

SERMONS: SKINNY, WIGGLY LITTLE THINGS

The Gould Discourse

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"British weather at its worst!" Who could doubt the accuracy of the comment? The rain was pouring down, the wind was blowing at gale force, and umbrellas were studies in futility. Sanity insisted that we stay in the bus, but this was Stratford-on-Avon, and we were prepared to trample anyone who stood between us and the door. We had arrived, and a little inclement weather was not about to stop us from paying homage to whoever or whatever it is that we call Shakespeare.

"Stratford-on-Avon"--the very name is the dream of every travel agent and every Chamber of Commerce executive. The work we call "Shakespeare" was done in the dirt, grime and chaos of London, but William Shakespeare was born and died in Stratford-on-Avon. Those two natural acts--among the very few acts which the Bard did not control--transformed this simple, pastoral, and dull little town into the world's most successful tourist draw (or tourist trap, depending upon your extravagance). After viewing what Shakespeare did for Stratford-on-Avon, we from Ithaca, New York, no longer feel driven to apologize for Ezra Cornell.

But our company was not there to dally in quaint shops and buy post cards. Not us. We were there for art. In little more than two hours, after we had found our seats somewhere in the higher reaches of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, the curtain rose on the resident company's production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Given the environment, atmosphere and anticipation, it would have been necessary for all the actors to have been struck speechless if the performance

were to be a disappointment. They were not, and we were not. Even the most cynical among us had to be impressed. And I was.

Still, there are those moments of tedium in any theatre--Royal or not. Like most Puritans, I have never learned to wait well. Luckily, I remembered to pack my responsibilities, and my mind reflected on this evening's discourse. I wanted to say something about sermons and how they took on strange shapes once they slipped over the edge of pulpits and into the lives of the listeners. They creep out of the preacher's mind, bounce off a sermon page, and slip into the ears of a waiting congregation, but who knows about these? Where can one find similes for mutating sermon fragments? Who describes such phenomena or recognizes the possibility of homiletical bacterium?

I should have known. Twenty minutes into *Romeo and Juliet*, when Romeo has confessed his love, Mercutio introduces him to Queen Mab.

*"She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
In shape no bigger than an agate stone
On the forefinger of an alderman,
Drawn with a team of little atomies
Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep.
Her waggon spokes made of long spinners' legs,
The cover of wings of grasshoppers,
Her traces of the smallest spider-web,
Her collars of the moonshine's watery beams,
Her whip of cricket's bone, the lash of film,
Her waggoner a small grey-coated gnat,
Not half so big as a round little worm
Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid.
Her chariot is an empty hazel-nut,
Made by the joiner-squirrel or old grub,
Time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers.
And in this state she gallops night by night
Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love;
O'er courtiers' knees, that dream on curtsies straight;
O'er lawyers' fingers, who straight dream on fees;
O'er ladies' lips, who straight on kisses dream,
Which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues,
Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are.
Sometime she gallops o'er a courtier's nose
And then dreams he of smelling out a suit;
And sometime comes she with a tithe-pig's tail,
Tickling a parson's nose as 'a lies asleep,
And then dreams he of another benefice;
Sometime she driveth o'er a soldier's neck,*

*And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats,
Of breaches, ambuscadoes, Spanish blades,
Of healths five fathom deep, and then anon
Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes,
And being thus frighten, swears a prayer or two,
And sleeps again. . .*

(Act I, Scene 4)

That, my friends, is a sermon examined one thousandth of an inch beyond the pulpit's edge and spinning at the speed of sound towards the listener's ear. It is a skinny, wiggly little thing bearing the legacy of a preacher and poised for the environment of the hearer.

This, it is here argued is education, and it is not only education, it is Unitarian Universalist education, and it is not only Unitarian Universalist education, it is Unitarian Universalist education at its best. Let us be done with those specious arguments which claim that sermons are an outdated form of public harassment and the proper subject of Madonna's obscenities. Surely we have grown past the sentimentality and subjectivity of the sixties in which the unresponsive were led by the inarticulate toward the inconceivable. Sermons, as membership questionnaires make clear and search committees make articulate, are still the criteria by which ministers are properly assessed. This is so, not because of some incipient Chrysostoms whose "golden mouths" stir the masses, but because these skinny, wiggly little things stimulate the minds of listeners in ways far beyond the imaginations of the preachers. It is that stimulation--inspiration, if you please--which raises the sermon to chief among Unitarian Universalist educational vehicles.

With that last sentence, I have revealed the key word to this discourse. The word? Inspiration. This, finally, is the reason for sermons and, I firmly believe, the reason that ministers, priests, rabbis, swamis, gurus, monks, nuns, the religious of every fashion and form, and, yes, perhaps chiefly, educators are tolerated, privileged and even honored in our society. To be inspired may be the unique human quest. We, alone on this planet, have the ability, and are probably the only creatures with the need, or desire, to shout: "Eureka!"

Few of us can count joys greater than those encased in the remark, "That's what I can do!" Chief among all our revelations are those announced by: "This is what she meant!" Few of us have been more thrilled, as either children or adults, than in those moments when the words, "I understand," burst in our brains. The quest for inspiration never ceases, and that may be the reason we sleep so little, and when we do, we do so fitfully. As Emerson reminded us:

"Always, always, something sings,"

And we don't want to miss it.

Perhaps like you, I have always known an elemental truth: people come to churches, meeting houses, synagogues and temples in the hope that they will be inspired. Sometimes, maybe even most times, they are. If that were not true, many of us in this room would have begun hunting for another way to make a living at an earlier age. Inspiration is what ministers, and ministers as the educators they are, do. That, folks, is what we are paid for.

Still, that inspiration often arrives as a surprise to our listeners, and a shock to us. Nothing new about this. I suggest that the Apostle Paul, although his metaphors and language are not ours, was expressing his own bewilderment when he wrote to the Corinthians:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

(I Corinthians 12:7-11)

Paul was trying to inspire in one way and, lo, he was inspiring in many. In fact, the "inspiration thing" was out of control and in desperation he said, "I say one simple thing, but it is understood in as many ways as there are listeners (my translation!)."

What happened to Paul happens to all of us who are in the "inspiration business." Inspiration doesn't come with a bang, but with a wiggle. It arrives in little ways that are unseen, unacknowledged, and unappreciated. We labor for the really big moment, the life transforming event which will crack the skies and leave everyone slack-jawed, but it rarely happens that way. Inspiration comes in little and unrecognizable ways as minute transformation. It is like Queen Mab:

"No bigger than an agate stone,"

or, better stated for our purposes:

*"Not half so big as a round little worm
Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid."*

Sermons are skinny, wiggly little things which flow from our minds doing exactly what they are suppose to do: inspire.

We, the preachers of inspiring sermons, expected some bolt of lightening punctuating the eloquent conclusion. We got better. We expected the congregation to burst into applause. We got better. We expected, alas, longed for, that

skinflint who sits in the seventh pew on the right hand side to hand the treasurer a blank check exclaiming it was the greatest sermon she ever heard. We got better. We got the woman who, upon seeing us waiting for the bus one afternoon, came up and said, because of a sermon two years ago she now understands her mother. And we say, "Thanks, I'm truly glad that you were helped," all the time wondering, "Who is she and what the hell is she talking about?"

That is inspiration. That is great preaching. That is great education. That is the skinny, wiggly little thing which proves sermons live.

But where do they live? Who among us hasn't thought in early September, "I've got forty sermons to prepare during this year," and hasn't felt faint? Our job is to inspire, but who inspires us? In this world of machines and mathematics, of sharp corners and hard surfaces, with people running hither and yon all in search of the muse, where do we find the skinny, wiggly little things which will enable us, as one of my seminary professors put it, "to keep the blessed sound a-goin'?" Where, indeed?

There, of course, is only one place: memory. We are what we remember, and we remember what we have recognized. To those who wish to extend this concept and introduce the theories of the sub-conscious and the super-ego, the welcome mat is offered. To those who seek here a springboard into the realms of the psychical, the re-incarnated and the supernatural, there is always the wisdom of H. L. Mencken: "You may be right." For those of us, however, who are committed to "hard wire" humanity, we are creatures of recognition and memory.

Which is not to say that we recognize and remember everything. How else can we account for those less than perfect scores on school tests? It was true then and it remains true that what we do not recognize we do not remember, and we do not recognize because we do not pay attention. But we pay attention to much, indeed, even the slowest among us recognizes much, and we remember a massive amount. There are some who claim that everything we recognize we remember.

Then why do we have such difficulty with our memory? For the simple reason that our lives are so busy, and--it is important to understand--they have always been busy. Our waking hours are filled with both activity and noise. We are doing, looking, and recognizing. We are so busy chucking stuff into our memories that they are overwhelmed. The workaday world is the place least likely to be an environment of education, and in such a situation the human memory does only what is needed for survival. When, in times like these we call upon our memory, we can almost hear our brain say, "Just a minute, I know it's here somewhere."

Then comes sleep. The mind, now free from survival and all the games which existence plays, is relaxed enough to allow memory full rein. Dreams arise. And what are dreams if not "memory-free-at-last?" We cannot dream what memory does not know. (I regularly dream of conversations with Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon. I guarantee that neither Kissinger nor Nixon dream of me!) Into this wonderland, rides Queen Mab in her chariot: "an empty hazel-nut." Now she performs her curious and wondrous tasks including:

*". . .sometime comes she with a tithe-pig's tail,
Tickling a parson's nose as 'a lies asleep,
And then dreams he of another benefice;"*

or another sermon.

But it is not the sermon or benefice of dreaming which is important to us. Our focus is the memory for in there lie the myriad skinny, wiggly little things which, though drowsy now, spring awake and fast and slippery as quick silver become our will and way. Here in preacher's memory that which ignites the listener's memory springs forth and the sermon lives. Nowhere has this been better exemplified than in that which is this generation's, and probably this century's, greatest sermon: *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Millions upon millions will attest to the genius of that skinny, wiggly little thing.

There, of course, is a difference between dreams and inspiration. Dreams are the random encounters of the recognitions in memory. This is the homeland of Queen Mab. She can dart in and out of our consciousness with,

"Her whip of cricket's bone, the lash of film,"

and play with our remembrances. Absurdities, entertainments, and fears are the ready fare, and inspiration lies off to the side, but never out of sight or feel.

For our inspiration we need more than dreams, we require exposure. Regular and steady confrontation with that which pries loose the pebbles and boulders of our minds and memory breaks loose. These times are essential, and they are precious.

Art is one of those times. We hear a sound or see a color and in our enthusiasm exclaim, "The artist was inspired." No. The inspiration is not in the artist, but in us. Something, some skinny, wiggly little thing has broken into our memory, and suddenly that which was not now is. It is in our brain, this fire, this inspiration.

Study is one of those times. Please may no one in my profession ever be so slow or have attended a seminary so prosaic that he or she does not remember, at least once a day, experiences during those years when the words leaped off the page. Under the gooseneck lamp and inside the margin's edge, a skinny,

wiggly little thing leaped inside the head, and we couldn't stay in the room much less sit in the chair. That is craziness; that is inspiration. And may it continue even, and especially, now.

Dialogue is one of those times. Why else should we attend meetings, for what reasons do we tolerate these allegiances to trivia if it is not for that moment of dialogue. Henry Nelson Wieman, blessed be his name, taught us that here, at least once in a while, that which was not, now is. Over a meal that is eminently forgettable, and from minds we had forgotten, comes an eruption of skinny, wiggly little things and our day is made, our week is made, our year is made. That is inspiration.

And worship, in whatever form and by whatever name, is one of those times. Our congregations do not come to make a sacrifice on our altar, or greet their friends, or praise our god. They come with desperate expectations of inspiration. They come, as we come, to be saved by those skinny, wiggly little things which might--and are most likely--to cascade from the pulpit. For the sake of human decency, if nothing else, let us who are responsible for worship look at the expectant faces of those gentle and splendid people who sit before us and know what they expect. Then let us release that inspiration and know that this is what we ministers, we educators, are for.

There is an environment for the exposure of these skinny, wiggly little things, and we are essential to that environment. If we do our jobs, inspiration rules supreme. People need not agree with us, need not follow us, need not find us witty or charming or entertaining. They need not find us bright, or admirable, or sacrificial. They need not accept our truth as their truth, or know our god as their god. What should happen is that during the sermon, or a day later, or a week later or years later, they should, because of our efforts at inspiration find themselves saying: "That is what it means!" "I can do this!" "I must not do that!" "She doesn't have to do that!" "I am in love!" "Life is wonderful!" or any of a thousand statements which confirm that the skinny, wiggly little thing has struck. That is religion at its most vibrant; that is Unitarian Universalism at work.

Our lives are filled with exposures which create the recognitions, the possibilities, and the consequences of memory. Those of us who call ourselves ministers labor in these fields, and they are always, "white unto the harvest." It is our privilege to be here. Our very lives are recognitions, memories and inspiration. Our task is the care and nurture of the skinny, wiggly little things. And if they do not save the world, they will do the next best thing: they will make living in the world a wonder. There has never been a greater challenge nor a more noble job.