

SPIRITS AMONG US: Or, 'What If It's All Real?'

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My grandmother told a story of her little brother John who died when he was 8 years old of a nameless virus infecting their small farm community in a part of the unsettled middle United States later known as Arkansas. The doctor gave no hope and advised great-grandma just to keep him comfortable till it was all over. One night as little John's young life faded, my great-grandma went to his bedside. He was barely conscious and hadn't spoken in days, but as grandma turned up the kerosene lamp near his bed, he suddenly whispered, "no, no don't do that -- it makes them go away!". When grandma asked who he was talking about, little John answered, "the ... angels."

Now hold on a minute before you conclude that this was just a sentimental story from Christian country folk on America's frontier. Oh no, my forebears definitely were not "angel-y" people. They were hard scrabble cotton farmers in the Western territories just one step removed from Calvinism, and highly practical, no-nonsense, salt of the earth folk who believed in a literal King James Bible wherein the appearance of angels ends with the resurrection of Jesus, and now we were all just doing the best we could till his promised return. Angels were not in their lives, their faith, or their vocabulary.

There was simply no context for little John to say that turning up the lamp made the angels go away. And so grandpa declared it was only the fever talking -- the story repeated again and again in our family lore -- partly, I'm sure, because despite Grandpa's rational explanation, it remained not-quite-explained.

That story, however, helped prepare me for the mornings when my own small son would excitedly exclaim while still half asleep, "Mommy, I got a new angel last night," and proceed to draw it for me, reminding me they're not boys or girls, just, well, angels. Incidentally, this is the son who was born seriously pre-mature, whose head Neo-natal Intensive Care Nurse was named "Angel." And who, when he needed an alternative school, attended the only one in our area by default -- named "All Angels Academy."

The first time I sat at the bedside of one of my hospice patients called Clyde, I listened as he poured out his life's stories like a mountainside brook in Spring thaw -- parts of his childhood, military service, working as an itinerant roofer afterward, stretches of homelessness. And then in the midst of the stream-of-consciousness torrent, he says, "And that's the day that I met God."

Holding very still, I asked "Can you tell me more about that?"

"Well ... ," he starts, "my brother-in-law and I were driving up around Lauderdale and it was pourin' down rain, I mean real Florida hard rain, and we see this fella walking in that rain and stop to pick him up. We asked where he was goin' and he said he needed to get to Pompano and we said, sure, we're goin' North anyway."

"And ... how did you know he was God?" I asked.

"Well, Pastor ... He wasn't wet! In all that hard rain. I mean, I even got out of the car to be sure, and I got soaked and got back in, and He was sure enough dry and so I said, 'How come you're not wet?' And He just smiled, and that's when I knew it was God. And so I said 'What are you doing here' and He said there were some things He needed to attend to up Pompano way, and He was thankful for the ride. Other'n that, He didn't say much the whole way."

At this point he looked at me gravely and said, "I'm telling the truth, Pastor. "I haven't been the same since."

"I'd think so, Clyde," I responded, holding his eyes. "And I'm honored you told me. Not everybody gets to meet God."

You can imagine that as a hospice chaplain, I have shared experiences both profound and peculiar at the bedsides of literally hundreds of people over the past four years. But my first encounter was with my own beloved Grandmother nearly 20 years ago, long before my ministry life, beside her in the hospital -- when all at once she looked past me and said, "What is Corrine doing here?!"

Now her dearest sister Corrine had died some twenty before. But there was my Grandmother staring hard over my right shoulder. Instinctively, I said, "Well, maybe she came to help."

Whereupon my Grandmother looked at me and said, "Well for cryin' out loud, then, get me my coat, it's cold out."

What in the world is going on here?

A little boy's angels disappearing in lamplight, an itinerant roofer giving God a ride in the rain, my own little boy drawing his new angel early on a school morning, my grandmother preparing to leave with her long-deceased favorite sister.

What do we make of this? How do we understand it? Where do we put it? Especially in our belovedly reasoned religion that holds more to that which we can prove than that which we cannot, where might be its place?

Let us look now to our Unitarian Universalist sources. Six places we Unitarian Universalists have commonly agreed to look for inspiration, for guidance, for substance as we search together for truth and meaning in our lives. These sources include the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity and the worlds religions, as well as the words and deeds of prophetic men and women, Humanist teachings of reason and science and Earth-centered traditions that beg us to live in harmony with all of nature.

But ***this*** is what we cite as our very first source: ***the direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.***

"The direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder."

"Direct experience." That means *your* experience ... and mine ... and Little John's ... and Clyde's. And none of us has the right to tell any other that their direct experience is not real just because it is not *our* direct experience! That's one of the beauties of

Unitarian Universalism – that each of our experiences should be respected for what it means to us whether or not others of us share that experience.

So your direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder of life might be in the forest in Canada, or at the beach on Key West, or in NICU where a baby boy first breathes on his own, or a hospital room where death waits in the hallway, or listening to Mozart, or dancing to Marley, or rocking to Imagine Dragons, or finding a new chord sequence on the guitar, or harvesting fresh vegetables, or reading Hemingway, or staring at the sky from a hammock in your own back yard, in an ashram or a church or a synagogue or a mosque, or on a long dark night of the soul, or analyzing quantum physics texts.

Ah, physics. Thank you, Preacher, for coming back to something we can understand!

Grandpa said Little John's angels were only fever. My little boy's angels -- lucid dreams. My Aunt Corrine coming for my Grandmother, oxygen shortage in her brain. And Clyde meeting God? Dementia, and nothing more.

Chemical reactions. Our emotions, ideas, attachments, fears, hopes, dreams. All ... the chemistry of life.

After all, one man's magic is another man's science.

(hold up cell phone) Not so long ago, this would get me burned at the stake. For only demons could talk through thin air.

How is it we humans demonize -- or deify -- or dismiss -- that which we don't understand?

Let me ask this: where is the radio?

We know radio waves are a type of electromagnetic radiation that travels at the speed of light, first discovered by Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell in 1867. Twenty years later, Heinrich Hertz built a machine to "capture" these waves for the purposes of communication. Radio waves were already out there in our universe – we just devised a way to "tune in" to them.

Modern physics goes way past radio waves, digging deeper and deeper into the nature of matter, as science comes closer and closer to confirming the ancient wisdom of the indigenous peoples – that EVERYTHING is energy. Including us. And that energy doesn't die, only transforms. And quantum physics tells us all energy is interlaced, which Eastern teachers have tried to tell us for thousands of years. We Unitarian Universalists affirm this in our 7th principle – respecting the interconnected web of all being.

It's all vibration -- 37 trillion cells vibrating together agreeing to be me. And your 37 trillion cells, and ALL our cells vibrating together to be River of Grass and THAT'S why people come here for the first time and say it feels **good** in here!

Ancient cultures called this energy "spirit" – and believed that everything was infused with it. Trees, rocks, air, water, animals ... humans. All shared the energy of life.

Okay, so these primitive cultures lacked the benefit of science as we have it ... right?

And science debunks primitive beliefs ... right?

Such is a founding source of the historic conflict between religion and science. Between faith and reason. Between heart and mind. Rene Descartes did us no favors with his binary view of human existence, separating body from spirit. It's taken us centuries to return again to awareness that life is – that we are -- all woven together. And I dare say it is this interwoven energy of life that draws us into this very room this morning.

(Sing) "Spirit of life, come unto me ..."

So, listen -- science and religion are really siblings. Siblings devoted to the search for truth and meaning. Both fired by passion to understand -- to dissect reality, to follow leads, to connect the dots, to plunge into the mystery of who we are and how and why anything works or doesn't and where we fit in the grand unfolding of the Universe we travel. Perhaps you noticed the quote from none other than Albert Einstein in your order of service where he says *,THE MOST BEAUTIFUL AND PROFOUND EMOTION WE CAN EXPERIENCE IS THE SENSATION OF THE MYSTICAL. IT IS THE POWER OF ALL TRUE SCIENCE.*

Preeminent cell biologist Dr. Bruce Lipton notes in his book “The Biology of Belief” that it was politics that actually forced the original split between science and spirit, with the Pope’s condemnation of Copernicus’ discovery that the Sun was actually the center of our solar system, because the church needed an Earth-centered science to support its doctrine and hold onto its power. Dr. Lipton’s revolutionary research actually led him to spiritual insight, as he says, “The fact science led me to spiritual insight is appropriate because the latest discoveries in physics and cell research are forging new links between the worlds of Science and Spirit. And,” he continues, “I truly believe that only when Spirit and Science are reunited will be afforded the means to create a better world.”

Isn't that why we're here -- to work toward a better world?

So, what if it's all real?

What if there *are* "spirits" among us, spiritual energy that we cannot see, like radio waves, whose presence intends to guide and inspire our lives? What if we became like spiritual radios, willing to “tune in” to this energy?

And *so-what*, if it's all real because of chemical processes? Is the life we live any less awesome? Are we any less compelled by our dreams, our hopes? Are we any less responsible? Any less connected? Is the love we feel here this morning any less profound?

You may have noticed a flurry of articles about a new book by none other than Barbara Ehrenreich, a dedicated fourth-generation atheist, gritty political activist and professional myth-buster. In this book, Ehrenreich goes public with mystic experiences of “the world flamed into life,” persuading her to consider the possibility of genuine encounters with – her words here – “some mystically potent being or beings.” Educated as a scientist, she criticizes “scientific reductionism” that deems mystical experiences as mere neuron misfires, and reminds us that in scientific process you don’t get to just throw out results than don’t fit your theory. Mystical experiences aside, she remains as disdainful of organized religion as ever. Well ... perhaps she hasn’t met us. But then ... If she met us, would she find room here for her world flamed into life?

When I first entered seminary to become a Unitarian Universalist minister, the very last person I told was of course the one I was most nervous to tell – a dear friend, devout

atheist and ex- catholic nun whose scorn for religion is surpassed only by the pain it has caused her. When we finally talked, she confessed, "I'm just afraid that because I have no faith you'll think I have no heart." To which I replied, "And I am afraid that because I have faith, you'll think I have lost my mind."

Neither of us is missing either.

What if there is something beyond the "rational versus supernatural," maybe call it the "super-rational"?

Two little boys' angels. My grandmother's favorite sister. Clyde's hitchhiker. Michael's "tipping point." Dr. Lipton's epiphany. Barbara Ehrenreich's "world on fire."

The direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder of life, not quite explained.

What if it's all real?

If, as our UU source says, *it moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life*, is it not?

I close here with a favorite poem of mine from George Eliot – the pen-name of Unitarian poet Mary Ann Evans.

*Oh, may I join the choir invisible
Of those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence ...
May I reach that purest heaven – be to other souls
the cup of strength in some great agony;
enkindle generous ardor, feed pure love,
beget the smiles that have no cruelty;
be the sweet presence of a good diffused,
and in diffusion ever more intense.
So shall I join the choir invisible,
Whose music is the gladness of the world.*

Amen, Aho, Ashé, Namaste, Blessed Be ... and may it be so.