

Soul Matters

August 2013

What does it mean to be a Person of Possibility?

The worship and Soul Matters theme this month is Possibility. Possibility is central to Unitarian Universalist faith. While others saw humankind as fundamentally depraved, early Universalists saw a possibility for redemption in everyone. While many saw the suffering of life as payment for eternal happiness in heaven, early Unitarians saw the possibility of heaven on earth. The early Christian Unitarians and Universalists believed in a good God who wanted the best for us. God would not give up on us, so we should not give up on God. Perhaps this makes us a religion of “Why not?”

As a UU mystic, I believe in possibility. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” Act 1, Scene 5.) I don’t know what all is out there in the world or the universe, or even inside me, but *I believe in the possibility* of things imagined and unimagined. Why not?

But what about you, personally? Are you open to the question of “Why not?” Do you believe in possibilities? These are your questions this month. One woman put it this way...

“When I think of possibility, I think of all the things, people, opportunities, on which we close the door, automatically.

“Such as, ‘I will never see eye to eye with my sister.’

‘I couldn’t possibly leave this job to start my own business.’

‘I will never have close friends like...’

‘I will never really make a difference, so why bother?’

‘UU’s will always be a small, select faith; why even consider that we could change the world?’

“We tell ourselves so many small things about who we are and what we are capable of, that our own words drown out the possibility of anything else. I actually think there’s comfort in that because it stops us from having to face our fears, our loneliness, our perceived inadequacies.”

This woman’s spiritual journey led her to ask the question, “*Are you willing to consider the possibility that you are not who you think you are?*” A fine question for UU’s to ask.

So this month, I ask you to consider the possibility that you are not who you think you are -- you are not as limited as the story you tell yourself about you. Consider the possibility that you might be more, that life can be more, that today can be more than you imagined or expected.

Say “Yes” to possibility, “Yes” to “why not?”

With love and hope for all the possibilities in your future, Beatrice

Soul Matters is the creation of the Rev. Scott Taylor. Materials in this packet are from Scott, Rev. Beatrice Hitchcock, participants in Soul Matters sharing circles, and members and friends of High Plains Church.

Spiritual Exercise(s):

Dancing with possibility is not easy. It takes us into uncomfortable territory. To make that journey easier, we have a choice of spiritual exercises this month. Make no mistake; both are challenging. But for this to be meaningful, it has to be a challenge that lures you at least a little. So pick the one that fits you best. Think about it, perhaps discuss with someone you trust, not only what this adventure taught you about yourself, but also why you picked the exercise you did.

Spiritual Exercise #1: Look at the World through Bly's Eyes...for 2 weeks

This exercise starts off simple, but then...

STEP ONE: Following the dotted lines, cut out the below poem by Robert Bly.

STEP TWO: Tape it someplace where you will encounter it every day. Your bathroom mirror for instance. Or your office desk. Or the dashboard of your car.

STEP THREE: For two weeks, start the day off by reading it at least once. Really do this! By the end of two weeks, you may know it by heart. The idea is get it stuck in your head. You may need to go back and read it mid-day just to get it "re-stuck." The goal is to feel like Robert is gently nagging you throughout your day.

STEP FOUR: Try to do what it says!

STEP FIVE: Tell someone you trust how it allowed you to see the bears that were sitting outside your door.

Things to Think

Think in ways you've never thought before.
If the phone rings, think of it as carrying a message
Larger than anything you've ever heard,
Vaster than a hundred lines of Yeats.

Think that someone may bring a bear to your door,
Maybe wounded and deranged; or think that a moose
Has risen out of the lake, and he's carrying on his antlers
A child of your own whom you've never seen.

When someone knocks on the door,
Think that he's about
To give you something large: tell you you're forgiven,
Or that it's not necessary to work all the time,
Or that it's been decided that if you lie down no one will die.

~ Robert Bly ~

Spiritual Exercise #2: Pick a “Can’t” and Commit to Proving it Wrong!

This is also one that will likely require two weeks, at least. First, take a few days to a week to think of the things in your life that you’ve placed a big fat “CAN’T” beside--or as the woman quoted earlier said, things on which you’ve “closed the door.” Remind yourself of her examples:

"I will never see eye to eye with my sister."

"I couldn't possibly leave this job to start my own business"

"I will never have close friends like..."

"I will never really make a difference, so why bother?"

"UU's will always be a small select faith, why even consider that we could change the world?"

As you do this, try to find one “can’t” that a small piece of you second-guesses. In other words, as you go through the list, listen carefully for a faint inner voice that says, “Why not?” or “Are you sure?”

Then commit yourself to taking this “can’t” on. Make a promise to yourself that you will do what it takes, for as long as it takes, to prove it wrong!

It might be something personal like those in the list above. Something that you’ve always told yourself “is just not me” or “just not within my reach.” For instance: “I can’t lead; I’m a follower” or “I can’t be alone” or “I’m just an appreciator; I can’t do art.” You will know it by the itch. A piece of you will simply be fed up. “I’m sick of dreading going to work.” “I’m sick of the way he talks to me.” “I’m sick of pretending I enjoy going to their house for dinner.” You know what we mean. Don’t blow it off this time. Take that fed up feeling seriously. Prove that “can’t” wrong. Make a commitment to finding a new job, telling him he’s not going to talk that way to you anymore, explaining to your spouse that you just find those friends of his annoying as heck!

Or come at this from another angle: pick a supposed impossibility! Take a moment and read the Robert Fulghum piece in the “For Inspiration” section. If those guys can eat a chair, just think of what you could do! Have you always told yourself that you could never jump out of a plane? Prove yourself wrong by signing up for skydiving this weekend. Afraid of heights? Get on the web and find your local indoor rock climbing gym. Always been quiet about your political opinions? Speak out or witness in a way that lands you in jail! Never been athletic? Go buy hiking shoes and work your way up to climbing one of the mountains in the Rockies. Dreamt of being a rock star as a teen but have a horrible voice? Have your friends take you to a Karaoke bar and make you get on stage. Be imaginative, even a bit nuts! What “chair” could you “eat”? Make Robert Fulghum and those students proud. But most of all, remember why they did it: to shake up their philosophy of life! So don’t just do it to prove that you’re brave and daring. Or even that you’re clever. Pick something that you think will make you look at life differently—like it is all of a sudden wide-open, your playground, an amazing place where so much is possible!

For Inspiration...

The below poems, podcasts and movies are offered to inspire you as you wrestle with this month's spiritual exercises. Usually, you are invited to pick and choose whichever catch your eye. But this month, take the time to explore every single one. Each has it's own special magic. You won't regret it.

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~ Robert Bly ~

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Rosamund and Benjamin Zander on “The Art of Possibility”

Ben and Rosamund Zander's book is definitely worth reading, but below are a couple podcasts, a transcript and a video that give you a wonderful taste of their inspiring ideas and contagious energy.

Interview with Diane Rehm: <http://wamu.org/programs/dr/01/03/29.php>

Transcript of another interview(for those who prefer to read rather than listen—but there's also a podcast for those who do want to listen): <http://www.ibm.com/developerworks/podcast/dwi/cm-int121906txt.html>

A MUST SEE!! Video of an inspirational talk by Ben Zander. It's presented as a talk about classical music, but don't be fooled, it's really about how we can inspire each other to believe in possibility—even how one person can make a world believe in possibility (And of course it is about classical music and how if you never thought it possible for you to like it...think again): http://www.ted.com/talks/benjamin_zander_on_music_and_passion.html

"The Chair Men"

By Robert Fulghum

(from "What On Earth Have I Done?")

We say the young have much to learn, but I find that they know and do things unfamiliar to me, so I am pleased to learn from them when I can. Example: Two young college students asked me for a ride, because they were late to work. Their summer construction job was near my office so I was glad to oblige. On the way, I asked, "Besides working hard and playing hard, what's happening in your lives?"

They exchanged glances. Then one said. "We are eating a chair."

What?

Yes. It seems that their college philosophy teacher gave them an extra-credit assignment: Do something unique and memorable – not dangerous or foolish, but something creative, inventive and instructive. Write it up and explain what was learned and how it might apply to their philosophy of life.

So. They are eating a chair.

They bought a plain wooden kitchen chair at an unfinished furniture store. Using a wood rasp, they have been shaving away at the chair, mixing the dust into their granola for breakfast, and sprinkling the dust on their salads at dinner. So far they have consumed most of a leg, two rungs and a back piece. And while they don't want to overdo it, the pace is picking up. Still the project may not be finished before summers' end, so they may enlist friends, who, it seems, are enthusiastically willing to help eat a chair.

And yes, they consulted a physician to make sure the wood dust was not harmful. And no, it doesn't taste bad – especially if they mix in a little cinnamon at breakfast and a little lemon pepper at dinner. And, yes, they have learned a few things along the way.

"Like what?", I asked.

Like how amazing long-time goals can be achieved in incremental stages. Like how something seemingly idiotic affects your thinking about other things you do. For example, they routinely run about fifteen miles a week to stay in shape – around and around a lake. They wondered where fifteen miles a week would take them if they ran in a straight line. So they got a road map and have been marking off the mileage, headed south. They could be in Portland, Oregon, in a couple of weeks. But that's boring, so they have a European map now and are starting out in Vienna headed for Athens. Using guidebooks they're figuring out what there is to see and do along the way. They're touring the world in their minds.

And, of course, they're very pleased with themselves. They're sure they'll astound the professor when he asks for their report. "We ate a chair."

"It will blow the dude away," said one.

For all the goofiness of the project, these young men are learning patience and perseverance. Some things cannot be had except on a little-at-a-time, keep-the-long-goal-in-mind, stay-focused basis.

Love and friendship are like that. Marriage and parenthood, too. And peace and justice and social change. As wonderfully silly as it seems, eating a chair may lead my young college friends to wisdom and nobler aspirations.

In their foolishness lies the seed of What-Might-Be, little by little.

Could You Be

Peter Meyer, copyright

Could you be a window in a darkened hall
To give a passing soul a way of seeing through the wall
And people stop in front of you and into you they peer
Uncertain what they see because you're not exactly clear?

Could you be a lighthouse standing on a shore
Meant to send a light out to the sailor in a storm
But even though you show your light not a boat can tell
You didn't know you're not supposed to shine it on yourself?

Are you a bell that hasn't tolled? A drum that hasn't rolled?
A word of hope unsaid? A declaration never read?
Could you be?

Could you be a siren made to raise your voice
But sinking in the silence afraid of making noise
Even though the enemy is flying overhead
Even though the fire is continuing to spread?

Are you a spear afraid of flight? A constellation afraid of night?
A principle unknown? A pilgrim holding on to home?
Could you be?

A flare afraid to burn? A wheel unfree to turn?
A compass shunning north in a vessel straying way off course?
Could you be?

Could you be a lighthouse
Standing on a shore
That the lost are looking for?

Fitzcarraldo: Werner Herzog's Dance With the Possible

On the one hand, this is a movie recommendation. But to truly "get it" you need to treat this as an exploration of the making of a film. Fitzcarraldo is considered a "masterpiece" of the great German director, Werner Herzog. Below is a description of the movie. You will understand right away why this fits with our theme of possibility! In addition, there's information on a documentary of the making of the film, called *Burden of Dreams*. It's considered by some to be even more compelling than the movie. If you're not a fan of slower moving foreign films, then start with the documentary; you'll then not be able to resist watching Fitzcarraldo. Also included below is a link to a review of a book written by Herzog about the making of the film; it's made up of his diaries while filming the movie. The book is called *Conquest of the Useless*. But read the review if nothing else! It may be as memorizing as the film itself.

Werner Herzog's Fitzcarraldo: an overview

Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald (Klaus Kinski), known as Fitzcarraldo to the native Peruvians, is an avid opera lover and rubber baron who dreams of building an opera house in the Peruvian jungle. To accomplish this, he plans to reach an isolated patch of rubber trees and make his fortune. But these trees are not directly accessible by river because of dangerous rapids, so Fitzcarraldo runs his ship as close as possible via an alternate river and then enlists the aid of the native Peruvians to drag his ship over a mountain to the desired area. However, the natives seem to have their own agenda so they mysteriously acceded to Fitzcarraldo's wishes. The results manage to both mock and affirm the dreams of determined figures like Fitzcarraldo, making absurdity out of the stuff of human endeavor without negating the beauty of that effort. There is hardly a more awe-inspiring or arresting image than that of Fitzcarraldo's ship pulling itself up the mountain with cables and pulleys, or of the ship resting in mid-ascent as seen through the thick morning fog of the jungle.

The tortured production history of Werner Herzog's Fitzcarraldo (ably recorded in Les Blank's documentary *Burden of Dreams*) tends to take the spotlight away from this deeply mesmerizing film. And that's unfortunate, because the film itself is even more fascinating than the trials and tribulations, amazing though they might be, that led to its being made. Part of the problem is the film's deliberate, some might say ponderous, pace, which invites the viewer to experience the slow immersion into the jungle that Fitzcarraldo and company experience. Herzog did something similar in *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, sometimes aiming his camera at the river rapids for extended periods of time, with hypnotic results. This could never happen in a Hollywood film, and it should be treasured. --Jim Gay

Video Clips of the Film

<http://www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi2678522137/>

http://video.google.com/videosearch?sourceid=navclient&rlz=1T4ADBF_enUS254US254&q=Werner+Herzog's+Fitzcarraldo&um=1&ie=UTF-8&ei=rZ8dS_DPNTklQeV1M3yCQ&sa=X&oi=video_result_group&ct=title&resnum=4&ved=0CBsQqwQwAw#sourceid=navclient&rlz=1T4ADBF_enUS254US254&q=Werner+Herzog's+Fitzcarraldo&um=1&ie=UTF-8&ei=rZ8dS_DPNTklQeV1M3yCQ&sa=X&oi=video_result_group&ct=title&resnum=4&ved=0CBsQqwQwAw&qvid=Werner+Herzog's+Fitzcarraldo&vid=1701782671574022333

Burden of Dreams: An overview of the documentary

For nearly five years, acclaimed German filmmaker Werner Herzog desperately tried to complete the most ambitious and difficult film of his career-Fitzcarraldo, the story of one man's attempt to build an opera house deep in the Amazon jungle. Documentary filmmaker Les Blank captured the unfolding of this production, made all the more perilous by Herzog's determination to shoot the most daunting scenes without models or special effects, including a sequence requiring hundreds of natives to pull a full-sized, 320-ton steamship over a small mountain. The result is an extraordinary document of the filmmaking process and a unique look into the single-minded passion of one of cinema's most fearless directors.

Book Review of Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of Fitzcarraldo

http://www.powells.com/review/2009_09_20.html

From the review...

"...Fitzcarraldo and Herzog of Conquest, however different their individual circumstances, are all embodiments of the same principle: the refusal to accept any disjunction between what can be imagined and what can be achieved. Usually such a refusal has tragic consequences, for there is a gulf between human aspiration and ability. Herzog is not blind to this dour insight -- so many of his films end in failure and defeat -- and yet he celebrates the impulse to transcend our limitations as noble in itself, regardless of what follows. In his films, the ability to see the world as something other than what we've been told it is -- as a place where boats move over mountains or apples follow their own will -- is already a kind of victory."

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My boat struck something deep.
Nothing happened.
Sound, silence, waves.
Nothing happened?
Or perhaps, everything happened
And I'm sitting in the middle of my new life.

- Juan Ramon Jimenez -

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