



First Parish in Brewster
Rev. Erik Walker Wikstrom

Gobsmacked by the Spirit
September 23, 2007

First Reading:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any--lifted from the no
of all nothing--human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

~ e.e. cummings

Second Reading: In her book *First Light*, Sue Monk Kidd (author of *Secret Life with Bees*) tells of an experience she had while reading Mary Oliver's poetry at a party with close friends:

I read last, choosing a poem with the cheery little title, "When Death Comes". I read along unsuspecting till I got to a line in which Oliver writes about coming to the end and wanting to say that she has spent her life married to amazement.



Suddenly something unexpected happened to me. My throat tightened. My eyes filled. I don't mean sad tears, but the kind that leak from something brimming.

I looked at the faces around the room. They seemed beautiful and shining to me. I glanced at a common white lily in a vase and honestly, the sight nearly wiped me out. It was *that* impertinently gorgeous. Out of nowhere, plain and simple objects were rising up to show off their flame. The divine,

unnameable spark. I couldn't think what to name the feeling except amazement at life. It was as if something fell from my eyes and I saw everything just as it is.

One second I was going along in a jaded marriage with life (because let's face it, the intimacy can fade after a while if you don't work on the relationship) when it rode in and swept me off my feet. I learned to be in love with life again. And I didn't even know the romance had slipped.

"Life is a spell so exquisite that everything conspires to break it," wrote Emily Dickinson. Somehow I'd begun moving through life on automatic pilot, half-seeing, half-here, abducted by the dreaded small stuff. But the evening of my party, I realized all over again: We will have a true and blissful marriage to life only to the extent that we are *aware*.

So. That's how I resolved the question about what I wished to become notorious for at fifty. Let it be for nothing more than harboring a wild amazement at life. Let it be for choking up at poetry and the sight of human faces. For falling into easy rapture over lilies and all the other run-of-the mill marvels that make up life. Let me become notorious for going around with my bridal veil tossed back and my mouth saying I do. Renewing my vows with life. Every day. A hundred times a day.

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Not that long ago I heard about a controversy brewing among our co-religionists across the pond. It seems that there are those who believe that traditional British Unitarianism, which is still at least nominally a liberal Christian tradition, is being infected by a strain of anything-goes relativism that threatens to shake the very foundations of the faith. I had passed on to me what amounted to an op ed piece by a clergyman who was warning against—and he didn't really use these words but they sure seemed to be his meaning—the heresies and false teachings of a relatively new preacher over there by the name of James Robinson.

That's right, our Jim, my predecessor in this pulpit, is shaking things up over there. And, truth be told, he's still shaking things up over here. I've been buzzing and bubbling with the idea of this sermon since back in the spring. Jim had e-mailed me a little note for the congregation on the occasion of our Installation of the Ministers event. In it he included this blessing: "May you always be gobsmacked by the joys of Spirit."

Gobsmacked indeed I was. But what does it mean to be gobsmacked? Gobsmacked—and I love saying that word—is a Brittishism, a slang term meaning "flabbergasted, astounded, shocked" and it comes from combining a Scotch-Gaelic term of the mid-1500's, *gob* (meaning "mouth") with the modern word *smacked* (meaning "clapping one's hand over in surprise"). It's like stunned, surprised, shocked, awed, amazed, and delighted all rolled together. So Jim's hope for us was that we'd all be gobsmacked by the joys of Spirit.

And that's what we're told Jesus wanted for his disciples. In the Christian Scriptures—specifically the book of John—it's said that after Jesus explains to them the whole deal—the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, the resurrection, everything—he says to them, “These things I say to you that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.” In one of the apocryphal books he then takes his friends outside and leads everybody in a dance.

In my experience people often think about religion as somber and serious, as full of *shalts* and *shalt nots*, responsibilities and guilt. There's repentance, and confession, and sin, and being a good person, and all that other hard stuff. There seems to be so much of an emphasis on suffering—Buddha even begins his first teaching with the three-word analysis, “Life is suffering.” It's fundamental to it; there's no escaping it.

And in the Jewish Scriptures we have the teacher of Ecclesiastes repeating over and over, “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.” The Hebrew word that is translated as “vanity” and the Sanskrit word that is translated as “suffering” actually are etymologically pretty close—they both have roots meaning “unsatisfying, transient,” and both point to the idea that life is ever-changing, that we can't hold on to it or anything in it, and that we don't like that very much. Life is suffering, and a chasing after wind.

And since life is suffering we'd better figure out how to deal with it, how to find meaning in it, and so religions develop all sorts of theologies around suffering. None, perhaps, more graphically than Christianity has done with the crucifixion, but all of them do it. And unless you go really deeply into these teachings—so deeply that you go not just into them but through them, which is something few of us do—then, let's face it, religion as it's often expressed can be pretty depressing.

Yet also in my experience—my own personal experience and that of all the mystics and teachers I've studied—at its core, at its heart, religion is always really about joy.

The Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote in one of his earliest books, “Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. [I love that line!] We must also be in touch with the wonders of life. . . . It would be a pity if we are only aware of suffering.”

At its core, at its heart, religion is about living in such a way that we are open to being gobsmacked by the wonders of life. The sunshine on our skin; the breeze in our hair; the feel of the grass under our feet and the mud between our toes; the scent of a basil leaf when you rub it in your hand; the smell of a tomato plant when you come anywhere near it; the feel of a warm cup of coffee in your hands on a cold morning; the soft skin of a freshly washed baby; the taste of salt on your skin after a day at the beach; cold water on a hot afternoon; hot water on a cold day; the sound of a favorite song; your lover's sleepy voice; clean sheets; fresh baked bread.

Have you ever been gobsmacked by the joys of life? Have you ever been open to the wonders all around you?

Beginning Friday evening and ending last night, Jews marked Yom Kippur, the holiest of the High Holy Days that began ten days back with Rosh Hashanah. It is the “Day of Atonement” on which one atones for her or his sins and recommits to God to live a righteous life. If there are “Christmas and Easter Christians” who do not darken the door of a church except for on those two days, there are certainly “Yom Kippur Jews.” It’s a day of rededication to a vision of who and how one wants to be.

I think we UUs need such a day—a day each year to rededicate ourselves, to recommit ourselves; a day on which we can let go of past mistakes and put our feet back under us to start again. And while no doubt a lively conversation would ensue if we tried to define what living a “righteous life” was all about, I’d like to suggest that at least part of it has to do with being open to being gobsmacked by life’s wonders.

And more than that—it has to do with a commitment to being actively out there looking for them. It’s so easy to dismiss those “little wonders,” so easy to take them for granted, like the “non-toothache” we talked about a couple of weeks ago. Ours is such a skeptical society that we’re conditioned to overlook such things in favor of the problems pressing in on us from all sides or the colossal techni-color miracles one reads about in the scriptures and the tabloids.

This week I’ve been watching and re-watching the movie *Willie Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* and a line keeps ringing in my ears—“if you want to view paradise, simply look around and view it.” Rich here; right now. “Everything is perfect, just as it is.” The kingdom of heaven is upon us.” “Present moment, wonderful moment.” It’s impossible to miss, yet it’s also incredibly easy not to see.

So let us recommit ourselves to keeping our eyes and our ears, our hands and our hearts, our noses and our nerve endings open to the miracles that are all around us. May we make it part of our daily practice to wander in wonder, to seek out surprises. And may we be gobsmacked indeed.

Final Words:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
And only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning