

Leaping in the Dark

The late dancer and choreographer Agnes De Mille wrote,
“Living is a form of not being sure, not knowing what next or how. The artist never entirely knows.
We take leap after leap into the dark.”

Leap after leap into the dark.... Imagine, if you will, a choreographer, a dancer, standing alone on a stage, faced with the challenge of creating an entirely new and original dance.

Dancer and choreographer Bob Fosse revolutionized modern dance by having small groups of dancers, whose motions were scripted down to the lift of an eyebrow, dance in ways that seemed to take the body apart: sometimes tortuously slow or disjointed, sometimes fast and sweeping. But before he was somebody, before his unique style of dance was celebrated, he must have felt like he was leaping into the dark. Before he was celebrated, I’m sure his unorthodox style was questioned and criticized by many. But he had a vision, a dream, and he was faithful to it. As the German Romantic poet and writer Goethe wrote,
“Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has its own genius, magic, and power.”

The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard observed, “Life is lived forwards and understood only backwards.” It doesn’t matter how well educated one is or how much technology or power one may have, each of us must ‘pay our dues and take our chances’ and leap into the dark.

This isn’t limited just to artists, though one can imagine how the first brushstroke of an artist on a blank canvass could be compared to a leap in the dark.

When I sit down to write a sermon, I’ve learned to just start writing, even if I’m not sure yet where I’m going. I’ve learned, to paraphrase the theme of the movie *Shakespeare in Love*, that even though I don’t know how it will work out, it will.

How?

It’s a mystery.

As human beings we are called to create, whether it be a new dance, a new song, a new sermon, or a new way of relating to a loved one. We need to create solutions to the problems of everyday life, to the problems and challenges we face at work and at home.

We turn ourselves to the future, sometimes with fear and trembling, and leap into the dark, turning our dreams into realities.

Yesterday a dozen or so of us marched against the prospect of war with Iraq. On the way back we asked ourselves, “Did we make a difference?” Nobody could say for sure, but we did choose to act, to do something, even though we can’t know how or if what we did will make a difference.

There is no road map for life though there have always been and always will be plenty of snake oil salesman out there hawking their certain and sure answers. But we don’t hand out any road maps here. Our mission is to hand out ready made maps but to teach ourselves how to make our own.

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In the second chapter of Daniel, the people of Israel have been exiled to Babylon for worshipping false Gods. The king of Babylon is troubled by a recurrent dream that none of his wise men can interpret. Finally, though, just before the king is about to have all the wise men executed, Daniel, one of those exiles from Judah, offers to interpret the king's dream. First he tells the king what he dreamed,

³¹ "You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue-an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. ³² The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, ³³ its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. ³⁴ While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. ³⁵ Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.

Daniel then interprets the dream by explaining that the rock that struck the statue represented the one true God and that even though the king was represented by the gold head of the statue, if he didn't base his life and his kingdom on the one true God, it would inevitably be shattered and swept away.

This passage is where the often used phrase "feet of clay" comes from. We use it in situations where someone or something appears to be invincible but, in fact, is actually based on fragile feet of clay.

Some years ago a bumper sticker that said "I found it!" was popular with evangelical Christians. Some enterprising Unitarian Universalist responded with a bumper sticker that said, "I found it, too, and it said to keep looking."

I think most of us are here because we are as skeptical as the maker of that bumper sticker. James Hopewell, author of *Story and Structure in Congregational Life*, wrote that one of the four ways in which Americans approach the issues of religion and faith is that of irony. Those who are attracted to the ironic approach are always looking for the clay feet. I think Hopewell is describing us.

My favorite jokes are about feet of clay.

I relish bringing the mighty low. I am a connoisseur of irony. I suspect most of you are, too. If something sounds too good to be true or if someone sounds just a little too sure of him or herself we immediately begin to look for the clay feet.

But just because we are deeply skeptical doesn't mean we don't believe in anything. We are skeptical, not cynical. We do believe.

My theology and my world view are best described as eclectic, i.e. consisting of components from diverse sources or styles. I am suspicious of grand schemes and theories that attempt to tie everything together. I have been there too often and found myself confronted with either the clay feet of my hero or my feet of clay. However, even though I have become much more cautious and skeptical in my search for the sacred, I still believe in the possibility of the sacred, in the possibility of holiness, in the presence of what has been called the divine.

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Although I know it may make some of you uncomfortable, I believe in God. Even more troubling, I suspect, is that I also believe in prayer.

It doesn't matter to me whether you share my belief in God or in prayer. My task up here is not to convince you that my way is right or better than yours. My task, to paraphrase my colleague Earl Holt, is to pose the questions that life asks of all of us, to answer them the best I can, and to encourage you to do the same.

Up to this point I have been talking about the problem: the challenge of living without any sure answers. I think this is a challenge we all face.

I am now going to begin talking about how I have learned to answer that challenge. But this is only my answer, not yours. My only hope is that by sharing my answer with you it might help you consider what your answer might be.

My colleague, Forrester Church, serves All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in Manhattan. He has written many books, including *Our Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, which he co-authored with John Buehrens, the immediate past president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. In many of his books he includes this statement. "God is not God's name."

God to me is the word we use to point to an aspect of existence that can't be captured through words. We can only point to it through symbol and metaphor. I believe God is the word we use to point to the system of which we are but a part, the hand of life from which we come and by which we are sustained.

When someone tells me they don't believe in God I'll often ask them to tell me about this God they don't believe in. When they're through, more often than not, I will agree with them and say something to the effect of, "I wouldn't believe in that God either".

Too often the only difference between a fundamentalist and an atheist is that the fundamentalist accepts a literal image of God while the atheist rejects it. What the fundamentalists and atheists have in common is the same limited image of God.

Just because you reject a flawed and limited image of God, doesn't mean that you have rejected God. Rejecting a flawed and inadequate map, after all, doesn't mean that you are rejecting the territory it was supposed to represent.

To use theological language, I am a panentheist. I believe God is in us and we are in God. I don't believe God is out there, a separate creator, distinct and apart from her creation. I don't believe God intervenes in history or contravenes the laws of nature. I don't believe that God is jealous or vengeful. In fact, I don't even imagine that God is a someone, an entity, a being. God is not he or she or them or it. In his song *It's All Right Ma, I'm Only Bleeding*, Dylan seemed to suggest this,

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“...A question in your nerves is lit
Yet you know there is no answer fit
To satisfy, to insure you not to quit
To keep it in your mind and not forget
That is not he or she or them or it
That you belong to....”

God is simply the word I use to represent my sense that I am part of a system larger than myself. This system, which includes everything and is everything has many resources beyond my understanding and control. Even though I can't control or understand many of these resources, I have learned that I can reliably depend on them, nonetheless. Our immune system is a good example of such a resource. Even though I don't understand it or control it, I can still depend on it.

But even though God is not God's name, we seem to need some name, some sign or symbol.

I don't know who or what God is. I do know that I am just one small part, though, of a larger chain of being. I know that the love I sometimes feel, the moments of inspiration that sometimes come to me unbidden and earned, and the sense that I am responsible to more than just me and mine seems to come more **through** me than **from** me.

I have also learned that sometimes, when I respond imaginatively to my image of God by speaking my deepest hopes and thoughts and fears out loud, not to my wife or a friend or a therapist, but just to the air, so to speak, that I am telling my truth in a way that is unlike any other.

I have learned that it helps me to unburden my heart, to speak my mind, to give voice to my deepest hopes and share my concerns. Is this not prayer?

I've learned that prayer makes a difference for me. I pray for courage and serenity. I pray for wisdom and understanding. I pray for patience and understanding. I pray out my troubles and worries and fears and insecurities. I pray for transformation.

I pray best when I am alone and feel free to pray out loud. I don't plan what I will pray for or how I should pray. I just pray. Sometimes I begin by confessing my broken-ness, my incompleteness. I list my shortcomings. It's not a terribly long list, but, on the other hand, it's not too short either. I pray for what I feel I need. I often ask for wisdom, for patience, and the serenity to accept myself and others.

I pray to God. That is to say, I use the word God when I pray. Other times I will address my prayers to “Thou of whom I am but a part” or “Holy one, blessing of all creation.” I don't think it matters what I call God when I pray. God is not God's name. I use whatever name, whatever image works for me.

The word we use for God can be compared to a finger pointing to the moon. It's what the finger is pointing towards that's important, not the finger. In the same way, it doesn't matter what word or words I use to represent my sense of being part of something larger than myself.

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When I pray I am putting myself in the way of change. I am naming my deepest desires. I am seeking to be moved, to be changed, to be transformed. I am holding out the outstretched wings of my spirit, hoping to be lifted out of my fears and resentments. I am turning my face to the sun, hoping to be warmed, hoping to discover the energy and direction I need to grow. Through the discipline of prayer I cast off my pretensions and cut through my denial, thus opening myself to new ways of seeing and living. When I pray I am lowering my defenses. I am making it possible for the winds of grace to fill my sails. I am readying myself to leap into the dark.

I am still wounded. I am still incomplete. But I have found, through prayer, a way to comfort myself, a way to ease the discomfort of my broken-ness. I don't know all the answers, but prayer helps me to live the questions, to keep on looking.

Every Sunday in our order of service, we include this reading by Rabbi Abraham Heschel:

Prayer invites God to be present in our spirits and in our lives. Prayer cannot bring water to parched land, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city, but prayer can water and arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.

Every Sunday I include the names of those we are concerned about in my pastoral prayer. But even though I include their names in the prayer I am not asking God to heal them or otherwise help them or change their situation.

I am praying that we will enlarge our hearts enough to include them in our circle of concern. I am praying that we will be transformed.

Prayer, I believe, does not change the world, but it changes me and enables me to change the world. Prayer cannot mend a broken bridge, but it can mend my sore and troubled spirit.

It helps me leap into the dark.