

The Spiritual Implications of Groundhog Day

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading “Groundhog Day” by Lynn Ungar

Celebrate this unlikely oracle,
this ball of fat and fur,
whom we so mysteriously endow
with the power to predict spring.
Let’s hear it for the improbable heroes who,
frightened at their own shadows,
nonetheless unwittingly work miracles.
Why shouldn’t we believe
this peculiar rodent holds power
over sun and seasons in his stubby paw?
Who says that God is all grandeur and glory?

Unnoticed in the earth, worms
are busily, brainlessly, tilling the soil.
Field mice, all unthinking, have scattered
seeds that will take root and grow.
Grape hyacinths, against all reason,
have been holding up green shoots beneath the snow.
How do you think spring arrives?
There is nothing quieter, nothing
more secret, miraculous, mundane.
Do you want to play your part
in bringing it to birth? Nothing simpler.
Find a spot not too far from the ground
and wait.

Reading “The Holy Shadow”
adapted from the telling by Rachel Remen in *Kitchen Table Wisdom*

There is an ancient Sufi story about a woman who is so good that the angels ask God to give her the gift of miracles. God wisely tells them to ask her if that is what she would wish. So the angels visit this woman and offer her first the gift of healing by hands, then the gift of conversion of souls, and lastly the gift of virtue. She refuses them all. They insist that she choose a gift or they will choose one for her. "Very well," she replies. "I ask that I may do a great deal of good without ever knowing it."

The story ends this way: The angels were perplexed. They took counsel and resolved upon the following plan: Every time the saint's shadow fell behind her it would have the power to cure disease, soothe pain and comfort sorrow. As she walked, behind her her shadow made arid paths green, caused withered plants to bloom, gave clear water to dried-up brooks, fresh color to pale children, and joy to unhappy men and women. The saint simply went about her daily life diffusing virtue as the stars diffuse light and the flowers scent, without ever being aware of it. The people respecting her humility followed her silently, never speaking to her about these miracles. Soon they even forgot her name and called her "the Holy Shadow."

Sermon: "The Spiritual Implications of Groundhog Day"

One of the things I most love about Unitarian Universalism is the vast theological buffet to which it invites us.

Our commitment to a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" encourages us to explore the great questions of life through the wisdom of many sources, and this is one of those weeks when there's a great deal on the menu.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, Earth-centered traditions will mark Imbolc, the festival of fire that celebrates the first stirrings of spring and heralds the growing daylight all around us.

As we near the midpoint between Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox, Imbolc reminds us of the seeds beneath the soil beginning to germinate, of the animals beginning to give milk for their newborns, and hibernating creatures who'll soon rouse from their long winter's naps.

As you probably guessed, this is where the groundhog figures in, but I'll get back to that.

Imbolc is also known as the Feast of Brighid,
in honour of the Celtic goddess, who was said to breathe life into Winter.

In the Middle Ages, Imbolc, with its ritual fires,
was transformed by Christians into Candlemas, the “Candle Mass,”
when clergy blessed all the candles to be burned for the coming year.

By borrowing the date, ditching the animals,
and tweaking the imagery of new light spreading over the earth,
the feast of Candlemas came to commemorate Jesus’ presentation in the
Temple as an infant and the ritual Purification of Mary.

Somewhere along the way, as Ireland was Christianised,
Brighid the Goddess became Brigit the Saint.

Though the biographical details of the two are often intertwined,
this Brigit, as a young woman, apparently became a nun
and was known throughout the land for her pious and generous spirit.

The marvelous poem, “The Giveaway” by Phyllis McGinley
tells the story better than I ever could and points to the possibility
that St. Brigit might have been, at times, a little bit too much to bear.¹

Saint Bridget was
A problem child.
Although a lass
Demure and mild,
And one who strove
To please her dad,
Saint Bridget drove
The family mad.
For here’s the fault in Bridget lay:
She would give everything away.

To any soul
Whose luck was out
She’d give her bowl

¹ Phyllis McGinley, “The Giveaway” from *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley*.

Of stirabout;
She'd give her shawl,
Divide her purse
With one or all.
And what was worse,
When she ran out of things to give
She'd borrow from a relative.

Her father's gold,
Her grandsire's dinner,
She'd hand to cold
and hungry sinner;
Give wine, give meat,
No matter whose;
Take from her feet
The very shoes,
And when her shoes had gone to others,
Fetch forth her sister's and her mother's.

She could not quit.
She had to share;
Gave bit by bit
The silverware,
The barnyard geese,
The parlor rug,
Her little
niece's christening mug,
Even her bed to those in want,
And then the mattress of her aunt.

An easy touch
For poor and lowly,
She gave so much
And grew so holy
That when she died
Of years and fame,
The countryside
Put on her name,
And still the Isles of Erin fidget
With generous girls named Bride or Bridget.

Well, one must love her.
Nonetheless,
In thinking of her
Givingness,
There's no denial
She must have been
A sort of trial
Unto her kin.
The moral, too, seems rather quaint.
Who had the patience of a saint,
From evidence presented here?
Saint Bridget? Or her near and dear?

Through the years, even with her dramatic religious makeover,
Brighid has remained a powerful presence in Ireland,
as both goddess and saint.

And, similarly, many of the Pagan traditions of Imbolc—
especially the part about predicting the weather—
were eventually melded into the celebration of Candlemas.

According to an old English song:

If Candlemas Day is clear and bright,
winter will have another bite.

If Candlemas Day brings cloud and rain,
winter is gone and won't come again.

Which brings us back to groundhogs.

Looking to animals to predict the length of winter seems actually
to have first developed among German devotees of the hedgehog.

When German settlers later immigrated to North America
in the 18th and 19th centuries, they imported this tradition,
though they had to overcome our shortage of hedgehogs here
by recruiting the noble groundhog to take up the duties instead.

Now, I have to say that as a kid growing up in Texas,
Groundhog Day didn't make a lot of sense.

There wasn't much to winter in the first place
and the worst of it was usually long gone by early February.

I was no meteorologist, but from what I could see around me,
it seemed pretty clear that the groundhog often got it wrong.

Obviously, location is everything when it comes to this particular tradition.

In this part of the world, though, it's clear enough
that the beginning of February is nowhere near the end of winter,
regardless of whether Wiarton Willie sees his shadow or not.

I'm told he has a record for being right 90% of the time.

Maybe that's why some 20,000 people will rise before dawn
on Tuesday morning and trek to the Bruce Peninsula
to see how Willie's prognostications turn out.

Under the glare of the spotlights and television cameras,
Willie will almost certainly tell us what we already know.

By the time we have our morning coffee,
the CBC will have confirmed that winter will still be with us for a while.

It's an odd ritual plunked down in the middle of our modern, urban lives.

So odd it makes you wonder why any sane person would leave the warmth of a
cozy bed in the middle of a winter's night to stand in the cold
awaiting the arrival of a large rodent turned weather guy.

I don't fully understand the urge,
but I do think there's something to be said for this focus on shadows.

Several years ago, Vytas Baksys,
a pianist and composer and co-worker of mine at Arlington Street Church,
wrote a Baroque-style cantata for Groundhog Day.

Scored for choir, small orchestra, and soloists, the *Oratorio: Groundhog* recounts
the challenges of a celebrity groundhog
coming to terms with his high and prophetic calling.

The most dramatic moment in the cantata comes, of course, when he spots the darkened form trailing along beside him on the ground.

After he sings an aria in full operatic tenor demanding to know what it is, the chorus, in an extended fugue, informs him that he has seen his shadow.

It stops him cold—as it were.

It's an experience most of us have likely had at some point in our lives.

At least I very much hope so.

Encountering our shadow—
truly seeing it for what it is, and for what it can teach us—
is one of life's most important spiritual disciplines.

Now, some religions, of course, put a lot of emphasis on this, but Unitarianism is not really one of them.

If anything, we have been accused over the centuries of having an overly optimistic view of human nature—of seeing only the positive potential in us all, and not adequately grappling with our capacity to cause harm, to perpetuate injustice, to act selfishly, or, even, sinfully.

Lois Fahs Timmins, the daughter of the legendary Unitarian religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs, once criticized her own Unitarian upbringing for failing to address the reality of evil.

“We spent 95 percent of our time,” she says, “studying good people doing good things, and skipped very lightly over the bad parts of humanity,”

“I was taught not to be judgmental, not to observe or report on the bad behaviour of others.”

“Consequently, because of my education, I grew up ignorant about bad human behavior, incompetent to observe it accurately, unskilled in how to respond to it,

and ashamed of talking about evil.”²

Now, I realise that her experience may stand in stark contrast to the religious traditions many of us were raised in.

Given that—and given our Unitarian tradition of asserting humans are not born broken and our Universalist belief that a loving God would never condemn humans to hell—it’s no surprise we might have some discomfort discussing the shadow side of human existence.

But there is a danger in living this way.
There is a danger in doing religion this way.

Because we can be so easily lulled into thinking—that because we’re good, decent people—that our every thought, word, and deed is good, too.

But, of course, life is more complicated than that.
And, any religion worth its salt should be, too.

To be fair, our tradition long ago abandoned the stark duality between good and evil.

Instead, in our braver moments,
we look to the continuum that runs between them.

And in moments of brutal honesty,
we know that our actions and our inactions
can fall anywhere along that spectrum.

To live in a city like this at the beginning of the 21st century means that our quality of life comes at a cost that we ourselves are never asked to fully pay for.

Though it is rarely visible to us,
either by design or by disinterest,
the way we live our lives—in the here and now—
how we spend our money and our time,

² Warren Ross, “Confronting Evil,” *UU World Magazine*, January/February 2002.

how we travel and how we eat—
has consequences that fall across the moral spectrum.

It's never easy to be reminded of this.
It's downright uncomfortable sometimes to look at our shadow.
And, yet, if we don't—who are we?

The upside of looking at our shadow as a spiritual practice
is the opportunity it offers us to make meaningful change—
an opportunity that typically doesn't exist
unless we take a long hard look at where our lives need real work.

As difficult as this path is to travel at times,
it is the way that leads on to a deeper understanding of ourselves and others.

It involves examining our motivations and our desires,
as well as the causes and effects of what we do or do not do.

In the 12th century, the great philosopher and rabbi Moses Maimonides
suggested that there was a “ladder of giving.”

He spoke of eight levels of moral value on this ladder,
each progressively higher than the one before it.

As John Parker Manwell describes it:

The lowest [rung], as you might expect, is giving begrudgingly,
making the recipient feel embarrassed.

Next comes the gift that's cheerful but too small,
then the cheerful and adequate gift,
then giving before even being asked.

Above these levels come giving when you do not know the recipient,
though the recipient knows your identity, then the opposite,
and then comes completely anonymous giving,
where neither of you is aware of each other.
[This is] giving for the sake of giving.

But highest of all, according to Maimonides, comes the gift

which actually enables the recipient to become self-supporting.³

This ladder of giving helps us to consider
what's behind something as seemingly simple as generosity.

It helps us to look at not only what we are giving, but why.

It gives us a lens through which we can see our shadow.

And, it casts something of a different light
on the amusing poem about St. Brigit I shared earlier,
causing me to wonder what was really behind her compulsive charity,
making me question how her great acts of generosity
may have actually hurt her nearest and her dearest.

Even saints have shadows, after all.

Which is why I most admire the Sufi saint,
the woman known only as “The Holy Shadow”
in the story Brigitte read earlier.

In refusing the angels' offers of miraculous powers,
the woman likely weighed the shadow side of such gifts—
the shadow side of herself if she were to have such wondrous abilities.

Knowing herself, she decided to go another way.

By her choice to “do great good without ever knowing it,”
she surely drew upon a lifetime of spiritual discipline
to reach for her best and highest self—
the one beyond all selfishness, the one beyond her shadow's reach.

I don't know about you, but I'm not there yet.
I'm not even close.

Here, in the wondrous depths of winter,
let us remember that the promise of spring is slowly starting to stir.

As we emerge from our dens into the light of day,

³ John Parker Manwell, “Creating Our Shadows,” Unitarian Church of Norfolks, 8 August 2010.

let us look squarely at our shadows
and take what we learn to plant the seeds of our own transformation.

Blessed Be.