

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

12.2.12 Sermon: “When God Talks Back: Voice, Wisdom, Community, Emotion”

Presenter: Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore

Anyone who wants to become a minister must wrestle with the question, “What or who calls me to ministry?” Here is what happened to me.

My employer, Northstar Computers, was dying a slow death trying to compete with IBM and Apple in 1985. A loyal employee, I should have jumped ship much earlier with the other rats. Finally ready to leave, I interviewed for and got a fantastic job offer working for Hewlett Packard as a test engineer in Santa Rosa, California. This was my dream job. When I returned to finish my engineering degree at UC Berkeley, I had dreamed of getting this exact position.

But something held me back from accepting it. What? I kept asking over and over why I felt I couldn't say yes to the offer.

Returning home from a dream analysis group led by UU minister Jeremy Taylor, cruising along in my little Honda Civic high up on a freeway exchange overlooking Berkeley and singing a joyful sacred chant, I suddenly knew why I was feeling held back. I suddenly recognized the call to ministry welling up within me. I was sure attending Starr King School for the Ministry, located in Berkeley, was the next step to respond to that calling. It felt inwardly like solving a complicated problem and an elegant answer emerging with perfect clarity.

So I experienced a moment of clarity – but what was the source? Did God send me a sign that this was the time I should start on the path of ministry? Or did my recognition come from some other source? As a boy, I remember standing in our Unitarian Fellowship's pulpit pretending to preach a sermon to the empty chairs. Unknown to me at the time, my father had contemplated UU ministry at one point in his life. I'd been inspired by the ministry of the Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs who served the First Unitarian Church of Oakland where I was a member. Doing dream work with Jeremy Taylor had opened me up. Was the source, maybe, a synthesis of these experiences?

Most seminarians continue to wrestle with this question long after the decision to seek ordination as a minister. Actually, anyone making a big life changing decision has the same *listening* problem. How does one decide to get married ... or have children? How does one decide which college to attend or job to pursue and accept? What moves us to believe ... or disbelieve? And is there a way to develop a *trustworthy inner sense of guidance* in making those decisions?

One way I've been reading about is to put a cup of coffee in front of an empty chair across a

table and have a conversation with God.

Tanya Luhrmann (who by the way grew up as a UU) describes this practice in her book, *When God Talks Back* that I read a portion from a little earlier this morning. The idea, basically, is using the imagination as a way to open a door to God so God can talk back conversationally, answer questions and give advice. With training and practice, many evangelicals report the experience of receiving divine messages and direction.

I was rather skeptical as I read the testimonials she reports in the book. I tremble at the idea of inviting a conversation like that. What if God shows up and tells me to take my son up to mount Greylock in the Berkshires and sacrifice him like God did in the story of Abraham and Isaac? What if I'm hiking in the Adirondacks and come upon a burning bush that talks to me and directs me to do something that sounds impossible? What if God tells me to sell all my possessions, become a homeless wanderer who loves and serves the way Jesus did?

The Evangelical vision of a relationship with God is far more benign than this. The God they imagine is one of unconditional love and acceptance. This God walks with you and talks with you. This God answers every prayer. This God is an intimate companion who never leaves your side. This God is the ultimate BFF, best friend forever. My question of this imagined relationship of course is, "Is it real?" Is our imagination a legitimate way to have contact with God?

In our history, the Transcendentalists might have said yes, but they would have used the word intuition rather than imagination. Historically, one of the sources evangelicals are tapping (though indirectly) are the Transcendentalists. In the American democratization of religion, instead of the exclusive privilege of priests and ministers, the Transcendentalists felt anyone could have a direct experience of the divine through this intuitive channel.

Transcendentalism offended the original nineteenth century American Unitarians trying to create a Biblically based *rational* Christianity. In the twentieth century, it continued and continues today to offend the humanists in our movement seeking to create a reasoned religious tradition free from the supernatural. There is quite a range of experience and belief within our movement and this congregation today about the existence or non-existence of God and our ability or lack of it to be in contact with God.

As someone who embraces the core teachings of Buddhism that remain neutral about the existence or non-existence of God, I don't think believing or not believing in God is critical to living a good life. What is of *supreme importance*, though, is *how we listen* and *how we respond*.

I don't care if you are a Bible literalist or a militant atheist, both have the same problem when a meaningful message of unusual power and clarity enters their consciousness. Both must figure out whether the emotionally intoxicating message comes from a reliable, trustworthy source. For the true believer, was the source God or the devil? For the atheist, was the source

a delusional detour into mental fabrication or inspired synthesis of timeless wisdom? Both must evaluate the truth value of the message. And both must decide whether to act on this message or let it go.

I found reflecting on the tests evangelicals informally apply to these messages quite useful and would like to now translate them into language more friendly to Unitarian Universalists. I hope you'll find these translations helpful as you hear potentially life changing, meaningful messages.

Test #1 The Voice Test: Do I recognize the voice of this message? We have internalized all kinds of messages from parents, teachers, partners, children, sisters, brothers, friends, etc. and hear echos of those voices in our heads. And there is the familiar ring of our own ego's voice, a synthesis of these voices. While an inspired message could come through one of those voices, odds are against it. The evangelicals say the voice of God will not be familiar to us. For UU's I'd expand this to any unfamiliar voice we don't recognize as a clue to the message's significance.

Test #2 The Wisdom Test: Is there wisdom, insight and/or compassion in the message? Foolish messages telling me I can fly because I am exempt from the law of gravity are unlikely to contain any wisdom. The evangelicals test the message to see if it is Biblical. UU's would be more expansive. Does the message contradict what we know scientifically? Would it come from the mouth of a great sage or philosopher? What about another religious tradition such as Buddhism or Taoism?

Test #3 The Community Test: What do other wise and learned people in our community think about the message? Even if the message is novel, witnessing others responses can be very informative. Sometimes a message might be a leading edge phenomena synchronous with other's inspiration.

Test #4 The Emotional Test: Does receiving the message bring a sense of peace and comfort? Does it open up and expand the heart? Does it bring more love into the world?

The Voice, Wisdom, Community, and Emotional Tests are all ways to reality test inspired, meaningful messages before deciding what to do about them. When I felt the call to ministry, it certainly passed the emotional test and the voice test right away. I then tested it with my minister, my parents and others who knew me well, listening carefully to their response. Did they see a minister growing in me? Did I have something to offer Unitarian Universalism? And finally, was this a wise choice for how I could use my life in the service of others? It passed all those tests and here I am today.

And sometimes the inner message isn't there or is not enough illustrated in this story.

A man named David who claimed his prayers were *always* answered by God, lived in a house by a river. A big storm was coming. A friend drove over to his house, knocked on his

door and suggested he evacuate ahead of the storm. "Gather your valuables, put them in the back of my car, and let's leave together," he said. David laughed, saying, "God will take care of me and answer my prayers."

The storm came up, torrents of rain came down, and soon the river overflowed its banks. David calmly got out his prayer book and prayed fervently for salvation from the storm. The water starting filling up the first floor of his house so he went upstairs to the second floor and prayed even harder to be saved from the storm.

Soon a boat came by and the captain offered to rescue him from the rising flood waters. Again David refused saying he had complete confidence in the power of prayer to save him from the flood. The water rose up to the second floor. So David climbed up onto the roof of his house. He decided to stop praying in English and started praying in Sanskrit, Hebrew and Arabic to cover all his bases.

A helicopter pilot spotted him and hovered over the house dropping a ladder for him to climb up and be rescued. Again David refused saying he had supreme confidence God would save him from the flood. And the water kept rising, now up to his neck. David just prayed harder and louder. I'm sad to say, the flood waters overcame him and he drowned.

David next found himself in heaven and had the opportunity to meet God face to face. David was of course grateful but also distressed at drowning. "What happened God?" he asked. "Why didn't you answer my prayers?" God looked a little perplexed and answered, "Why, I sent you a car, a boat and a helicopter!"

Those inspired messages may appear inside our minds but they may also come to us from the outside too. I listen very attentively to the voices in our congregation for those messages. I owe much of my growth and development as a minister over the last thirteen plus years here, to what I have heard and how I have responded. And sometimes I hear something that inspires something big to happen.

In the spring of 2004, I visited New Paltz where two UU ministers were doing same sex marriages had been arrested. I came back wondering if there might be some way we could support them. A television reporter showed up on a Sunday morning, about that same time, to ask how the members of our congregation felt about same sex marriage. The reporter was surprised to find no one opposed to it. In that moment, I heard a powerful message that our congregation might be ready and willing to stand up for marriage equality. My act to defy the law by publicly marrying Lynne and Elissa and George and Bob in April in our sanctuary galvanized our congregation in a way we look back on today with pride. We were part of making history, just like our involvement with the Committee on Progressive Legislation was part of legalizing abortion in New York State in 1971.

There is great metaphorical truth, metaphorical or otherwise in the familiar Biblical passage, wherever two or more are gathered, there am I. The possibilities and potentials of a

community like ours are enormous. These possibilities are heard moving through and between us.

So whether a meaningful message comes to you inside your head or through others around you, listen carefully, then apply the voice, wisdom, community and emotional tests to it. If it passes those tests, let it guide your action. But don't stop there, keep listening and responding.

We are part of an interdependent web of existence.

No one of us is an island.

No one of us is God.

Where charity and love abound,

God is there and the Spirit of Life and Love are present.

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