

YOU DO THE HOKEY POKEY

UUMH CHATHAM

REV. RICHARD M. FEWKES

JULY 27, 2008

Back in the late 1960s there was a movie and a theme song called “Alfie”. The main character, Alfie, doesn’t have a clue where it’s at and what it’s all about. He kind of drifts through life moment to moment. The song asks the question, “*What’s it all about, Alfie? Is it just for the moment we live? What’s it all about when you sort it out, Alfie? Are we meant to take more than we give, or are we meant to be kind?*” The song says there’s something more to life than just existing. And that something more is love. Alfie sets out to seek it, to follow his heart, not just his head.

“What’s it all about, Alfie?” In the sequel that was never made (I’m making this up) Alfie gets in touch with his spiritual hunger and sets out to find the true guru who will give him the answers he seeks about the meaning of life. He hears about a wise and all loving spiritual master who resides on top of a holy mountain somewhere in the Himalayas. He gets his act together and makes the long trek to India and struggles to the top of the mount. Sure enough, there sits the spiritual master deep in meditation. As Alfie approaches, the master opens his eyes, and says, “Can I help you?” Alfie asks the question in his song, “What’s it all about?” And the master replies, “You do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around—that’s what it’s all about.”

Would you believe that six years ago in February of 2000 five UU ministers preached on this very topic—the hokey pokey. We got the idea at a meditation prayer group we all attend. One of our group referred to a cartoon that had appeared in a recent issue of *The New Yorker* that depicted a scene along the lines of my story about Alfie and the guru. We all said, there’s a sermon in there somewhere, and so we challenged one another to make a sermon out of the Hokey Pokey, which we all did. We all shared our hokey pokey sermons with one another and reported that our congregations thought they were great. So, like it or not, that’s what you’re going to get.

The composer of the Hokey Pokey, Larry LaPrise, a native of Detroit, died a few years ago in Boise, Idaho, at age 83. His song writing career pretty much ended with the composition of the Hokey Pokey in the early 1940s. But he made a modest fortune out of it and spent the rest of his life as a postal service employee. The song was eventually picked up by bandleader Ray Anthony who recorded it in 1953 on the B-side of another novelty song-dance, “The Bunny Hop.” In no time, the Hokey Pokey was everywhere. School yards. Bar mitzvahs. Weddings. You name it. Today every school kid in the country knows the Hokey Pokey. The word “hokey” means “stupidly simple.” Well, the song and the dance are stupidly simple and easy to learn. And great fun. You don’t have to be a whiz on the dance floor to do the hokey pokey.

The story goes that Larry LaPrise’s funeral lasted a long time. The Hokey Pokey was playing in the background. The undertakers tried to get his body in the coffin. They put his left leg in, and the right leg would pop out, they put his right leg in and the left leg

would pop out. They put his whole body in and he'd soon be sitting up and shaking, and turning around. But that's what it's all about. As they wheeled his coffin out to the hearse, which was parked on a hill, the undertakers lost their grip and the coffin headed down the street, whizzing by traffic, going through red lights, and eventually flying in the open door of a local pharmacy, and coming to a crashing halt in front of the counter. The coffin cover fell off and the body sat up straight in its bier. The pharmacist leaned over the counter and asked, "Can I help you?" And LaPrise replied, "Yeah, have you got something that will stop this coffin?"

I actually heard this joke from the captain of the United Airlines flight I took to Washington, D.C. in January 2000. He was a stand up comic on the flight intercom and entertained us with one funny story after another. Since I knew I was slated to preach on the hokey pokey I said to myself, "I gotta use that joke. It's good sermon filler." So, don't blame me, blame United Airlines.

Let's take a look at the hokey pokey in greater detail. There is a sermon in here somewhere. Note that the song and dance asks us to counterbalance each move we make with the right or the left, with its opposite. If we put our left leg in and shake it all about, then we are asked to put our right leg in and shake it all about. The hokey pokey is teaching us to seek harmony and balance in our lives. Don't become one-sided or lopsided in your approach to living or in your view of the world.

You know the expression—"on the one hand, on the other hand." It means, take into consideration the opposite truth, the other point of view, to the one you hold. During political campaigns keep that in mind as you hear the various candidates spout their favorite proposals. Consider that political wisdom probably lies somewhere in the middle between democratic plan and republican proposal. Listen to both sides and weigh the evidence. Where does the truth lie?

Consider also that the Hokey Pokey asks us, after we have balanced both right and left, and put our whole selves in, to then turn ourselves around—that's what it's all about. To turn yourself around has religious overtones of the concept of repentance. Repentance means to cease faulty thinking and behavior, to turn yourself around, and head in a new direction, one that will engage your whole self and lead to health and healing and wholeness. That is certainly the emphasis in the A.A. Twelve-Step Program. The apostle Paul put it this way: "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you may know the good, acceptable and perfect will of God."

The challenge to renew our minds fits in with the wisdom of the Hokey Pokey. One of the actions we are asked to perform is to put our head in and out and shake it all about. That gets both the left side and right side of the head moving in and out and the blood flowing to both sides of the brain. Don't use only one half of your brain. Be whole-brained.

This fits in nicely with what we have been learning in recent years from so-called split brain research. This has led to the mapping of the contours of consciousness in the left

and right hemispheres of the brain, which are joined together by a large bundle of interconnecting fibers called the corpus callosum. In some individuals the connecting link between the two lobes of the brain is severed through accident of operation. They function normally except that in certain situations they are unable to make the connection between one form of awareness and another—for example, they cannot translate sensory information gathered by the right hand to the left hand because the memory of the sensory information is hidden in the other lobe which is not accessible to the left hand. The right hand literally knows not what the left hand is doing.

Briefly, split brain research reveals that the left lobe of the brain (which controls the right side of the body) is the primary center of the verbal and analytical mind—while the right lobe (which controls the left side of the body) is the primary center of the intuitive and synthetic mind, that part of ourselves that responds to art, music, poetry, dance and religious vision. Modern western culture is and has been heavily one-sided in its orientation towards the fruits of the left-lobed analytical mind, the source of our science and technology.

What might happen to an individual and a society that expended most of its energies in scientific, technological and material pursuits to the exclusion of the intuitive dimension of art and music and religious vision? Well, it happened to Charles Darwin, the British Unitarian scientist of the 19th century, responsible for the theory of evolution in biology.

Darwin recorded in his journal one day that he had lost all capacity to respond positively to art and music, a source of pleasure he had once enjoyed. Said Darwin: “My mind seems to have become grinding loaves out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher states depend, I cannot conceive.... If I had to live my life again, I would make it a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week, for perhaps the part of my brain now atrophied would have thus been kept active through use.” As the expression goes, “Use it or lose it.” Darwin, we might say, got mired in the left lobe and lost the connecting link, that spiritual corpus callosum, to the other side of his mind and soul. He lost the capacity of holistic response. In religious terms he no longer was able to respond to the Holy. He needed to do the Hokey Pokey and turn himself around.

We too need to begin to find ways to change the patterns of our individual lives and our cultural life-style, so that the one-sidedness of our psychic-social development in the west will not destroy us in soul and body and society. A new appreciation and practice of mysticism, meditation, worship, music, art and dance in religious and non-religious celebrations are part of the answer. But so also are ecology, solar energy, peaceful resolutions of conflicts, and the liberation of those who are oppressed—all expressions of the spirit in action and as integrally related to one another as the two lobes of the brain.

Adam Smith, author of the book *Powers of Mind*, published some two decades ago, pokes fun at supposedly modern sophisticated people trying to get in touch with feelings, which I like to apply to Unitarian Universalists at summer conference centers like Ferry Beach and Star Island: “So nice, linear, book-reading people come to Star Island, they do

their nonlinear, nonreading, touching, feeling workshop, and then they go to the bookstore and buy a linear verbal book about the nonlinear, feeling experience they just had and they take it home and read it. And the book says, get out of your head, you stupid, the head is not where it's at. The body is where it's at. The body never lies."

The message to get out of your head is really no answer when it becomes a one-sided rejection of all rational and intellectual reflection. To get mired in the right lobe of the brain (as Darwin once found himself mired in the left lobe) can be a far worse fate leading to irrational social and self-destructive actions. No, the message is not to get out of your head, but rather to get over to the other side of your brain for a spell, and then to switch lobes and reflect on your experience, and to do this on a regular basis. As the title of one of my favorite folk songs puts it, *Both Sides Now*. Theologically, this could be called, "faith seeking understanding."

Christianity teaches that the *Logos* or Word of God became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth in order to manifest and make known the love of God. In Greek, the word *Logos* means Reason. It represents the rational structure of creation and the rational side of the human mind. Among the Stoics that part of ourselves that makes us divine and akin to the gods is our reason. So in Christian theology Divine Reason becomes Love in order to fulfill the purpose of human existence on earth. I like the Gnostic notion that Jesus modeled this lesson not in word only, but in a hymn and a dance at the Last Supper. Maybe that's where the Hokey Pokey had its origins!

As Unitarian Universalists we can look upon the Christian myth of the Incarnation not as something applying to one person only, but rather as a parable of the process of the unfolding of the Universal Self in all human beings. Reason (*Logos*) must become Love (*Agape*) in each and everyone of us. The left lobe rational mind must link up with the right lobe intuitive feeling consciousness of love and connection if we are to become complete and whole beings in soul and society. That's what it's all about.

When the merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America took place in 1961 it could be said that this represented the coming together of the two sides of our religious heritage—the rational and intellectual side of our faith represented by the educated minds of the Unitarians—and the intuitive feeling side of our faith represented by the emotional appeal of the Universalists. That is somewhat of an oversimplification of the two sides of our religious heritage, I grant you, but there is enough truth there to make it our own. The Unitarians emphasized the use of reason in faith and the dignity of human nature, while the Universalists preached an enthusiastic Gospel of eternal love and universal salvation. You put the two together in holistic response and you get the Hokey Pokey.

I told you there was a sermon in here somewhere. We invite you to embrace both sides of our Unitarian Universalist religious heritage, reason and love, faith and action, and both sides of your personal mind and consciousness—thought and feeling. It is not a question of one or the other, but of both/and. The word of the day is, "Both Sides Now." So, "You do the Hokey Pokey, and you turn yourselves around. That's what it's all about", Alfie.