

To Think About God

Sermon for the Ordination & Installation of Michael Leuchtenberger

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Unitarian Universalist Church, Concord, NH

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Michael, it seems we may need a little more work on American idioms. When we say “Break a leg” to a performer as they are heading on stage, it is a paradoxical wish for good luck – not an instruction!

While I trust that your present indisposition is not an omen of things to come, I must say that it puts me forcibly in mind of another tale from the Hebrew Scriptures – a followup from the one we heard earlier today. It is said that Abraham’s grandson Jacob turned out to be a bit of a bad egg. He tricked his father, and stole his older brother’s filial blessing. He tricked his father in law into turning over a much larger share of their joint herds than the old man had intended to give. But then one night, as he and wives and children and concubines and cattle and servants were fleeing from his in-laws’ wrath, back to the arms of his disenfranchised brother, Jacob found himself momentarily alone in the desert. Without distractions, with only his conscience and his fears for company, something transformative happened to the scheming wheeler dealer. It is written that an angel of god appeared to Jacob, and wrestled with him there in the lonely desert all night long. Neither of them achieved a decisive victory in that contest, unless you might think that just not being immediately flattened by the angel of god is a victory in itself. As dawn broke over the sand, Jacob had to get on with it – catch up with his family, and continue the journey into his future. The mysterious athlete refused to give his own name when asked, but he gave a new name to Jacob – Isra-el; the one who strives with god. And to make his point more emphatically, he then struck Jacob/Israel in the leg, and left him with a permanent limping injury. Israel went on the found the great nation that was promised to Abraham, a nation and a people who from that day to this would continue to wrestle with the demands of god. So what’s *your* story?

It’s actually useful to be accurate with the text, because in the original telling, it only says that a “stranger” wrestled with Jacob until dawn. It is later piety that identifies this challenger as an angel of god. And since I know that you are, and you know that I know that you are a practicing humanist, and seeing as how I am one too, that angel of god business has the potential to be an issue for us. So once again we are going to have to join Mary Oliver on that summer hillside, and sit down to think about god. It is, as she observes, a worthy pastime, and we have a few minutes here. Let’s not stomp off right away to the nearest chemistry lab or art gallery,

muttering under our breath about superstition and the crusades. It's a nice enough hillside, and the poets and the crickets are good company.

Michael, you are preparing to devote your life to the service of something – some call, some set of ideals – that have summoned you out of your ordinary life to this extraordinary responsibility that we affirm in you today. If this were an orthodox faith it would be easy to call that something god. But we're not, and so it is not that easy. Yet easy or not, you appear determined. I want to propose that what you are actually doing is making a public commitment to a certain kind of growing up; that you are making yourself, insofar as you are able, into a model and an advocate and a guide toward spiritual maturity.

We are familiar with other dimensions of maturity; you are surely watching with delight and wonder as your boys move through the changing stages of physical growth. You have been recently engaged in the excitement of intellectual growth, as your knowledge and understanding have matured during your seminary experience. The challenges of marriage, parenthood, maintaining a multi-national identity, performing as a professional musician, and even the search process itself, have pushed you to a certain level of emotional maturity. And of course, these are all good things, for without any one of them, the work of ministry is hobbled, if not altogether shipwrecked. But all of these together do not describe the particular kind of grownupness that ministry is intended to represent. We are the folks who have the insight – or the nerve, depending on your perspective – to hold out the possibility, and the importance, of another kind of ripening; to suggest that our humanity is most fully realized as we become more spiritually mature. This is the quality that the great mystics and sages have easily recognized in one another across all the varieties of religious and cultural traditions. It is what enables us to name Rumi and Gandhi and Schwietzer and Julian and the Dalai Lama all in the same breath. The lack of it turns faith into pogroms and witch hunts and terrorism. It is, I suggest to you, the necessary foundation of our ability to live together as humanists and theists, skeptics and mystics, prophets and seekers, all in this liberal religious covenant community of ours.

Let me share with you a concept from the disciplines of human development theory to show you what I mean about god. We can all imagine the difficulty of trying to talk with a fish about water – water is the medium of a fish's existence; he is embedded in it; he has no conceptual alternative of not-water. The great child psychologist Piaget demonstrated in a series of elegant experiments that young children are embedded in their perceptions of reality. When liquid is poured from a tall thin container into a short wide container, pre-schoolers are absolutely certain that the amount of liquid is diminished. You can teach them to parrot the

statement that the amount of liquid is the same, but do a similar demonstration with sand, and they are right back where they started, embedded in their perceptions. They have not yet developed the ability to take the appearances of things as an object of reflection, something to be questioned. At a certain point in their mental growth, the light switch will go on, and they will spontaneously recognize the conservation of the amount of liquid or anything else, regardless of the shape of the container. The same principle applies to adolescents, who initially lack the capacity to take the judgment of their peer group as an object of reflection. While they remain embedded in that judgment, the desirability of being “cool” is not debatable; it is an objective reality of the universe. Those who study these matters suggest that as we grow, we become increasingly able to take our world, and ourselves within that world, as objects of reflection. As we emerge from our embeddedness, we mature.

So. To think about god.. I am persuaded that our spiritual maturing works in much the same way. We start out embedded in our wonder and terror, in beauty and gratitude, in our longing for wholeness and love. We start out held in community, functional or dysfunctional, like a fish in water, for if not, we don't survive at all. We are inescapably related to all other human beings, but so embedded in that kinship that it takes decades to begin to see it as something to think about, to question or acknowledge, to celebrate or despise. Spiritual maturity happens as we begin to be able to take these existential realities and the meanings that we inevitably make of them, as objects of reflection. And so it is, I suppose, with the idea of a self-conscious, personal god. We come to awareness of that idea embedded either in the acceptance or the rejection of it as a literal truth about the world. Whichever view we hold, people who disagree with us are objectively and demonstrably mistaken. As earnest liberals, we can teach our children – and we do, with a misplaced sense of satisfaction – to parrot the dictum that all religious traditions have wisdom to offer, and that each person's unique spiritual journey should be treated with respect. But scratch the surface, and they will tell you with eager righteousness how grateful they are to have been raised to believe this, and not to be close-minded like their fundamentalist classmates. There is no hypocrisy here; they are doing the developmental work appropriate to their years, in forming the capacity for loyalty to a community, but the light bulb of genuine appreciation for diversity has not yet gone on.

If we go out to the hillside to think of god as a part of the reality in which we are embedded, we may find ourselves smiling in the warmth of god's presence, or scowling at the credulity that perpetuates this lie, and spoiling for a fight. I warn you now that neither of these stances represents the spiritually mature perspective that I think is your task and mine to embrace, and over time to share with others. When we go out to the hillside to think of god, let it be to take as an object of reflection the human imagination's impulse to capture the mystery and power

of ultimacy in these concrete beings to whom we attribute divinity. Every spiritually mature believer rejects the attempt to portray, and thereby to limit, what is holiest in the life we share. In its most practical form, this is why we are forbidden to pronounce god's name, to draw god's picture, or to carve statues of god – because the wiser ones always know that doing so spells trouble; that somebody will eventually mistake that representation for the thing itself, and we will wind up back in our misplaced concreteness. And don't kid yourself – we humanists are just as subject to this temptation as any other true believers. When we can think of god only as a proposition for debate, an unwarranted hypothesis invented to compensate for human ignorance and enforce human authority, we are still embedded in our spiritual unselfconsciousness; the light bulb of our mature inner life has not yet come on.

More than a century ago, in the early dawning of the modern humanist movement, our elder brother William Channing Gannett put it this way:

But as to names, let those for whom the inadequacy of all words about the Infinite dims truth say neither "God" nor "Love" nor "Father". Let such keep silence; and let their silence be revered as reverence by those who find the poverty of words less poor than silence to voice their sense of the Mystery and Blessedness. As reverently let those who choose the silence bear with those who break it. Our many names at utmost best are only poems, emblems, symbols; idols of the mind. But know what 'idol' means – an image serving to make thought more visible to consciousness... With this imaging, this picturing necessity upon us, it does not long avail us to dismantle our cathedrals, whitewash frescoes, and forswear symbolism in the interest of "truth". Mankind has a birthright to poetry and symbolism, and they will not long be denied out of him. If denied in one set of terms, they are sure to come back before long in another.

These "ethical culture" friends of ours will deepen spiritual perception in us all. They are prophets of the living god, whose name, for the god's sake, they would fain forbid to men; even as in elder time, for the god's sake, prophets forbade his graven image. But, grateful for and not unmindful of their warning, we need not go out to dwell with these reformers in the dry lands of their prose. There is a nobler way. Be braver, all! Be fairer, too. Say "Our Father," or say "Christ" or "Madonna", yet saying them, beware! Forget not that they are symbols, and all inadequate to name the god we worship, the life and love in which we live, and of which we are a part. Or, refuse to say "Our Father," if truthfulness forbid you; but beware as much in that refusal! For to fear idols for oneself, or to rave at them in others, is still to fear and rave – at idols! Mistake not *thou* the form for substance. To put both warnings into one, beware of deeming it

either the essence of religion, or the essence of superstition, to say “God” and “Father”. To think it either is to confound names with realities, -- and that is the superstition, that is the sacrilege.

And I would say to you today, Michael, that that superstition and sacrilege is what you are called to overcome – in yourself, at least, to outgrow – so that you may lead this congregation from a position of wisdom, sympathy, and mature reverence. The community of love can be built by raw enthusiasm, but it can only be sustained over the long term by the aspiration toward spiritual adulthood. That maturity has many facets, but none is more central than this capacity to take our access to the divine through metaphor as an object of reflection in itself. Once that light bulb goes on in our souls, all the images and songs become translucent; and instead of barriers to our mutual understanding, they bring us all back to that summer hillside where the poets preside, and thinking of god is our shared and worthy pastime.

You need not make an idol of a literal, personal deity in order to recognize in the challenging stranger a messenger of the most high, an angel of god. Religious community should be the place where we are called upon to grow up as spiritual people, where we learn to reach out of our embeddedness toward a larger perspective and a new self-understanding. It should be where we come to understand the overflowing reverence of metaphor and the austere reverence of silence in naming the divine as mirror images of each other; both manifestations of our shared yearning for the best and truest lives of which human beings are capable. We hunger for leaders who are spiritually mature, who can take their own process of meaning-making, and ours, as objects of contemplation, and summon us to honor authentic reverence in whatever ways it may be experienced or expressed. Of all the talents and skills you bring to the vocation of ministry, Michael, and they are many, none matters more than this, that you should be an example of spiritual adulthood. The greatest souls of all ages have testified that this is a process that never ends; we can always go deeper, learn more, become able to see ourselves and the world more clearly. As you commit yourself to a life of that endeavor, may you indeed be guided and blessed and led by love, and may the invitation to think of god grow for you into an ever more profound window on what it means to be most truly human.