

What is Divine?

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

If I had to narrow it down, and I do...I'd say that what is divine is the giving and receiving of gifts. Not necessarily gifts given for birthdays, or gifts dictated by Emily Post, or gifts given as payment or persuasion...no divine gifts are surprises: spontaneously given, carrying hidden meanings, given without expectation of return, gifts you might even feel you don't deserve.

I'm thinking of the kinds of gifts that shine with the divinity of the giver, and stir the divine spark of love in the recipient.

Recently Dave and I had overnight guests in our home. Some were tea drinkers, some coffee drinkers...each morning someone staggered into the kitchen to heat some water. We have one of those coffee presses that needs boiling water added.

Of my many failings as a housekeeper is my resistance to buying basic necessities like a decent tea kettle. The old one is good enough for me. Yes, it was broken and it dripped boiling hot water onto the counter every single time you poured, and it looked just a little rusted...good enough for me.

Everyone managed to use it throughout the weekend. No one got burned. Everyone got the tea or coffee they needed. But several days later I was surprised by the delivery of a big package at my front door. I couldn't tell what it was at first...

but it turned out to be a heavenly surprise...a brand new, beautifully made, non-drip, non-rusty tea kettle! Without a word of complaint or comment on my old kettle, my friend sent me a gift, a totally unexpected gift. I knew immediately who had sent it...and I divined the unspoken, unwritten message of the giver... Lynn, you deserve a shiny, efficient, Zen-like tea kettle.

Annie Dillard's writings teach me again and again, about the power of creative, alive, loving relationship and of our everyday connection to divine energy. My surprise gift reminded me that Dave and I had entertained angles, unaware!

I love that Dillard writes so much about congregations...and the messy, imperfect divinity that abounds within the hearts of people who gather for worship.

In "Holy the Firm", Dillard writes

"There is one church here, so I go to it. On Sunday mornings I quit the house and wander down the hill to the white frame church in the pines. On a big Sunday there might be twenty of us there, often I am the only person under sixty.

The members are of mixed denominations, the minister is a Congregationalist. The man knows God. Once in the middle of the long pastoral prayer of intercession for the whole world- for the gift of wisdom for its leaders, for hope and mercy for the grieving and pained, succor to the oppressed, and God's grace to all- in the middle of this he stopped and burst out "Lord, we bring you these same petitions every week." After a shocked pause, he continued reading the prayer.

The church women all bring flowers for the altar, they haul in arrangements as big as hedges...bunches of foliage and blossoms as tall as I am, in vases the size of tubs...and the altar still looks empty, irredeemably linoleum and beige.

We had a wretched singer once, a guest, a blond girl who wore a long lacy dress and sang, grinning, to faltering accompaniment, an entirely secular song about mountains.

Nothing could have been more apparent than that God loved this girl, nothing could more surely convince me of God's unending mercy than the continued existence on earth of this church."

Some gifts, most gifts come to us unexpected- like manna from heaven, gifts from what we call God or the universe or the Spirit of Universal Love.

On any given day, our lives are filled with such gifts.

The golden leaves of autumn, the commitment of new church members, the smiles of our children singing to us, the dedication of all of our volunteers, the spirit of life in us that gets us out of bed in the morning...the music...how heavenly!

Divine things surround us and flow through us...surprise us and bless us- everyday, everyday.

Websters Dictionary has a list of definitions of divine including: heavenly, celestial, pertaining to divinity or theology, surpassing excellence, a priest or clergyman, to portend, godlike character, science of divine things... my favorite definition is- a fluffy, white confection made usually of sugar, corn syrup, egg whites, and flavoring, often with nuts.

Divine things do not have to be perfect, only have a heavenly quality, a surpassing excellence, be somewhat godlike, or fluffy, white and sweet...or maybe fluffy, chocolaty and sweet.

Our gifts to one another, or the gifts we have been blessed with do not have to be perfect.

Our habit of looking for perfection can serve to blind us to the wealth of gifts we receive every day.

Recently I began a dance/exercise class which I really enjoy. I am no doubt, the oldest person in the class. The instructors are in their twenties...and the class is made of women of various ages, sizes and abilities. Some of us have rhythm and learn the steps quickly – enjoying the dance aspects...others are flexible yogis with long arms and legs and a carefree gracefulness, others concentrate so hard on keeping up and learning the steps that they are stiff and straight throughout the hour.

It makes me want to laugh...the diversity of bodies attempting to move in a chorus line of perfection. Effort and imagination takes us a long way toward a vision of flowing, synchronized motion. In spite of the advertising world's hype about women's bodies, most of us have learned that there is no standard of perfection...and that health and stamina is what matters most.

I have no doubt that this class is a gift in the lives of all of us who participate. And that we are a gift to one another, even though we are strangers, even though we fall short of our perfectionist dreams.

I think of divine things as having a character of light – a quality of inner light that shines through...in spite of circumstances...Dillard saw divine light in the small congregational church, I see it in my exercise class...I see it in the changing of the leaves, I see it in this sanctuary...empty and full.

You were so wise to build this sanctuary with so many places for the light to enter in. Is it celestial light, does it portend...or divine something of mystery, something beyond the glass and beam? Does it surprise you every Sunday, with a gift that is just what you need?

There's a story told by writer and doctor, Rachel Naomi Remen...she writes,

"I had a man come to my practice with bone cancer. His leg was removed at the hip in order to save his life.

He was twenty-four years old when I started working with him and he was a very angry man with a lot of bitterness. He felt a deep sense of injustice and a very deep hatred for all well people, it seemed so unfair to him that he had suffered this terrible loss so early in life.

I worked with this man through his grief and rage and pain using painting, imagery, and deep psychotherapy. After working with him for more than two years there came a profound shift.

He began "coming out of himself". Later he started to visit other people who had suffered severe physical losses and he would tell me the most wonderful stories about these visits.

Once he visited a young woman who was almost his own age. It was a hot day in Palo Alto and he was in running shorts so his artificial leg showed when he came into her hospital room. The woman was so depressed about the loss of her breasts to cancer that she wouldn't even look at him.

The nurses had left her radio playing in order to cheer her up.

So, desperate to get her attention, he unstrapped his leg and began dancing around the room on one leg, snapping his fingers to the music. The young woman looked at him in amazement, and then burst out laughing.

A year later, the young man was in my office reviewing our work together, and we came upon a drawing he had made just after his initial surgery. He had drawn a picture of a vase with a deep crack running through it. This was the image he had of his body. He had been angry and had drawn the crack on the vase over and over again.

It seemed to him that the vase would never function as a vase again, would never hold water.

Now, several years later, he looked at this picture and said "Oh this isn't finished. He took a yellow crayon and putting his finger on the crack he said, "you see here, where it is broken, this is where the light comes through.' And with the yellow crayon, he drew light streaming through the crack in his body. We can grow strong at the broken places"

Divine light is within us all.

We can understand it in either religious or scientific terms.

I read this week in the New York Times about gamma-rays and "afterglow". In April, NASA's space-based Swift satellite sent back a text message announcing that it had detected a gamma-ray burst- the remains of an extraordinarily violent explosion that ended the life of a distant star.

Since then, astronomers using ground-based telescopes have been able to measure the spectrum of the burst's infrared afterglow and estimate its distance from Earth.

When you look at the stars, you are looking at light that comes from the past. This gamma-ray burst, GRB 090423 is, the most distant and oldest object yet detected in our universe, it is some 13.1 billion light-years away. This is the vestige of an explosion that took place 630 million years after the Big Bang.

It is one thing to explore such remote recesses of time in theory. It's something else again to witness their afterglow. It is an invitation for all of us to unfetter our imaginations. We can imagine looking outward from that distant point knowing that our own exploration of space still lies some 13 billion years in the future.

Different faith traditions look for the gift of divine light in different places and in different forms. This weekend of All Hallows Eve and All Souls...originated with the Earth Centered, Goddess, tradition of Samhain...(a celebration of the coming of the dark of winter) the dark and the light are considered to flow from the same divine essence.

In the Jewish tradition the power of God's guidance and protection comes from the belief that the Jews are God's chosen people...that divine light shines on them with special blessing and special responsibility.

In the Christian tradition, divine light flows through rituals that celebrate that they are a people saved by God's own sacrifice.

A strong strain within Unitarian Universalism today is Process Theology...it is an understanding that divine light and healing energy flows in and among all living things...

What I am calling Divine Light is the ultimate gift – it is the gift of life itself. It is what I mean when I say, “Spirit of Life” bless us this day.”

Garrison Keillor and others sometimes joke that Unitarian Universalism is a feel good religion...that it carries few obligations- no prayer is required, no confession is encouraged, no conversion is recognized, no fasting, no bowing, no kneeling.

But I tell you ours is a profound task; I tell you that we are among those called to find the light, the divine light, the creative healing energy in all things, in all people...without exception.

Our faith of inclusion does carry obligations...it is ours to witness to the light in all of life.

The light is celestial, heavenly, fluffy and sweet, the light is within the darkness, and present in all suffering and brokenness, the light is given as a gift- in and among all living things and all that is created.

Forget perfection- and open to the truly divine, which is both whole and broken, before and after, religion and science, old and young, white and black and brown, male and female and transgendered, Jewish and Hindu and Muslim, Catholic and Protestant, rich and poor, divine light...all gift, all good.

Amen/Blessed Be