

The Mystery Seed¹
Rev. Myke Johnson
May 1, 2005
Allen Avenue UU Church

Love all creation
the whole and every grain of sand in it
Love every leaf,
and every ray of light
Love the plants
Love the animals
Love everything.
If you love everything
you will perceive the Divine Mystery in all things.
Once you perceive it
you will comprehend it better every day.
And you will come, at last,
to love the whole world
with an all embracing love.

From The Brothers Karamazov by Dostoyevsky

What shape waits in the seed of you
to grow and spread its branches against a future sky?

From "What to Remember When Waking" by David Whyte (The House of Belonging)

Sermon

Today is May Day, the ancient pagan festival of fertility and the planting season. What a wonderful day to be here with all of you for the first time! When we first meet someone new, we are like gardeners out planting their seeds in the fresh ground. Who knows what might happen? Who knows what we might create together? We are face to face with mystery.

May Day was sacred to the Druids, who believed in the magic of trees. Each village in Britain would cut a tall tree, trim off the branches, and bring it into the town. The villagers would dance around this May Pole with colorful streamers to weave a pattern of beauty. In some places the May Day ceremonies took place around a sacred tree which was not uprooted or cut down. It represented the world tree, the axis between earth and heaven.

There are remnants of this mythology in the fairy tale of Jack and the Beanstalk. When his mother and he are in desperate straits, Jack trades their cow for some magical bean seeds. The bean seeds grow overnight into a vine that reaches up to heaven. There he encounters an evil giant, who eats human beings, but Jack is able to escape with a magical hen that lays golden eggs, and a golden harp that plays by itself. He learns from a fairy that the giant's castle is actually his very own—he is really a prince whose father was killed by the giant. In the end, he kills the giant, and recovers his hidden inheritance.

So what does this have to do with us? I believe that inside each of us is something like those magical bean seeds, a mystery seed if you will, a seed of what we might become, fully alive. That seed is not just in some of us, not just in kings or saints or movie stars, but in every one of us. Henry David Thoreau wrote: "I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

Last October, I was on retreat with the other ministers of the Ballou-Channing District where I have been serving during the last six years. Our retreat leader was a priest, Rev. Ray Tetrault. He was a friend of one of my colleagues and known to us as a passionate advocate for social justice. Our task together was to reflect on the politics of our time, in light of our role as spiritual leaders.

He started us off with an unlikely reference from the gospel of Luke. It said, "A census was called during the time when Herod was the king of Judea, Augustus was Caesar of the Roman Empire, and Quirinius was the governor of Syria." Ray reminded us that they were the politicians in charge of the regional and imperial governments some two thousand years ago. "But what was really going on?" he asked. Something mysterious. In a small town, a baby had just been born—we know him as John the Baptist—and something new was beginning that would literally transform the world. This new thing emerged, not from those at the top, but from underneath, from an unexpected and hidden place.

Since our retreat was happening just before the elections, all of us were sitting there with many stirred up feelings about the issues facing our country. It would have been easy to talk together about our concerns and our analysis. But Ray invited us instead to be silent, to listen deep in the quiet of our hearts, underneath our thoughts and feelings. He invited us to reflect on the question: "What is really going on?" What else might be happening here in our own time and country, underneath, unseen, and yet full of potential significance? What is really going on?

We kept the silence for an hour, and then we shared from our hearts. The next day we went back into silence, and then shared again from that deeper place. When I went into the silence, I felt something like a seed in my heart that was swelling and expanding, and also something like a shell cracking open, something like an old husk.

I remembered an email that I had sent a few days earlier to my family members. I am the oldest of nine siblings, and my parents are both still alive, living in Texas. I have siblings in Michigan, West Virginia, and Montana as well. My family grew up Catholic, and I remember we were excited when John F. Kennedy became president, but mostly we had not been very involved in politics. Now we have vast disagreements among us. In fact, the deep religious and political divisions in our country are directly mirrored in my family.

The previous week I had been moved to send an email to my family members about my feelings and concerns about the elections, and about the spiritual beliefs underlying my hopes and fears. Then others started replying: several of my sisters, my father, a niece and a nephew sent emails to all the others. Many began by expressing fear that if they shared their beliefs, others might reject them, but still they wanted to take the risk. And even those with very strong

views kept repeating that, in spite of these differences, they loved each member of the family and hoped that everyone still loved them.

Somehow, in the midst of the cultural divisions facing our nation, we had ventured across the walls of politics and religion, painfully, but hopefully, to share our truths with love. Our differences were deep, and our emails did not make them go away. But we were touching each other at a deeper level than our differences. And that gave me hope for facing the divide in our nation. In the silence of the retreat, I was realizing the mysterious unfolding that had taken place in our email conversation. It felt something like a seed in my heart swelling and expanding, something like a shell cracking open, something like an old husk.

In that retreat, Ray invited us to move beneath the turmoil of politics, beneath the struggle of winning or losing elections, to the place where all that we value finds its roots. He called it “latent divinity.” Now, the word divinity, like the word God, makes some of us uncomfortable. But those UU ministers, many of whom would identify as humanists, were not worrying about the words. We were letting ourselves go to the deeper place that Ray was invoking. You might prefer to call it Life, or Goddess, or human potential. I like to call it the Mystery seed. Latent divinity is like a spark of the sacred, hidden inside each of us, burning like a glimmer of light and fire and possibility.

I had written in my email to my family, “I believe that the presence of God is in every being on earth, every shoreline, every tree, every rainfall, every turtle, every person. Even the word *God* is incomplete. The doors of my heart have expanded open like that. We are all bright sparks of light.”

In the silence of the retreat, I could feel that spark in my heart, that mystery seed of life and love. I could imagine that seed of divinity in every person alive, pulsing to grow, laboring to be born, and I realized just a glimpse of how beautiful we are. In that place of mystery, we are all connected, and anything is possible. In that place of mystery, there is hope for the problems facing our world. I could also feel how the seed of divinity in me was surrounded by an old husk of separation and division. I was attached to that old husk, that part of me that needs to feel separate from others. That old husk didn’t want to be connected with those who disagreed with me, or to see divinity in people who believed differently from me. I just wanted my side to win. But in order for divinity to grow in me, I would have to let go of the husk of separation.

The German mystic, Meister Eckhart, wrote, “The seed of God is in us. Pear seeds grow into pear trees. Hazel seeds grow into hazel trees. And God seeds grow into God.”

What might we do together if we remembered that each of us has the seed of God inside? Antoine de St. Exupery, in *The Little Prince*, tells us “it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

Each one of us is like Jack and the Beanstalk. Each one of us has within us this spark of divinity, like a mystery seed, a seed of what we might become, fully alive. And we also have some husk that tries to keep it contained and hidden. But if we let those mystery seeds grow, like Jack with his beanstalk, we will become much more than we ever imagined.

I can't help but think today of one of the elders I knew in the church in Brewster. Her name was Ellie. Ellie died last May at the age of ninety-four. She had always suffered from a stutter. As a child, she was sent to all the specialists that her prominent father could afford, and nothing cured the stutter. But in the midst of this, Ellie was able to find her voice.

She became a writer, both in her career, and in her passion for politics and social justice. She was a speechwriter for several political campaigns and an active member of the League of Women Voters. She was also active in the nuclear freeze movement. Somehow, she didn't need to get rid of her stutter to bring forth her voice. It was almost as if her stutter helped her to find her voice. It was like an old husk, long ago cracked open, lying almost unnoticed around the bright flower of a plant that had grown from her heart. She had brought forth her latent divinity.

Essayist Merle Shain wrote, "The world needs all of our power and love and energy, and each of us has something to give. The trick is to find it and use it, and give it away, so that there will always be more. We can be lights for each other, and through each other's illumination we will see the way. Each of us is a seed, a silent promise, and it is always spring."

I love being a minister because I get to see and nurture the mystery seed in each person. I love being a minister because a church is a garden of people growing into their gifts and becoming fully alive. Ministry has been the most challenging work I have ever done, and also the most joyful. But at the heart of it, it is simple. It is all about love. Marianne Williamson wrote, "Love is to people what water is to plants."

May Day was the ancient festival of seed planting, and the ancient festival of love. To me, that is what church is all about: loving each other, nurturing the divine seed in each other, and waiting to see what wonders may come of it. When we have this circle of love, we can face with hope any of the challenges in our nation and in our families. When we have this circle of love, we can sing and dance and laugh and play. When we have this circle of love, our seed of god can grow into a tall tree of Life.

As Dostoyevsky reminded us,

Love everything.
If you love everything
you will perceive the Divine Mystery in all things.
Once you perceive it
you will comprehend it better every day.
And you will come, at last, to love the whole world
with an all embracing love.

¹ Copyright 2005 by Rev. Mykel Johnson and Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church. Permission to reprint must be requested from office@a2u2.org, and is usually granted.