

**A True Human Being  
The Rev. Suzelle Lynch  
Unitarian Universalist Church West  
June 12, 2005**

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**Readings**

Rumi: (in *The Essential Rumi*, trans., Coleman Barks with John Moyne, A.J. Arberry, Reynold Nicholson, 1995.)

Gamble everything for love,  
if you're a true human being.  
If not, leave this gathering.  
Half-heartedness doesn't reach into majesty.  
You set out to find God,  
but then you keep stopping for long periods  
at mean-spirited roadhouses.

From Thoreau's journal:

As I climbed the hill again toward my old bean-field, I listened to the ancient, familiar, immortal, dear cricket sound under all others, hearing at first some distinct chirps; but when these ceased I was aware of the general earth-song, which my hearing had not heard, amid which these were only taller flowers in a bed, and I wondered if behind or beneath this there was not some other chant yet more universal.

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**Sermon**

In my former congregation there was a little tiny woman named Helen Long, who was one of the oldest members of that church. She was shy, and very quiet, but powerfully intelligent and perceptive, and we used to talk from time to time during the coffee hour after church. One day, as she was talking about some of the physical problems aging had brought her way, she commented, "Old age isn't for sissies." We both laughed, but her remark has always stayed with me. It's a quote from Bette Davis, actually, who said "old age ain't no place for sissies," but it could probably have been said by anyone who has reached a certain achievement in years.

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I haven't achieved old age yet, but hope that one day I will be able to laugh about its difficulties as easily as Helen did. She lived well into her nineties with mind and spirit intact. But I have lived long enough to say that life – at any age – isn't for sissies. For life, if lived truly, is challenging. That doesn't mean it isn't also rewarding and joyful, but we have to understand that by its very design, life cannot and will not leave us unchanged, unscathed, or unhurt. Living truly – true to our deepest humanity – is risky. It's a gamble!

That's what Rumi says, "Gamble everything for love, if you're a true human being. If not, leave this gathering." He's echoing Helen and Bette. Get in the game, he says. Or else get out. Half-heartedness doesn't reach into majesty. Be a true human being, or leave this gathering.

There's something shocking about this, something provocative. He's challenging our very self-image. Of course we are true human beings, aren't we? He makes us want to say, "Hey, wait a minute. I can't gamble everything. I have a family to support. I have a responsible job. People are counting on me." Or perhaps we'd say, "I'm too set in my ways to take big risks. Let the younger people do it. I'm happy with myself as I am." But a younger person might say, "Hey, I'm not looking to gamble right now, I'm just getting started in life."

What does it mean to gamble everything for love? Rumi was a Sufi, and at the core of Sufism is the quest to enter mystical union with the Presence which is neither male nor female but from which the universe manifests. God, in a word – or Allah, more truly. Sufis believe that this mystical union is the ultimate aim in life and that it may be achieved through union with another person, with a teacher who has touched the holy him or herself.

For Rumi, gambling everything for love meant following his teacher Shams of Tabriz, and finding in his devotion to Shams the meaning of the universe. Rumi wrote that Shams' face was the sun which every religion was trying to remember. (*From The Soul of Rumi, A New Collection of Ecstatic Poems, translated by Coleman Barks, p. 49*) Rumi and Shams are said to have experienced a love as friends that transcended any they had ever known – they became lost in conversation that was so sustaining that they did not need food or drink or sleep. Rumi wrote, "If you want to live your soul, find a friend like Shams and stay near." (p. 236)

Talk about risk! Talk about faith! To say nothing of passion.

Faith and passion are not always things that come easily for us as Unitarian Universalists. We'd rather stand back a bit from our spiritual quest. We pride ourselves on being skeptics, on being in step with the scientific, analytical culture in which we live. Some of us have had disappointments and

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disillusionments with religions that didn't allow us to question, and so we have become good at questioning everything, and having faith only in that which can be proven.

There's nothing wrong with this approach, of course. It helps us avoid situations like the one in which a certain disciple in a Hindu story found himself. This disciple's guru told him, "God has many names, and one of these is Rama. If you see God in everything, then you will be safe wherever you go." So as the disciple traveled, he recited, "Ram, Ram" everywhere he went to keep himself safe.

One day on his travels he came to a village that was being terrorized by a mad elephant who rampaged through the streets, charging everything that moved. When the villagers warned the disciple that the elephant was nearby, he was unconcerned. "My guru told me only to recognize God in everything and I will be safe," he said. But the villagers persisted, warning him that it was very dangerous to go out when the elephant was around.

"This elephant is God, and I am God, so why should I be afraid?" thought the disciple, stepping out into the street. The elephant, upon seeing him, charged him. "Watch out!" the villagers cried. And even as the disciple was thinking, "I am God and you are God," the mad elephant picked him up and dashed him down on the side of the road, nearly killing him.

After a long convalescence the disciple returned to his guru to tell the story and complain. He said, "You told me to see Rama in everything and I would be safe! But look what happened."

"Oh, my disciple," said the guru, "You were right to see God in yourself and in the elephant. But why," he went on, "did you fail to recognize God in the voice of the villagers?" (*Adapted from "Soul Food," eds. Kornfield and Feldman, pp. 214-15.*)

The problem with the disciple is that he sealed his faith into a bubble of belief. His guru encouraged him to follow a living process of seeing God in everything – surely a more fluid and changing faith practice could not be imagined!

But the disciple took his teacher's advice too literally and risked his life on blind faith. When we turn faith into belief, it blinds us to the possibilities in life – possibilities for both growth and danger.

We know this, of course. But I wonder how many of you would believe me if I told you that being faithless is equally dangerous. Refusing to trust our

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inner knowing, relying only on logic and on that which is scientifically provable is as much a form of fundamentalism as is blind faith. It, too, is a closing of the mind and spirit to the myriad possibilities we need to be truly human.

What is called for, then, is not blind faith or no faith, but a wise faith. “Wise faith opens us rather than narrows us. It encourages us to question, to explore, to inquire. It encourages us to discover our own answers and to trust in our own experience. Wise faith enables us to listen to and learn from the guidance and experience of others while knowing that the power of transformation lies within....” (*Kornfield and Feldman, pp. 208-9.*)

But wise faith isn’t something we develop overnight – it takes a lifetime. For at each stage of our lives, the primary task of faith is different. Perhaps you remember the riddle of the sphinx from the story of Oedipus: What animal walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening, but has only one voice?

The answer, of course, is a human being. In the morning of life, we crawl on all fours, and in this vulnerable state, our faith is mostly directed toward our parents and the other adults who take care of us. Faith is a matter of survival. In adolescence and young adulthood, we work on developing faith in our powers and abilities, as we build a life and identity, and test our influence in the world. This is the noontime of life, when we learn what it means to “stand on our own two feet.” We learn to have faith in ourselves, and in what can be proven.

At mid-life, the task of faith slowly shifts from the external world to our inner life. As death’s constellation rises above the horizon of our inner evening sky, we are pushed toward understanding a wider universe of meaning. As our bodies age in this evening of life, some of us gain that third foot, the cane or stick we might need for support; but all of us gain the opportunity to develop a spiritual third foot – to develop a supporting faith in the transcendent dimension of human being. The dimension that lies beyond the limits of our ordinary experience; the dimension that is beyond all concrete knowing. Like Thoreau hiking up the hill to his bean-field, we wonder about the chanting of the universe that sounds beneath the earth-song, the cricket chirps, and we learn to open our ears to it. Also like Thoreau, we may find ourselves drawn into solitude.

Wise faith. We survive, we prove ourselves and learn what can be proven, and therefore trusted, and then what? That which is beyond our knowing, but in which we must place our faith, starts galloping towards us across the great plains of middle age.

Or to use another metaphor, the journey of our inner life, the journey of our inner growth and development, is rarely a smooth, level path. It’s more like a

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mountainous hike, a path with many switchbacks, sharp rocks, and a lot of elevation gain. We go along, sometimes in the company of loved ones and friends, sometimes alone. And then suddenly, right in front of us, the trail is gone, wiped out. We stand at the edge of a chasm.

And just as suddenly, our old beliefs and ideas about life are no longer sufficient to bridge the chasm, and we must change. We must leap.

But hey! Look over there! What's that, just off the side of the trail? A roadhouse.

Webster says a roadhouse is an inn or tavern outside city limits that provides liquor and usually meals and dancing, and often gambling as well. Roadhouses are hospitable and entertaining places, places to stop for the night while on a journey. Clearly, this is not a bad thing. So why, then, would Rumi say, "You set out to find God, but then you keep stopping for long periods at mean-spirited roadhouses."

He makes me think of Jesus, who once said it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it would be for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. He makes me think of Lao Tzu, the Taoist, who wrote, "the way that can be named is not the way." He makes me think of something an unnamed pundit once said, "The site of your next technique of avoidance is the site of your last breakthrough."

Every time we face a challenge in our lives, there's always the opportunity to stop, and turn aside for a time. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, for quite naturally, the roadhouse has a bar that has our favorite beverage, and it's full of interesting-looking people who've made the same climb we have and they have great stories to tell about it. So, instead of going on, we go in, have a drink, and listen to the people's stories. We tell them our story, too. And we're happy – at least for a while, because there's this nice view of the mountains, and we're warm and well-fed, and in good company.... But Rumi warns us that if we stay there, our spirits will die.

Perhaps you know what stops you, which risks you have found yourself unable to take; which ideas and stories and answers to life's questions are so important to you that any challenge to them shuts you down.

Perhaps you also know what your roadhouses are. I suspect we all have them, those things we do that seem so soothing and appealing, but which really are simply stopovers on the hard hike of our spiritual lives....

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For some of us, the roadhouse might be watching TV, or playing computer games, or surfing the net. Some of us obsess over our children, muffling the gnawing of our spirits by pouring into them all the love and attention we ourselves need. For some of us the call of work drowns out all other voices from within us. And sometimes the very things our spirits crave are actually present in our lives, but we are directing them towards someone else, or are not giving them the mindful attention that would make them a part of our spiritual journey. It's up to us – with a little help from our friends, perhaps – to wake up and notice the roadhouse we've stopped into.

Only then do we have a choice. We can stay there and stagnate or we can leave the inn's comforts and confront the chasm.

For life, lived truly, is not for sissies. If we are growing, it is full of challenge and passion, full of change, full of risk. It is full of the tension that comes from holding questions open until the answers emerge, instead of rushing in with solutions because the tension makes us so uncomfortable.

Gamble everything for love – leap the chasms that open up on your path. Risk telling the truth about yourself and your life. Risk listening to your heart instead of your head, or to your head instead of your heart – you know which one. Be a true human being – let go of your disappointments and disillusionments with religions that did not allow you to question, and embrace this one which delights in questions.

Gamble everything for love, for that which brings deep meaning to your life. Let go of your self-image and live for something broader and more passionate than self.

Be a true human being – and know, that no matter where you are in life, no matter whether you have four feet on the ground or two feet or three, majesty shall be yours.

Amen.

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