

August 20, 2006

What I bring to church, What I leave behind, and What I take home

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Opening words - "Do not let Sunday be taken from you. If your soul has no Sunday, it becomes an orphan." - Albert Schweitzer

"For one human being to love another; that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation."
- Rainer Maria Rilke

Presentation and discussion - "The Sunday Service; What I bring, What I leave behind, and what I take home."

Many of us have people who might be muses whose conversations with us give us an insight, a clarity we don't otherwise enjoy. I've mentioned before that Tim Marr is one of those people for me. I'm sure he doesn't even realize it when he performs this function for me, and I often don't recognize it at the time, either. Often the clarity comes later after things percolate a bit.

Likewise, I often have revelations big and small that blossom out of conversations with groups of you. Many of these moments of blinding clarity for me only serve to make me aware of what others have discovered long before, but no matter; they're powerful moments for me anyway.

A week or so ago, I went to the program committee meeting, and thoughts springing from that meeting provided two incentives for this talk. First, it made me reflect on what it is we're trying to do here on Sunday morning, and second, we discovered we needed someone to speak today. Here I am.

My epiphany from a conversation with Tim was that meditation and self-hypnosis are opposites.

Self-hypnosis transfixes us, reduces our awareness of the world around us, blocks stimuli. Preoccupations and obsessions can be a form of self-hypnosis in that sense. Meditation and what I will call spirit are the opposite of obsession - they enable me to expand my awareness. To me that's what balance, in the spiritual sense, is all about. This hour, this Sabbath, if you will, is to help me restore my balance. Before Sunday was a day of worship, the Sabbath was first a day of rest. I take that as rest from the issues of the world. They'll grind you down if you deal with them 7 days a week.

Unfortunately, it's easy to get obsessed. An obsession with worldly events, or a preoccupation with events on the other side of the world or in the national capitol over which we have little control can be a kind of self-hypnosis, and our commercial media do their best to make these our obsession by reporting on them in the most emotional terms possible. The paradox here is that our immersion in the world we see transmitted to us electronically or read about can keep us from restoring our spirit, the very thing that might enable us to act effectively to influence events around us.

That's why personally I'm a little reluctant to give over our pulpit to the events of the day or people who have worldly topics to discuss. Certainly we need to hear about the struggles and passion of others to do right, but I'm concerned that this pulpit can become just one more aspect of the media bombardment we experience every day.

I find every day is a battle to try to put aside what is important to others in favor of what is meaningful to me. What is meaningful to me may be mundane to others, such as painting the trim on the house or attending a meeting. But it is the joy, and the curse, of retirement that I now have to get up each morning and decide what I will do to make this day meaningful.

The problem with obsession for me, and that includes an obsession with current events, is that it diverts me from the present moment and my involvement in it. By the present here I mean my awareness, beyond my senses, of the universe of which I am a part.

Sometimes, When I find myself repeating the same mundane thoughts about fixing the house, working in the garden, or working on the car, I ask myself, what is this all about? What is it that I'm avoiding by thinking these thoughts over and over again? Is there something in the present moment that I'm avoiding? The present moment can be painful. In fact, the present moment is where pain resides. The present moment may be full of loss, conflict, anxiety and frustration.

That's why the three more commercialized obsessions - drugs, including the legal recreational drug alcohol, as well as gambling and pornography - are each billion-dollar industries. They take us away from the cares of the moment. Self-hypnosis. To me, examples of self-hypnosis also include some Sunday morning services in some houses of worship. If one becomes so preoccupied with one's personal salvation, one's afterlife, one's ritual, that one is separated from instead of joined with the present world, that to me is obsession, not spirit.

The cost these obsessions extract is that they divert the energy we might use to make the world a better place for ourselves and others. It seems to me that all obsessions are directly in conflict with the true message of Christ, Buddha and Mohammad. Idolatry, if you will. Love requires awareness in the fullest sense. Our obsessions limit our ability to be compassionate.

But the world can be less painful - not only by what we do here on Sunday morning, but by what we do with the strength and passion this service provides us. To me that is the most important thing this hour can provide. How each of us will use that strength and passion is less important than the ability of our Sunday morning to instill that strength and passion. Some of us may use that strength to face personal challenges. Others may use it to try to create a more just, sustainable world.

When we don't participate in the real world on the other six days, all of us, bad things happen. And right now, bad things are happening, as they always have. It's important not to let our obsessions distract us from doing what we can. And it's important to have this time to tune up our spirits to return tomorrow to the work that needs to be done.

I believe our spiritual strength leads to our social action; I don't believe it can work the other way around. Here, in this hour I feel the best work we can do is to affirm and instill peace, compassion, justice, respect, and wholeness in ourselves. We can then have many debates, initiate many actions in the world outside, based on our convictions and beliefs.

Likewise I believe We, as sentient beings, give meaning to life - not the other way around. Life is just so much diverse primordial ooze until we appreciate it, and embrace it. Then, it becomes miraculous.

So on Sunday Morning, here's what I hope you and I can do here. Bring the empty spot that we might otherwise fill with some less ennobling and empowering obsession. Leave behind the concerns of the world for this time, if not the fact of them. We need a break. And take away with us spirit that motivates us to be present in the world, makes us mindful, makes us part of the solution. Go out and help others to make their spirit healthy.

Closing words - "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve." Albert Schweitzer