

Drinking from Wells We Did Not Dig

the Rev. Edmund Robinson

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When I was a lawyer in my middle age, I once had a civil case where my opposing counsel was a young woman who had just been admitted to the bar and who had a side job as an aerobics instructor at 7 in the morning before she started her day at the law office. One day we were scheduled for some kind of motion hearing – the really boring stuff – in a little country courthouse. There isn't much luxury in those places – all the lawyers line up in the corridor and wait to be admitted, in twos and threes, into the judge's office, where the matter is heard with a court reporter present. It's an informal setting. Our hearing was presided over by a country judge who must have been upwards of two hundred fifty pounds, and as we took our turns to sit down in front of the judge's desk, I noticed a box of Krispy Kreme Doughnuts. I said, "judge are these doughnuts for anyone?" and he said, "why sure, Mr. Robinson, have one," and I did. Then realizing that he needed to be fair, he turned to my wasp-waisted opposing counsel and said, "here, Miss Sanders, have a doughnut." She flushed a little and said, "oh no sir, I couldn't." The judge looked over his glasses at her and said, "now honey, think about this. When you get to heaven and St. Peter asks you if you enjoyed all the good things that the Lord put in front of you in this life, you're not going to want to tell him that you didn't have this doughnut!" And with that, she took the doughnut and ate it.

So the question of the morning is, do we appreciate all the doughnuts, all the good things that are put in front of us?

Not that the world always gives us something sweet. Some of you may be suffering, as I am, from the blahs or worse these last few weeks. Maybe it's the long-drawn-out tail of winter, or cabin fever, or the things I can't seem to get around to, or the bug that I had, but it's been a down time for me and I think for a lot of you. We are concerned about the economy in general, and each of us is concerned about our own financial health and the health of our loved ones. Relationships are getting strained, our families are feeling pinched, some painfully. The whole time we're living through seems disorienting. Gratitude is hard to come by at times like this.

But it is at times like this that gratitude, awareness of the blessings of our lives, is most necessary. And this is why I want to talk, as we go into the season the Jews call Passover and the Christians call Holy Week, a bit about what we are grateful for and who we are grateful to.

Look at Dick Fewkes' beautiful words that the choir sang so marvelously just now: "For all things which come to us as gifts of being from sources beyond ourselves." Notice how inclusive that is — it includes all sources beyond ourselves – God, fellow humans, nature. The gifts we are given. This is straight Unitarian Universalism.

Now the doughnut image is apt, because I have described Unitarian Universalism as a theological doughnut. Several years ago, the UU Commission on appraisal, our in-house think tank, set out to find the theological "core" of Unitarian Universalism, and after looking into it for three years, the best minds in the denomination came up with the conclusion that there is no core. There is a hole at the center. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Consider our seventh principle, respect for the Interconnected web of all existence, of which we are a part. A web doesn't necessarily have a core. The Internet doesn't have a core.

Rev. David Bumbaugh, who teaches theology at Meadville Lombard, writes:

The heart of a faith for the Twenty-First Century, I am convinced, is suggested by the Seventh Principle.... Hidden in this apparently uncomplicated, uncontroversial, innocuous statement is a radical theological position. The Seventh Principle calls us to reverence before the world, not some future world,

but this miraculous world of our everyday experience. It challenges us to understand the world as reflexive and relational rather than hierarchical. It bespeaks a world in which neither god nor humanity is at the center; in which the center is the void, the ever fecund matrix out of which being emerges.... It calls us to trust the process, the creative, evolving, renewing, redeeming process which brings us into being, which sustains us in being, and which transforms our being. It offers a vision of the world in which the holy, the sacred is incarnated in every moment, in every aspect of being, a world in which God is always fully present, and in which God is always fully at risk.¹”

So the hole at the center of the doughnut is actually the source for all that is good and bad in our world. The peculiar thing about our religion is that it calls us to be grateful both to the doughnut and to the hole.

This is well expressed in Dick Fewkes’ Psalm of praise. And I’d like to compare that to couple of biblical passages that might have been in the back of his mind. Dick has told me that he didn’t have a conscious model for his words, but I see a similarity with two passages in the Hebrew Bible.

The first is Psalm 8, which begins, in the King James version,

8:1 O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.

...

8:3 When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

8:4 What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

8:5 For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.

Here we have a general comparison of the greatness of God, maker of all things, and the smallness of the human before the majesty of God’s creation.

The second is a passage in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy. Here, Moses is addressing the children of Israel as they are at the gates of the promised land, after wandering in the desert for forty years. He reminds them not to forget who brought them there when they are in the promised land:

6:1 Now these are the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, which the LORD your God commanded to teach you, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go to possess it:

6:2 That thou mightest fear the LORD thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee, thou, and thy son, and thy son’s son, all the days of thy life; and that thy days may be prolonged.

6:3 Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it; that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily, as the LORD God of thy fathers hath promised thee, in the land that floweth with milk and honey.

6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD:

6:5 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

¹David Bumbaugh, “The Heart of a Faith for the Twenty-First Century,” in *Unitarian Universalism: Selected Essays* (Boston: UU Ministers Association, 1994), 37., quoted in *Engaging our Theological Diversity*, UUA Commission on Appraisal, May 2005, p. 90.

6:6 And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart:
6:7 And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.
6:8 And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes.
6:9 And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.
6:10 And it shall be, when the LORD thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not,
6:11 And houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full;
6:12 Then beware lest thou forget the LORD, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

Now there are several things which I want to lift up from this passage. In the big picture of the Torah, this is a restatement of the covenant between God and Israel. Moses is reminding the Israelites that it was God who brought them forth from Egyptian slavery, and that God demands loyalty. The phrase “hear O Israel, the Lord thy God, the Lord is one; you shall love the lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your might,” is called the Shema, and it is the closest thing to a creed in Judaism. It is said by devout Jews many times per day.

The covenant with God is one that the children of Israel, and their children and children’s children, are to carry in their hearts, put them on their hands, carry them in front of their eyes, and put them on the door-post of the house. This is a reference not only to the mezuzah, which Jewish families today post on the doorframes of their houses, and which contains this very passage, but it is also a reference to the last miracle of liberation from Egypt, where the angel of death passed over the houses of the Israelites, who had smeared lamb’s blood on the lintel.

The Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey, is explicitly made part of this covenant by this passage, and that is the religious overtone for the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians today. And there’s the problem. Many of us will read these words today through a skeptical eye, for it seems unjust that God should allow one people to simply displace another. The God who would do such a thing does not comport with our ideas of a God of justice. Why should the Israelites be allowed to inhabit houses they did not build, to harvest from vineyards they did not plant, to drink from wells they did not dig? We are disturbed by this because we think justice consists of people getting what they deserve, what they earn with the sweat of their brow.

We want God to stand for justice. We want God to be a good guy. And we are repelled by stories which show God acting unjustly. The very Passover story of the last plague, the slaying of the firstborn, is very liberating for the Israelites, but horrifying from the point of view of the Egyptians. Why wouldn’t a just God arrange it so that the Israelites slip out of town under cover of night? Why kill babies?

Hinduism, by the way, presents a more balanced God, a God who has aspects of creator (brahman), sustainer (vishnu) and destroyer (shiva).

So there is a political problem with this passage, but in effect God is recognizing that by enjoining the children of Israel to recognize that they do not deserve the bounties that are being set before them. It is easy for us to get hung up on the justice issue and lose sight of the larger issue of grace and gift. Those of us of European ancestry living in America can also get hung

up on the fact that our ancestors took this land for its original inhabitants, and some of us had ancestors who enslaved African peoples and benefitted from their forced labor.

Justice is important, but the givenness of life transcends right and wrong, justice and injustice. The larger point is that none of us deserves the benefits, the blessings that we enjoy. It is a point made by Moses and a point well made by Dick Fewkes' beautiful words, and a point emphasized by Robbie Walsh's essay that I read earlier:

"Some say we get what we deserve in life, but I don't believe it. We certainly don't deserve Bach. What have I done to deserve the 2nd Brandenburg Concerto? I have not been kind enough; I have not done enough justice; I have not loved my neighbor, nor myself, sufficiently; nor praised God enough to have earned a gift like this.²"

When you put Dick's words beside Moses' words in Deuteronomy, you see that Dick has generalized the covenant. The covenant is no longer with God who brought us out of Egypt, but with the source of all gifts which come from beyond ourselves. Thus it embraces gifts from humanity as well as from nature, as well as from the holy.

We all drink from wells we did not dig. If we were to be thrown onto what we could eat and drink from our own labors, we would die of starvation. I suppose I could figure out how to grow a carrot, but I'm pretty sure I couldn't skin a rabbit.

I said before that the down times are when gratitude is most needed. The setting of this passage from Deuteronomy illustrates this. The great action by God to liberate the Israelites, the ten plagues and the Exodus which are celebrated at Passover, are all forty years in the past when Moses makes this speech. We may assume that few of the people originally enslaved are left. The children of Israel are effectively nomads.

The Promised Land has many meanings; for Christians it tracks the Kingdom of Heaven preached by Jesus, and for Martin Luther King, Jr. and we his heirs who share his dream of a color blind society, it is the Beloved Community. But I think the point of Moses' speech here is that you don't get to the Promised Land without wandering a long time in the desert. It's all part of the same passage. You don't have a dawn without a dark night of the soul preceding it. You don't have spring without winter. You don't have joy without sadness. You don't have Easter without Good Friday.

Yes, there are lots of scary and disturbing things happening in our lives in the present time; bad things are happening to us which we don't deserve, but we don't deserve the good things either. Have you taken advantage of all the good things that have been set before you in this life? We UUs know that we are part of the interconnected web of all existence. I have spoken before about how the financial crisis demonstrates this interconnectivity. Our own very existence is tied up with the existence of everything else in this web. The fact that the center is a void is a blessing, for the void is the center of creativity.

We UUs learn to be grateful not just for the doughnut, but for the hole, too. It is most holy. This Passover, let us not pass over the good things that have been set before us. As we drink from wells we did not dig and harvest from vineyards we did not plant, let us never forget to be thankful for gifts we did nothing to deserve. Let our hearts be full.

Amen.

Reading:

April 2009 Quest, UUA Church of the larger Fellowship,

²"More than We Deserve" by Rev. Robbie Walsh, *Quest*, Church of the Larger Fellowship, April 2009.

“More Than We Deserve”

By Robert R. Walsh, Minister Emeritus, First Parish Church Unitarian Universalist, Duxbury, Massachusetts

I heard the 2nd Brandenburg Concerto played in honor of J. S. Bach’s 300th birthday. I was swept away. I remember a story about the people who send messages into space in hopes they will be heard by intelligent beings on other planets. They were trying to decide what content would best tell them who we are. Someone suggested that we send something by Bach. The reply was, “But that would be bragging.”

Some say we get what we deserve in life, but I don’t believe it. We certainly don’t deserve Bach. What have I done to deserve the 2nd Brandenburg Concerto? I have not been kind enough; I have not done enough justice; I have not loved my neighbor, nor myself, sufficiently, nor praised God enough to have earned a gift like this.

The stories of Passover and Easter are about an urge to life that is somehow built into everything. Your life is a manifestation of that urge. Your beating heart, your seeing eye, your questing mind, your love, your service, your enjoyment, your suffering, are all substance pushed toward life and freedom by the creative process. The stories tell of life triumphant in spite of individual death, of freedom victorious though many have suffered bondage.

This, too, is a gift we have not earned and for which we cannot pay. There is no necessity that there be a universe, no inevitability about a world moving toward life and then self consciousness. There might have been—nothing at all.

Since we do not deserve Bach, or crocuses, or lovers, the best we can do is to do our share in the world of creation, and to keep telling the stories.