

Where Stars Touch the Horizon

Robert B. Keim

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Sometime back in May of 2001, a group of us from the Tampa office where I worked gathered to say goodbye to a friend of nearly twelve years. Two weeks' prior, Miles was riding his bicycle in his neighborhood when a small group of local ducks wandered out onto the road's edge. An excellent bicyclist, he swerved to miss them, somehow lost control and fell forward, hitting the roadway first with the top of his head.

His brain suffered deep damage and he faded into a state where we knew we might be losing him. Standing by his bed in Critical Care on a Saturday afternoon, I watched his eyes flit about, occasionally, hauntingly, fixating on me for a few seconds. His hands trembled from time to time, but was I watching intentional movement? I could not interpret anything.

Within twenty-four hours, Miles was gone.

The day after his memorial service, I trekked to University Community Hospital to put in my four hours of volunteer work on a Friday afternoon, really desiring to find a hopeful counterpoint to the day before. I had not slept peacefully and work had been difficult, with so many long faces and malicious words about ducks.

Most of the hospital time went well, until dinner. I had the opportunity, as I often did during his stay with us, to feed a man I knew as Al, short for Albert. A native of Grenada who was a Royal Air Force pilot during the Second World War, he had suffered three small strokes within a four-day period five months previous and floated between worlds with a quiet, often smiling presence that helped make being with him rewarding and usually un-troubling.

I was sitting, "flying" food into his mouth, as you might with a child when a presence entered the dining hall. "**Angry Eddy.**" Another stroke victim, Eddy had no way to communicate with anyone at the time. He could only yell, "**Aye!**" Forty-six years old, intensely confused and emotionally traumatized, he was a daunting patient wanting his wife twenty-four hours a day. She was trying hard, but the stress had worn her down. On this evening, she went home to get some rest.

So now, here he was amongst other patients and their families.

But he was not happy. He wanted his wife. **Now!**

After about five minutes of ignoring the staff and yelling that grew in volume, he pitched a fit of frustration, spastically clearing the table of his tray and the one belonging to the woman next to him. The Nurses' Aide and I scurried about, cleaning up the mess; he was taken back to his room.

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Then I noticed all but one of the other people in the room sitting almost perfectly still, transfixed by the commotion, hesitant to move.

Except Al. He was crying gently. When I got back to him and gave him a hug, he managed to pick up his roll, holding it out, mumbling in nonsensical language, but clearly making an offer.

Such moments can make you wonder who is sane and present, and who is not?

It goes without saying that life is difficult, often painfully unfair or even evil. From accidents to crime, diseases, and just the demands of everyday life – not to mention the challenges of a body that insists on malfunctioning at inopportune or inconvenient times, we are brought to the edge day after day after day.

Being Unitarian Universalist, it's no surprise to you, but I've come to believe that anyone who does not challenge God or the universe in anger or utter frustration at least once (or once in a while) either leads a life of tranquility I have not yet found or doesn't see the train headed their way.

How many of you happened to see one of the last versions of the television program *West Wing*? Do you remember the President's tirade in the Cathedral? The Associated Press posted the following commentary for the service surrounding his aide, Ms. Landingham's funeral:

President Josiah Bartlett, played by Martin Sheen, proceeded to fill the vast Cathedral with his anger.

"She bought her first new car and you hit her with a drunk driver. What? That's supposed to be funny? Have I displeased you, you feckless thug?"

And he wasn't through. The next 30 seconds of his tirade were delivered in Latin, once language of the Catholic Church. His anger was clear, even if only Latin scholars could parse the specifics.

Here's the translation included with "The West Wing" shooting script:

"Am I to really to believe that these are the acts of a loving God? A just God? A wise God? Well, To hell with your punishments. I was your servant here on Earth. And I spread your word and I did your work. But, to hell with your punishments. And, to hell with you."

I'm sure that for some of you, this is a mild-mannered exchange. And with all due respects to Universalists amongst us, there are questions warranting such emotion. The true point? Whatever the challenge to our deepest belief system, we must find the strength to go on every day. The alternative is darkness.

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As if that were not enough, our culture wants us to focus on images of desire. We are bodies with hungers to fill, needs to slake, comforts to buy. And, advertising continually reinforces our discontent, implying we are too fat, our hair is all wrong, we have a big nose, and bad skin. We stink, in oh so many ways. We are pressured to conform and compete, to measure up, or lose.

But does this make sense? To quote Reverend Alison Hyder, of Provincetown, Massachusetts:

“Emphasis on the physical is dangerous on many levels. It encourages us to judge everything by superficial qualities, breeding a relentless sense of inadequacy. It encourages conformity, wearing the right expression of worldly boredom so we’ll be perfect. And everybody will love us.”

This assault on our senses has an even darker side. In her book **The Fountain of Age**, Betty Friedan talks about moving her mother into a continuing care facility, and what she discovered in the process.

“...here, as elsewhere, there was a strong feeling against wheelchairs, walkers, or crutches in the dining room because, ‘Face it,’ the Administrator told me, ‘we don’t want people to see themselves the way they’ll be in the future. It’s too unsettling.’”

What are we running from, and how shall we respond to such things? How do we regain control of our world, taking it back from those creating a climate of want?

In the face of this worry, I have found hope. It has become my conviction that, at this very moment, we are actually sitting amid sources of power and courage. Let me state the case this way: there is a very real-world foundation to this community, and that’s what brought you here this morning.

The first and second of our Principles affirm:

***“The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;”***

Compelled by these principles, we are moved to become a community reaching out to those amongst us who suffer. Yet, you might ask, so? That’s something common to most religious communities.

The difference is that we act in the belief that, ***“We do not have an explanation for what you are enduring. Perhaps there is not one. Some things just happen. But, no matter. If you will let us, we are here to share your anguish, to maybe help you clean your house or fix some dinner, and watch over you while you sleep. We are here because you matter to us.”***

And in times of joy, if you like, we will join you in celebration, marveling at the beauty and wonder that is life, and that we all are. Without each one of us this would be an impoverished reality. Somehow, in some way, almost everyone helps to make this such a beautiful place, in spite of prickly things that do arise. So, come, let us dance together.

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We do these things in celebration of this world. As a community, **here** is where we find meaning. Not in God. That's not to say that we, as a people wholly deny the existence of God, although some of us as individuals do. In our communal voice **we point not to the heavens, but to the world around us. Not to a savior, but to our brothers and sisters in life. And not to some state beyond the pale, but to the very world in which we are immersed.**

Allow me to read to you from the novel **Big Fish**, by Daniel Wallace:

“On one of our last car trips, near the end of my father’s life as a man, we stopped by a river, and we took a walk to its banks, where we sat in the shade of an old oak tree.

After a couple of minutes, my father took off his shoes and his socks and placed his feet in the clear-running water, and he looked at them there. Then he closed his eyes and smiled. I hadn’t seen him smile like that in a while.

And he took a deep breath and said, ‘This reminds me.’

And he stopped and thought some more. Things came slow for him then if they ever came at all, and I guessed he was thinking of some joke to tell, because he always had some joke to tell. Or he might tell me a story that would celebrate his adventurous and heroic life. And I wondered. What does this remind him of? Does it remind him of the duck in the hardware store? The horse in the bar? The boy who was knee-high to a grasshopper? Does it remind him of the dinosaur egg he found one day, then lost, or the country he once ruled for the better part of a week?

‘This reminds me,’ he said, ‘of when I was a boy.’”

I looked at this old man, my old man with his old white feet in the clear-running stream, these moments amongst the very last in his life, and I thought of him suddenly and simply, as a boy, a child, a youth, with his whole life ahead of him, much as mine was ahead of me. I’d never done that before. And these images – the now and then of my father – converged, and at that moment he turned into a weird creature, wild, concurrently young and old, dying and newborn.

My father became a myth.”

Personally, for all of the pain, anguish, bewilderment and anger that has colored the world lately, I am grateful for the comfort of loved ones and friends – for all the myths I have come to know. And for the wisdom and strength – sometimes hidden, sometimes overpowering – of this beloved community.

What I have found, too, is that this house is a community of faith seeking meaning and justice wherever we might find it, a gathering of resiliency that stores the tools to stand and be counted, to use in the struggles, if necessary, for those less fortunate – a place where stars touch the

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horizon. Whether they be the poor in urban or rural America, the sick or lonely in institutions across this land, or caribou threatened in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, our fellow travelers call us. And the foundations of Unitarian Universalism offer us many weapons with which to fight – from *the free and responsible search for truth and meaning to the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large, to the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all*. These are powerful and long-lasting weapons; and long may they stay sharp and ready.

Therefore, I declare this Our Day of Life. I call forth all souls. You are both celebrated and needed. Whether you bring a skill with words, a pair of strong hands, the power in your mind or heart, or the money in your pocket – or all of the above – you are needed, wanted, and appreciated. And you stand welcome in this bastion of freedom and commitment. In the words of Seminole Indian Buffalo Jim:

“Ask me questions from your heart, and I’ll give you answers from mine.”

(Widsomkeepers: Meetings with Native American Spiritual Elders)

Today, my heart celebrates you.

Amen and blessed be.