

BEYOND DOG HEAVEN

by Rev. Jack Young

MEDITATION

We come together this morning to celebrate that which is of worth in our human venture in this corner of our lovely planet. We come together as a community dedicated to our health and nourishment at this time and in this place. We come in need of affirmation and of hope, just as we come with our strengths and talents. We come as each other's teacher, and as each others' student, as each other's minister and caregiver. We come for fresh and new perspective, and we come for affirmation that we can overcome burdens and challenges and find peace. Let us open our hearts and minds to possibilities just as we give thanks and gratitude for all that is well. Let these thoughts color our time together here as we share our love one for the other. So let it be.

SERMON

I was asked, last Fall, to fill in for a local UU minister who had a schedule conflict, and perform a memorial service for a fellow from North Carolina. It was a military event down at Quantico for a navy veteran who had spent his lifetime after his military service teaching little kids in Montessori Schools. The widow sent me a very complete obituary, a few personal comments from herself and others, and a copy of his favorite book, a children's book, of all things, with no explanation as to why it was his favorite. And here it is, "Dog Heaven," written and illustrated by Cynthia Rylant, published by Blue Sky Press, 1995.

It doesn't really have a story line, but rather is a description of a Dog Heaven which God created in a unique way. Instead of a heavenly realm of clouds and angel wings, dog heaven is an array of endless fields and woods where a dog can do its favorite things, run and bark and chase, and be chased, where there are lots of angel children, because dogs love children, and there are dog biscuits in the shape of kitty cats and squirrels and ham sandwiches, couches to lie on and tables to sit under, and on and on. God appears in the illustrations as a white haired and bearded old man, lurking behind trees and rocks, taking great pleasure in what he saw, that is to say, a dog being a dog, doing what its nature compels. And he was pleased with that.

The book, in short, suggests, in a traditional manner, God's love for a creature on the creature's own terms, in its own fullness, and living its heavenly life according to its own nature. It is a description of what I would deem to be unconditional love, i.e., being open to the fulness of another being on its own terms and speaking its own language.

And it hit me why it was his favorite book. You can't lecture a child to self-discovery. You can't really e-duce, draw from, another what hasn't yet been discovered by them, unless your understanding and acceptance of where they are in their life is both visible and felt by them. Oh, to be sure, you can enforce rules and lecture, and call that teaching, and it is in a truncated way, but it falls short of leading to much self-discovery. This truth is built into the Montessori approach to education, and, as a teacher, an e-ducer, one needs to keep working at it. Dog Heaven served as a reminder of that truth for him.

I would love to have known this man. In the Montessori system, there is a red line painted on the floor and children are seated along that line a couple of times a day to do certain things. Our teacher did it differently. He would have them stand along the line and grab their behinds with both hands. Someone eventually asked him what was the point of that, and he responded by saying “I am not sure I can help any of these kids, but at least, twice a day, I know they can find their rear ends with both hands, and that might just give them a leg up along the way through life.

I am not referring in these comments to a kind of love which is as full of ardor and blind hormones as romantic love often seems to be, nor to a love that is characterized by collapsing one’s boundaries in order to feel oneness with another, nor a state of mind that negates one’s self, or subordinates one’s own being to another. I mean, rather, an openness to another in his or her entirety and a recognition of the divinity, of God, many would say, in the whomever it is that we have encountered. And I mean, to be sure, that it is an openness without reservation and without discounting or disqualifying any aspect of the other, or the other’s experience of life.

This is not an easy thing to do.

There is an old saw “I love mankind. It’s individual people that I can’t stand.” At the big UU church in San Francisco, where I interned back in the mid-eighties, I was amazed to see people coming to the church and hurriedly stepping over the homeless who often slept on the front steps, while in their hurry to get to the meeting inside to talk about feeding the starving in Ethiopia. It’s something we all have to recognize as operative in our life, to one extent or another. Abstractions are always easier to deal with than concrete others in our face.

The greater difficulty for me, and most of us, I suspect, tends to lie in our family or close-in relationships moreso than with the wider world. Family members and intimates have an elevated capacity to hurt us. Heaven forbid, they might not embrace our well thought out value structures, or our current truths pointing to the nature of it all. Or our sense of justice. They may have habits or ways or attitudes that are strange and annoying to us. These differences tend to surface around mealtime. Eating together is a learning experience in that respect. Interestingly, the only known sacrament of Jesus of Nazareth was eating together with those close to him. Maybe, indeed, the business of being able to be open to others in all their virtues and with all their blemishes, alike, just as they are, and doing so without reservation, may have been a mainstay of Jesus’ method as teacher.

It has certainly been so for me. Like most others, I have always had a well defended core of ego-based mental and emotional structures, like a castle with moats and drawbridges and the such protecting my sense of self from the possibility of hurt or unwelcome intrusions into my rational and emotional equilibrium. These defenses are usually distancers from other people, like invisible shields. They were also devastating limiters when it came to dealing with those in my immediate families, which spans two marriages and two broods of children spread over about fifty years, and includes a divorce, the death of several people close to me, a couple of drug addiction scenarios in the younger set, death of parents, and a change of career. Looking back on it all, my basic fear was losing my identity if I let things get too close to me emotionally. There was always a great pull to remain a detached problem solver, as a sort of safe haven, far from

intimacy. After all, I was a lawyer most of my life, and that composure lends itself to lawyering.

In those life events I mention, being a detached problem solver was ineffective -useless, except maybe for the divorce. I could not make several people I dearly loved healthy enough to survive. I could be support for the family, which was new turf for me, to be the nourisher, and park my ego somewhere on a shelf for a while. I did my best at it. Later, when I took my ego back off of the shelf, it wasn't quite the same. Surprisingly, I added a new dimension to my arsenal of being and have been much the stronger for it over the years since.

I had great difficulty really sharing myself openly with others, then married Diane, my wife now of 22 years, a most powerful and energetic woman, and my fear of being subsumed under another's energy and strength was pushed to the limit. Slowly, to be sure, but nonetheless, my fear of intimacy, at least with her, has been replaced by a faith that her strength and energy are no threat, but rather a mirror in which I see a stronger, more versatile, me evolving who does not fear openness so much. I am now pretty open to her power, and am the stronger for it. I gained , not lost, something there, also.

One interesting anecdote in it all, has to do with my relationship with grandchildren. When they were smaller, they climbed on me, hung off me like little monkeys, and were always delighted to see me. Now, at college age, and in college, they pursue what college kids pursue, and do what they do, exactly as I did when I was that age. Ancestors and grandparents are not set aside totally, but are no longer in the mainstream as they once were. As painful for me as not being a center of attention any more plays out, they are doing what is appropriate. I am about to the point where I do not need them to change back to an inappropriate behavior for their now age, and rejoice in them being just as they are, but even something as simple as that has not been easy for me.

Unconditional love does not presume to solve every problem one sees in the world, but it does open the lines of communication which can bring out the best, eventually, in every participant in our sphere of influence. It is not directive, but rather evocative. As our Montessori teacher said, "I am not sure I can be of any help to these kids," but the climate unconditional love creates may well produce a self-discovery that is of tremendous help to a kid, or a teen, or an adult, or an elder. You just cannot control that. It happens when and how it happens. What's most important seems to be the climate.

But what I do know to my very satisfaction, is that embracing this form of love, as we are able, inherently makes us bigger, less fearful, persons. My own feeble efforts have, for me, proved that to be true. We may well have to let go of some of our stucknesses in order to do it more easily. It seems to me to involve a dissolving of our limiting ego-bound structures, particularly our fears, in order to reach a place of openness in our intimate and other relationships. Those I have known who have moved much further than I have moved with all this, seem to live almost totally without fear, of anything.

Mystical religion and, I would add, good mental health, are all about this topic. The religious mystics of history, meaning those who, within Christianity, Judaism and Islam, and most certainly Buddhism and Hinduism, but also other less well known, but enduring, religions,

focus on the divinity within each of us, readily honoring the divinity within every person. The concept of such an open form of love is perhaps the, but always *an*, ultimate goal of mystical religion. So we are addressing one of, if not the, major essences of mystical religion, when we speak of unconditional love. We UUs are mystics, in that we experience the divine, however we define that to be, directly and not mediated by Pope or Priest or even Christ.

But even within orthodoxy, this kind of love between individuals is surely a by-product of its major point, that unconditional love points to God's perfect love for humankind and for individual humans, and its corollary: that such love is very difficult, if not impossible, to be fully reached by individual humans. Both the orthodox and the mystics surely agree that it nonetheless remains as an ideal and can be embraced effectively, at least in bits and spurts, by most of us.

And where in all this do we, as Unitarian Universalists fit in? We do tend not to accept things just because the Pope told us to accept it. And we are more humanist than theist, to be sure. We tend to be more rational than emotional in our judgments. Well, cognitively, we can work on our ego-drivenness and ego-defended processes, and our fears, if for no other reason than attaining good mental health. That's moving in the right direction, it seems to me.

And we can perhaps internalize more fully, and take seriously, one of our stated principles, "to have respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person." It is so stated, "to have respect for" because our denomination resists any creed or dogma. It's worded as a principle on which we stand by majority vote of the General Assembly, and it points to the essence of Unitarianism from the Reformation itself and is a central message of Universalism. So the same idea of perfect unconditional love found in the history of Western religion, is simply stated in humanistic language in our denomination.

So, what would it mean were we to adopt the largest possible meaning from that principle, that is, not just respect it, but live it as an item of faith? It would certainly justify our concern with justice for all, and legal and social fairness and support the causes that proliferate around those issues. Such causes are abstract ways of expressing it. And it would also perhaps mean that individual persons we meet have a worth and a dignity, call it divinity if you wish, that we respect, suggesting it applies to the person with great virtues and the person with lots of warts alike. The principle says "every person."

Even if none of the foregoing works for you there is still hope. Life events of every kind provide us with, I'll use the traditional word, Grace, meaning unearned bounty, in the form of movement down the path of so loving, often without our even recognizing it. Every major event in my life, together with a couple of epiphanies that sort of came out of the blue, have made incremental changes in my attitudes and significantly reduced my fear of change and of openness and of intimacy. And that is so for many here this morning, we can be quite sure.

I care little for arcane theologies. I do not embrace the orthodox notion of salvation. To me, salvation is not the perpetual life of our ego, just as it is now, in some far off realm in the sky sitting at the right hand of a bearded voyeur who has always seemed inordinately concerned with my sex life. Salvation, rather, just like heaven and hell, is something that plays out in our own soul as we proceed through life.

I believe that one's personal salvation is being in process toward greater love for an entire lifetime, accepting the grace one is given in that venture and making a bit of grace of one's own along the way. It lies in approaching others with such love and respect in a way they can perceive it and be stretched themselves to transcend their own limits in loving unconditionally. As I reflected in the meditation this morning, we are each other's minister. We are each other's teacher, each other's e-ducer, pulling the best out of each other.

Much like the man memorialized down at Quantico last November, we may not be sure how we can help each other, but we can genuinely listen to another's story and love them and their story unconditionally. Perhaps, when that person, as the student, is ready, another of us will be the teacher that appears. Such may be the path to discovery of just how large we really are.

Thank you for hearing what I have to say.