

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

## Empirical Sacraments

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**Sunday 17 September 2017**

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**READING** *adapted from Terry Tempest Williams, naturalist*

One day when I was eight, I spotted a white bird perched above me, a shock of light in a shadowed world. It was unlike anything I had ever seen. I ran inside and telephoned my grandmother, still watching the ghost bird through the sliding glass door. I explained that the size and shape of this mysterious bird were those of a robin, only without the brown back, black head, and red breast. She listened carefully. We both had our bird books in hand. "Perhaps it is an albino," she said. That very word, albino, was a revelation to me. She might as well have said, "of the spirit world," a concept Mormons like us understand.

We hung up, and I returned to watching this rare specimen in my own backyard. It was indeed a robin, the most common of birds, free of its prescribed dressings, pure white with red eyes. I was inspired and called her "the Holy Ghost."

When I reported my find to our local Audubon chapter, the president said he could not legitimately count it as a "credible sighting" due to my age. My grandmother, on hearing this, simply shook her head and said, "Trust your instincts. The bird doesn't need to be counted and neither do you."

Each Sunday in our church, a man dressed in a black suit walked slowly up the aisles, counting the congregation, row by row. Numbers mattered. Yet, like the albino robin in the oak brush, I felt more spirit than flesh and tried to remain invisible. Much of my childhood was spent outside, unseen.

The Holy Ghost I was taught to worship indoors has been replaced by the Holy Ghost I followed outside, who asked me to consider the countenance of a species before its color. All my life, my path from a Latter-Day Saint to a latter-day human has been, in its pleasure and struggle, like walking the gentle path of deer. Ascension has become for me a matter more closely aligned with wild iris than with Jesus.

For me, religion is a mirage in the desert. The God I know is water - a dewdrop and a flood, a weeping rock wall, and the Atlantic in full tidal swing, retreating one moment and rushing in the next. I feel the holy waves within my own body. God is rain. God is drought. Earth is a revolving state of grace. I believe in God and nature. God in nature. God within the mystery of our own breathing, pulsating bodies. We are not separate. The God I have felt move me from the seat of certitude inspires a letting go of all we have been taught, as our ego begins to untangle itself from what we have created to a deeper understanding of what has been created before us. Earth underfoot replaces heaven above. Instead of trying to define the ineffable through our own images and count ourselves as members of a congregation in power, we can begin to live with the mysteries and humbly congregate around them with awe and wonder and respect.

## Empirical Sacraments

The largest inland body of water in Massachusetts is a great reservoir in the western part of the state: thirty-eight and a half square miles of clean, deep water ringed by thousands of acres of old and new forest and gentle, rounded mountains. To get there you drive on rural roads through small, white-steeped villages; in the fall it is beautiful. We used to love to go there when we lived in that part of the world. Hiking the trails or skimming the surface in a canoe on a misty morning, it's easy to believe that you're in the wilderness there - but that's not exactly the case. This lake is a human creation, engineered in the 1930's to slake the thirst of Boston; aqueducts carry the water 65 miles to the east. The state redirected a river and built a dam to build this lake, and they evacuated four entire towns: schools and houses emptied; mills and shops and every standing tree, millions of trees, taken down; town halls and churches disassembled, the boards and bricks and windows, bells and pews piled on wagons pulled by horses to be rebuilt someplace else or scrapped. The cemeteries were disinterred and replanted miles away. Once the valley was empty, it took seven years to flood and fill with billions of gallons of water, to swallow a range of hills and turn small mountains into islands.

They allow boats and fishing on the north section of that great field of water, and on a quiet morning if you lift your paddle, look down and squint your eyes, it's tempting to imagine you can see roofs and steeples and tree tops below, fish swimming in and out of the windows and the branches. Until fairly recently you could see older people doing this, people who'd been children in those towns, people who'd grown up there, floating 150 feet above where their houses used to be. Other people don't know the history at all. They wonder at old dirt roads or stone walls which once encircled pastures, all marching down into the water. They marvel at random cellar holes in the woods, or the several sets of granite stairs, some pretty steep and impressive, rising out of nowhere, leading into nothing. It is a beautiful, enchanted place, and the truth of it is hidden in the depths of memory and time and water.

The truth is it's a reservoir.

The truth is it's a natural preserve, great for fishing and hiking.

The truth is, it is four towns - Prescott, Greenwich, Enfield, and Dana - filled with stories, voices, church bells, dogs and birds. Babies were conceived and born under there, meals were cooked in kitchens, people lived long lives and died, and argued, loved and sang.

I know about the singing because the congregation I served years ago near there had a tiny endowment fund, dating from the 1930's. It brought in less than a hundred dollars a year, and had been given by the Unitarian (or Universalist?) church in one of those towns, when it was dissolved and drowned. They divided their net worth among several congregations in the region, and asked that the funds be used for music, always and forever.

Places hold stories, invisibly. The land holds stories, and secrets way older than those of little white villages settled in the 1700's. Who lived there before that? What was there before the people came at all, and before the glaciers came? What was *here*? The truth is only rarely fully present on the surface, as anyone who's ever been in any kind of therapy can tell you. The truth

is only rarely fully present on the surface, as any archeologist or geologist or mythologist will tell you. It's always a matter of diving and divining.

Have you ever seen divining – dowsing – the old art of taking a Y-shaped branch into the woods or the fields to find water? I've seen people do it, and I've known others who've dug their wells or built houses based on what the dowser told them a divining rod had said – a stick that jumped in the hand in response to groundwater way down deep. The truth is only rarely fully present on the surface. How do you go after it? With what kind of curiosity, mixed with skepticism, mixed with open-mindedness, mixed with hope, with fear, with logic? With what kind of agenda do you go seeking truth?

I remember a man in that New England congregation who was a philosopher and author, retired, and who really liked true truth. That church had six geologists in it, all at once, when I was there. This man wasn't one of them, but he liked how ... *grounded*... the discussions were, how scientific and reasoned and empirical. This was a highly humanist Unitarian society. He hated the word "mystery" and we'd go back and forth, because I say "mystery" all the time, and he'd say, "There's no such thing. There's only information we don't have yet, only truth we don't yet know." He was an atheist, a beautiful, brilliant person. He believed that theoretically we would one day understand how this whole universe works, how it got here, what it is. He believed science could, in theory, dispel all ignorance. He believed that we could one day understand how *people* work. He would not say "soul," or "spirit," but that was what he meant, the mystery inside us. In some UU churches they say a variation on the Opening Words that we say here; they say, *Love is the spirit of this church, the quest for truth its sacrament, and service is its law*. He would have liked that, minus the sacrament. He would have said, "the quest for truth is a noble, worthy endeavor, a courageous, necessary thing," and on that we would agree.

Unitarian Universalism is a spiritual way, a practice, a tradition, devoted to deep diving and divining, to discerning, and always redefining truth. It's why for us the present political "war on science" is not just an outrage, but a tragedy. If there can be blasphemy within a Unitarian Universalist theology, and I believe there can, one way it would appear would be in disrespecting, disdaining, denying, and defunding the cumulative results of centuries of scientific inquiry. Science is technical, mechanical and logical, but for us, here, it is also a profoundly spiritual endeavor, seeking knowledge (yes), but more importantly, *understanding* (asking *how* and *why* as well as *what*). To cease that quest, whether we're talking about geology, physics, medicine, climate, or the mysterious maneuvers of your own heart and mind, to abandon the quest to understand what lies beneath the surface or beyond the surface – that blatant disregard is heresy to us.

In 1837, in a sermon called "The Sunday School," Unitarian William Ellery Channing offered a frame for religious education which describes how every soul may be encouraged to keep growing, keep expanding, no matter what age we are. He describes this hard spiritual practice of trying always to stay open (open-minded, open hearted), always seeking, never clutching, truth. I think of it each year when we dedicate our teachers:

*The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own;*

*not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own;*

*not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions, but to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may be offered to their decision;*

*not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth...*

It was 1837, and he was urging a Sunday School curriculum that would move past memorization; move past the lives of the saints and rote commandments; move past the literal acceptance of ancient texts that were poetically, mystically beautiful but no longer historically sound; move past received truths and medieval doctrine into exploration; move past the catechism into a curriculum of ethical reasoning - and wonder.

*... not to burden the memory, but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought;*

*not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules, but to awaken the conscience, the moral discernment;*

*not to form an outward regularity, but to touch inward springs...*

*In a word, the great end is to awaken the soul, to excite and to cherish the spiritual life.*

This was a radical, unprecedented way to “teach” religion, to children or adults, and it emerged concurrently in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with unprecedented scientific discoveries and theories about the age of the planet, the reality of evolution, the invisible structures inherent within and among atoms and animals and stars. A sacrament is defined as an outward and visible sign of inward, invisible grace – and empirical sacraments, the evidence of unimagined beauty and truth, and signs of material elegance in the natural world, and also mystery, were everywhere.

I think of Beatrix Potter, born at the other end of that century, and remembered now for her Peter Rabbit books. But she was first a naturalist, taught at home as women were, but well-trained in the sciences. She was a keen and rigorous observer of rodents, insects, mushrooms, plants, from the time she was small, raised by her Unitarian parents with a love for methodical research. She studied natural history and botany, biology, she made exquisite, professional drawings. One writer says, “If she is loved [and remembered] for her bunny books, that is because, as a girl, she used to boil her dead pet rabbits and measure the bones, the better to grasp their anatomy.” The quest for truth is a courageous, gritty sacrament. [Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker*, January 2007]

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How do you go after it?

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With what kind of agenda do you go seeking truth?

Robert Bly, the poet, speaks of wonder and amazement. I thought of this last month, for obvious reasons: his poem is called *Seeing the Eclipse in Maine*:

*It started about noon. On top of Mount Batte,  
We were all exclaiming. Someone had a cardboard  
And a pin, and we all cried out when the sun  
Appeared in tiny form on the notebook cover.*

*It was hard to believe. The high school teacher  
We'd met called it a pinhole camera,  
People in the Renaissance loved to do that.  
And when the moon had passed partly through*

*We saw on a rock underneath a fir tree,  
Dozens of crescents—made the same way—  
Thousands! Even our straw hats produced  
A few as we moved them over the bare granite.*

*We shared chocolate, and one man from Maine  
Told a joke. Suns were everywhere—at our feet.*

The quest for truth requires discipline and courage, perseverance. It requires training if you're a scientist, and intelligence and hard work. But without curiosity and playfulness and laughter and delight, I don't know how far we can get. We need to stay perpetually astonish-able.

Terry Tempest Williams, who is a Mormon and a mystic, a memoirist and scientist, saw a small albino robin when she was a child, and conferred with her grandmother, who was an ornithologist, and with the Audubon Society, who dismissed her as too young to know what her own eyes had seen. Undaunted, she named that bird "the Holy Ghost," and took notes on what she saw.

*The Holy Ghost I was taught to worship indoors was replaced by the Holy Ghost I followed outside... All my life, my path from a Latter-Day Saint to a latter-day human has been, in its pleasure and struggle, like walking the gentle path of deer. Ascension has become for me a matter more closely aligned with wild iris than with Jesus. The God I know is water. I feel the holy waves within my own body. God is rain. God is drought. Earth is a revolving state of grace. I believe in God and nature. God in nature. We are not separate. **The God I have felt move me from the seat of certitude inspires a letting go of all we have been taught, as our ego begins to untangle itself from what we have created to a deeper understanding of what has been created before us.** Earth underfoot replaces heaven above. Instead of trying to define the ineffable through our own images and count ourselves in power, we can begin to live with the mysteries and humbly congregate around them with awe and wonder and respect.*

It's that premise of humility, the requisite of right perspective, the human person who is always small compared to the enormity of what she does not yet know, the larger truths we dive for and divine, but never fully apprehend – it's this attitude of right relation, this mix of trembling awe and bravery, that blurs the line for me between true science and religion. The quest for truth is a sacrament, and the empirical evidence, in the land, in the rivers, in the air, in the trees and animals, the evidence in the fossil record and the ice shelves and the warming oceans – the tangible record is holy scripture. It's our sacred text, and we humans on the earth are like young scholars in the synagogue, just learning how to read the ancient language in which our own story is contained. We dive, we reach, we shatter assumptions again and again, because the truth in this world is only rarely fully present on the surface.

You may have seen on Friday these astronomers who for twenty years have guided the Cassini spacecraft on its mission to Saturn. What moved me was how moved they were, how reverent, these brilliant people, to receive over such a long time so many images and so much information, even up to the final hours of the project. The team loved the work, and they wept this week as Cassini plunged into Saturn's atmosphere, right on schedule, just as planned, because the work was beautiful and had integrity. There is something noble and gallant, rigorous and bracing and right in risking every preconception. It's an old virtue, seeking the truth and speaking it, a gracious discipline, which has fallen out of favor and out of style in these first fraught months of a new administration. As one agency after another is hobbled and shut down, one website after another censored and stripped, it feels like we're in a spacecraft ourselves, a time capsule, racing toward the Dark Ages.

*Truth is beauty*, said the poet, say the scientists, and it is not at all the same as that oily substance that Stephen Colbert used to call "truthiness," back in the long ago days when it still felt right to joke about these things (the long ago days of 2016). There's virtue in knowing the difference between truth and not-truth, and leaders once could do it, as when someone wrote, "We pledge to one another our lives, our fortune, and our sacred honor." To give your word, to seek the truth and speak the truth, to lean toward it as toward light and life, used to be an honor.

It still is.

It's how we do religion here, it's how we teach our children, how we live our lives. *Love is the spirit of this church, the quest for truth its sacrament, and service is its law....* The Congregationalists say, about the Bible, "God is still speaking," meaning there's always more to learn and understand. An old hymn, Unitarian, tells us, "Revelation is not sealed, and a new one reminds: "drifting here with our ship's companions, leaning over the edge in wonder, we keep on casting our questions into the deep,"\* with hope without fear, because to do otherwise would be beneath us as a species. It would be a kind of blasphemy.

These words in closing come from the poet William Stafford, his poem, "Earth Dweller." He's writing about a farm, but for him it's a cathedral:

*It was all the clods at once become  
precious; it was the barn, and the shed,*

*and the windmill, my hands, the crack  
Arlie made in the ax handle: oh, let me stay  
here humbly, forgotten, to rejoice in it all;  
let the sun casually rise and set.  
If I have not found the right place,  
teach me; for, somewhere inside the clods are  
vaulted mansions, lines through the barn sing  
for the saints forever, the shed and windmill  
rear so glorious the sun shudders like a gong.  
Now I know why people worship, carry around  
magic emblems, wake up talking dreams  
they teach to their children: the world speaks.  
The world speaks everything to us.  
It is our only friend.*

*(Allegiances, 1970)*

*\*with thanks to Pete Mayer*