

“Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered”

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26 January 2020

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.

A few years ago I preached on the text, “Let’s Face the Music and Dance.” I like to get some of my sermon texts from popular culture—movies, songs, TV shows. For, like many other Unitarians, I feel that the canon is not closed. The sources of religious inspiration cannot be hedged about in any way. Wisdom can come to us from anywhere and everywhere, including all of nature and all of culture—it remains to us to sort it all out. Today, I have once again reached into the barrel of popular standards. I regretfully pass by “Autumn in New York” and “Stardust”—two of my favorites—and “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” with its great mantric doo-wah, doo-wah refrain—because, to be honest, I haven’t got much swing. Then there is that promising Ira Gershwin title, “I Can’t Get Started.” But I can get started, and I promise you I soon will.

Today’s message started with a dream. Have you ever dreamed that you were back in school? I once dreamed that I was back in grade ten. I was a new student in the high school, and, as I hesitantly entered the classroom, the home room teacher looked up and said to me, “Would you please sit down in the third desk next to the window, Doctor Hughes”?

I had another sleeping vision that was like unto it. In this dream I was an assistant minister. It was early on Sunday morning, and it had just occurred to me that I had no idea what we were going to be doing in the service that day. So I went into the office of the great and powerful senior minister and asked him what he was going to preach about. He looked at me, kind of strangely, and said, “Don’t you remember that I will be leaving, in a few moments, for a conference? You are going to be preaching, of course. “ I was, needless to say, taken aback. I went outside to think it over, while strolling in the nearby wood. By the way, in my dreams I can walk unaided. I can also play the piano and sing. While walking, my brain was humming to itself. The tune was “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered.” And, to tell the truth, at first I felt entirely bewildered. But a few moments later a light bulb went on in my dreaming mind and I said to myself, “That’s it. I will preach today, using this song as my text.” I woke up, and the rest is history.

So here it is, a sermon, with a topic chosen by my dreaming self. Of course, the precise content of the sermon was left as an exercise for my waking self to develop. Dreams are not much good at detail.

But, first a disclaimer. This sermon is not going to be a commentary on the song “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered,” taken as a whole. There is a lot in the text, written by Lorenz Hart, about sex, brandy, bromo-seltzer, and ants in your pants, that I will pass over for other commentators and exegetes to elucidate. I will merely say that the basic story is that the protagonist is falling in love with—or rather is bewitched, bothered and bewildered by—someone described as a “half-pint imitation.” The story ends with “learning a lot,” and getting over it.

For me, as a non-singer and more of an instrumentalist, what matters is not the events in the story as narrated in the lyrics, but the moments of pure magic encapsulated in the music and the title: the evocative and nostalgic Richard Rodgers melody, and the three “B” words that waft gently by amongst the notes, forming an enchantment that immediately takes hold whenever I begin to hear them.

Now, at last, I am ready to explain why I, or anyone else, should allow themselves to be bewitched, bothered, and bewildered.

Not everyone here is called to a religious vocation. But most people who come to a Unitarian church are called to take organized religion seriously and thus to participate in a liberal religious community. To be a Unitarian, clergy or lay, is to hear a call and to respond to that call. We are the priesthood and prophethood of all doubtful believers. So a message about how to approach the process of being called, and its aftermath, ought not to come amiss.

I break the process of a religious calling into three stages: 1) bewitched, 2) bothered, and 3) bewildered. So let us break the song title down into its component words, and imagine three powerpoint bullet points projected on the wall behind me. Big dot. Bewitched. Big dot. Bothered. Big dot. Bewildered. Now let’s get down to them, one at a time.

Stage one: bewitched. This is that feeling we get when we have an experience, or encounter something, that changes the direction of our lives. It might be a person, setting off a romance, as in the song. But it might also be some new knowledge, an idea, a message, a gut feeling. Or an invitation to explore a new path. It might come as a physical object that is itself an invitation. To me a clarinet is an invitation to try to play “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered.” To a person getting religion, or getting to a new level with their religion, it is a “calling.” I know that feeling of being called. It is what I experienced when I was about thirty years old, shortly before I decided to apply to seminary.

My call to ministry came about because I began to listen. To listen to what the universe was telling me. I was bewitched by my sensation of openness to the universe and by the messages I was hearing. Now, mostly the universe was telling me things that I already knew, and things that are obvious to many, but it was the sense of authority that surrounded and supported these messages that gave them their authority. And, gathering together these messages, I interpreted one great, overall message: that the universe was

not just open to me, but was open to everybody, and it was part of my mission to help others to understand that.

Of course, other people may get other messages or directives from their special calls. There are lots of great calls, many quite different from my own. But each one must be bewitching. As bewitching as is a love to a lover.

Being bewitched is a great feeling. With all due respect to the song, it is not so much ants in your pants as a tingling from within, with one's heart and mind resonating. It is like walking on air, or even flying. Bewitchment is the feeling that launches anything great, whether it is in religion, or in science, or in any field of human endeavour. But it is only stage one. Nothing actually gets done by someone who is merely bewitched. One can just sit still and enjoy the feeling of having an open channel to the ground of being or the source of all knowledge, but still not fully experience a call. A call requires a response. To "be called" means, at the very minimum, to move on to stage two, to be bothered.

So, here we are, bullet point and stage two. Bothered. To be bothered is to realize that something in the world is not right, or that something could and ought to be done to make things better. A minister, being called, wants to share the fruits of his or her connection with the divine with others, and to share even that connection itself. And someone who is called to be an activist wants to educate others, to convince them to change their ways, and /or to participate in some combined and communal effort. Thus, being bothered leads us to bother others.

Of course I use the word "bother" in a non-pejorative, non-critical way. A person who is both bewitched and bothered, thinks that it is right to be bothered, for, after all, the bother seems a natural and inevitable consequence of bewitchment. Very often we are right to be bothered. And we have every right to bother others. Climate activists for one, bother us, and are thought by many to be a great bother. But, being bothered, most of us have come to realize that the botherers are right. They must bother us, and make us, like them, bothered about the imminent threat to our environment. We must be bothered. In short, being bothered can be good.

But what about stage three: bewildered? Being bewitched sounds exciting. And being bothered can be important and useful. But where is the fun in being bewildered? What possible use could there be in bewilderment? Do we have to become bewildered? Isn't it optional?

No, it turns out that it is not optional. It is essential. For the whole process of a calling, and a struggling for change, is not complete without stage three, bewilderment.

There are many sources of bewilderment. For instance, after we have been called, people may not respond to our message in the way that we expect. They may say, "Yes, yes, that is so," and go marching off in a different direction. They may entirely reject our message. Or they may follow another prophet's different calling. There may be several messages out there, all based on deep ethical concern, all the result of some kind of calling, which

come into opposition. For example, protecting local economies, and building a global community. How can there be two right answers when they seem to exclude each other? It is bewildering. It makes us pause.

It is bewildering when we allow ourselves to doubt. We ask: is our message correct after all? Is it the best message available? Is it working out the way we think it should? Should we persist because we are right? Or maybe we are only preaching part of what is right, and our persistence is, at best, maintaining a balance that is not entirely wrong.

For it would be easy to be called to some mission, by being bewitched, and, by becoming intensely bothered, to end up as a fanatic. Thus, into our bewitched bother we must always stir a bit of doubt. We must always remain open to the possibility that those other than ourselves might be right, or at least be in possession of some portion of the truth. We must always recognize that, however confident we may feel, we are human beings with limits to our understanding, and that out there in society, and out there in the universe, there are opposing forces that we cannot always reconcile. We must remain open to truths that complicate and modify our own, we must acknowledge our doubts, and we must own our bewilderment.

I believe that only a bewildered prophet, a bewildered minister, or a bewildered activist is fit to lead, is fit to point out the way. For, by being bewildered, our ideas are no longer fixed. We are neither blinkered nor hamstrung by our previous experiences of enlightenment. Bewildered, we recognize that we can learn the way ahead only by seeking out fresh and deeper enlightenment. And, when we are bewildered, our souls and minds are open, once again, to being bewitched.

And so it goes. Bewitched, bothered, bewildered. And bewitched, bothered, and bewildered again. And again. The cycle goes on. There is always more to learn. More growth we can achieve. Better things we can teach the world, if we are open to what the universe can teach us, and we are humble before it. For it may well be that it is the bewildered who will inherit the earth.