

Where is That Wind Blowing?

March 16, 2014

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Recently, in looking around on the internet, I found a web site with the address sbnr.org: Spiritual But Not Religious dot Org. And I was curious so I started reading, but discovered that nothing new had been posted for 2 years. So I kept looking, and found another web site, this one with [spiritualnotreligious](http://spiritualnotreligious.com) spelled out in the address. But when I got to their home page, it wouldn't tell me anything until I registered as a member (does anyone else find this ironic?), and I did not feel quite right about that – given my current position as a religious person. Of course, I don't have to search around on line. The pollsters tell us that spiritual but not religious people are all over the place – especially – you guessed it – in Vermont.

I was thinking about this a few days ago because of our Scripture readings. I asked myself, “Would we call Abraham religious or spiritual?” Could one even make those distinctions thousands of years ago? Abraham lived before the laws given to Moses, before there was a Temple in Jerusalem, before the Prophets, long before Jesus and the Apostles. Our discussions and controversies dividing spirituality and religion are a purely modern concern. Maybe Abraham's contemporaries would have called him “New Age” because he seemed to be going off in some strange directions, hearing some strange instructions, from an unseen source.

William James wrote a book over a century ago called The Varieties of Religious Experience. He wrote, “in its broadest terms, religion says that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in rightful relations to it.” The Hebrew tradition is the story of a long and intimate dialogue of a certain people with that “unseen order”. They called that order the Spirit (or breath) of God. In the opening verses of the Bible, this Spirit plays upon the waters of chaos to create the world. As breath, it also entered the first human, animating and giving consciousness. They sensed this Spirit world as intensely alive, so they populated it with angels and demons. But God or Yahweh was its center, its source. They kept coming up with words to help envision this source of Spirit: Shepherd, King, Judge, Father. They tended to think of Spirit as being above the earth – with ladders and mountains and looking upward – in order to name its difference from and superiority to our everyday existence. They looked for signs of the Spirit in nature and history. Creation and the Spirit were in constant interaction. God was pictured as walking in the Garden of Eden. The psalmist sang that the whole earth was full of God's glory. Abraham got into arguments with God's Spirit about whether it was possible to have a family. And that “unseen order,” when it took the form of divine wind or spirit or breath, could really energize apathetic humanity.

Out of this tradition, the writer of the Gospel of John tried to describe the life and ministry of Jesus, one who was plugged in to the “unseen order” in a unique way. This Gospel gives us extended conversations, often full of quirky phrases and comical misunderstandings, words with double meanings, references to old stories. Even people who spoke Jesus' language, other teachers of religion, were confused. Nicodemus, a respected Jewish leader, educated, concerned, comes to Jesus to try to understand what was going on. He first asks about the miraculous signs: they seem to

be a sign of authority, of God's favor. Jesus turns the conversation – the signs point to the imminent kingdom of God. He makes this a personal issue. A person has to undergo a transformation to even perceive this kingdom, this world of the Spirit. Jesus calls this transformation being born from above or being born anew. There is a trickiness of language: in the original Greek, he could be saying born anew or born from above. He could be speaking about time – “again”- or space – “from above.” Not being happy with ambiguity, Nicodemus latches on to the most literal meaning. Is Jesus doing even more miraculous things and having old men go through a physical birth process again? Jesus clarifies the birth image: it's about water, like the waters of baptism, and it's about the breath and Spirit of God.

One gets the feeling that Jesus is enjoying the word play here, almost teasing Nicodemus with his responses. There is more ambiguity: the same word can mean either “Spirit” or “wind” or “breath”. So he shifts from talking about spiritual birth to talking about the wind. Or is he? As mysterious as the movement of the wind is the movement of God's breath in the world, spinning us around, inspiring us, giving us life. In seeking Jesus out, Nicodemus was getting more than he bargained for. Jesus is offering a chance for transformation, a chance to be blown by that wind, a chance for new life, a kind of rebirth. But, rooted in his literal, material world, all Nicodemus can say is “How can these things be?”

What Jesus seems to be asking for here is receptivity. We are not in charge of our own birth. We do not control the wind. In the same way, we do not control the movement of God's Spirit. Nevertheless, it touches us every day in many ways. In beauty, in joy, in love, in the face of birth and the moment of death, we catch glimpses of that Spirit. But it is not a vague sort of permission to feel special and avoid accountability. It is more like a life preserver, thrown to us in our need. It is a chance to breathe deeply and start over when things have gone wrong. It is the possibility of losing old prejudices and habits of mind. It is the opportunity to find common humanity with people in pain and in need, and so to become more human ourselves.

Jesus is not asking for an affirmation of intellectual certainty. He is asking that one's life reflect the movement of that Holy Wind. In a way that we can't capture with our minds, we do not know the origin, we do not know the destination, but we can see the direction and the effects of its presence. When we see what Jesus was moved to do by the Spirit, we begin to see a pattern of compassion, healing, and justice. The apostle Paul wrote, “The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control.” When we see these things loose in our lives, we are standing in the presence of God, just as we know that the wind is blowing when we hear the sound of the leaves moving in the trees.

A UCC pastor, Lillian Daniel, wrote, “Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.”

It seems that there are pitfalls on every side. One is the temptation to use the expression “spiritual” as an escape from “religion” or “faith”. It goes without saying that we are all spiritual beings, infused with the breath of God and the need to ponder life's mysteries. But the tug of the Spirit will always be towards finding right relationships with each other and all creation. Compassion and justice cannot have meaning in isolation. We need to find connection to our

ancestors, our children, and our neighbors. The Spirit will always blow us into community. And there we may find that a claim to spirituality holds us to a greater, not a lesser, accountability.

Another pitfall of spirituality would be the easy acceptance of a concept like being “born again”. For all its use in modern America, it seems that this is the only time that Jesus used the phrase, and, as we have seen, it could have a different translation: “born from above.” Jesus didn’t use it again: not with the woman at the well, or with sinners, or the blind man, or the rich young ruler. He did talk about the need for ongoing change, the kingdom of God, and the challenge of living in that kingdom. Rather than a single moment in the life of a believer, Jesus talks about an ongoing encounter with a mysterious wind. It’s not a formula. It’s one image among many.

If we work with the image of the wind of the Spirit blowing through our hearts, our families, our church, we might imagine what would be blown out and what would be blown in. Habits and prejudices that we’ve had for years might fly out the windows. Sorrows and apathy might waft slowly out the door, while through another coming a breeze smelling like hope and purpose. Maybe some people we don’t recognize would find themselves blown through the door of the sanctuary, and we would feel drawn in their direction, seeking a connection with the unseen order in their company.

I am in the privileged position of seeing many movements of the Spirit in this congregation, many ways that people are challenged by God’s mysterious energy, many ways that our community is held to a higher standard through its religious tradition. As many of you know, last year our church voted on a resolution to prevent gun violence, and this weekend is Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath, an interfaith movement to prayerfully raise issues of gun violence. What I saw the Spirit do this week was this: Chirper Ashley and Hillary White, who were not in agreement about the way the resolution passed last year worked together to craft a prayer. They worked hard to hear each other and be honest about their differences. This was religious and spiritual work, born from above, a blessing, a sign of hope in a weary and disillusioned world.

The wind blows where it chooses, rooted in creation, inspiring humanity, mysterious and out of control. Not open to explanation or analysis, not knowable as an object, but only experienced as power. I want to leave you with a couple of images that you may find helpful in cultivating receptivity to this holy wind. One is from the 12th century mystic, Hildegard of Bingen. She wrote, in one of her musings on the mystery of faith, "Listen: there was once a king sitting on his throne. Around Him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king with great honor. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground, and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus am I, a feather on the breath of God." A feather on the breath of God.

The other image comes from eastern traditions, and is put into words by the Persian poet Rumi: "God picks up the reed-flute and blows. Each note is a need coming through one of us, a passion, a longing-pain. Remember the lips where the wind-breath originated, and let your note be clear. Don't try to end it. Be your note." We can be flutes through which the breath of God flows, making music, healing the world. As we remember the pain and the bravery of many who suffer and work for peace and healing, as we plan for the safety of children, let the wind blow where it chooses. Amen