

REACHING TOWARD TRUTH  
The Rev. Cynthia B. Johnson  
April 20, 2008  
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Reading: God and the Artists' Colony  
Rebecca Baggett (for James Burgess)

Talking at dinner, we discover  
how many of us have fundamentalist  
families—mothers and sisters stricken

With gifts of tongues, ponderous  
deacon fathers, brothers who praise  
Jesus for every red light missed.

God rides them, we decide, the way  
our art rides us. Perhaps God  
*is* their art, driving them toward that

Perfect abnegation, that desire to open  
themselves and let Him fill them,  
use them, just as we, alone here, locked

in our separate cells, struggle  
to surrender self and let our blankness  
fill with words, light, music, images

flashing against the dark screen  
of our eyes, each of us moving, aching,  
toward that private *Alleluia*, revelation,

*Yes....*

--from Claiming the Spirit Within, Marilyn Sewell, editor

REACHING TOWARD TRUTH  
The Rev. Cynthia B. Johnson

I'm VERY glad to be here with you this morning! Being part of the Fox Cities Book Festival brought me back to Appleton for three and one-half days. It's been nice to stay longer than I usually do on our trips down from Door County.

I appreciate your Fellowship's hospitality in welcoming The Ripple Project exhibit, hosting my Book Festival workshop yesterday, and inviting me to preach this morning. I want to thank Roger and Dottie and all six members of the Arts Committee that assisted Al and me with installing the exhibit. This morning is the first time ever I've been in a space where three areas of my life that are very important to me are all present at the same time: art, poetry, and ministry. When the significance of that dawned on me a day or two after installing the exhibit, I felt really lucky, filled with gratitude. Thank you!

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Door County is excited about having our first Sunday service in our new building on May 25 and having the official dedication service on Sunday, June 22, at 4:30 pm. We're moving into a 4400 square foot building in Ephraim from our 1600 square foot building in Sister Bay which is for sale at an attractive price by motivated sellers! )

What I want to talk about this morning is some of the different ways people experience the world. In Door County we have a naturalist who writes excellent nature columns. Last spring Roy Lukes wrote about a walk he'd taken, describing seeing "the leatherwood and buffaloberry shrubs, two of the earliest blossoming native shrubs that are downright beautiful to the eye, especially through a hand lens." His attention to concrete detail with a hand lens, his feet literally on the ground of all the places he explores is the way he experiences the world.

My husband always knows what direction he is facing and reads maps fluently. On the other hand, when I come to a place where I have to choose to go left or right, as in exiting a building I entered ten minutes ago, I choose the incorrect direction more than half the time. Both Al and I feel a little sorry for me being so impaired in orienting myself to my immediate surroundings. Sometimes I say that although I don't know where I am on a map, I try to pay attention to where I am in the universe. But there is a man in our Fellowship who endowed a new Astronomy Center last year, and I realize that I'm not oriented in the universe in the same way that he is.

Roy Lukes keeps a hand lens with him to look at the world. Al navigates around cities he hasn't visited for years out of memory. Ray Stonecipher knows the universe. My friend Marilyn lives seasons in awareness of the cycle of bluebirds by tending their nesting boxes. Many people develop specialized ways of seeing the world, understanding the world.

Me, I'm a metaphor person. I like words and images that lead me on toward new understanding along meandering paths of thinking and imagining. I like sitting and thinking, staring out the window. I love reading and writing. I try to be informed about local, national,

and international news, notice connections, appreciate glimpses of things in view and wonder about others just beyond my understanding.

For me, the act of painting begins with a lengthy period of thinking about that painting before I move into the physical act of putting pastels on sanded paper decisively.

I like volunteer projects with a beginning and end as opposed to committing to attend a meeting every third Tuesday for the next three years. I am not a useful addition to a crew that needs to work hard for a long time and get dirty and sweaty, but I work very hard on things that interest me. I try to spend most of my time on things that interest me, and the days are not long enough for everything that interests me. Thinking about thinking, thinking about the world the way it really is, thinking theologically – these things lead me in new directions.

Not surprisingly, people who like metaphors were often English majors: 1) A figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another, thereby making an implicit comparison, as in “a sea of troubles” or “All the world’s a stage” (Shakespeare). 2) One thing conceived as representing another; a symbol.

Something that interests me is how differently religions approach truth. As I look around, I find it surprising that so many of the religions have concluded that they know exactly what is ultimately true. Having grown up in the Unitarian church, I was not taught creeds that summarized truth but rather an approach to religion that expected me to grow in my ability to plumb the mystery and make observations and try to live my life reasonably congruently with what I discern as truth.

This morning I will talk about four metaphorical images that help me understand the world and my place in it. The four metaphors are 1) life as a geological process; 2) myself as one individual in an elaborate system of cogs; 3) “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part”; and 4) ripples.

First, the metaphor of geological processes was a recent Aha! as I read Joan Didion’s excellent book The Year of Magical Thinking. Throughout the book she struggles to understand how her life changed when her husband died at the dinner table. She observed herself thinking and feeling during that year, a year that also included the death of their daughter. I resonated with Didion’s ability to link her personal life with world news and integrate what she had learned as a child from her grandfather about the geological patterns of the Earth.

*As the grandchild of a geologist I learned early to anticipate the absolute mutability of hills and waterfalls and even islands. When a hill slumps in the ocean I see order in it. When a 5.2 on the Richter Scale wrenches the writing table in my own room in my own house in my own particular Welbeck Street I keep on typing. A hill is a transitional accommodation to stress and ego may be a similar accommodation. A waterfall is a self-correcting maladjustment of stream to structure, and so, for all I know, is technique. The very island Inez Victor returned in the Spring of 1975—Oahu, an emergent post-erosional land mass along the Hawaiian Ridge—is a temporary feature,*

*and every rainfall or tremor along the Pacific plates alters its shape and shortens its tenure as Crossroads of the Pacific...*

*I looked up this passage after the 9.0 Richter earthquake along a six-hundred-mile section of the Sumatran subduction zone had triggered the tsunami that wiped out large parts of coastline bordering the Indian Ocean.*

*I am unable to stop trying to imagine this event.*

*There is no video of what I try to imagine. There are no beaches, no flooded swimming pools, no hotel rooms breaking up like rotted pilings in a storm. What I want to see happened under the surface. The Indian Plate buckling as it is thrust under the Burma Plate. The current sweeping unseen through the deep water. I do not have a depth chart for the Indian Ocean but can pick up the broad outline even from my Rand McNally cardboard globe. Seven hundred and eight meters off Banda Aceh. Twenty-three hundred between Sumatra and Sri Lanka. Twenty-one hundred between the Andamans and Thailand and then a slow shallowing toward Phuket. The instant when the leading edge of the unseen current got slowed by the continental shelf. The buildup of water as the bottom of the shelf began to shallow out.*

***As it was in the beginning, is now and shall ever be, world without end.***

--Joan Didion: The Year of Magical Thinking, pp. 220-222

Even when the earth feels firm beneath my feet, I try to remember that everything is in process.

Second, cogs. Perhaps my discovery of the cog metaphor emerged out of the insights I had about life when I was in my 20's and 30's. It was an era when women in general and I, specifically, were exploring issues about identity and roles that included but were not limited to being a wife and mother.

I'd known my entire life that everyone doesn't die at the same time. I found it almost unbearable as a little girl that my mother would die -- my own awareness amplified by knowing that both my mother's parents died the same week when she was seven years old. As a young bride, I remember saying to friends that I questioned whether I would want to stay alive if my husband died -- but that I thought I would let at least a year pass before I would make that decision. Sometime later, I had the life-altering insight when I recognized myself as an individual with my own destiny to fulfill. That helped me realize that I was actually lucky to have the privilege throughout what I hoped would be a long life to know many individuals for a portion of our individual lives. Along the way I had another insight: that no one person shares every one of their interests with any other single person. And THAT led me to noticing which of my cog bumps intersect with other people's cog bumps. "One of a series of teeth, as on the rim of a wheel or gear, whose engagement transmits successive motive force to a corresponding wheel or gear." I've never really thought of love and friendship and specialized acquaintances as "successive motive force," but maybe that is what happens when two people realize that some of their cog bumps have matched up.

Sometimes we intersect with people because of a shared interest or activity: books, art, hiking, wine, wanting to laugh. There's an extra comfort level when political or religious perspectives are harmonious enough that we are able to speak without carefully editing our

words. Connecting with another person because we are drawn toward the same things is one way of bonding. Binding together when we detest the same things is at least as strong a bond. Noticing and appreciating people who will treat your heart tenderly is important information. Learning whose spirit weighs your spirit down and whose caring words and hugs help us feel better tells us who to seek out when we need support and solace.

Third metaphor: webs. Once I got used to having a spider front and center of a metaphor, I have liked the 7th principle in the UUA covenant to affirm and promote: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

This metaphor reminds me that I am only one member in the very large human family. That metaphor reminds me of any concept of God needs to have front and center than no one member of that human family is more or less deserving of participating in sharing the bounty of the earth. That metaphor pricks my conscience more than any of the Unitarian Universalist purposes and principles.

On the other hand, I have come to understand the limitations of the metaphor of the web. A romanticized attachment to the metaphor of the Interconnected Web can leave us feeling very good about the level of our caring and compassion as we watch the web tremble. It is possible that the web metaphor does not go far enough to make justice when we realize that the web can favor the status quo of the privileged rather than confronting the harder truth sometimes part of the web must itself be torn and reconstructed. I read something about this a few years ago and now realize that the web that continues to tremble but doesn't break and reform itself favors those of us who have more than our share than those billions of our sisters and brothers around the world. Deciding what we individually and collectively we will do with the world's very trembly web is the biggest religious issue of our lifetime. Whether we will do enough to avert ecological and social disaster is yet to be decided. Figuring out how to inspire people to want to be better people will accomplish more than trying to nag people to change.

Fourth metaphor: ripples. Almost three years ago I started an interactive arts project called The Ripple Project. Back and forth, from person to person: ripples out, ripples back, ripples out again. In 2004 I published my second book, The Way Crows Really Fly, a book of my poetry and paintings. While I was pleased to sell about 800 copies in the first year, I had a problem because I had printed 3,000 copies after noticing how the per copy cost came down so much with each additional 1,000 copies. I'd already realized how much I enjoyed wiring and publishing books and how much I disliked marketing them -- and thought and thought about what I could do with all those boxes in our closets and a warehouse at the printing company.

Over a period of about a week, I decided that I wanted to see what would happen if I tried to give 1,000 books away free, invite responses from those new readers (“Perhaps you will send me a poem you wrote in response, a photograph, a memory, a painting, or something else I haven't even imagined”, then I planned to paint and write and photograph in response to their responses, and have the project culminate in an exhibit of The Ripple Project. Ripples out, ripples back, ripples out again.

I numbered the books, explained the project in a handout inside the back cover, said they could keep the book even if they didn't want to respond to my invitation, and set about giving books to people who gave them to other people, set them out at Land Trust meetings and at our UU Fellowship and in art galleries, and sought no publicity about the project, which I carefully tended month after month as responses arrived and I sent out free books to people in many states and countries.

By the time of my exhibit at the Peninsula Art School last April/May, I had heard from about 115 people in 11 states. I filed their responses in a huge blue binder, keeping track of the emails, letters, poems, essays, paintings, photographs, quilts, crafts -- and a choral work based on one of my poems, not only the score but also a video of the First Unitarian Church of Oklahoma City singing it.

The final months before the exhibit included a personal rippling drama in our lives when Netta, one of Tad and Beth's twins, was in a medical crisis that began at birth and continued for several months. The metaphor of rippling took on an additional meaning as people who knew any of Tad and Beth's family or friends were connected in a rippling process that provided everyone with an incredible amount of support and affection. (One Sunday morning in Door County, both the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist church lifted up Netta in their prayers, something that I found very touching when I heard about it.) That both Wyatt and Netta are healthy, happy one-year-olds is a wonderful thing.

Closing: two poems

A Little Piece of Lois

awash in the macro visioning of the art exhibit

I grounded myself in a disciplined consideration  
of hardware, fasteners, relative merits of foam core  
versus pastel board, framed versus frameless

spread out in the back counter employee-only area,

primary focus of the clerk/artist/member of a mutual admiration society  
another customer needed her assistance, apologized  
as he passed by me in the narrow aisle, spoke

of his need to return to the hospital to be with his dying mother

I murmured sympathy and said I, too, was waiting for hospital news  
from Colorado where my daughter-in-law and son  
this very hour were in the delivery room to meet their twins

my news from the happier edge of the range of human existence, I noted

au contraire, he replied in the 60's, They said death  
was the greatest adventure of them all, the reason  
it was saved for last, not be be feared but awaited

we moved apart after docking for twenty seconds in our cosmic orbits  
he said his mother was a wonderful person, he'd been lucky  
to have the parents he had, perhaps my new grandchildren  
would be so lucky as to get a little piece of Lois

Cynthia B. Johnson  
February 9, 2007  
(The day after Wyatt and Netta were born!)

Believe Me

(formerly known as "To Baby Netta from Grancie" until a man requested a copy  
of "the Believe Me poem" after the service in the Durango UU Fellowship in March 2008)

Netta, if you listen, perhaps you can hear me whisper across eight hundred miles,  
through ranges of mountains, across the grassy plains, whirling in spring snow storms,  
beneath vapor trails of airplanes, along rivers swelling with the winter melt, past feed lots,  
through cities, in the shadow of factories, in the presence of daffodils in bud.

There are things even more wonderful than what you've seen and done in these eight weeks.  
Truth be told, you've missed a lot of it because you've been asleep.

Let me tell you about things I love: pileated woodpeckers, chunky peanut butter, the soft place  
behind Moo-Shoo's ear, twilight, crystal prisms on a sunny day, the silhouette of a cyclamen in  
the window, sparkles on the lake, fresh-squeezed orange juice, Sirens Chocolate Cake, laughing,  
being lost in making art, reporting for the Crane Count at 5:30 am, a perfect avocado, hugging  
people I love, visiting inside other people in well-written books, a perfectly-punctuated sentence,  
on good days the whole human race, armloads of people most other days.

Believe me: you are loved by more people than you can count on your fingers and toes.  
Believe me: most days won't include needle pricks for tests and more tests. Most of us go years,  
nay decades, without needing barium coursing through our veins, without oxygen tubes,  
without x-rays, without being weighed every day. Believe me: most days will find you at home  
with people you love and people who love you, not in hospitals. Believe me: as you master that  
wobbly neck thing, you will have a good view of the world. Voices and hands will have faces  
attached to them. The world will get bigger, be more wondrous when you, like Wyatt,  
can watch the clouds and shadows outside. Your first walk was on your back, with only a peek  
hole in your pink snowsuit. The view will get better.

I know what I want: you to collect your own list of things you love, you to move through life  
and with life, you to love and be loved. Take hold, hang on; feel the earth  
underneath the hospital, join us all on this little blue marble, spinning together through space.

Cynthia B. Johnson  
April 10, 2007

