

Unitarian Society of Hartford
Holy Cows and Other Signs of Hope
Sunday December 10, 2006

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Reading - **A Story**, Elie Wiesel

When the great Rabbi Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortunes averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezeritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say:

"Master of the Universe, listen!

I do not know how to light the fire, but am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say,

"I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I do know this is the place, and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Finally, it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God:

"I can not light the fire. I do not know the prayer, I cannot even find the place in the forest.

All I can do is tell the story, and hope it is sufficient."

And it was sufficient. From his armchair, the story was sufficient.

Sermon: Holy Cows and Other Signs of Hope

According to the reading by Elie Weisel, "the place in the forest, the prayer, and the fire" are significant—

This place, our religious words and rituals are significant, but, peeling away the layers, what is sufficient for miracles to be accomplished and misfortunes to be averted?

Weisel suggests that just recalling the story of earlier miracles accomplished and misfortunes averted is sufficient.

Just daring to hope that the same miraculous light might shine again in our world and our time, is sufficient.

The candles of Hanukkah are lit in memory of a miracle accomplished, A disaster averted in the life of the Jewish people. Such stories of God's saving acts in history bring them courage and conviction.

Recalling stories of saving moments in our own congregation's history can bring us strength for today and hope for tomorrow as well.

Appreciative inquiry is the name of a strategic planning technique, which asserts that

recalling times when things have turned out well in the past, and recounting resources which rose up and came to bear, can call forth those same strengths and skills again.

You might try inquiring with appreciation with some group you are part of-- You might ask, "What things have been accomplished here before?" How did it happen? Who was there with what tools in their hands or heads or hearts?

Stories from our own lives can be similarly powerful for us personally, as well. My "holy cow" tale is an example.

15 years ago, I was driving 100 miles across beautiful rural landscape, and had fallen into a mental lull, when I crested a rolling hill and was shocked to see in a pasture, dozens of cows, frolicking, leaping and playing with each other.

I'd never even imagined a cow frolicking,

except in the Far Side cartoon, you may have seen:

The cows are standing around drinking tea, reading books, dancing.

A car approaches, and the cows fall to all fours,

Then in the Final frame: the cows are back up again dancing and laughing.

Well, in that moment I felt a surge of hope,

surprising serendipitous anticipation that anything is possible,

that those things which seem so ordinary, predictable, bovine might be different than they seem.

Ever since then, when I see a cow, however placid she appears, I have that surge of hope.

Stories can nurture hope in us- stories about this little guy for example. (Pick up baby Jesus from manger.)

A Jewish boy, hailed as Messiah among those who loved him, and today his name called prince of peace for Christians, named as honored prophet among Muslims, an avatar in the Hindu pantheon,--incredible, scandalous, unbelievable.

To think that one human life could make such a profound change in the history of the world, transform individual hearts so profoundly they feel as if they are born again, a new creation.

For me his story is a symbol that there is power for new birth, that there is in the world a power higher than I normally have access to, that can transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, that can locate and highlight the super, not beyond, but **within** the natural world. Super-natural.

He is not for me the savior of the world, but his story is a vehicle for accessing the saving grace inside the human form, a reminder that there is more.

I don't believe that HE makes cows frolic.
I suspect that certain neurotransmitters in cow brains do it because they are happy or horny or having some cow feeling I can't name.

I don't need to know what makes cows frolic.....
But I know is that I can't make a cow frolic,
I can't accomplish miracles or avert misfortune.

I graze amidst the broken glass of life,
the ambiguous ambivalence of our human pasture.
Head down, I forget, that restoration, redemption, renewal, reunion, re-creation are possible.
And stories like his, remind me to look up,

remind me that my part, when I can DO no more, is to look up, to hope.

I know that not everyone feels that way about cows, or the Christ child.
(put Jesus away.) So here's another story in my anthology of hope.

Norman Cousins book ***Head First, the Biology of Hope***,
is about the ways that physical changes occur when we hope—
changes that heal us, either physically or emotionally.

Written nearly 30 years ago, it's a classic among hundreds of newer texts on
the power of our thoughts.

What makes it timeless is that it is based on Cousin's own experience of
Laughing himself into cancer remission and several more years of life,
through intense doses of watching those funny
"You're on Candid Camera" TV shows.

You can buy a used copy of Head First on Amazon.com for 4 cents!

As a hospital chaplain, I saw hope work in the ways Cousins described,
saw the positive attitude of sick people bring them back to health
or carry them through a serene death,
saw hope filled bed side vigils of family and friends bring healing
of relationships and spirits and sometimes bodies.

Hope is a powerful thing, like finding a map when you're lost.
The map doesn't bring you out of the woods, but it gets you on your feet.

The poem, "Brief Thoughts on Maps" tells of a young officer
who sends a detachment of his men into the **Alps**, just as a
heavy snow storm begins. His men do not return and he fears
he has condemned them to death.

Three days later, his men return. How did it happen? A miracle!
The men say that at first they were disoriented, turned around,
but that one of them found a map in his pocket.
So, they huddled, waited out the storm,
then used the map and found the way back.

The officer looks gratefully at the remarkable map,
and finds that it was not a map of the Alps at all, but of the Pyrenees.
The map...gave them the good sense to huddle, to wait out the storm,
And then to get on their feet.

As the hymn we sang earlier said, however bare the hills in Bethlehem,
however cold the winter stars, however tired the heart,
that very place is where angels hover holding new life,
the very place where God will come to mortal hands.
Our darkest stable, brothers and sister, is the gestation place of greatness
when we let hope leverage us to our feet.

The Buddha taught that hope makes us impotent because it suggests
That hope is all we need to do.

Norman Cousins saw it differently, saw hope not as an opiate,
or some fuzzy new age positive visualization silliness,
but as a sparkplug to pragmatic action,
Saw that thoughts and feelings have consequences.

You can get a sense of that from Cousins' piece in our hymnal—
Yes the editor of the Saturday Review for 40 years
has a reading in our sacred text!

He writes: "I will work for human unity and peace,
for a moral order in harmony with the order of the universe.
For a society in which we need not live beneath our moral capacity,
and in which justice has a life of its own.
I am interlocked with other human beings in the consequences of our thoughts,
and feelings. We are single cells in one body named humankind."

Hope is not just a personal option that makes the daily grind more bearable. It is
a moral imperative that makes US more bearable,
Makes our one cell in the body of humankind more fully functioning
for the good of all.

It is as we practice virtues like hope, doing the inner work of
spiritual maturation,
that we are empowered to outer work for justice, equity, and unity.

Dorothy Day wrote, "A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread
in all directions—Each one of our thoughts and words is like that—
So no one has the right to feel hopeless.
Because there is too much work to do."

The hope inherent in stories of cows and baby Jesus, and candles burning eight days, and laughing oneself to life, and magic maps, is all right here.

Hope, the one sparkplug sufficient for
Accomplishing miracles, averting misfortune.
Let yourself hope this season that there is more. Let Christmas come.