

## Reasonless Hope and Joy



Rev. Art Lester.

There are some things I'd like to tell my friends and companions on this odd pilgrimage we are making together. When I was first invited to preach this sermon there might have been some thought of grand words, of raising issues that affect the whole world. But in the end I decided that I really just wanted to talk about us, about who we are and where we're heading.

Right now, maybe we're all feeling a bit vulnerable. There has been recent news of a predator that seems to be stalking us. This predator's ghastly breathing is audible over our hymns, and its fearsome head can be seen through our stained glass windows. You know this beast. Its name is *demographix*\*. The perfect name for a 21st century Bogey Man. The *demographix* will get us. In so many years there will only be so many ministers. The numbers and the age profile of our congregations are worsening. Just look at the charts and graphs if you don't believe me. And listen to what has been said in some meetings. Things that are about as cheerful as a BBC newsreader predicting a pandemic of Bird Flu.

So tonight I have a question for us. I ask it in as much humility as someone like me can muster. *Why is it that we fear we're dying?*

On the face of it, that's a silly question. All those signs seem to tell us that if things continue exactly as they have been doing that there will be a vanishing point somewhere out there. Numbers *are* shrinking, age profiles rising, ministerial ranks declining. Oddly, said like that, these things sound a lot like *symptoms*, symptoms that are affecting the body of Unitarianism.

If you took this body to a doctor, she might do a diagnosis based on the physical evidence and offer a prognosis that was either satisfactory or dire. She would probably prescribe medicines and give advice. Some of these would be good, old-fashioned tonics: paint the church door, invite a friend to a service, liven up the newsletter. And some would be miracle cures straight from the laboratories of the scientists: market analysis, focus groups, internet visibility, targets and new programmes. Any of these might be good interventions, and it is an unwise patient that ignores doctors' orders.

But what if the problems were not due solely to physical causes? What if, following hints from such writers as Thomas Moore and James Hillman, they were problems of a deeper kind? What if the dread of loss and dying was really a reflection of something amiss with the soul?

Ask any psychotherapist about a client whose focus is on the symptoms of illness, and they will tell you that these "presenting issues" often mask afflictions of a more profound sort. The symptoms they experience with the conscious mind are often just an Aunt Sally for an illness nearer the heart; they are urgent cues to address what is actually wrong. So, what if our current obsession with avoiding death by attrition is really urging us - no, begging us - to address a need of the soul?

If that is so, then we need to face up to that fact, even as we take the new medicines that we are being prescribed. If the problem lies only superficially with the body, then treatment of the body can only have a limited and temporary effect. If the real problem lies with the soul, we must address ourselves to learning how to understand ourselves in a new way.

Now I would not blame you if you thought, "What cheek! Our little church does its very best with limited resources, and all of us are very satisfied with what we get on Sunday, thank you very much. Besides, we've just begun a new membership drive." I'm sure that if I were sitting out there with you tonight that I might think just that. But I am reminded of something tantalising and mysterious that the Indian spiritual teacher Meher Baba once said. He said, "The spiritual life is like this. Someone throws a huge snake into a crowded room. Some scream and flee in terror. Others plot and manoeuvre to avoid being bitten. And others, a very few, are filled with a reasonless hope and joy." It is just that reasonless hope and joy that I am appealing to tonight.

If the problem we face is indeed one of the soul of our movement, what is to be done about it? Physical remedies are to be found on all sides, but there is no neighbourhood Boots the Chemist for deeper ailments. We can read lots of paperback spirituality, engage in the DIY voodoo of awareness sessions, get out the healing crystals and the special teas, bump knees in every kind of planning activity we can dream up, but where is the consulting room for problems of the soul?

But there *is* somewhere we could go. Somewhere where problems to do with the soul have always been taken. As I say it, I wonder how many in this room can raise their hands and say they have considered it. I'm talking about what the fundamentalist denominations would have done as a first resort. I can hear them now, can't you? "Brother, Sister, *have you prayed about it?*"

If that phrase sounds strange coming from a Unitarian minister, maybe we should ask ourselves why. It has a certain frisson of the forbidden about it, a touch of Unitarian infra-dig, doesn't it? But wait a minute - we are religious people, aren't we? If not, what are we? The fact of that question's strangeness to our ears may just point to the nature of the problem. Some church-goers in other denominations might want to ask, "Why haven't you taken this pressing matter to the highest court?"

Namely, God. If you have a problem with that word, please interpolate. You can call it "ultimate concern", "ground of being" or whatever you want. I prefer to use that three-letter word - not just because it is so easy to spell - but because it links me to the faithful of all religions who feel humbled in the presence of something transcendent and wonderful. And please - this is not just a get-out clause for me. I really don't mind

what you call Him, or Her or It, and I suspect God doesn't either.

It may be that we have stopped viewing God as someone you can really talk to. If that is so, then the happy-clappies have it all over us. Maybe God and the Spirit and all that have become nothing more than an idea, a topic for discussion. Maybe it means that we think that God isn't really there at all, that He has joined the mobs in the great drive-in temples of loony America, and left us to merely philosophise. And if God doesn't make an appearance in church on Sunday, how can we expect to see anyone who is actually looking for Him?

Our failing is not one of hypnotising the throngs with guitar chords and rhetoric as the evangelicals do; it is that we often attempt to worship an idea. You can't worship an idea. You can't fall to your knees before an opinion, and you can't find yourself weeping with pity and love over a finely-turned philosophical argument. The question of why we are declining may have an answer that is at once simple and complex. Simple because it can be expressed in a single sentence. Complex because it may entail some re-thinking of our customs, our activities and - yes - even our theology. I think I might put it in another question: *are we nourishing the soul?*

In the spirit of honesty as we look at our situation, I ask for a bit of courage here. Emerson once said something like, "Preach to the soul, and the world will beat a path to your door." I need to respond to that for myself: are we really giving the world the kind of spiritual vision it needs? Does what we do animate, inspire, touch the soul? Does it address the questions, both vocal and mute, that trouble the world? Given our hard-won freedom from outside control, can we open it to the purposes of the Holy Spirit? Or have we forged ourselves a new set of chains that bind us to the inoffensive, the vague and the timid?

I'm not a Christian, liberal or otherwise. Nor am I a Buddhist, a humanist or a pagan. Did I leave anyone out? I'm just a Unitarian, and I want the movement that I love to reclaim some of the spiritual joy that we have left to the so-called evangelical churches. I want the beautiful songs that spring from the inchoate longing we might call the love of God to be heard in our churches again. Not the words; they do nothing but confuse and divide us anyway. Throw out sin and salvation, ignore saviours and saints, use the crucifix in the kitchen to hang potholders on if we must, but refuse to let go of the great ancient tunes of worship.

Am I speaking about actual music? Maybe. But I am really speaking about the tunes heard not by the ears, but by the heart, that resonate in the human soul. Like the minister of the story, who countered rhetoric with harmony, I would like to see us drop a few of our prideful habits and just let the Spirit flow through us again.

No, not empty emotionalism; not the hypnosis of happy-clappy preaching reinforced by choirs that sound like backing singers for James Brown, and certainly not the glazed eyes of the born again. But yes, the feeling of being held by something too great to imagine and the trust like that of little children which it engenders. And the sense that sometimes, just sometimes, the heart can be wiser than the head.

So... am I seriously suggesting that we pray for new members to save us from decline? Well, yes and no. No, because praying for something specific is an invitation

to disappointment - it is the theological monkey's paw. But yes, because my hope is that by praying at all we may recover something of our spiritual courage. Ironically, if we do start praying, really praying, that will surely bring in new members. I don't want to imply that some divine bursar is going to top off our balance because He is pleased with our supplication. I mean that any act of engaging with the one true reality carries with it an aura of that which is so often missing from our worship, and in our humility we will have become more worthy of being joined again. And when the new ones come, as they will, we may wonder what the problem ever was, after all.

I know, I know. We Unitarians have never been all that good at humility. We don't *do* humility; we're the ones who famously gave up kneeling, after all. But when we humbly admit that we need guidance, the limiting strictures of pride fall away. When the absence in our churches that so worries us ceases to be the absence of all those new faces to take the minutes and make the tea, and starts being the absence of that Spirit that inspired us in the first place, we will be found by those who are actually looking for God - not just talking about Him. And when that happens, chain link fences couldn't keep them away.

If you *were* going to ask God about our situation, how would you put it? Would you say, "Dear God, please send me twenty-six new members of mixed ages - including at least one chartered accountant - who have 9.4 children and can drive a car." Probably not. You'd probably say something more modest, like, "God, what can we do to increase our membership?" leaving the details to Him. But, you know, I think the silence would continue to be deafening. I think it would stay like that until you got around to this question: "What can we do to bring your living presence back into this place that we love?"

As is so often the case, the question contains the answer. Once you stop worrying about yourself and start concentrating on the presence of the spirit, you unlock the miracle you have been seeking.

The questions never stop; all these factions and differences of opinion are part of life in the slow lane of church-going. But they seem to lose their ability to harm in the over-brooding presence of the spirit. To borrow some lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins, what you are left with is, "Ah, bright wings!" Differences? I should say so; we are composed of differences - we Unitarians eat them for breakfast. The words of the hymns multiply and divide; theological perspectives come and go. But that tune is the same, ancient and eternal. God loves that tune. I like to think that faithful people have always hummed that tune and that others have come and sat around and hummed with them. That they hummed a few bars out of nothing more mysterious than love and God did the rest. I'd like to think that we will do the same.

No, I pray that we will.

AMEN

*\*I am indebted to Stephen Lingwood for this spelling of the monster's name.*

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