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UUCM

"I'm Not Sure I Believe"

(in prayer, miracle or epiphany)

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When a person says to me "I'm not sure I believe in prayer, miracle or epiphany; what do you think?" what should I say? Even if I had strong views, I would want to stay respectful of the person asking the question and try to understand what it was I could say that would be of use to them.

In our Unitarian Universalist context a person asking such a question may have roots as a liberal Jew, a Deist, a Christian of any stripe, a Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Humanist, Agnostic, Atheist, Wiccan, Pagan and any number of various religious or non-religious histories found within Unitarian Universalist communities?

As a Unitarian Universalist minister I am confronted with how to respond in such a context. What to say, particularly when a statement is made at a time clearly difficult and traumatic for the person asking.

Human anguish and pain often surfaces when our life or the life of someone connected to us in an important way is significantly compromised, dramatically changed or is lost.

We all find ourselves at times in these places where we can't just appraise and move through them easily; times that linger and take our minds if not our souls into the depths of despair and darkness; it can feel uncomfortable, timeless, disconnected, often riddled with feelings of inadequacy.

This place is there within each and every one of us at some time or other. Not that unlike 'streptococcus', that bug which is with us at all times but dormant or maybe better said, unassuming, until our immune systems are in some way compromised.

When I'm confronted with situations like this in my life the challenge for me is clear. There is no way to stop feelings as far as I know, but engaging and managing feelings can be an option. So naturally my response to someone who comes to me in a time of discomfort like this is to help them look for a way to manage their feelings.

Traditional religious teaching has always held that prayer at these times will offer help and lead to some epiphany or understanding. And if you really are good at it, even miracles can happen! And in a context of a more traditional theologically oriented person I can and do offer a perspective of help in this way. However, this kind of support is perceived by many Unitarian Universalists as misleading, foolish or not really a helpful answer.

But are prayer, miracle, and the experience of epiphany really misleading, or are they just misunderstood? And in the end do they offer a way to effectively manage feelings of distress in difficult times?

What is there for rational pragmatic folk in times of human turmoil? All humans, even the most rational confront times where some shelter is needed, a word of comfort, some ice on the burn, a warm blanket in a biting cold?

Many of us more rational types can find no entry to a place of solace, healing or support under these classical labels because we dismiss these as real remedies. These traditional forms are really just tools in life's arsenal to navigate tough situations. Have they really lost their healing properties?

Still they do seem to chafe the spirit rather than deepen trust in the arch of time for many. These forms in the ways we are given to understand them mire some folks even deeper into what for lack of a better term, I'll call "Hell".

Actually these things we call prayer, epiphany and even miracle are much larger ideas and more expansive than most people think. The kinds of experiences that can be evoked by what we call prayer; like an 'epiphany', are real and important experiences. They reach far beyond their typical limited definitions. The closed, creed driven mythology of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions barely cracks the window on what can be had from this type of affirmative experience.

Let's take the word prayer; it is a word that comes to us from the Latin precari to entreat; postulate. It is not some plea to some ethereal outside force to intervene. Rather it describes an internal conversation with a deep resource that resides in each of us. That is prayer. Yet few of us understand it in this way anymore.

An expectation of some external effect from this kind of personal conversation may actually in some very real ways remove the possibility of an outcome that could be experienced as helpful.

This other way of understanding prayer makes it a very different animal than it's commonly thought to be.

And Epiphany, that's another powerful word like awesome. It comes from the Greek epiphaneia or appearance, to show forth, manifest. It is about realization. It is about understanding in deep way things in the occurrence of life that transcend even the most poetic language. Epiphany speaks to that which prayer in its root meaning can offer. We need to remember that such experiences are accessible.

And then there is miracle, the toughest one for most rational liberal religious folks because of its common use and literal interpretations. However the root word of miracle is mirari, meaning to wonder at, and mirus, meaning wonderful, a miracle is something full of wonder.

It is a miracle that the planet continues to turn in the same direction; that the sunset warms the face as well as the heart; that a group of brown pelicans can soar over the water never flapping a wing. And one of the most miraculous things of all is that we were born human, considering all the other possibilities.

Miracles are everywhere only limited by our ability or willingness to perceive them. Miracles abound, they are not created they just are. They are a gift to us and have and will continue to accompany us as long as we have eyes to see them and hearts to hold them and minds to wonder about them.

So these things we call religious experiences can be broadly understood. Prayer as a tool of affirmation goes back long before the myths of either Judaism or Christianity. In fact, we find reference to what we would call miracle, epiphany and prayer in the icons and writings in archeological sites as old as Majhinga-Daru in southern Pakistan that dates back possibly 11 thousand years. Miracle and epiphany run through the Vedas like water whose stories date back as far as 13 thousand years, some say more.

So regardless of whether you believe in them or not, prayer, epiphany and miracles have been around for a long time and continue to speak to human experience. Clearly they have and will continue. The key is will they contribute to our understanding and to the quality of life?

Regardless of how prayer, epiphany and miracles might be generally seen, in the limited and literal ways we've been given to understand them, it seems likely they are inextricably bound to the language of our human experience.

So how do these experiences get limited in the ways we see so often?

Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr, a Protestant theologian known for his study relating Christian faith to reality, modern politics and diplomacy, said that "self-interest is contained in all human endeavors, and therein our good actions harbor seeds of the destruction the good seeks to remedy."

So perhaps these human endeavors are now so codified in self-interest in this way by institutional religious communities their epitaphs have been effectively written. That we are standing at the gravesite of these religious concepts?

Can these universal experiences be dead? Can experience be destroyed by the words we use to communicate about it? I don't think so.

I think words like God, religion, holy, prayer, miracle and epiphany have been hijacked, limited and literalized to no longer offer an understanding of what they truly represent. But the experiences these words were coined to reflect are still universal and available!

Because of all this I struggle at times to find new words to speak to these old experiences. I pulled this poem from my archives, and would credit it if I remembered who wrote it.

Still the query for me in this poem is why not a prayer? When I hear, "I'm not sure I believe in prayer, miracle or epiphany, but my world needs rescue, my spirit needs warmth, my soul needs some solace." Rather than offering "Ye though I walk through the valley of the shadow" I can offer this.

“Did you ever think
there might be a fault line
passing underneath your living room?
A place in which your life is lived
in meeting and in separating,
wondering and telling,
unaware that just beneath you
is the unseen seam of great plates

that strain through time?

And that your life, already spilling over the brim,
could be invaded, sent off in a new direction,
turned aside by forces you were warned about
but not prepared for?

Shelves could be spilled out,
the level floor set at an angle
in some seconds and shaking
you would have to take your losses,
do whatever must be done next.

When the great plates slip
and the earth shivers
and the flaw is seen to lie in what you trusted most,
look not to more solidity,
to weighty slabs of concrete of strength of cantilevered beam,
to save the fractured order.

Trust more the tinsel strands of love
that bend and stretch to hold you in the web of life
that is often torn, but always healing.

There is your strength

the shifting plates,
the restive earth,
your room, your precious life,
they all proceed from love,
the ground on which we walk together”.

Even without this sense, to awaken to the truth that we are together in this journey. We do touch one and another, often deeply and with effect.

In the final assessment, if there is such a thing as final, the saving grace it is that we not only touch one and other but are tied together by strands of matter molded from dust that is older than the rocks.

It was Brian Swimme, the mathematician cosmologist who made popular the idea that we are all star dust. That literally means we are all made of the same stuff that fills the vast expanse of space, and forms and reforms to express light. We will always be tied together in the dance of the cosmos in this way. How miraculous!

It's a miracle that we, such unique constellations of matter and energy, on this little ball spinning in the vast reaches of space are able to communicate, understand and touch one and other.

I will continue to trust the experiences of my life, not only the explanations. And when the time asks it of me, I will continue to offer prayer, care, and a willingness to trust in something deep inside.

I will continue to open my heart to the joy, the epiphany of living, and be cuddled by the miraculous truth that I can experience even that which has no proof in a brick and mortar world knowing the sun not only warms the ground and the air, but the heart as well! So engage the explanations, but do not discard experience.

Search for new understanding and experience so that together we can build a world of support and care, a world where the strands of the May pole may weave our hearts together for no good reason other than it should!

If you are not sure you believe in prayer, miracle or epiphany, embrace the experience. It's only labels. For our connectedness has no equal and will continue to give us a depth of meaning and

comfort by whatever name. There is no greater gift we can gift to another than our heartfelt care.

Salaam Alycom, Namaste.