

## “Breakthrough”

JANUARY 8, 2017

Robert Bella, late Professor Emeritus and longtime Chair of the Sociology Department at U.C. Berkeley, spoke to delegates at our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly not quite twenty years ago. Professor Bella was responding at length to a comprehensive survey of Unitarian Universalist congregations. The survey had been conducted in association with our UUA-wide *Fulfilling the Promise* recovenanting process around anti-racism that many of our congregations were deeply involved in at the time. It revealed—not surprisingly, noted Professor Bella—a high premium on *individualism* among UUs across the board.

Making clear at the outset his own membership in the Episcopal Church, Dr. Bella went on to affectionately critique Unitarian Universalism as being *too* individualistic. Indeed, in his conclusion he suggested that ultimately we had things mixed up; that our First Principle—the inherent worth and dignity of every person (or as we teach in our Sunday school, “everyone’s important”)—should, in fact, be second. And that our Seventh Principle—respect for the interconnected web of all existence—should, rather, be first. That the Web—not the individual—is *a priori*.

This is an interesting idea to ponder, it seems to me: *which is the ultimate value*, the Web or individual people? A month ago, our Music Director, Severin Behnen, and I put together a service on the Unitarian poet E.E. Cummings; Cummings clearly comes down in favor of the individual. But Cummings view—even among UUs—is not universal. Maybe Robert Bella is on to something. And though I am *inclined* to agree with him, I am not going to today. Nor am I going to take him on.

I think the truth is more paradoxical. My thesis this morning is that we *are* part of the Web; an integral part. But because we’re human we tend to forget this—forget our connection—and get carried away in all the hundred and fifty thousand responsibilities and demands and considerations of life. Trapped in a never-ending-pursuit-of-the-future, we lose touch with the ever-present moment, become alienated and strung out, heartsick, restless, confused; basically, off-center. Or as my Mom would put it from time to time: totally schmoed.

Well, we have all been there. And one can become pretty desperate, as we all know.

Until, by some circumstance, often seemingly serendipitous, we catch ourselves...or, more accurately—it seems to me—are *caught* by the Web and reminded—literally *re-minded*—of our connection to something bigger than our egos. Our connection, in a word, to the Spirit, to *Source*.

What I want to talk about this morning are those moments: that experience of getting caught, of being re-minded; of re-remembering or re-collecting one’s *whole* Self—the experience, in other words, of *breaking through*.

There is a Greek word for this—*metanoia*, which we can think of, essentially, as the positive experience of paranoia. Not that the universe is a conspiracy to *do me in* (as paranoids think) but that the universe is a conspiracy *designed for my benefit* (as James Joyce repeatedly suggested). In other words, we're part of a web designed, as it were, to enlist our awe, our wonder, and our inspired efforts to become—to blossom into—the best persons we can be. We are vessels, each of us, *personally nuanced vessels*, of the web's creative power.

Maybe you have had an experience that brought this home to you; an experience that suddenly “brought you to your senses” in spite of yourself. The 17<sup>th</sup> century mathematician Blaise Pascal did and it changed his life. He wrote about it and kept a copy of his words in his breast pocket and next to his heart from that day forth until he died.

Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave describes something similar, which must have occurred to him through the influence of his mentor, Socrates. The allegory is described at length in *The Republic*. Of course, it's all expressed dialectically, with Socrates asking questions and Glaucon his interlocutor answering, but essentially what's depicted is this: a deep underground cave filled with people who are all bound and shackled so that they can't move and can only look in one direction: at the back wall of the cave. Behind them is a balustrade. Behind it is a bonfire. Now it happens that the prison guards have the habit of regularly walking across this balustrade carrying, as they go, large cut-out figures that—with the fire behind them—cast shadows on the wall in front of the prisoners. And, wouldn't you know it, the community living there in the cave—none of whom realize their predicament—ends up being organized and ranked socially by virtue of who, among them, can most accurately predict what shadow figures are likely to appear next, and what they all mean.

Until, one morning, one of the prisoners wakes up and finds her chains and shackles removed. Naturally, she gets up and slowly ascends from the depths of the cave, past her captors, past the balustrade, the bonfire, and on up into the light of day. *Only now* she realizes how misguided and constricted her former condition has been.

The experience—the psychological experience—of release and escape from bondage, of wondering out of constrictive darkness and into daylight and freedom—such an experience clearly must have happened to Plato. Of course it happened, since basically that's what *The Dialogues* are all about: philosophy as a means of liberation and *enlightenment*; escape from psychic-emotional darkness and entrapment into clarity.

Some people, plainly, have had experiences of this kind: epiphanies. Super-epiphanies almost; what scholars would call a hierophany. Like this fellow (or woman, I am not sure which) on the cover of this morning's Order of Service. [the *Flammarian Engraving*]

For others—most of us, I would suspect—things don't happen with such a bang. The change is subtler. And more gradual. Unlike Saint Paul on the road to Damascus, we're

not knocked off our horse. Still... there is such a thing as *awakening*. In the words of the late Kenneth Patton, renowned UU minister and humanist,

There are moments when the sheerest and simplest sensual experience wears a golden significance. Suddenly, as the air is crystal clear after the rain, objects take on a naked, transparent meaning. We are probed and wounded by the smooth, chill surface of glass, by a flashing sword of color, by the explosive individuality of a bird or child. We are stabbed by the is-ness and that-ness of things, and there comes a fresh and splendid sense of existence. We are shocked into self-awareness....

[*Naturalistic Mysticism: Man's Hidden Search*, Boston, 1954, p.105]

I remember reading an essay written by one of my colleagues, Denise Tracy. Reverend Tracy had missed her plane and was in a crummy mood, sitting alone in a far-away airport, simmering and staring blankly out the window when, slowly at first, she became entranced by an emerging scene on the tarmac outside the terminal. A group of adults was huddled, waiting. A plane came up. Stairs were attached and then a bunch of children stepped off, some carried in grown-up arms, some older ones walking by themselves. Slowly she realized what she was witnessing: Chinese children meeting—for the first time—their adoptive parents. And slowly she began also to realize longings of her own heart captured by this scene—longings that led ultimately to adopting a child of her own. Breakthrough.

I had a breakthrough of my own 17 years ago this month, walking my dog. I was living in Upstate, New York at the time. It had been cold—below freezing—for several days and so I decided (Mayzie, the dog, seemed to think it was a good idea) to walk over the frozen Susquehanna River and visit the deer-covered island half way across. Coming back—you guessed it—Breakthrough! What was funny about it—like Denise Tracy—I'd been kind of down-in-the-dumps at the time, sullenly walking along, head down, while brooding over this or that problem or difficulty. “What about this? What about that? Oh, so many problems, Mayzie! What am I ever gonna do?” When suddenly—splash!—into the drink: ice cold, rapidly flowing H<sub>2</sub>O.

There's a curious aspect to these life-threatening situations. One's other concerns sort of immediately fall away. Breakthroughs have a way of doing that. Have a way, that is, of putting things in perspective. And indeed, problems notwithstanding, my immediate, unscripted, and totally unselfconscious response was to ***reach for LIFE!***

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I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing, but unlike this “blown away fellow” on the cover of the Order of Service, for most of us, most of the time, breakthroughs are painful. Maybe not the breakthrough itself so much as the trip down the birth canal leading up to it. Experiencing a significant loss: a death, divorce, a health crisis, financial reversals, getting fired or otherwise waylaid professionally.

“It’s so easy to exist instead of live,” writes the author Anna Quinlan, describing a breakthrough experience of her own.

I learned many years ago. Something really bad happened to me, something that changed my life in ways that, if I had my druthers, I would never have been changed at all. And what I learned from it is what, today, seems to be the hardest lesson of all. I learned to love the journey, not the destination. I learned that it is not a dress rehearsal, and that today is the only guarantee you get. I learned to look at all the good in the world and to try to give some of it back because I believed in it completely and utterly. And I tried to do that, in part, by telling others, what I had learned. By telling them this:

Consider the lilies of the field. Look at the fuzz on a baby’s ear. Read in the backyard with the sun on your face. Learn to be happy. And think of life as a terminal illness because if you do you will live it with joy and passion as it ought to be lived. Well, you can learn to do all those things, if you get a [life, a] real life, a full life, a professional life, yes, but another life, too, a life of love and laughs and of connection to other human beings.

[Villanova University commencement address, 1999]

Breakthrough!

Different from Pascal’s experience. Different from Denise Tracy’s, but not all *that* different.

What all these experiences of metanoia have in common—what makes them epiphanies, or full-blown hierophanies—is that they break us out of our isolation and self-centeredness and into *relationship*. Not just “smelling the roses”-type relationships either (between oneself and nature or products of the imagination), but person-to-person give-a-damn relationships with actual human beings that matter. Relationships that require investment of time and energy. And that pay back, I might add, significant dividends. Dividends that link. That connect. That heal. That remind us of our inherent worth and dignity—the First UU Principle—by simultaneously making manifest, making clear, and making realized our integral connection to the Web—our Seventh UU Principle. Such that we experience ourselves simultaneously as *unique individual persons* AND *integrally connected* to everyone—and everything—else.

Breakthrough!

Let me add that this dynamic applies interpersonally as well. So often our most intimate relationships get stuck until some crisis forces us to look one another in the eyes and say, “Come on, Honey, we gotta break through this.” Followed by reaching out. Helping one another off the ice, if one has fallen through, back out of the torrent and onto solid ground.

Communities, too, can fall into ruts of convention and self-absorption. And can break through, as well. Our churches can break through, and some of them have, and are—breaking through right onto the threshold. Today. PUC was actually *designated* by denominational officials as a Breakthrough Congregation. From what I can tell reading through the church's history and from talking to many who were here at the time and still are here, this congregation has on several occasions gone through breakthrough periods—as you will in the future. There's a lot that needs to be attended to over the coming six months; some of it will be hard, but a great deal—like selecting, getting to know, and voting on calling a new settled Minister—will be fun and great cause for celebration.

And *now is* the time! American culture (not to mention global culture) is currently in the midst of an enormous transformation. A sea change is happening *right now*. Some of it dangerously destructive, for sure. But there is a lot going on that is wonderful, life-affirming, and uplifting to the heart and spirit. Let yourselves be part of it; let *us* collectively be a part of it: beyond too much individualism and into relationship, into beloved community, into the Interdependent Web of All Existence. Into *Life*. Beginning again *anew* today.

Spirit of Life, we ask Thee: Let *us* break through.  
 Every day  
 let us live breakthrough lives.

So may it be. Shalom. Namaste.