

Order of Service
Secrets of Enlightenment
Sunday, October 26, 2008

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

We come to this place because we are drawn here.

We are drawn by good company,

By friends who listen and support.

We are drawn to explore new ideas,

To find meaning that eludes us alone.

We are drawn to grow in a spiritual dimension,
In a way that is too often denied by our busy lives.

We are drawn to the peace and beauty of this sacred
place,

Of this religious home.

We are drawn once again to the chalice,

Bright with light,

Centering our community.

Meditation and Prayer

Too often our habit is to

Explain away the difficulties in our life

And to escape our sorrow by denying to self and
others

That there is anything wrong at all.

We close up like a turtle in her shell,

Hopeful that the storm will go by

Without disturbing our fragile peace.

And yet the step to authentic peace
Is not away from our pain, whatever it may be,
But toward it.
If we will level with ourselves about what is really
going on,
If we will open to the reality of sorrow in our
lives,
If we will share with others who care about us that
we are hurting,
We may find our way through the turbulence of the
storm
To the quietude and the calm that follows,
As surely as day will follow night.

May this then be our practice:
To feel what we feel.
Just that.
Where is this turbulence of my life showing up
As turbulence in my body?
Feel that.
Just feel it lightly.
Just be present gently to the discomfort.
In time it will lessen, opening into peace,
Providing the freedom to be comfortably ourselves
Once again.

Now silently..

Amen.

Readings

"A Golden Treasure," from Chandogya Upanishad

You could have golden treasure buried beneath your feet,

And walk over it again and again,

Yet never find it

Because you don't realize it is there.

Just so, all beings live every moment in the city of the Divine,

But never find the Divine because it is hidden

By the well of illusion.

"An Experience," by Rainer Maria Rilke (486)

It could have been little more than a year ago that, in the ... garden which sloped down quite steeply to the sea, something strange happened to him. Walking back and forth with a book, as was his custom, he had happened to recline into the more or less shoulder-high fork of a shrub-like tree, and in this position he immediately felt himself so pleasurably supported and so deeply soothed that he remained as he was, without reading, completely absorbed into Nature, in a nearly unconscious contemplation. Little by little his attention awakened to a feeling he had never known before: it was as if almost unnoticeable pulsations were passing into him from the inside of the tree.... He was more and more surprised, indeed astonished, by the effect of this pulsation which kept ceaselessly passing over into him; it seemed to him that he had never been filled by more delicate movements; his body was being treated, so to speak, like a soul, and made capable of absorbing a degree of influence which, in the usual distinctness of physical conditions, wouldn't really have been sensed at all. Nor could he correctly determine, during the first few moments, which of his senses it was through which he was receiving so delicate and extended a communication. ... Concerned as he always was to account for precisely the *subtlest* impressions, he asked himself insistently what was happening to him, and almost immediately found an expression that satisfied him as he said it aloud: he had passed over to the other side of Nature. His body became indescribably touching to him and of no further use than to be

purely and cautiously present inSlowly looking around himself, without otherwise shifting his position, he recognized everything, remembered it, smiled at it with a kind of distant affection, let it be, as if it were something which had once, in circumstances long since vanished, taken part in his life. ...He understood the quiet superabundance of these Things [that were around him]: he was allowed, intimately, to see these ephemeral earthly forms used in such an absolute way that their harmony drove out of him everything else he had learned....A periwinkle that stood near him and whose blue gaze he had already met a number of times, touched him now from a more spiritual distance, but with so inexhaustible a meaning that it seemed as if there were nothing more that could be concealed. Altogether, he was able to observe how all objects yielded themselves to him more distantly and, at the same time, somehow more truly; this might have been due to his own vision, which was no longer directed forward and diluted in empty space; he was looking, as if over his shoulder, *backward* at Things, and their now completed existence took on a bold, sweet aftertaste, as though everything had been spiced with a trace of the blossom of parting.

Sermon *Secrets of Enlightenment* Rev. Bruce Davis (1957)

Of all the definitions for enlightenment that I've heard or read about in the wisdom traditions of the world, the one that makes the most sense to me is Self Realization. This term suggests that enlightenment is not about accessing something new, creating something unbelievable, or achieving some impossible state of mind. Because enlightenment is none of these.

Enlightenment is about realizing something that was true all along. And what is *realized* has to do with this *self*, this being that I am.

Enlightenment is thought by many to be the hardest thing in life to achieve. It is not. It is here for us to experience right now. Author Douglas Harding of England, himself realized through the teachings of Ramana Maharshi, puts it this way:

I have to record my gratitude to Maharshi for his insistence on the ever-present accessibility, the naturalness, the obviousness, of Self Realization. Many a time, I had been informed and had read, that

enlightenment is, of all states, the rarest and the remotest and the most difficult—in practice impossible—and here was a great sage telling us that, on the contrary, it was the easiest. Such, indeed, was my own experience, and I had never been intimidated by those religious persons who were careful to tell me that I couldn't see what I saw.

Nevertheless, for me it was marvelously refreshing to find that Maharshi never sent inquirers away with instructions to work for liberation at some distant date. It is not, he insisted, a glittering prize to be awarded for future achievements of any sort...but for noticing now, just as one is.

I have worked with at least three such enlightened persons during my lifetime. Each was entirely unique, and yet they all had a profound core experience in common. They told me that the shift of awareness that leads to a new sense of self is very subtle, hardly a change at all. And yet they declared the result of that subtle shift to be a profound change in how they saw the world and how they related to other beings. All three told me that coming into enlightenment is like waking up—an expansion of awareness more profound than waking from a deep slumber.

We humans seem to be hardwired for the experience of enlightenment, as if nothing could be more natural than slipping into Self Realization. And yet, caught in the web of our experience, lost in the thrall of our busy lives, many of us fail to realize that enlightenment is even a possibility.

Which reminds me of a story I heard recently. God was busy creating the world and decided that people would need a path to an enlightened consciousness. So he created *spirituality* as a natural part of being human. Satan, who was still hanging around God at that time, said, “What a great idea, God. I'll organize it for you.” So began *religion*.

The organized religions of the world, with their adherence to creed and dogma and with their emphasis on following strict behavioral precepts toward a salvation that is not of this life, have taken the natural human experience of spirituality and institutionalized it. Satan would be proud of us. The universal human yearning for personal and spiritual growth can blossom into this Self Realization with commitment and with practice. And yet, organized religions,

for many of us, have squeezed the *life-blood* out of the search for spiritual truth.

Two of the values in Unitarian Universalism that I cherish most are our fourth principle, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and our second principle, acceptance of each other and encouragement of spiritual growth in our communities. If you get too *organized* about religion, the freedom and creativity necessary for spiritual growth may wither. Indeed the yearning for enlightenment itself may become stifled.

In the conservative Presbyterian church of my youth my pastor did his best to organize *me*. Like many of our own UU high schoolers, I was growing in my own spirituality, especially in the beauty of Nature. My pastor took me aside when he heard this and frankly chewed me out. He insisted that my focus return to the creeds and behaviors of the religion. That's when I knew I needed to find a community, like this one, who could accept me as I am and support me along my own *authentic* spiritual path. What I might call my journey toward enlightenment began in those years.

Shortly after leaving the church of my youth I had a moment of awakening. I didn't understand it at the time, but now I have a context to put it in. It was what the Buddhists call a *kensho*, an opening into deeper understanding. I was sitting alone at night high on a mountainside. I was the hiker noticing the beauty of the moment. Suddenly I was also the boulder I was sitting next to. I saw that boulder was conscious, as I was conscious, and they were the same consciousness. The same self. The awareness passed in minutes, but I was not the same after that. This was just the kind of experience that my pastor was afraid I might have that would cause me to forsake the Presbyterian dogmas and creeds. It was one of those moments that convinced me that my life would be a spiritual journey.

Enlightenment is like the coming of the dawn. You can't make it happen because that subtle shift in awareness must emerge naturally as Self Realization becomes real. But what do I mean, Self Realization?

Enlightenment is that profound shift in self-identity whereby the personal I or ego gives way to a universal I, self as being. This bears further explanation.

The spiritual seeker comes to a time in her journey when the personal identification with roles is too narrow to contain the fullness of her expanding consciousness. For a time in our lives it's enough to say that I'm a doctor, I'm a father, I'm a minister. For a time we satisfy ourselves with personal attributes, for example that I'm bright or dull, creative or plodding, handsome or ugly. We come to know ourselves as the father of someone, the son of someone, or the friend of someone. We identify with our achievements in career, family, and recreation. Out of all this we build our ego identity or our mind-based sense of self. We live out of this sense of self, which is bolstered by grasping and holding on to relationships and events that reinforce its existence. We bolster this mind-made sense of self with myriad thoughts, reminding us of the diverse parts that make up our personal self.

As enlightenment emerges, which usually happens gradually over a lifetime, we realize that this ego identity or mind-based sense of self is not who we actually are. More basic than a self concept that I am the father of three children, smart enough to get by, and enjoying work as a minister is a self concept simply that *I am the awareness*, the awake *consciousness*, that is present to all of these unique *personal* characteristics.

When we come into the present moment fully, we notice not only that we participate in what's happening but also that we also are present as *observer* to what is happening. For those who become enlightened, this quality of *witnessing* one's life and of *being* that witness become a full-time reality.

At essence we are human *beings* not human *doings*.

Because of our tendency of organizing spirituality into religions, concepts of enlightenment have become complicated, mysterious, and inaccessible. But it's so much simpler than that. The beauty of the writing and speaking that Eckhart Tolle has been offering here in the West is its simplicity. He guides us not into convoluted concepts or complex practices. He simply points to the power of *being* in the present moment.

Let's do an experiment for a minute. Notice that you are listening to what I'm saying. With your intellect you can understand my words. I want you to notice also, for a moment, who is doing the listening? Who is the listener? So you are hearing what I am saying at the same time as observing yourself as the listener to what I am saying.... Do you get the sense of yourself present as listener? That observer is your self, your being, your "I am."

This is the *I am* that is inherent in I am acting or I am feeling or I am thinking. Embedded in anything we *do* is who we *are*. I am this Being.

Now it's not possible to shift yourself into enlightenment by forcibly expanding this observer or witness that you are. Frankly, that's a good way to get a headache! What happens as the spiritual path unfolds is that your presence grows and this awareness of being infuses your life experience more and more.

If this shift is so subtle, why is it that we hear stories about enlightenment that are so dramatic? Particularly, how is it that beauty, compassion and peace expand in the perception of the seeker who is coming into the enlightened state? Like the reading from Rilke we looked at a few minutes ago, those who experience this shift in awareness have almost celestial visions of their life. Eckhart Tolle, for example, was so overcome with the beauty of the enlightened state that he sat on park benches for about a year, simply being present to all that beauty. Parahansa Yogananda perceived light flowing down the leaves of a tree as if it was water.

The answer here is the human heart. The subtle shift in self-identity from the personal egoic to the universal *I am* is accompanied by an expansion of the qualities of the heart. One is drawn to live peace, create harmony, laugh with delight, and love people and the world as fully as loving oneself. As the heart grows the perception refines, so that yesterday's experience of beauty is eclipsed by a greater intensity and subtlety of beauty today. Those I know who experience enlightenment say that it's like coming into a whole new world. Only the world hasn't changed—we have.

They say that we can't *force* enlightenment to happen. I think that's true, that it comes to us over time as we are ready for it. I believe that this is the experience of *grace* that religious traditions talk about. However, I also know that there are things we can do to prepare the way. Each practice, in its own way, begins to build a habit of favoring a sense of self that goes beyond an egoic mind-made self to a universal self as being.

- Be present. If you find yourself getting lost in concerns about yesterday and fears about tomorrow, take a time out. Feel what is in your body right now. Notice what is happening around you in your immediate environment. Enter into the present moment. Simple presence mediates the subtle shift in self from personal to universal.

- When you are involved in listening, speaking, or doing, take a moment from time to time to notice yourself as the observer of what is happening.
- Pay attention to your body. Simply resting with your attention in your body catapults you into the present moment and gives you a glimpse of the witnessing *I am* that you are, observing your body.
- Meditation is any practice that puts you in touch with the silence and stillness of consciousness. A walk on the beach, a cross-country ski, or a quiet moment in your favorite chair can all bring expansive moments, sensing the universality self. The *path* to enlightenment strings such moments together, developing a habit of knowing you are in fact that deeper self. *Enlightenment* is the dawning of that moment in a way that does not come and go.
- Let your heart grow in love. It might be spending time with a child, or renewing a spousal partnership, or caring for those in need here and abroad. The mind-bound sense of self tends to cling co-dependently in relationships, while the self that is growing into enlightenment loves in a more universal, interdependent, less-attached way. As the heartfulness expands, enjoy your growing capacity for peace, harmony, laughter and love.
- As the heart grows in its capacity to love, notice the beauty around you. Explore the delicacy and harmony of creation in ways that you have never noticed before.

Finally the secret of enlightenment is about consciousness. Not consciousness that we *have*, as when we may be conscious of the fact that we are hungry or thirsty. But, rather, the consciousness that we *are*. Enlightenment begins to dawn when I start to realize my self not as a personal ego but *as that consciousness*—when I realize that my self is the very awareness or awakens from which I observe and serve in my world.

Not only that. I begin to realize that my world is conscious, as the boulder I sat next to as a youth appeared to me as conscious. Enlightenment emerges in its full value when consciousness of self and consciousness of the world are realized as the same consciousness. In Sanskrit, “Tatwam asyi” or “I

am that consciousness, you are that consciousness, all this is that consciousness.”

So enlightenment is not so secret after all. We *know* consciousness. We *are* awake. There is nothing to *achieve* here, no goal to *strive* for. Our path to enlightenment is to know what we already have, ever more abundantly.

May it be so.