

# Trusting the Voyage: Images of Quest and Hope

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Strangely enough, I'd like to start off with the words of a couple of old UU hymns, sort of as my "text" for the morning. They come to us from a much earlier time. They're from the old, *red* hymnal entitled *Hymns of the Spirit*, published by the Unitarians back in 1937!

Twenty-seven years later, in 1964, when we brought out a *blue* hymnal called *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, both of these were dropped from our repertoire. They were dropped probably because many Unitarian Universalists by then had found the older theology they embodied somewhat objectionable and a little out-of-date. I can readily understand that.

And indeed, one could say they were *even more* out-of-date when we issued our present hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition* [1993], where you will NOT find them. For not only were they somewhat archaic in their theology, but rather sexist in their gender-specific nature.

The first is entitled: "Blow, Winds of God," and goes like this:

Blow, winds of God, and bring us on our way!  
    We set our sails to catch ye if we may.  
The night is dark with storm and tossing spray,  
    And yet we trust the morning and we say,  
Blow, winds of God, and bring us on our way!

We will not think we are the mad waves' sport;  
    A track is in the deep, that leads to port;  
We follow, and the hardship dare to court.  
    If God but guide us we shall make the bay.  
Blow, winds of God, and bring us on our way!

Oft-times the sea is lonely; there be few  
    Who sail with us to countries rich and new;  
Some fear they may not safely weather through,  
    But yet our way is onward, and we pray,  
Blow, winds of God, and bring us on our way!

The second bears the title of "Lord, In the Hollow of Thy Hand," and goes:

Lord, in the hollow of thy hand  
    Unfathomed lies the boundless deep,  
Whose billows rage at thy command,  
    And at thy bidding sink to sleep.

Thy way is on the pathless sea;  
    On farthest coasts still thou art near;  
And fearing, loving, trusting thee,  
    No peril shall thy servants fear.

When, swept by wind and wave, they breast  
    The fury of the winter gale,  
On thee their valiant hearts shall rest,  
    Assured that thou canst never fail.

Their way is sure, whate'er betide,  
    Whose mind on thee, O Lord, is stayed;  
In life and death still by thy side,  
    They journey onward unafraid.

Let me tell you something about them. The first -- "Blow Winds of God" -- was by Dwight Munson Hodge, an American Universalist living mostly in the latter half of the 19th Century. The second -- "Lord, In the Hollow of Thy Hand" -- is by a British Anglican, George Wallace Briggs, who was born some 30 years after Hodge and whose life was spent in the early part of the 20th Century.

Admittedly both reflect an earlier view of religion no longer shared by most religious liberals of our persuasion. It's probably a perspective on religion that seems to us to be terribly "orthodox" and "conventional."

But I mention them today because they're favorites of mine -- favorites for a couple of reasons. First, I love the gusto of them, the enthusiastic fervor of their spirit. I love them -- *despite* their theology, and *because of* their theology.

And, second, I love them for their "images," for the "metaphors" by which they express themselves. And you know, "images" are very important in living. (And I don't mean "image" in the public relations sense that our contemporary politicians have come to use that term. I mean it in a profounder sense -- in the sense that poetry can be profound.)

The images or metaphors we use help us conceive of what our personal and collective living is all about. They help us express the implications of our living -- beyond mere fact

and cautious reasoning. Often, our "metaphors of living" serve as our emotional guides, "guides" for acting when we're called upon to do so in the face of uncertainty.

And unlike in paragraphs or poetry, in life "mixed metaphors" are quite acceptable! In fact, the mixing of the metaphors of living sometimes allows us to express some of the ambiguity of existence -- an ambiguity that would be hidden by foolish consistency.

And it seems to me that we religious liberals have a distinct shortage of "images" in our public worship, at least certain kinds of images. We lack images that convey a sense that our "voyage" into the Unknown -- our questing and searching after the new and the untried. We lack a sense that such a voyage has any divine force behind it. We lack the metaphors that suggest our quest has any "divine sanction," if you will. Yet, I personally, at least, believe this to be true.

Our religious living is not simply the result of our own "selfish discontent," our "greedy unrest" for something more and newer. Nor do I believe it is the outcome of an "inability to fit in with the rest of the world." Or again, I don't believe it is the outward expression of "individualism gone wild," as I've heard some accuse us. Rather, I believe our movement rests upon a far more profound religious base than that.

We religious liberals -- let me amend that -- *some of us* religious liberals need to be able to say: "It's God's way!" -- at least for us, though not necessarily for all people, but for us! We need to be able to say: "God's way is on the pathless sea," ... it is on the way to strange, "farthest coasts," in the words of the hymn.

If you will, we need the metaphors that say: "For us, this is the way God comes to us -- in the restless reaching out, ... in the adventurous searching for the beyond." In some fashion or other, we should be able to express the meaning conveyed by Dwight Hodge when he said:

Oft-times the sea is lonely; There be few  
Who sail with us to countries rich and new;  
Some fear they may not safely weather through,  
But yet our way is onward, and we pray,  
Blow, winds of God, and bring us on our way!

Anne Morrow Lindberg -- in her book *The Gift from the Sea* -- comments on the "impossibility" of permanence, of anything remaining "exactly the same from moment to moment." It's a passage I frequently use in wedding ceremonies I conduct, since I think it carries a lot of wisdom about marriage, as well as for the rest of living.

But after making that observation (about the "impossibility" of permanence), she goes on to remark:

*Yet this is exactly what most of us demand. We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide, and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return! We insist on permanency, on duration...*

For that very reason, I think we need "images of trust and hope" -- of faith and trust in "our voyage to countries rich and new" (to use Hodge's phrase). It's true that like most I don't agree with all his theology. I doubt that there is "a track in the deep that leads to port." In my view, certainly it may not be like any "port" we may envision in advance. And perhaps, there will be no port at all -- not in the sense of a "home port." Perhaps, our voyage is an endless succession of wonderful "ports-of-call," with no final "arrival." If so, then so be it!

And I doubt that the "billows rage at God's command," and likewise "sink to sleep" -- even in a poetic sense. On that I do indeed have doubts, but they are far from "certainty doubts." In some deeper sense beyond our knowledge, perhaps it is true that the elements of existence are not as capricious as they seem. I do not know.

But one thing I would venture with some certainty: *I do not believe our lives are controlled by forces completely beyond our reach.* Nor do I believe that our decisions count for nothing in the outcome of our lives. Far from it -- they are often crucial and all important.

But I think we can trust the "voyage." We can trust it in this sense: when we "risk," when we *choose* to venture beyond our accustomed "safe harbor" to undertake the unknown or the untried, AND when we lay the best plans we can to insure the successful outcome, using the best knowledge and wisdom we possess—when we've done that, then we can trust that *whatever is divine-in-life* WILL sustain us!

I don't know if many of you are familiar with the writings of the Swedish novelist and playwright, Par Lagerkvist. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature back in 1951, and was read widely throughout Europe and in this country. Much of his writing is in a kind of strange, allegorical form with sometimes rather startling implications. He was a kind of modern mythologist.

And in his collection of short stories entitled *The Eternal Smile*, he has a wonderful little fable that I wanted to share with you. However, look though I might, I couldn't find the book in my jumbled library. So, I'll have to tell you a brief summary of the tale from memory. Sadly, it will not be with all creative literary skill of Lagerkvist himself. The story goes like this:

There came a time when humanity had had enough of the suffering and sorrow of this life. Angry and indignant, they decided to find God, to confront him and demand an accounting from the creator of this universe. Surely, God would be able to explain the violence, the evil, the suffering and deformity that afflicted the world.

And so they set forth, a vast horde of men and women and children marching in search of God. And after many weeks, they came to a deep, dark forest -- so dark that even in broad daylight they had to carry torches. And they penetrated deep into the woods, until they came upon a clearing where the light filtered through. And there in the clearing was an old, humble, white-haired man in plain clothing, chopping wood. And the crowd of people stopped at the edge of the clearing. They stopped, drew back, and fell silent. For they sensed that they were in the presence of God!

Finally, some of the bolder came forward and spoke to the old woodcutter. One man demanded: "How could you create a world with war and violence and cruelty in it? How could you do this?" And the old woodcutter looked sadly at him and said: "I have done the best I could."

And a woman cried out: "How could you allow so much disease and poverty and deprivation to continue in the world?" And with deepening sorrow, the old man said: "I have done the best I could."

Another thrust forward a little child -- blind and with deformed limbs -- and asked: "How could you afflict a child like this from birth? How could you bring into the world an infant so twisted and crippled?" And the old man looked down, with even greater sorrow, and said: "I have done the best I could."

And again and again, as others pressed forward with accusations, God offered only one response: "I have done the best I could." And realizing they would receive no other answer, they grew silent.

Then, an elderly man came forward and asked: "But what is the purpose of all this? What did you mean in creating the world? What is the ultimate significance of all this?" And the old woodcutter responded: "I only intended that you need never be content with nothing."

And with that, the old woodcutter picked up the deformed child, cradled it gently in his arms and kissed it on the forehead. And then he sat it down. And they sensed that their time with God was over. They turned back into the forest, their lights fading off amongst the dark trees -- leaving the old woodcutter alone in the clearing.

That's the story!

The humble, old woodcutter-God of Lagerkvist's tale has only two responses, but I personally find them very meaningful. First, he says, over and over again, to every charge: "I HAVE DONE THE BEST I COULD." Admittedly they are strange words for a God to utter. But I believe that I can indeed trust the divine-in-life to do "the best it can." By that, I mean that given my decisions, my circumstances, my desires and yearnings and hopes—given these "raw materials" with which to work, I can trust it to build the best of my life THAT IS POSSIBLE!

The second response of the old woodcutter is: "I ONLY INTENDED THAT YOU NEED NEVER BE CONTENT WITH NOTHING." This is his final answer to the demand for cosmic purpose, his final response to the question "What did you INTEND for existence?" *I only intended that you need never to content with nothing.* To me, Lagerkvist is saying that I can trust the divine-in-life to "weave" my existence into a worthwhile, meaningful whole -- come what may!

That trust is well founded, I believe, with one proviso. I must be willing to accept what is offered! And what is offered may not be what I planned or envisioned or demanded. The luxury liner for my world cruise may not be forthcoming. But if I can ACCEPT the well-stocked little sailboat provided, then it will be worthwhile. It will sustain and nourish my spirit. In fact, it may even be more wondrous than what my limited desires could grasp in advance! Who knows!

I've come to believe this on the basis of my own life experiences. As a youth, I was reared in somewhat impoverished circumstances. Not "impoverished" in an economic sense, let me hasten to say, but in a cultural and social sense. But, growing up, I always had a sense that there was "something more out there in the world," something more to be sought. And I had many youthful fantasies about the "other world" *out there*, and my role in it. Like most, I had dreams of marvelous experiences and achievements that would be mine, of great creative endeavors, of fame and fortune, of all that would satisfy my great "hunger for life."

Looking back, I must say that Life *failed* to fulfill most, if not all, those youthful dreams. From that viewpoint, Life could be called a great "disappointment." Life did not "come through" as planned and envisioned. It was a great bust!

But I can still say, now, that Life as actually experienced *exceeded* all the dreams and expectations I ever held. Life has given me more of richness, of profound and moving experiences, of pain and sorrow, of loving, caring relationships, more of intensity of living -- more than I was ever able to anticipate or envision!

Had I possessed complete control over my life (and this is often what so many of us say we want), if I had possessed the power to fulfill all my dreams and expectations -- I would have missed most of the important experiences of my life! I would have walked blithely past the most beautiful, intense moments of my existence.

Given the power of complete "self-determination," I suspect that my life would have been built mostly around my fears and shortcomings and blindnesses. It would have reflected mostly the shortsighted, "lesser" dimensions of myself.

Yet, I did possess some sense that "my way was onward." And I followed onward, never quite knowing what lay ahead. (And probably it was a good thing, too, that I didn't know!) As a result, it has brought me a great deal of pain and anguish at times, AND a great deal of joy!

And I would not have missed any of the "voyage" for anything in the world. I can say, at this point, that I am glad I trusted the journey. Nor do I believe that its outcome, and its continuing outcome, was and is entirely of my own doing!

Images of Questing and Hoping, in human life and human history, are numerous. They range from the medieval quest for the Holy Grail to Lagerkvist's multitudes in their quest for life's ultimate meaning and purpose. Perhaps, in a sense, there is no shortage of such metaphors.

But I think it a mistake to see the Quest as a search for the "pre-conceived," the "pre-determined" goal or ultimate "Grail." The future, to me at least, is not all foreordained, set up in advance. That's what is both so exciting and so frightening about our obsession with the "onward way."

No entity in the universe -- not even God -- knows what the future holds. Because the future does not exist! There is nothing to know! What happens NOW—the events and accidents, the decisions we make or fail to make, the dreams we embrace or discard, the actions we take or hold back from—what transpires now is the "raw material" from which Life -- or God, if you will -- weaves the future!

That's why we are so important. Because we are "co-creators" of the future and the future world! In some way, great or small, we participate in the creation of what-is-to-be. And no one can "know" with certainty all the dimensions and nuances of that future -- until it has come to be. No one can truly envision the "home port," or even if one will ever come into being. That's not the important decision we each must make.

Rather, one must decide whether to remain safely in the "snug harbor," or to set sail and risk the "unknown seas." And the truth is, no one can say that one is the "wiser course"

than the other. Not really! For some, at least some of the time, the "harbor" is the most prudent place to be. To claim otherwise would be terribly deceitful.

Yet for others, the outward-bound voyage is the only course. And if we decide to risk trusting the voyage, then we must be prepared to give up our "home territory" for something rich, but new and undreamed of. We undertake that voyage with trust and hope, allowing if you will the "winds of God" to blow us on our way.

In Par Lagerkvist's curious little legend, as the multitudes march away into the darkness, marching away from their meeting with God, one of them finally says:

*The wealth of life is boundless. The wealth of life is as great as we can grasp. Can we ask for more? When, nevertheless, we do ask for more, then all the incomprehensible comes to exist as well, all that we cannot grasp. As soon as we are able to reach out our hands for something, as soon as we get the feeling that something is, immediately it is. Can we ask for more? (The Eternal Smile, p. 63.)*

I think we religious liberals need to hold fast to this hopeful wisdom, even as we hold fast to the image of the "hopeful voyage," the image of the questing upon the pathless seas. We need to trust in our future and our destiny.

We need to trust in that future -- not only as we shape it, but as God shapes it for us, beyond our wildest hopes and dreams! For some, God's way may lie within the "safe harbor" and the "leeward channel." And we would not deny them that religious way.

But we have *chosen* otherwise. And perhaps, we *have even been chosen* otherwise. Who knows? But I believe we are equally grounded in the divine-in-life. Let us trust that power. Let us go forward with the voyage joyfully, trusting and accepting it, come what may -- until the end of life!

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**Richard W. Kelley** served Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church from 1971-1991, when he retired and was named Minister Emeritus.

He preached this sermon on the annual occasion of Founders Day, which this year (2006) included a Doctor of Durability degree ceremony, celebrating 11 Paint Branchers (including Rick) who had entered their ninth decade of life (the 80 year marker).

The honorary degree of *Doctoris Durabilitatis* had been previously awarded to a class of 15 Paint Branchers in 2003.