

*Sunday December 19, 2012*

**Reading: “Diaries” by Franz Kafka**

“If we knew we were on the right road, having to leave it would mean endless despair. But we are on a road that only leads to a second one and then to a third and so forth. And the real highway will not be sighted for a long, long time, perhaps never. So we drift in doubt. But also in an unbelievable beautiful diversity. Thus the accomplishment of hopes remains an always unexpected miracle. But in compensation, the miracle remains forever possible.”

**Reading: “Perspectives” by Rabbi Charisse Kranes**

“As you travel a path toward a goal,  
A goal you deem worthy and essential,  
And you suddenly hit a wall  
What you do next depends on your perspective  
The wall is a challenge and you climb,  
The wall is a failure and you dig a hole to crawl beneath.  
The wall is an obstacle, you bang your head.  
Or  
Upon the wall there is a sign, which beckons you to detour.  
You turn your head sharply to the left and go another way.  
Perspective is the eyesight of your mind.  
It is how you choose to look at the world, events and possibilities.  
I have seen lives transformed  
When people make a choice  
To see things a different way.”

**Responsive Reading # 629 “Hanukkah”**

**“A Month of Miracles”**

**A Sermon by  
Reverend Bill Clark**

**“You have kept us alive. You have sustained us. You have brought us to this moment.”**

This moment is the busy and often hectic month of miracles. Last evening at sunset began the celebration of the miracle of lights or Hanukkah. The Hanukkah story tells of Judah Maccabee and his soldier’s triumphant victory over the Greek armies

from religious persecution. The Maccabee soldiers return to Jerusalem only to find their temple desecrated and in disarray. Where once stood the holy menorah now stood a statue of the Greek God Zeus. Judah and his men immediately began to repair and clean the temple. When they had finished they decided to have a huge celebration ceremony. This ceremony was to dedicate the temple once again. In Hebrew this is called Hanukkah. Hanukkah means dedication. As an important part of the dedication celebration the Maccabees wished to light the menorah. They hunted everywhere for pure oil to light the menorah candles, but found none. Finally, they discovered a small sealed container. It had only enough oil to last one day. Then the miracle ..... the oil lasted for eight days. This gave the Jewish people enough time to prepare new oil to keep the menorah lit.

Hanukkah is the celebration of that miracle of light. A reminder every year of the importance of religious freedom. A reminder every year of liberation from enslavement and freedom from persecution. Persecution for simply being who you are and believing in what you believe. The miracle of the Hanukkah story goes far beyond the miracle of oil lasting eight days when there was only enough for one. The miracle of Hanukkah cuts right through to religious freedom and to the hope for a persons right to believe and practice the religion that most speaks to ones soul. Hanukkah is the yearly reminder of the profound accomplishment of hope remaining that always unexpected miracle.

This month is also the winter solstice. The day many pagan and earth centered religions honor the miracle of darkness and the glory and beauty of natural winter light. UU minister, Greta Crosby writes; “Let us not wish away the winter, it is a season to itself, not simply a way to spring. Winter is when trees rest, growing no leaves, gathering no light, they let in sky and trace themselves delicately against dawns and sunsets. Let us therefore praise winter, rich in beauty, challenge and pregnant negativities.”

I love that phrase, pregnant negativities. This is where the miracle of the solstice lies, in the times of pregnant negativities – these times of being without – these times of being without light, without colors, without the trees adorned with leaves. The birth of newness and the possibility of hope live in these times of *pregnant* negativities. This is where the miracle remains forever possible. The miracle of wonderful work. The miracle of deep introspection. The miracle of pregnant negativities. Let us therefore praise winter, rich in beauty, coolness and pregnant with the possibilities of seeing things, unexpectedly perhaps and in a new way.

Now naturally, in this month, one cannot mention miracles and pregnant possibilities without speaking to the birth in Bethlehem. The celebration, this

month, of the Christmas birth has been hailed by many as the miracle of all miracles. This reminds me of the story of a pastor who was once speaking to an agnostic and trying to convince and convert him to his way of thinking.

“Speaking of miracles,” the pastor said, “if a man jumped out of a ten-story building and did not die, would that not be a miracle?”

“No,” said the agnostic, “it would only be an accident.”

“Then what if he jumped out the second time and he did not die. Wouldn’t you say that would be a miracle?”

“No,” replied the man, “that would be a coincidence.”

“Then what if he jumped a third time and did not die. Wouldn’t that be a miracle?”

“No,” replied the agnostic, “that’s just a habit.”

Has it become a habit for some to automatically celebrate the miracle at Bethlehem? Is it a habit of tradition to believe in the miracle of lights of Hanukkah? How do we as Unitarian Universalist rap our reason and rationality around this concept of miracles?

First let me say that miracles are not unheard of in our own history. In 1770, John Murray, often called the father of Universalism, experienced what has been called a miracle. Murray was aboard a ship coming from England that ran aground on a sandbar off the coast of New Jersey. As Murray went ashore to fetch provisions he met a local farmer named Thomas Potter. Potter was an uneducated but deeply religious man who had built a chapel on his property and invited itinerant ministers to preach there, hoping to hear a message that he could wholeheartedly embrace. Upon hearing that Murray had once done some preaching, Potter invited him to deliver a sermon the following Sunday. Murray at first refused but later gave in to Potter’s persistent urging. He gave in on one condition; that the wind did not change first and blow the ship off the sandbar. Potter assured him that this would not occur.

That Sunday, September 30, 1770 Murray’s sermon on universal grace was preached in Potter’s chapel. This was exactly the word Potter had been waiting to hear. Its effect on Murray himself was likewise profound. By time he had finished preaching all his reservations about preaching were gone. Soon after the service had ended a sailor came dashing in from the ship with the news that the wind had just changed direction and the ship was ready to sail.

Potter and Murray both regarded their chance meeting and the postponement of the winds change as a sign of God’s providence. It is perhaps the only miracle in our Universalist history.

Although this miracle, always written in our history books in quotes and with a sort of tongue and cheek attitude, for me, raises the question of what exactly is a miracle? Was this a chance meeting? Did God play a role in this encounter? Was it merely a coincidence? Had the wind changed and Murray not preached would the father of Universalism in the United States not taken up his call once again? Surely our history would be different had not John Murray spread the word of Universal salvation and grace through out the country.

Did a deity hold off the wind change? Did a deity allow the candles to burn eight nights instead of only one? Was the birth in Bethlehem the result of a miracle conception? What constitutes a miracle?

The American Heritage Dictionary defines miracle as “an extraordinary or unusual event that is considered to be a manifestation of divine or supernatural power.” December, the month of miracles certainly is the celebration and acknowledgement of unusual events, often times considered a manifestation of divine power. Holding off a change in the wind may fall in that category as well.

This definition does not leave us, as Unitarian Universalist, even with our history much room for our minds wrapping. However, there is a second definition, which may calm our rational minds. Miracle, “one that excites admiration, awe or wonder.” The events off the coast of New Jersey in 1770 filled John Murray with awe and wonder. He took up the practice of preaching once again! All the holidays in this month of miracles certainly invite us to experience a sense of admiration, awe or wonder.

There may events in our everyday life, which invite us to pause and ponder this state of awe and wonder. Are they not miracles as well? Seeing the reddish full moon rise over the ocean last weekend in Maine certainly gave me moments of awe and wonder. Witnessing the suffering of illness and loss often leaves me in a state of awe at the unexpected that may happen in our lives. Is not part of the journey down this path to be considered a miracle as well? Is not Kafka’s unbelievable beautiful diversity in the traveling on this road of life also a miracle?

Perhaps the true miracle lies, as Rabbi Kranes’ suggests, in the eyesight of our mind. The true miracle is in our perspective. It is how we choose to look at the world, the events and the possibilities, the pregnant possibilities we may encounter.

**The simple and very real miracle is perchance to see things in a different way.** A way that invites admiration, awe and wonder. I am traveling down this path now, man what a surprise. I am on this journey of illness, unemployment a new job or separation. Everything looks different. The miracle is how we choose to look at these events and possibilities. The miracle lies, in the words of Rabbi Kranes, in

the eyesight of our minds. It is our Perspectives that will allow us to feel excitement, awe and wonder.

Such is the story of young Adam Levine of Cleveland Ohio. At the age of nineteen, Adam, after a powerful argument with his father, Joseph Levine, himself a Holocaust survivor, made the painful decision to divorce himself from his Jewish religious practices and heritage. Adam journeyed down the painful path of separation. His father, in deep grief and despair felt Adam was making mockery of his legacy, his heritage and of his family's losses. They encountered walls. They both banged their heads.

“Get out here!” he screamed at Adam. “Get out of my home and never come back! You are not my son. I disown you from my heart, from my soul, from my life. I never want to see you again.”

“Well that is fine with me,” Adam shouted back, “because I never want to see you again either!” And he left.

Young Adam began to travel the path of a spiritual sojourner to fill his religious void. In a year he found himself in India. Traveling from guru to guru in search of a spiritual path he could embrace. As often happens to distant travelers in far away places he met up with a childhood friend from Cleveland. They agreed to meet in a café over some spicy Indian tea and share their traveling stories. After about an hour, as they prepared to depart his friend added that he was sorry to hear about his father's death.

Adam stood there a bit dumbfounded. He had not heard of his father's passing. No one knew where he was or how to get in touch with him.

Feeling overwhelmed with grief, guilt and despair, Adam wandered around India in a fog. “This country tastes like ashes to me,” he commented to his traveling companions. “I need to leave. I need to go to Israel.” His traveling companions were confused by his sudden interest in traveling to Israel.

“I just feel this sudden pull. I can't explain it, but I have to go.”

Upon his arrival Adam went straight to the Wailing Wall to pray. The wall is the only remnant left of the First and Second Temples. It is considered the holiest Jewish site in Jerusalem. Jews believe that God's presence is stronger there than in any part of Israel. It is where people from all over the world go to pray, to petition God and to ask for miracles.

Adam went there to pray for his father's forgiveness. Approaching the wall he felt awkward and uneasy as what he was supposed to do. He was given a yarmulke and a prayer book and he walk forward toward the holiest shrine for the Jewish people.

He began to cry and pray. “I wish I could ask your forgiveness. How I wish I could tell you how much I loved you. How I regret all the pain I caused you. I left just to find my way in the world. You meant everything to me, Dad I wish I could tell you that.”

When he had finished he turned to see what he was supposed to do next. He noticed people around him scribbling notes and inserting them into the crevices of the Wall. He asked a youth standing by, “Why are so many people putting pieces of paper into the cracks of the wall?”

“Oh these are their petitions,” he answered. It is believed that the stones are so holy that requests placed inside of them will be especially blessed.

Adam decided he, too, wished to place a petition in the crevices of the Wall. He wrote his note asking for his father’s forgiveness and began to search for an empty crevice. Many of the cracks were filled as the local boy had told him. As he finally found what he thought to be an empty space he carefully slid his petition inside. Upon doing so he accidentally dislodged another that had already been resting there and it fell to the ground. Adam quickly picked it up to place it back inside when he had as he described a tremendous curiosity to read the words written. He unrolled the paper to examine its content. And this is what he read:

“My dear son Adam, If you happen to come to Israel and some how, by some miracle find this note, this is what I want you to know. I always loved you, even when you hurt me and I will never stop loving you. You are and always will be my beloved son. Please know that I forgive you for everything and only hope that you, in turn, will forgive a foolish old man. The note was signed, Joseph Levine, Cleveland, Ohio.

In this true story of Adam and his father we witness two miracles. The first when Adam encountered the “wall” in hearing of his father’s death. This news provoked a change in the eyesight of Adam’s mind. It changed his perspective. It literally changed his path. The miracle brought him from India to Israel.

The second was finding his father’s prayer. A coincidence to some. A miracle to many. I am reminded of Doris Lessings’ comment that “Coincidences are God’s way of remaining anonymous.”

And yet the profound message in this month of miracles is not that we must wait for some divine intervention for some event to be considered a miracle. Miracles happened every day. Every new day brings to us the opportunity and challenges for a change in our lives path. How we look out on to that change is where our lives may be transformed. The transformation of our everyday life is in itself, a miracle!!

It is the unbelievable beautiful diversity where the miracle remains forever possible.

If you are searching for something to wrap your rational thinking mind around, something to hold on to and believe in during this often hectic and hurried month of December. Then this is what I offer you on this Sunday.

Believe in miracles! Believe in excitement, admiration, awe and wonder. Believe in your life as a journey on a road that may lead to another road and yet another and each offering the opportunities for transformation and change. Believe in detours and walls and the possibilities of the wonderful work of miracles. Believe that through this “wonderful work” we can transform this world into place of hope, peace and true possibility.

Believe in yourself and your ability to see things from a different perspective – to see things in a different way. This is the wonderful work of miracles!

***Blessed Be***

***Silent Prayer and Meditation***

***Hymn #57 “All Beautiful March of Days”***

***Benediction: Henry David Thoreau wrote;***

***“Men talk of Bible miracles because there is no miracle in their lives. Cease to gnaw that crust. There is ripe fruit over your head.”***

***Indeed there is my friends! There is ripe fruit over our heads, warm hands to hold, hearts to touch and miracles to watch and witness. May you go forth on this day with your eyes wide open to watch the wonderful work, the miracles, in your everyday life.***

***Extinguishing the Chalice***