CALL TO WORSHIP

“To see a world in a grain of sand
A nd a heaven in a wild flower;
H old infinity in the palm of your hand
A nd eternity in an hour.”

Such is one way of seeing, according to the mystic poet William Blake, just one of 7 ways... We can speak of the 7 wonders of the world, Lotto Super 7, Snow White’s 7 dwarves, 7 deadly sins, and on the 7th day, He rested, and here we sit, weaving our meanings as Unitarians through our ever-widening calls to service in our 7 principles, our 6 sources of wisdom, our 5 senses call to the 4 directions; 3 for the Trinity we have disclaimed, 2 for the dualism that has us trapped, and 1 for our UNI-tarian faith... that calls us to serve one interdependent web of vast diversity. But our UNI-tarian view must not eclipse those other useful ways of seeing WE cannot fully understand the mysteries of this world and our being in it if we consent only to being anthropologists on the outside, curious but detached; instead, let our vision point to all these ways of being, to the interdependent web – unity in diversity. How appropriate (and by the way, purely coincidence – if you believe in such a thing-) that in all the services this summer, it is this one, urging you to explore other ways of seeing, that you are displaced from your customary sanctuary?!

Let’s take a moment, pause and look around silently. What do you miss... what do you like? What invitation is here, in this different, and temporary space that you might embrace as a useful challenge? Will you take the sanctuary for granted, next week, will it feel renewed, not just because of the fresh coat of paint, but will your awareness of that space fade with familiarity? Let us look on with new eyes, let us heed the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: “The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched the chambers and magazines of the soul. In its experiments there has always remained, in the last analysis, a residuum it could not resolve.”

And so, let us worship today, as Reverend Patton proclaimed, with our “eyes and ears and fingertips”... Come, let us worship together...
I stood at the counter of a gift shop - it’s one of those intricately delicately placed shops full from ceiling to floor of culled bits of collector’s oddities, local artisans’ wares, pottery, kitsch and catch-all from the owner’s varied tastes and experiments in eclecticism. It is an inspiring place to stroll, and I consider my occasional modest purchase to be akin to paying admission at a small amusing museum. On this day I came with more purpose than usual -- to purchase a small kit to grow an indoor tree; I’d been in the store alone for some time, but my timing in turning to the counter put me behind two women -- friends -- who engage the shop owner in small talk. One of the women is buying an entire carton of individual vials of mosquito repellant cream, and the owner meticulously removed the stickers one at a time from every single bottle. It took a very long time. I’m not in a hurry, but had to remind myself that this is precisely the kind of painfully painstaking personalized service that I claim I miss from stores, so I relaxed and gazed idly at the wares near the counter. My eyes lit on a series of paperweights. At first glance, these gifts were nothing special - flowers under glass: a lovely violet, a small bouquet of wildflowers, and then, a dandelion. . . . a perfect, globular seed head dandelion with its flurry of cottony parachuted strands suspended under glass. I wonder about the trick of it, the optical illusion. The women finally leave and it is my turn to make small talk, so I ask, without much hope or expectation, pointing to the dandelion paperweight, “Is that real?”

Curiosity is its own reward, and patience pays off in story . . . the shop keeper said it is, in fact, real -- that the artist spent ten years figuring out the secret of how to capture the deployed dandelion in resin. I pick it up, paying attention now, and notice how the curve of the glass bends light around and through the weed, animating it as though it still blows in the wind and even poised in this varnish might vanish in an instant. The irony and poetry hits me -- this fragile thing in this weighted object, suspended in its beauty, captured, forever ephemeral. This plain object I had dismissed as gifted garbage is a marvel now; it is a story now; it is someone’s work and obsession, a pride and joy, a secret that neglected will wisp away unless the secret is shared. The object itself now has taken on a meaning beyond my first casual glance, entirely different under this second sighting under new light because I have become part of its story now as a participant, not an idle observer. I see what seems impossible and yet it is undeniably before me, and it reminds me of my favorite ghost story.

Oh, you heard me right . . . from the ultra-rational pulpit of the Unitarian pulpit, I propose to tell you a ghost story. On first view, one might well be skeptical, after all, most of us in this room have not encountered such a thing. But the world is full of marvels that defy our neatly drawn categories of logic and challenge what we believe we know, and such was the case of anthropologist Edith Turner.
In 1985, Edith Turner returned to Zambia among the Ndembu tribe where she and her family had lived and studied for three years in the nineteen-fifties. She had the opportunity not just to observe, but to participate in a series of healing rituals from an illness known as Ihamba. According to local doctor Singleton Kahona, an Ihamba is the tooth of a dead hunter that travels a victim’s veins, rampaging, cutting, and eating its way through the afflicted body. The cure is the extraction of that tooth by drawing it out by suction and the cupping of horns. However, that physical act of healing is only made possible by the coaxing of the tooth to loosen its hold, releasing it by ritual. In many ways the ceremony matches our notions of such events: medicines are collected and consumed, and the victim is circled with drumming, dancing, and singing. But the releasing of the gnawing tooth also requires that the congregation members first release their pent up aggressions against one another. This revelation is known as mazu, meaning “words” and refers to a “coming out of grudges”. Just as surely as the Ihamba cure required the pouring on of cleansing medicines and water, it needed the pouring on of ‘words’. Community members and the afflicted must name their grievances, reveal their secret disputes, and release their grief, tears, and anger. In this process of gradual reconnection and healing of relationship, the tooth loosens its hold, is coaxed from its rampage, expelled from the body, then captured and stored so that it cannot find its way into another victim.

Edith Turner had first observed the ritual in 1951, and her husband Victor had recorded all the details of the preparations and its aftermath, had interviewed the participants, and created an explanation grounded in the best-known psycho-social theories of the day. By 1985, Edith returned, grieving over her husband’s death, and because she was known to the community, had brought back her husband’s books about their lives, and shared pictures and memories, she was accepted, not just as an observer, but as participant. Edith-as-scientist wondered about the effects and ethics of being less impartial – wondered if she would learn more, or learn differently if her involvement became more subjective than objective. In the end, she decided that many studies had been written about the objective viewpoint; maybe it was time to see differently. And she did... much to her own amazement, in the last Ihamba ritual in which she participated, at the end of a long struggle with a diseased woman, Edith Turner danced, chanting and clapping with the assembled tribe – Edith -- a Westerner, a trained scientist, an experienced anthropologist, an expert cynic – watched, awestruck, and saw a small spirit emerge from the skin of the victim’s back, and captured by the doctor. The scientist had seen a ghost.

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Edith Turner’s decision to view that healing ceremony from the inside, rather than maintaining her distance as an outsider, allowed her a whole new and holy way of seeing. While we are accustomed to considering just five senses, and speak generously but vaguely of a sixth sense, Turner concluded there are seven ways of seeing. Specifically, she names them: first, the physical act of seeing with one’s eyes; second, the mental construct of connecting with a thought, as in “seeing the point” of an argument; she lists three types of dream states: daydreams, the unconscious dream, and portentous dreams. Intentional visualization is another way of seeing, one commonly used as a spiritual exercise. And, according to Turner, the seventh way of seeing is the physical event of seeing, with one’s own eyes, a manifestation of a spirit, vision, or ghost.\(^2\)

Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson hinted at such glimpses in describing the “over-soul.” He wrote:

“We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole . . . is the soul.”\(^3\)

And so we need the internal in order to reflect the external, and vice-versa; not to substitute one for the other, but to employ both vantage points to create an approximation of what we know and see. The need requires that we reclaim more than one way of seeing from the fragmentation inherent in our theological history.

Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka says that in the history of liberal theology, the idea of a Christian trinity - Father/ Son/ Holy Spirit -- was gradually abandoned, but rather than resting on a unified, integrated model of wholeness, liberal theology unceremoniously dismantled the trinity’s third arm, subsequently separating mind from body without accommodating a need to attend to any mediating force, that force sometimes called Spirit.\(^4\) We are left with an unsatisfied appetite, our minds rationalizing and justifying the world in words that too often prove inadequate; we are left with a body disconnected from the understanding of its very biologically real nervous system that regulates and informs our feelings. Our

\(^2\) Turner 170
\(^3\) Ralph Waldo Emerson. “IX: The Over-Soul.” The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Accessed online: http://www.rwe.org/works/Essays-1st_Series_09_The_Over-Soul.htm
habitual neglect of the spirit starves the body and the mind, which require connection to become an integrated whole.

It is just such a reconnection sought through the Ndembu ritual of mazu – the pouring on of “words” and pouring out of grievances. Turner points out that mazu is most exactly translated as “psychoanalysis” which literally means “soul un-loosening”.

Such a reconnection between mind and body, through the matching of words with our experiences is akin to a modern technique called focusing, developed by Eugene Gendlin. For Dr. Gendlin, body plus mind – before they are split apart is a “felt sense” (which is not the same as an “emotion”) and the expression of it gives us a new way of seeing ourselves, lighting the way toward a shift, or transformation. In acknowledging the ‘felt sense’, the body-mind link is restored, and a shift toward wholeness and wellness is begun.

This is the work of religion, our business here on a Sunday morning, to create, in our religious practices, ways to reconnect. The Ndembu’s ritual seems far less foreign if you consider your own real pain as similar to the dead hunter’s tooth. Each of us carries accumulated pain, those aches and scars that we carry from abuse, from neglect, from boredom and inattentiveness, from shame, from fear. This dislocated pain manifests itself in self-destruction through distraction, depression, alcoholism, or against those around us as anger, road rage, violence, oppression. The pain eats at you. The ritual of removing the root pain of your symptoms might start by naming the pain, just as a tribal doctor coaxes out that painful Ihamba tooth. And though such pain cannot always be encapsulated and released forever, its acknowledgement relaxes us, allows us to rest a moment, reframe our experience, shift into a new relationship with ourselves and that persistent pain. We find relief in its release.

Some of our healing religious practices hearken to those witnessed by Turner at Ihamba – we coax our truest selves out, urging them through music and song, dancing, feeling the ground beneath our feet, sitting in stillness and silence, making real and solid physical connections with those around us with a handshake or smile; we gather around a flame, light candles of memory and prayer, meditate with artwork, walk a labyrinth, commune over coffee or potluck, and wash the dishes . . . for we are changed by our experiences and particularly when we understand ourselves not to be alone in our anguish. And we do so, just like the Ndembu tribe, by the pouring on of words . . . by naming our experiences through proof and

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6 Gendlin 10
poetry, through story and testimony. This is how, as a people who exalt the powers of mind, we also attend to our bodies and to that invisible indelible link we might call spirit.

Our wholeness requires that we not limit ourselves to just one of these ritual forms - - because we must never mistake “the map for the territory.” Religious liturgy at its best serves as a journey through all the territories of our being, its map pointing in many directions at once. For Unitarians, this variety is more pronounced than in other congregations. Without a common set of beliefs, no sealed scripture nor mandate of worship, Unitarians look to personal experience as our theological foundation. In other words, our theology is biography; what we believe stems from our lived experience of religion, and is bounded by the language we choose to describe those experiences, whether that language is verbal or not. And here’s the irony for our faith in reason - our revered scientific method allows us to describe what we see, and demonstrate repeatable experiments; but no means of sophistication in methodology allows us to “prove” a personal experience. Science measures matter but cannot tell us what matters. And while we may search forever to “prove” the effectiveness of ritual and religion, to prove or disprove an experience in that seventh way of seeing described by Edith Turner, I invite you to consider that you already know how to see severally.

The day I visited the gift shop, where I saw that impossibly dangling dandelion, I bought a tree-planting kit. The small box contained a small planter, two handfuls of soil, and five black seeds. During the course of drafting this sermon, I stopped for the unlikely chore of planting a tree in my kitchen. And I noticed how natural it felt that I could see the seed and I could see the tree. The seed’s invisible potential is apparent from the perspective of my experience, although should I cut it open, I will find no tree. But, plant it whole and watch the invisible grow.

Edith Turner, before seeing a ghost, said: “It’s true that I once had an experience of religion, after which I didn’t see the point of disbelieving other people’s experiences. It gave me something else to be inquisitive about.”

Indeed, there are “more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies.” May our shared faith journey and its varied riddled rituals serve to intrigue you, to interest you in your own lives

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8 See Ted Falconar. Creative Intelligence and Self-Liberation: Korzybski, Non-Aristotelian Thinking and Eastern Realization. (Carmarthen, Wales UK: Crown House Publishing Ltd., 2000). My explication was edited (for length and discursiveness) from this sermon:

I say Unitarians are “People of the Book” in a very literal sense. We Unitarians love our words. Alfred Korzybski, in his theory of general semantics, reminds us that we must not mistake ‘the map for the territory’. . . after all, a life-sized map of your city is completely useless for getting from point A to point B. Korzybski claims that we eat words, are nourished by them as sure as any food. To illustrate the point, he once brought a box of biscuits to class, ate one, and began offering them to students. “Lovely biscuits, yes,” he’d ask, and the students would chew and nod in agreement. Then, mid-bite, he would reveal the label on the box: Dog Biscuits it read . . . and the students would revulse in horror, some becoming physically ill. We eat our words, they matter so much . . . and more the horror that they are so often inadequate to capture in fullness what we think or feel or know.

9 Turner xiii
again, to risk a conversation with a newcomer, to make you curious enough to pick up that odd object here and there, something you have seen and dismissed as unimportant, untrue, or unimaginable, and see it again for the first time with new eyes, with a new sense, with renewed spirit. May it be so.