses and the aides while surrounded by semi-conscious residents in various stages of decline toward death. She dreaded spending a day with her mother who is gradually losing her mind. But her actual experience was quite different. As she sat with her mother, working to stay conscious in each moment, instead of fear, she felt gratitude and loving feelings of connection she hadn't had with her mother for years.

Fear is most often present *before* the plunge happens. Only when contemplating all the possible bad outcomes of what we are planning to do, does fear have a hold on us.

Once we've stepped off the ledge, hurdling toward the water, there is only the intensity of the present moment.

Before a street retreat, people have all kinds of fears, primary among them, not having enough to eat. Yet on all the retreats Bernie has led, no one has ended the retreat concerned about how much they ate or didn't eat. In the experience of the moment, they adapted and did fine. The enlightening stimulation of the surprises and being in a state of not-knowing what was happening next, kept their minds off their stomachs.

Actually, life presents us with plunges whether we want them or not. Accidents happen, usually at the most inopportune time. Waking up one morning may bring with it, the discovery of an unexpected lump in the wrong place. Economic conditions can change and suddenly one is on the street looking for a new job. A loved one dies or asks for a separation and life gets caught in a tornado of anger, panic, despair and grief.

Most of us do everything we can to protect ourselves from these unexpected turns of events, fearing the day one might arrive. Yet, could they also be used as spiritual wake-up calls, calls that drive us out of our caves and into the potential illumination of not-knowing what will happen next? Rather than cowering inside a barricade of defenses, perhaps living on the edge of the moment could bring us fully alive, kicking and screaming.

I've been thinking about living on the edge as our Finance Committee has begun building our budget for next year. There are a number of strains you'll be hearing more about in the coming months, that are a little scary. Like most non-profit service organizations, most of our budget is personnel. Your leaders decided to upgrade Leah's position to full-time when we hired her last summer and wrote that in her contract for this new budget. We are also working into our budget the full cost of our quarter time membership coordinator Lynne. The Personnel Committee has also realized they have been under-paying me as compared to what other UU ministers are being paid in similar sized congregations. And we have unexpected expenses with our new building, particularly maintaining our new elevator.

Our congregation took a big plunge when we agreed to build this new space. Though the funding was conservatively calculated on no-growth in membership, increasing the Director of Religious Education position from $\frac{3}{4}$ to full time and adding a membership coordinator were not part of that plan two years ago. These two decisions were calculated risks that we would see growth in membership with growth in space. We are starting to see that growth happening and I expect to see it continue into the next budget year and beyond. But the future is uncertain and hard to predict when putting a budget together.

What is hard about leaping off the ledge is wanting to turn around in mid-air and reconsider jumping. The next couple of years will reveal if we were right, believing that

increasing our space would lead to growth in our membership. I see very healthy signs, right now, that we're headed in that direction.

Were our leader's decisions wise or foolish? We don't know for sure yet. It's scary at times ... and it's also very exciting. And courageously moving through these uncertain times has the potential to direct us toward a greater vision full of compelling purpose. These are the times that force us to get serious about our commitments and invest our energies to make a difference in the life of this community.

A UU colleague of mine, the Reverend James Ford, reminded me recently of this insightful quote by the novelist Marcel Proust. "We do not receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness, which no one else can make for us, which no one can spare us, for our wisdom is the point of view from which we come, at last, to regard the world."

Something exciting is happening here through this congregation's journey into this new space; something exciting, but definitely still emerging, from the not-knowing realm. Part of me would rather avoid all the anxiety. Part of me would prefer to avoid the unpleasantness of the struggles of being alive for that matter. So much easier to take my instructions from someone else, be it parents, leaders, bosses, teachers, spouses, or even one's pets. Let the numbers and probabilities dictate our actions.

But to be genuinely who I am and respond authentically to what arises today, *that is* where the Spirit of Life waits for all of us ... on the other side of our fear.

May this congregation, may each of us, rise to the occasion and take the plunge.

Benediction

Ludwig Wittgenstein is reported to have said: "I don't know why we are here, but I'm pretty sure that it is not in order to enjoy ourselves."

Let us not be confused
 believing the purpose in life is to enjoy ourselves.
 Real enjoyment is the byproduct
 of plunging into life with a whole heart.

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