

Synesthesia

(with the play “*Santa Claus*” by ee cummings)

DECEMBER 11, 2016

My remarks this morning will be brief; more of a homily, than a sermon. I want, first, to draw the somewhat disparate elements of this service into one piece, if possible. And secondly, read from and speak a little bit about ee cummings, so that the little play we’re about to enact will be somewhat more understandable.

For the last several years, apparently, PUC has been celebrating a Festival of Lights Sunday every year at this time, acknowledging the common beauty and many common forms in the many winter solstice celebrations from across the world. I want to try something different this December, beginning by focusing on the two most widely known of these wintertime rituals: Christmas and Hanukkah. *Hanukkah* is basically a celebration of political freedom. The Hanukkah story lauds the courage, brains, and chutzpah of a Second Century B.C. Jewish family—the Maccabees—who managed to expel Greek imperial overlords from Judea and reestablish the orthodox faith of their ancestors.

Much has been written about these events, but today, suffice it to say that the orthodox state established by the Maccabees was hardly what *we* would call freedom in any democratic sense. Minority rights were in no way protected. Nor was the right of individual conscience. These two elements—minority rights and the individual right of conscience—are the hallmarks of true democracy. Everything else is just majoritarianism.

Although it is never secure and demands our constant vigilance, we are lucky, here in America, to enjoy a semblance of political freedom. However, political freedom is no guarantee that—in fact—we *are* free. The blessings of political freedom merely offer us *the opportunity* to become free. To actually *live as a free person* requires courage and integrity and responsibility. It is this courage and responsibility that ee cummings is concerned with.

Christmas is the story of a miraculous occurrence: the incarnation. The idea that God (or, shall we say, the creative forces of the universe) became incarnate in the body, and heart, and mind of a little child. Indeed, in every child and every person—if one has the eyes and heart to see it. This is the Christmas story.

Over the next two weeks Christians across the globe will share and act out the myth and ritual of Jesus’ birth. The Christmas myth, like all myth, is basically a series of narrative metaphors; a poem. An imagery with which we make sense, perhaps, of the world. In this way no myth can really be called “false,” or “untrue.” Only *affective* or (as the case may be) *not affective*. Ritual is the acting out of myth, so that we know it—or rather, *experience* the myth—with our whole bodies and central nervous systems and not just our heads.

When it works (*i.e.*, when it's affective) the use of myth in this way can engender the intuition, maybe even the experience, of genuine wholeness or connection to the creative sources within; the divine inner Self.

This experience, this insight, according to ee cummings, is real freedom. And, as I have said, it's no mere head-trip. Rather, it's the total psychic and physical experience of integration—with others, and paradoxically, with our deepest Self. There may even be, in the words of William Wordsworth (one of cummings's major influences), "intimations of immortality."

Another dimension of these moments of deep insight is the sensation of *total esthetic synthesis*: what the French poet Charles Baudelaire called *synesthesia*. Usually this is experienced as *a blending of the senses*: seeing lights or colors when a sound is heard, or hearing music at the sight of something beautiful or heart-rending. As Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan wrote and our choir just sang, "We gazed upon the Chimes of Freedom flashing."

But there's a problem. Religious ritual by use of myth and metaphor is designed to open us up to these integrative insights, sometimes even intimations of immortality. But for many Unitarian Universalists (for many people in the modern world) the forms of religious myth and ritual that they grew up with have become—for them—rigid and lifeless, such that they no longer serve as expressive vehicles for bringing about the kinds of deep, connecting experiences I'm talking about. The Christmas story, for some of these folks—or the Hanukkah story for that matter—is not alive for them. They don't connect to any of it.

So what do we do in that case? Or, rather, what do *I* do?—charged as I am with nurturing the spiritual life of our community and charged, too, with preaching three times a month; preaching something meaningful, something—one hopes—that signifies. Great preaching, great oratory of any kind (including theater) *connects* the listener with others; *re-minds* us of our wholeness. Somehow I'm supposed to do that, at least occasionally. But how to do it? How to help us collectively feel our collective hearts when we don't share the same symbols or (in the case of some) consider the symbols bogus to begin with? What then? Is the only way people can feel part of something bigger than themselves nowadays is by joining a gang, or a rally, or a cell? Do we just bag the whole notion of Sunday services as having any kind of *worshipful* purpose?

I don't think so. I think, instead, UUs need to take the images around that *do* affect us, and work with them. Or re-work them. If some of the traditional metaphors don't always work for us then how about acting out some of our own? ee cummings is one of our own. The son of a prominent Unitarian minister in Boston, his poetry speaks from a place that many of us, I suspect, can resonate with. Anyway, let's give it a whirl and see....

Our drama, "Santa Claus" was first published in 1946. Our production this morning is a slightly shortened version, the cuts made by cummings himself when delivering the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University in 1953. Before we go on to the play

itself, however, I'd like to read a few short passages from the same lecture—or as the poet put it—*nonlecture* series.

So far as I am concerned, poetry and every other art was and is and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality. If poetry were anything—like dropping an atom bomb—which anyone did, anyone could become a poet merely by doing the necessary anything; whatever that anything might or might not entail. But (as it happens) poetry is being, not doing. If you wish to follow, even at a distance, the poet's calling...you've got to come out of the measurable doing universe and into the immeasurable house of being.

Art is a mystery.

A mystery is something immeasurable.

In so far as every child and woman and man may be immeasurable, art is the mystery of every man and woman and child. In so far as a human being is an artist, skies and mountains and oceans and thunderbolts and butterflies are immeasurable; and art is every mystery of nature....

The artist doesn't live in some geographical abstraction... [superimposed on a part of this beautiful earth by the nonimagination of unanimals and dedicated to the proposition that massacre is a social virtue because murder is an individual vice. Nor does an artist live in some soi-disant [self-styled] world, nor does he live in some so-called universe, nor does he live in any number of "worlds" or in any number of "universes". As for a few trifling delusions like the "past" and "present" and "future" or quote mankind unquote, they may be big enough for a couple of billion supermechanized submorons but they're much too small for one human being.]

Every artist's strictly illimitable country is himself.

An artist who plays that country false has committed suicide; and even a good lawyer cannot kill the dead. But a human being who's true to himself—whoever himself may be—is immortal; and all the atomic bombs of all the antiartists in spacetime will never civilize immortality.

Thirty-two years ago I had the occasion to be up in Cambridge, Massachusetts visiting the Harvard Andover Library at the Harvard Divinity School. It was October. October 15th. The leaves were in the midst of their annual autumn display, and I took an hour or so to make kind of a pilgrimage, walking around the corner through the beautiful old neighborhood from the library to Irving Street and ee cummings's childhood home. On what would have been his 100th birthday.

trivial, so unso" that "phantoms are solid by comparison." ["This is a world of salesmanship"] (he continues) and you are so unlucky as to be gifted with understanding; "the only thing which simply can't be sold." What you should do is become a scientist—"Or in plain English, a knowledge-salesman"—since

In this empty un-understanding world
anyone can sell knowledge; everybody wants knowledge,
and there's no price people won't pay to get it.

But (objects Santa Claus) it appears that

Santa Claus. "I have no knowledge...only understanding—"

Death. Forget your understanding for a while,
(*he plucks off Santa Claus' mask, revealing a young man's face*)
and as for knowledge, why, don't let that worry you:
(*he slips off his own mask, revealing a fleshless human skull,
and crams the skull over the young face of Santa Claus*)
once people hear the magic name of "Science"
(*slipping the Santa Claus mask over his own skull face*)
you can sell people anything—except understanding.

Santa Claus. Yes?

Death. Anything at all.

Santa Claus. You mean, provided—

Death. Provided nothing!

Santa Claus. You don't mean to tell me I could sell people
something which
didn't exist?

Death. Why not? You don't suppose people exist, do you?

Santa Claus. Don't people exist?

Death. People? —I'll say they don't!

I wish to heaven they did exist; in that case I shouldn't be the
skeleton I am.

No—in this "Science" game, this knowledge racket, infinity's your
limit;

but remember: the less something exists, the more people want it.

Santa Claus. I can't seem to think of anything that doesn't exist
—perhaps you can help me.

Death. How about a wheelmine?

Santa Claus. A wheelmine?

Death. Surely a wheelmine doesn't exist and never will, and never has
existed.

Santa Claus. A wheelmine...but that's perfectly fantastic!

Death. Why say "fantastic" when you mean "Scientific"?

—Well, I'll be strolling. So long, Mister Scientist!

Next we behold Santa Claus—now masked as Death and loudly proclaiming himself a Scientist—in the act of selling shares of wheelmine stock to a mob; whose rampant skepticism rapidly turns to wild enthusiasm.

Santa Claus. —Anybody else?
Voices. Me! Me, too! Gimme!
Santa Claus. —Just a moment. Friends,
it never shall be said that Science favored
or slighted anyone. Remember: Science
is no mere individual. Individuals
are, after all, nothing but human beings;
and human beings are corruptible:
for (as you doubtless know) to err is human.
Think—only think! For untold centuries
this earth was overrun by human beings!
Think: it was not so many years ago
that individuals could be found among us!
O those dark ages! What a darkness, friends!
But now that hideous darkness turns to light;
the flame of Science blazes far and wide:
Science, impartial and omnipotent,
before whose superhuman radiance
all dark prescientific instincts vanish.
Think—only think! at last the monster, man,
is freed from his obscene humanity!
—While men were merely men, and nothing more,
what was equality? A word. A dream.
Men never could be equal—why? Because
equality's the attribute of supermen
like you, and you, and you, and you. And therefore
(superladies and supergentlemen)
when the impartial ear of Science hears
your superhuman voices crying "gimme,"
Science responds in Its omnipotence
"let there be enough wheelmine stock for all."
Voices. Adda baby! Long live Science! Hooray for wheelmines!

As Scene Three opens, Santa Claus—in terror of his life—comes running to Death: crying there's been a terrible accident in the wheelmine; and, as a consequence, the enthusiastic Mob now wants to lynch him. Death, secretly delighted, pooh-poohs the whole matter; and coolly assures his victim that a wheelmine is something perfectly nonexistent.

Santa Claus. O, then tell me; tell me:
how can it maim, how can it mutilate;
how can it turn mere people into monsters:
answer me—how!

Death. My friend, you've forgotten something:
Namely, that people, like wheelmines, don't exist
—two negatives, you know, make an affirmative.
Now if I may be allowed to analyze—

Santa Claus. Do you want to die?

Death. I die? Ha-ha-ha-ha! How could Death die?

Santa Claus. —Death?

Death. Didn't you know?

Santa Claus. I'm going mad. You: tell me,
whatever you are, Death or the Devil, tell me:
how can I prove I'm not to blame for the damage
caused by an accident which never happened
to people who are nonexistent?

Death. You can't.

Santa Claus. My God—what am I going to do, then?

Death. Do?

Why, my dear fellow, it looks to me as if
You'd have to prove you don't exist yourself.

Santa Claus. But that's absurd!

Death. —And tragic; yet a fact.
So make it snappy, Mister Santa Claus
(Exit. From the opposite direction enter Mob, furious: a little girl follows)

Facing the furious Mob, Santa Claus at first denies he's a Scientist and asserts that wheelmines don't exist—but all in vain.

Voices. We say you're Science! Down with Science!

Santa Claus. —Wait!
Ladies and gentleman: if you all have been
deceived by some imposter—so have I.
If you all have been tricked and ruined—so have I.
And so has every man and woman, I say.
I say it, and you feel it in your hearts:
we are all of us no longer glad and whole,
we have all of us sold our spirits unto death,
we are all of us the sick parts of a sick thing,
we have all of us lost our living honesty,
and so we are all of us not any more ourselves.

—Who can tell truth from falsehood any more?
I say it, and you feel it in your hearts:
no man or woman on this big small earth.
—How should our sages miss the mark of life,
and our most skillful players lose the game?
your hearts will tell you, as my heart has told me:
because all know, and no one understands.
—O, we are so full of knowing
that we are empty: empty of understanding;
but, by that emptiness, I swear to you
(and if I lie, ladies and gentlemen,
hang me a little higher than the sky)
all men and every woman may be wrong;
but nobody who lives can fool a child.
—Now I'll abide by the verdict of that little girls
over there, with the yellow hair and the blue eyes.
I'll simply ask her who I am; and whoever
she says I am, I am: is that fair enough?

Voices. Okay! Sure! Why not? Fine! A swell idea!
The kid will tell him who he is, all right!
Everybody knows!

Santa Claus. —Silence! (*To child*) Don't be afraid:
who am I?

Child. You are Santa Claus.

Voices. ...Santa Claus?

Chorus. Ha-ha-ha-ha—there ain't no Santa Claus!

Santa Claus. Them ladies and gentlemen, I don't exist.
And since I don't exist, I am not guilty.
And since I am not guilty, I am innocent.
—Goodbye! And, next time, look before you leap.

When next we see our unhero, he is wondering if the little girl, who (despite his deathmask) identified him as Santa Claus, could perhaps be his own lost child. Our villain now appears, emanating cordiality; and (in return for the good advice which saved his almost victim's life) asks a favor

Death. I've got a heavy date
with a swell jane up the street a little way,
but something tells me she prefers plump fellows.
Will you give me your fat and take my skeleton?

Santa Claus. With all the pleasure in the world, old-timer;
and I'll throw in a wheelmine, just for luck!

Death. No wheelmines, thank you.

They undress and exchange costumes; then off goes Death as Santa Claus, and in comes Child. Although the real Santa Claus is now completely disguised as Death, she immediately recognizes him; and before she dances away, he understands not only that he is her father, but that she—like himself—is looking for somebody “very beautiful. And very sad” who has lost them both.

Scene five follows—

(Enter Woman, weeping)

Woman. Knowledge has taken love out of the world
and all the world is empty empty empty:
men are not men any more in all the world
for a man who cannot love is not a man,
and only a woman in love can be a woman;
and, from their love alone, joy is born—joy!
Knowledge has taken love out of the world
and all the world is joyless joyless joyless.
Come, death! For I have lost my joy and I
have lost my love and I have lost myself.

(Enter Santa Claus, as Death)

You have wanted me. Now take me.

Santa Claus. Now and forever.

Woman. How fortunate is dying, since I seem
to hear his voice again.

Voices. *(offstage)* Dead! Dead!

Woman. Could the world be emptier?

(Turmult offstage. She cringes)

Santa Claus. Don't be afraid.

Woman. O voice of him I loved more than life,
protect me from that deathless lifelessness—.

*(Enter Mob in procession, reeling and capering: the last
Mobsters carry a pole, from which dangles the capering and
reeling corpse of Death disguised as Santa Claus)*

Chorus. Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead.

Voices. Hooray! Dead; yes, dead: dead. Hooray!
Science is dead! Dead. Science is dead!

Voice. He'll never sell another wheelmine—never!

Voices. Dead! Hooray! Dead! Hooray! Dead!

Voice. The filthy lousy stinking son of a bitch!

Chorus. Hooray hooray hooray hooray hooray!

A Voice. He fooled us once, and once was once too much!

Another. He never fooled us, pal: it was the kid.

(Woman starts)

Another. Yeah, but the second time—boy, was that good!

Another. I'll say it was!
Another. Did you see the look she gave him?
Another. Did you hear her say "that isn't Santa Claus"?
(Woman turns: sees the dangling effigy—recoils from the real Santa Claus)
Chorus. Ha-ha-ha-ha—there ain't no Santa Claus!
(Exit Mob, reeling and capering, booing, whistling, screeching)
Woman. Yes, the world could be emptier.
Santa Claus. Now and—
Woman. Never.
 I had remembered love—but who am I?
 Thanks, Death, for making love remember me.
(Enter dancing Child; sees Woman, and rushes to her arms)
Woman. Joy—yes! My (yes; o, yes) my life my love
 My soul myself... —Not yours, Death!
Santa Claus. *(unmasking)* No.
Woman. *(kneeling to Santa Claus)* Ours.

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So ends our little allegory and this morning's lesson: a double lesson—outwardly affirming that, whereas a world (or an empire, a culture, any mob) rises only to fall, the human spirit descends to ascend.

The inward lesson, that the road to individuation—to heaven—begins with our personal confrontation with Death, has been said by poets of all ages. But our Unitarian prophet mr. cummings goes further. It is the outward lesson, simple and yet so elusive: that "all groups, gangs, collectivities"—no matter how apparently disparate—are fundamentally alike; and that what makes the world go round is not the trivial difference between a Palos Verdes and a Compton, but the immeasurable difference between either of them and individuality. "I've found," cummings writes, "authentic individuals in the most varied environments conceivable." And what, then, is an "authentic individual" according to ee cummings?

(Spoken by the cast) I am someone who proudly and humbly affirms that love is the mystery-of-mysteries, and that nothing measurable matters "a very good God damn": that "an artist, a man, a failure" is no mere whenfully accreting mechanism, but a givingly eternal complexity—**neither some soulless and heartless ultrapredatory infra-animal** nor any un-understandingly knowing and believing and thinking automation, but a naturally and miraculously whole human being—a **feelingly illimitable individual**; whose only happiness is to **transcend himself**, whose every agony **is to grow.** *Amen.*

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