

Devoted to the Vision
September 7th, 2008

To what vision are your heart and eyes devoted? For what do you search and search again without losing hope? For what, as the song says, do you keep your lamps trimmed and burning?

If you're tempted to answer those questions on a daily-existence level of thinking, you may be saying to yourself, "The only thing in my vision right now is the back of someone else's head. The only things I search for again and again are my car keys and my glasses, and I don't *have* to keep my lamp trimmed, because I use energy-efficient fluorescent light bulbs." I understand that.

But of course I'm asking these questions on a spiritual level, a religious level, just as 90 of you—yes, 90—asked yourselves and each other about your vision for this church

yesterday, in attending our Search for the Future workshop. Yesterday, you showed yourselves as true visionaries. So this morning I'm not going to let you be led into the temptation of answering in that daily existence kind of way. At least not ultimately. Because, while some of us may like to believe that ours is a church for non-religious people; while we might celebrate our non-hierarchical way of being with one another—thus, in part, me, or any other clergy person, not being the boss of you; and, most radically, while we have no creed demanding we proclaim our perpetual surrender to and worship of a specific God, or gods or goddesses; I do believe that, ultimately, we are accountable to a call, in our hearts, minds, and souls, that demands we transcend our daily lives, our daily concerns, our daily vision of what life asks of us.

I believe, as far removed as we may be from the world of Muslim poet Mohammad Iqbal, who proclaims, in the reading

we shared earlier, that his heart and eyes are all devoted to a treasure to be found in his unendingly hopeful search, I believe that we too *have*, as Iqbal *had*, a burning of desire in our hearts—a desire that goes deeper than our everyday desire for food or drink, tobacco or sex.

And I believe that that desire is a desire, quite simply, for love. Love in all its manifestations: kindness, compassion, friendship, beauty, justice, truth, peace—to name a few.

But desire itself can become a fairly tricky thing, for it seems so often to offer, as if it were a bit of a trickster, two different paths to take towards those experiences of love: there is the path that leads to a quick, though ultimately temporary fix; and there is the path that demands surrender—surrender to patience, faith, time, twists, turns, symbols and signs.

Considering those two paths, how often do you go for the former, the quick, and, seeing that that doesn't work quite as

well as you'd hoped, how often does the latter path end up feeling better? Take not smoking as opposed smoking, for instance, or breathing through and trying to understand one's own anger, rather than hastily acting out in it. Think about slipping on the shoes of whoever is foreign or strange to you, and walking in those shoes for a few hundred miles or so, versus making swift assumptions about that person or group, and thus distancing yourself from them without ever trying to get to know them. Sometimes, literally or figuratively, it takes walking a few hundred miles to understand both others and ourselves. Sometimes we do have to cross that vast desert, as Mohammad Iqbal says, to attain the true treasure of true love.

Now, speaking of deserts, the notion of deserts came up last week, too, when I mentioned crossing deserts to escape from slavery and injustice, and I noted then Martin Luther King, Jr.'s notion, in regard to such escape, of redemptive

suffering. In that context, it might be easier to see the good in crossing that desert, because the oppressor is externalized, and we know the further we walk away from that oppressor's system of slavery and hierarchical domination, the closer we get to systems of freedom and collective empowerment.

But crossing deserts to transform our own internal systems is perhaps a bit more daunting. For one, for many, the mere idea of such suffering in order to transform ourselves draws dangerously close to the notion of original sin, of depravity, and our need to purify ourselves of our innately tainted souls. Both our Unitarian and our Universalist ancestors long ago rejected such views of human nature, so why dwell, you might ask, on the bad, when we can focus on the good?

Well, the thought that comes to my mind is the invitation to think of ourselves as sponges. Now, if your mind goes

immediately to the image of the cartoon character Sponge Bob Square Pants, that's OK. It speaks to the point I want to make. And that point is that we human beings soak in our surroundings. We soak in big bright billboards, fast food jingles, fickle phenomena of fashion, automobile logos, sexy celebrity tidbits, cinematic violence, political jabs and jargon, gooey chocolaty deliciousness, hypnotically colorful, shiny toys and gadgets, and on down the line.

Of course, we also soak in knowledge, beauty, love, and relationships. And I'm going to get to that. But go with me for now on the idea—the subliminal *truth*—of all this consumption media soaking into our very pores, as if it were, say, a two-liter bottle of Coca Cola. There, see? I just did again. Product placement. I invite you, when you go back out into the world today, to look and listen, with a critical eye and ear, at just how much product placement there is out there.

For now though, coming back to our sponginess, imagine how all that intake of commercialism and consumerism influences our very emotions and behaviors. Think of how it influences our decision making when we come to that fork in the road of desire. Ah, that quick and easy path is going to make me feel a whole lot better a whole lot faster than that long, winding laborious one, the end of which I can't even see. So, you take the quick path: you choose to drink, or yell at your spouse, or eat an entire cake for lunch, or watch six hours of TV, and in that moment of indulging, wow, it's like there's this release of all the tension you've been feeling. All your troubles just slip away.... And then you come to the end of that quick path and, oops, it's a loop. It's brought you right back to where you started. Instead of freeing yourself of your struggles, you've inadvertently soaked in more pain, more shame.

What to do? In this particular case, remembering ourselves as sponges who have, willingly or not, taken in a lot of toxic teachings and indulgences that popular culture creates for us, I would encourage us wring ourselves out, to dry up, so to speak, and to turn, again, to the words of Mohammad Iqbal, who writes, “It is true that we are made of dust and the World is made of dust, but the dust has motes rising. Whence comes that drive in us?” Iqbal asks. “We look to the starry sky and love storms in our hearts.”

In other words, freeing ourselves of the muddying weight of consumerism and insatiability that our culture so prolifically encourages, we rise above and look beyond the quick fix, *beyond* the things that masquerade as love, and point our hearts towards the *true* treasure of *true* love. This is what Unitarian Universalist minister Abhi Jana-manchi is striving for when he offers that we might take “a lesson from

our Muslim sisters and brothers.” This is what he means when he invites us to “make our own fast, make our own emptying, so the Spirit of Life can enter into our lives.”

Now, while Janamanchi chooses to fast as millions of Muslims do—from dawn until dusk during the entire month of Ramadan—he is not, quote, “in any way pressuring [anyone else] to fast.” Nor am *I* pressuring you, or myself, to do so. It is the *spirit* of this Muslim holy time that I ask each of us to consider, in order that we too, to paraphrase Janamanchi, may learn self-restraint, deepen our relationship with God, or true love, as well as with each other, and to create “deeper empathy and compassion” toward our friends and families as well as strangers.

Implicitly, I believe, to truly create deeper empathy and compassion toward others, we must also do so for ourselves. We must therefore practice a level of forgiveness toward

ourselves for the habits which we have, consciously or not, allowed to soak themselves into our beings. And forgiveness, which I will be discussing in depth next week, can be a long and winding road.

Perhaps then it's not surprising, according to Reza Aslan, author of *No god but God*, that the Prophet Muhammad adopted the Muslim ritual of fasting from Jewish inhabitants of Arabia during his time. Aslan writes, "considering that the concept of fasting was thoroughly foreign to the Bedouin experience—it would have been absurd to go voluntarily without food or water in a desert climate—there can be no doubt" of this adoption of ritual. Aslan continues, "The Quran admits as much when it states, 'fasting is prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed before you.'" This, of course, is in reference to the fact that Islam is the youngest of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism being the oldest. Furthermore,

Aslan states that, according to another scholar, “the first Muslim fast coincided with Yom Kippur.” And Yom Kippur is, remember, the Jewish holy time of atonement and forgiveness.

“Only later,” notes Aslan, “was the fast changed to Ramadan, the month in which Muslims believe the Quran was first revealed to Muhammed.” On that particular *night* of revelation, Muhammed was said to have cried out, “*La ilaha illa ‘llah!* There is no god but God!”

Now, recall that I said earlier, that *our* religion is a non-creedal religion. It does require of any of us to surrender to or worship any one god. But remember also that historically we are Unitarians, believing not in the trinity of God, but the unity, the oneness of God. And remember, too, that while we are not required by ecclesiastical hierarchy to follow any one path, we are *called* to follow our conscience, which calls us to be our best, our truest, our most loving selves.

How we cleanse ourselves of the toxins of negative habits, or negative familial tradition, or of entire systems of oppression, and so reconnect with real love and relationship, is up to our conscience. Some of us will literally cleanse our bodies of toxins through fast and diet. Others will emotionally cleanse ourselves through counseling. Some will seek and find *spiritual* healing from addiction. Others will turn off their TVs, and go without logos. Some will learn to count to ten, or a thousand, before acting out in judgment or anger. Some will join with others in solidarity, in the struggle against systemic abuses of power.

However it is that you feel you need and desire to free yourself of negativity, however it is that we, in Abhi Janamanchi's words, "create the spiritual and emotional space our lives so desperately need," and so and liberate ourselves

toward greater love, I encourage each of us to reflect, and act, upon that intention.

So again, let me ask, to what vision are your heart and eyes devoted? For what do you search and search again without losing hope? For what, as the song says, do you keep your lamps trimmed and burning?

May it be love and, as our closing hymn says, may love continue long.

Amen.

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