

The Golden Harvester

A sermon by Rev. Phillip Hewett

August 10, 2014

© 2014 Unitarian Church of Vancouver

As I look back over the years, something that people of my age frequently do, I have come to realize how significant the theme of pilgrimage has been for me, not very consciously at first, but increasingly so as time has gone by. I have made my way to many places I have felt to have a special meaning, either because of their association with memorable persons or events, or through intangible qualities that have caused them to be widely recognized as holy.

For some years I have felt drawn in this way to make the pilgrimage that so many people have made over the centuries to the magnificent medieval cathedral at Chartres, and if possible to walk the labyrinth embedded in its floor. My interest in labyrinths was aroused by reading a book called *Walking a Sacred Path*, by Lauren Artress, a canon of the cathedral in San Francisco who has made this a central focus of her ministry. The opportunity came. I was going to the annual meetings of the Canadian Unitarian Council in Montreal. That meant that I was already almost halfway from Vancouver to Europe. I Googled “Chartres pilgrimage” and was delighted to discover that a week-long seminar on spirituality was scheduled to begin in Chartres just three days after the Montreal meetings, led by Lauren Artress herself, with a labyrinth walk included as a high point in the proceedings.

So I went. There were about three dozen of us. The theme speaker in the mornings was John Philip Newell, a leading advocate for the Celtic tradition of Christianity -- a tradition now enjoying a new surge of popularity, but for centuries outlawed by the established churches and still not generally acceptable to them. That tradition built upon and included the ancient forms of religion rooted in reverence for the earth, as well as a tolerance for the various ways in which

different people have put this into practice. Newell told of a time he had given a lecture on Celtic Christianity in Ottawa. At the end of his lecture a Mohawk elder came to him with tears streaming down his face, saying: “What a tragedy it was that when you Europeans came to our country the missionaries were Roman and not Celtic. Those missionaries told us that our ancestral religion, around which our identity was built, was evil and had to be eradicated and replaced by what they would teach us. If they had been Celtic, they would have wanted to sit down with our elders to explore what we had in common, and we might have been spared the centuries of oppression and erosion of our identity!”

That whole week at Chartres was intensely memorable. I was the oldest participant in the seminar, but I learned a great deal both from our sharing and from the daily experience of being in the majestic setting of the cathedral. For our labyrinth walk we had the building to ourselves in the evening, and moved through by candle light.

Then it was time to proceed to the next stage of my journey, a celebration at a Sunday morning service of the 60th anniversary of the beginning of my ministry at Ipswich in England. This too was memorable in its own way, but by now I had developed a chest cough, and after I moved on for what was intended to be a relaxed time with my sister in Dorset, I was unwell enough for her to take me straightaway to a doctor, and in short order I found myself in hospital with pneumonia.

The next few days are kaleidoscopic in memory. I was certainly delirious. It is said that a drowning person sees the whole of his or her life in a flash, and I can well believe that at least the most momentous episodes could flash up in that way. After all, at my age pneumonia can be as life-threatening as imminent drowning. I find it hard to say how much of what I recall is actual

memory and how much is later interpretation. Perhaps it doesn't matter. I look back with mixed feelings. Lauren Artress refers in her book to another book with the strange title *Thank God for my Heart Attack*, which she says describes the challenge posed by a life-threatening event to redesign your life in a way that really fits. I don't quite feel disposed at this point to thank God for my pneumonia, but I do have to say that it has helped me sort out my priorities in life.

If I attempt now to recall one or two of the flash-backs of memory that may make it easier to see the connection. The first one took me back to something that occurred about half a century ago. I was in Boston at the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and had been asked to lead their regular midweek service. I took as my theme the Chassidic Jewish story retold by Martin Buber, telling how the rabbi in St Petersburg had been imprisoned on trumped-up charges, with a gendarme set to guard him. The gendarme took the opportunity to amuse himself with some trick questions and said: "It's recorded in the Bible that after Adam had eaten the forbidden fruit and heard the Lord God approaching, he hid himself. The Lord called out: 'Adam, where are you?' Now we have been taught that the Lord knows everything, so he must have known perfectly well where Adam was without asking."

The rabbi replied, "'Adam' means 'Man' – Adam is Everyman and Everywoman. In every place and every time, God calls to each of us: 'Where are you in your life?'" For instance, he may say: 'You have lived 46 years, and how far have you come?'" When the gendarme heard his age mentioned, he pulled himself together, laid his hand on the rabbi's shoulder and cried out: 'Bravo!' But his heart trembled.

I have seldom encountered such a response after a sermon as I received that day. Quite obviously, a lot of the hearers had identified with the gendarme. So, for that matter, had I; after all, I had myself just passed the conventional half-way point in life.

The second flashback takes me back further, to a time when I was still training for the ministry and had been sent to a college in Birmingham for a three-week course on religious education for children. I can't remember now what I learned about religious education, except that it must have been useful, for I wasn't bored. But what I do remember vividly and gratefully was the instructor's infectious enthusiasm for the poetry of Edwin Muir, with whose work I have to confess I was completely unfamiliar, despite his having been described by T.S. Eliot as "one of the poets who have added glory to the English language". It was for the religious dimension of his poetry that the course instructor commended him. I took the bait and was well and truly hooked. I now have on my bookshelves not only Muir's collected poems and autobiography, but half a dozen books about his work by literary critics.

He was obsessed by the theme of our life-journey, and by "our" life-journey I mean not only the journey that each one of us makes individually between birth and death, but the journey of all life over the millennia. What is the meaning of it all, if indeed there is a meaning? In poem after poem he skirts around that kind of question in a wide variety of different ways. One of his greatest poems, *The Journey Back*, begins with the lines,

*I take my journey back, to seek my kindred,
Old founts dried up whose rivers run far on
Through you and me*

and ends with the lines,

*But we have watched against the evening sky,
Tranquil and bright, the golden harvester.*

What a magnificent image! The setting sun lingers on the horizon as it does in Muir's native Orkney, harvesting with its rays the high points in the landscape that has been traversed during the day. I suppose that I relate to that more deeply because I have now reached a stage in life at which it is indisputably the **evening** sky that I contemplate as I ask: "What has been harvested?" I pick up here from another of Muir's poems, a lesser one he called *Soliloquy*, in which he takes on the persona of a Greek adventurer of two thousand years ago, looking back in his old age and asking:

What have I gathered? I have picked up wisdom lying

Disused about the world, available still,

Employable still, small odds and scraps of wisdom....

.... I have learned another lesson:

When life's half done you must give quality

To the other half, else you lose both, lose all.

Select, select: make an anthology

Of what's been given you by bold casual time,

Revise, omit; keep what's significant.....

Life must be lived; then live. And so I turn

To past experience, watch it being shaped,

But never to its own true shape. However,

I have fitted this or that into the pattern,

Caught sight sometimes of the original

That is myself – should rather be myself -- ...

I have had such glimpses, made such tentative

Essays to shape my life, have had successes,

Whether real or apparent time may tell

Implicit in such writing is a challenge. Can you and I make that attempt? What can I say I have gathered as I look back over a fuller life-span than Edwin Muir knew? Perhaps a few “odds and scraps of wisdom”, as he put it. But here another flash-back suddenly emerges and demands that I ask just why it is that I have felt Muir’s presentation of the theme so compelling. No doubt there have been factors deep in the subconscious. Muir was born in Orkney, that group of islands away to the north of Scotland, and spent the impressionable years of early childhood in that remote environment. I had a similar experience, not in as isolated a spot as Orkney, but in what was very much a little world of its own – the rural Dorset setting in which Thomas Hardy, another poet to whose work I respond strongly, also grew up. I could add that Kathleen Raine, another of my favourite twentieth-century poets, also spent her formative years in an equally small and remote village, in the same way close to nature, with human life following its centuries-old pattern. Is it coincidence then that I relate so strongly to their poetry? I hardly think so, but this only occurred to me in the recent past.

There is another conjunction to add to that medley of memories. I mentioned my developing interest in pilgrimage, and Edwin Muir was certainly a pilgrim -- hence his sense of life as a journey. His friend and fellow-poet Stephen Spender wrote of him: *“I was struck by the integrity of purpose in his work and life, which made him seem a pilgrim from place to place rather than a wanderer like myself. Indeed, he had the purpose which converted a life of shifting jobs into a spiritual pilgrimage.”* On looking back now, I don’t know how far that example has

influenced my own life and thought. During my week in Chartres, I discussed this theme with John Philip Newell, and discovered that he too was under the spell of Muir's poetry, and had like myself made a pilgrimage to the little island of Wyre in Orkney, where we had each spent time sitting in the ruins of "Cubby Roo"'s castle, gazing as Muir had done beyond the few farms that occupied the island to the surrounding sea, dotted with other islands, each with its own story and fable.

Newell also quoted from a poem in which Muir was unusually caustic as he contemplated what he called "Calvin's kirk crowning the barren brae". This is what he wrote:

*The Word made flesh here is made word again,
A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook.
See there King Calvin with his iron pen,
And God three angry letters in a book,
And there the logical hook
On which the Mystery is impaled and bent
Into an ideological instrument.*

I have felt that way about Calvinism too, but then I reflect that this is only the extreme form of an approach to religion that has been dominant in the Western tradition, in which the core religious activity is seen as the intellectual one of **believing**, so that persons with a religious commitment are commonly just called Believers. The outcome of this process is a set of beliefs, whether formalized into a creed or simply a collection of doctrines and dogmas couched in abstract propositions and principles. The "Word made flesh", on the other hand, is well illustrated in the teaching of Jesus, full of stories and people involved in real life-situations. The

central focus here was not on believing, but on being and becoming, aspiring and acting, on awe and wonder, and above all on relating – relating in love and compassion.

All this stirred other memories, in a further flash-back to my teen-age break with the church of my upbringing to become a Unitarian. This was not, in the first instance, motivated by intellectual problems over prescribed beliefs, but rather by a feeling that I was not being spiritually nourished. But then after I began to give more thought to the picture I came to realize that I could no longer accept many of the beliefs that had been an essential part of that background. I was no longer a Believer, but an Unbeliever. But I was too immature at that point to see the whole picture. In just saying “No” where others were saying “Yes” I had not escaped from bondage to the word as an “ideological instrument”. I had simply followed the course another poet had described in the words: “We called the chessboard white, -- we call it black”. In neither case were we using the chessboard for its intended purpose.

Looking back now, I begin to see the pattern of how I have gradually groped my way, as Muir had done, out of this Western focus on beliefs, of whatever kind. I can see it in the books I wrote. The first one, early in the process, I called *An Unfettered Faith*, and the fetters I had in mind were certainly ones of belief and dogma. The second, fourteen years later, I called *On Being a Unitarian*, and that word “being” was very deliberately chosen. We identify ourselves as “human beings”, not (despite Descartes) as “human thinkers”. The third book, fifteen years later still, was called *The Unitarian Way*, the word “way” meaning following a path rather than putting together a set of beliefs. It is a word with a long history in various forms of religion, particularly in the Far East. The Unitarian Church of Vancouver, which is now beginning to publish some Unitarian literature in Chinese, has followed the precedent set by the Hong Kong Unitarians in translating its own name as what would literally mean “Seekers of the Way”.

This too leads back to my experiences of a few months ago. Following my spell in the hospital, I was convalescing for a couple of weeks at my sister's home, saw a copy of *The Unitarian Way* on her bookshelf and decided to re-read it after not having done so for many years. In the perspective of time I found I was looking at it objectively, as though it had been the work of someone else, and so did not feel embarrassed as I thought: "This is still relevant, and with a few minor revisions it could read as though it was written yesterday." I was still thinking this over when I got back home, and ran into another coincidence. Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan* was to be played at a local theatre, which prompted me to reach down my own copy to read before I attended. That copy was one of a set I bought years ago, issued to celebrate Shaw's ninetieth birthday. With my own ninetieth coming up in a few months' time I thought it might be a nice celebration if *The Unitarian Way* could be republished to mark the occasion, and went so far as to broach the idea with my publisher, who, I was pleased to find, wholeheartedly agreed. So the book is going to be available to a new generation of readers, and that is one other by-product of my misfortunes last summer.

I see now that another part of this whole evolutionary process was another of the experiences that had flashed back upon my memory. Thirty years ago I participated in an interfaith conference in Japan, in which various organizations from different countries were represented. A group of us sat in a circle to explain ourselves, and whereas in the West the co-ordinator might well have asked us in turn: "What do you people believe?" the Japanese co-ordinator asked: "What are your spiritual disciplines?" I was stuck for an immediate response, and felt obliged to respond that whatever our individual practices might be, we Unitarians as a body don't have any, unless attending a service chiefly devoted to listening to words, words, words, can count as one. This in

turn raises the question of whether we are indeed a community, or just a collection of individualists gathered together.

Even if we do find a way of building a community in which the word can become flesh, we still have to reckon with the fact that ours is a movement that has survived over the years primarily through a continuous influx of newcomers. Many of them go through the same phase as I did at first, of debating beliefs, often with the additional handicap of expressing them in negative terms, playing the part of the Unbeliever. Oh, to be sure, which direction is positive and which is negative depends upon the way the question is put, and the roles are delightfully reversed in the old doggerel rhyme:

*Our fathers all were churchmen, two thousand years or so,
And to every new suggestion they always answered "No".*

Can we get beyond this obsession with words and beliefs so that the word really becomes flesh? There is still much to be done. Sometimes we even set up sub-divisions within our congregations labelled according to what are supposed to be our beliefs: theists and atheists, humanists and pantheists and so forth, and congratulate ourselves on being so inclusive. But at heart I think we aspire to get beyond all that, and I'll end with another favourite quotation, this one from a document sent out by British Unitarians as long ago as 1821 in an attempt to establish links with kindred spirits in other countries. In describing what Unitarians aspire to become, they wrote: "they take love as their bond of union rather than faith."

Amen!