

Eureka!

A sermon by Jackie Clement

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington Normal, IL

January 8, 2017

Long before I ever thought of entering the ministry I was trained as a scientist. A product of the race for space and the cold war, I was expected to go into either the sciences or engineering, not only as a matter of modernity but a matter of national interest. From as early as I can remember, stories of scientific discovery like the one about Archimedes leaping from his bath to shout “Eureka!” stood side by side with “See Spot run.”

The kind of epiphany that Archimedes experienced—stepping into the bath and realizing that the volume of water displaced was equal to the volume of his good self—*this* is the kind of epiphany that was legitimized by my upbringing. It is a sudden realization based in experience with a good dollop of reason thrown in. Purely as an aside, this is known as the heuristic method, and ‘heuristic’ being a close linguistic relative of ‘eureka’ it makes a tidy circle.

Anyway, beginning in the 1930s, this was the method used to teach Unitarian Sunday School classes: to introduce children to the things that would naturally catch their interest and through their own exploration and questioning offer them those aha moments of learning about themselves and the world. It was revolutionary then, but in hindsight doesn’t it just seem to fit in with a religious system that stresses the individual search for truth and meaning rooted in personal experience and guided by reason? It’s no wonder that having been raised on stories like Archimedes’ eureka moment I ended up a UU. We are all about that process of understanding created by passing experience through the fire of rational thought.

So it was with some surprise that I encountered the first quote printed at the top of your order of service, the words of Albert Einstein: *I never made one of my discoveries through the process of rational thinking.*

Really, if Albert Einstein never came to a discovery through rational thought, what chance do the rest of us have? But I quickly realized it was the same thing as Archimedes in his eureka moment. Those sudden moments of knowing often come to us not so much through the process of sustained exploration and rational thought but rather when we set those aside. Surely the exploration and thought form a necessary backdrop, but inspiration can’t be accounted for on a timeline or in a daily to do list.

Sometimes those moments of understanding come as blinding flashes and sometimes they come as the quiet moments that get written in spiral notebooks for further consideration. Still, those moments of revelation can change everything, even when they come in the most mundane ways. This poem by Dorothy Walters, *When We Stumble and Find It*, describes it well:

We all have our favorite themes
the ones we say over and over
in a thousand different tongues.

Mine is the moment which
changed my life

forever.
 Not the one I planned for
 or expected, but the one which simply
 happened.
 It could have been a
 revelation
 speaking from a cloud of fire.
 It could have been
 a rare accomplishment, election
 descending like a dove after
 so many years.

It was none of these.
 Merely a moment,
 the one I keep returning to,
 feeling along the wall for the
 hidden latch
 which will spring open
 and reveal the undefined.

Large or small, I think these epiphanies come to us all in some way, at some time, maybe just once, maybe many, many times in a lifetime.

This sort of epiphany, the moment of understanding, is only one definition of the word. Perhaps it is one that fits best in our religious context of a search for truth and meaning, but it is certainly not the most widely understood definition in religion. The more common religious meaning of ‘epiphany’ is a manifestation of the divine. In Christianity it is specifically the moment when the magi encountered the baby Jesus in a manger. It is not the moment that God was born into human form, but the moment in which humanity encountered God in human form. Eureka! I found it!

In many countries the holiday of Epiphany, celebrated on the 6th of January, the 12th day of Christmas, is at least as big a celebration if not more so than Christmas. Because this is not just the moment when the divine became manifest in the world but when someone figured it out. Is it an epiphany if no one notices?

The reading from Diana Eck talks about a way of understanding the world in which epiphanies are common place, in which epiphanies (the manifestation of the holy) is so frequent that perhaps some of them don’t get noticed. Just like the epiphanies of understanding there may be one or there may be many, many instances of divine indwelling.

In the ancient world epiphanies were a common thing. Think about the ancient Greek epics of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* where divine beings take human shape and suddenly reveal themselves. Think about the stories of the Bible where angels in disguise appear at people’s front doors. It was a common way of seeing connection with the sacred and the mysterious, to have it appear in a form humans could not only understand but see and speak with and touch.

As the reading indicated, this idea of divine incarnation is an important one in Hinduism, as well, with many *avatars* or incarnations of the supreme deity in various forms. But Hinduism also

makes the idea of incarnation a more personal one through the concept of *atman*, the true, divine core that lives at the heart of each human being. The atman is that part of us that is essentially, inherently and eternally connected to the divine, to the divine in all other beings. This idea was communicated into nineteenth century Unitarianism through the Transcendentalists. In the essay “The Over-Soul,” possibly the best statement of Transcendentalist thinking or at least his own theology, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “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.”

This is the stream of thought to which we are heir, that there is within each person something of the holy, something through which we hold connection to everything that is greater than ourselves. But just because this is the tradition in which we stand does not mean it is an idea we must accept. That’s something we have to determine for ourselves. As my colleague Jane Rzepka writes:

It’s up to us. Is the person before us divine, however we define that? It’s up to us. Is the moment sacred, however we define that? It’s up to us. Is the ground we stand on holy ground, however we define that? It’s up to us. We are deemers of the divine, we are creators, we are the dreamers.

So what are the implications of belief? What would we do about it? How might we act differently in the world if we saw divinity within ourselves as well as within all other people? How might we act differently if we didn’t?

There’s a story about a monastery that had fallen on hard times. Once a thriving house of worship, now it housed only a few dispirited monks who dragged slowly through their chores and devotions, bickering and finding fault with each other. The few visitors who came to the monastery didn’t stay long and rarely returned so unpleasant was the atmosphere.

The abbot, despondent at what had become of this once thriving community, went to seek the advice of a friend, a rabbi who was known as a very wise and faithful man. The rabbi told his friend that he had a had a vision that God dwelt at the monastery, but it was not something that should be spoken of. The abbot might tell the brothers once, but it was never to be spoken of again.

So the abbot duly told the brothers what his friend had said along with the warning that they were never to mention it again. Well, the monks were no little bit surprised. How could God be living here in this dispirited place, and who could it be? Certainly not crotchety old Brother Matthew or the quarrelsome Father Bernard and it couldn’t possibly be the argumentative Phillip. But even in their doubt the brothers began to treat each other as if the divine resided in their midst. They spoke with respect and affirmation. They left their petty quarrels and wanting to get their own way aside. And slowly the monastery changed, becoming a holy place once again.

As the few visitors who still came to the monastery saw the change they spread the word about the amazing spirit of the place. And soon it was a thriving and spirit filled space once again.

A little condensed to make a point perhaps, but think about what this church would be like if everyone saw the other as a sacred being. This is already a place of great spirit and care. The unkind words and acts are few and far between, but what if they did not enter these doors at all?

In “The Over-Soul” Emerson puts it this way: “Because we cannot understand—using language—the God within us, all we can do is demonstrate this presence by how we live our lives—by our actions and our characters.”

There is danger in seeing humanity as godlike, certainly. We have done enough damage to the planet in our rush to claim dominion over all creation, goodness knows. But there is also a danger in not recognizing the sacredness in a human life at all. Or that every life carries that same sacredness.

This past week a woman stopped by the church because she was troubled by our Black Lives Matter sign. As many people do, she felt that it was a denial of her belief that all lives matter. Although we differed in how we saw the sign, I truly admire that she stopped in to talk about it. Some people would harbor resentment or lash out in acts of violence. She just wanted to understand and thought that meant entering into conversation with someone she disagreed with. Her actions were a good model for anyone who sees the sacredness in all life. She sought relationship.

We had a really good conversation. I started with the first principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person but then moved into the particularity of why we declare at this time and in this place that Black lives matter. It is about living as if the divine lived within every person; as if each person you meet, as if *every* person you meet, regardless of any attribute of color or age or size or gender is holy. I think I managed to impart that Black Lives Matter is a movement that calls us to consider whether we are living according to our belief of epiphany. Whether we believe that a force beyond knowing that we call God lives within human beings or whether we see it as a metaphor that calls us to see life itself as sacred. Black Lives Matter is like saying God dwells among you.

By the time we were done speaking I think each of us had a little more understanding. Not one of those big flash of light from the heavens epiphanies, but one of the small ones that happens when we treat one another with the respect to hear what is of concern and value to the other. There was no star in the heavens to follow, only some imperfect conversation. There was no gold or frankincense as a gift for finding the sacredness of life, only a parting as friends. But the holy is there if we follow not only stars and dreams, but if we follow our hearts and the belief in the sacredness of all beings.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

© 2016 Jacqueline R. Clement. All rights reserved.