

Looking at Things by the Rev. David Usher
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Port Augusta is a dusty, dreary town at the top of Spencer's Gulf, two hundred miles to the north of my home town of Adelaide, South Australia. It markets itself as the gateway to the north. Gateway to a whole load of nothing would be nearer the mark. Two thousand miles north to Darwin, two thousand miles west to Perth, and virtually nothing in between in either direction.

To this dreary town some years ago there came a fourth rate circus, one charm of which was a sad collection of exotic animals including an ostrich. This circus was a ragbag affair, but if you have the misfortune to live in Port Augusta, you are grateful for any diversion. Anyway, one day the ostrich got loose and, with the whiff of freedom in its nostrils, it made off into the scrub. The circus folk and some of the locals gave chase for a while but soon gave up, and a few days later the circus moved on to ply its tawdry trade in the next dusty town and the worthy citizens of Port Augusta returned to their heat and beer induced torpor.

I knew nothing of this episode when, a year or so later, I was a nineteen year old jackaroo on a sheep station a hundred miles north of Port Augusta. Also on that station were two brothers, Ned and Dan, grizzled old bachelors who had spent their lives knocking about in the outback. Soon after I had arrived at the station, Ned and Dan had gone down to Port Augusta for the weekend. Six months later, they rang up to say they were ready to be collected. I was despatched. I found them, ashen faced and wasted from their six months in the town's bars and brothels. They looked and smelled terrible. Driving back in the summer's heat, I was leaning out of my open window to catch whatever fresh air I could. Dan, on the passenger side, was fast asleep. Ned, in the middle, was awake but enduring cold sweats and groaning quietly. I had never seen anyone with the DTs. I figured I was now.

Suddenly, out of the scrub and directly in front of us from right to left, dashed an ostrich. An ostrich! In Australia. Emus, yes, aplenty, but an ostrich? I turned to Ned. "Did you see that?" He was shaking, his eyes like saucers. "Thank God you saw it too," he said finally.

While working as a jackaroo on that sheep station, one of the best experiences of my life by the way, I learned to do something remarkable. I learned to see. I learned to see things to which I was at first blind. As a novice musterer, riding around on my motor bike in paddocks of fifty square miles and more, I struggled to locate any sheep at all. I would ride right past them, or even if I was stationary and staring intently at the distance, I could see nothing. Only with practice did I learn how to see the creamy grey specks on a distant hill, or the tracks in the sandy dirt. Back then, I had excellent 20/20 vision. Even so, I had to learn how to see.

What do you fail to see, though it be right in front of you? What do you need to look at differently? Lucy M Green's poem, Looking at Things, talks about how she learned to look at things so that she could see something different in them. Something magical, mysterious, beautiful, bewitching.

*Wonder awoke in me
When, a child, I discovered feathers,
Marvelling at their softness, their delicacy of outline,
But still more at the sheen and ripple
Of changing colour, blue, and green and gold,
Gleaming across the peacock feathers I found -
Not the great eye-feathers only,*

*But tiny ones catching the light, to change as I turned them;
Yet never could all the colours be caught together.
The magic was in the moment, the glimpsing,
The passing enchantment,
Sweeter perhaps for the very swiftness of loss.*

*Shells with their circles of pearl
And hollowed, satin-smooth curves
Had their transient rainbows for my delight,
Shadows of rose and blue and pale sea-green;
Even the milky moonstones
Took on soft colours, like the ring of haze round the moon.
Mystery held them, as the colours were glimpsed, and then vanished.*

*I treasured the pearly shells, and the feathers,
Even as later in life I found joy
In the blue or gold fire of opals, caught for a moment;
Still more in the rainbow mist
Of a great waterfall, seen from afar,
Incredibly distant along a Norwegian valley;
Or the colours mingling in the flung spray of a wave.*

*It is given to us to see only one aspect in the moment,
One fact of the prism,
One colour of the spectrum.
That is enough of joy, but also enough of blindness
To bring humility, and kindle in us faith
That one day we may see life in its fullness
In the constant light of eternity.
Then may we know the whole of love blended in beauty,
Even as here on earth we see, for a passing moment only,
The rainbow with every colour alight in joy.*

When you look at the world, what do you see? Do you see loveliness and joy, radiance and delight? Or do you see misery and pain, suffering and despair? Beauty or boredom? Both are there. Which you see depends on the eyes with which you are looking; the openness of your heart; the willingness of your mind to engage; your imagination to be transfixed.

Whether we are looking for sheep in the dusty outback, or at the sheen of a peacock's tail feather, we can learn to see what we are seeking but is not immediately obvious. Faith is learning to see. We can learn to discern beauty amidst the drab, to discover hope amidst the gloom, to see cause for courage when our hearts might otherwise falter. Faith is learning to see, to see even that which is fleeting, ephemeral, and darkly through a glass. Even that which is not there, but which our imaginations make real. And in seeing beauty, we are made beautiful. In seeing hope, we are made hopeful. The world reflects who we are. Faith is how we see the world, it is how we see our place within the world. It is how the world sees us.
What do you see? What do *you* see?

What do you see when you look at Unitarianism? I confess that sometimes my eyes grow dim from having had it before me all my days. There are days when I see only its faults and failings, the pettiness of our squabbles about things which do not matter, when meanwhile there is a

hurting world out there which needs us to be our best selves, not our worst. I grow complacent in my familiarity with the faith which has always been there for me, but sometimes I am glad and grateful to have the cool embers of my complacency shaken when I encounter someone who has just discovered Unitarianism for the first time and who is on fire because of it. This faith is precious, it is a pearl of great price, yet it is also precarious if we fail to perceive and appreciate its preciousness, not just for ourselves but for as many others as possible.

And what is that faith? What is the faith that has the power to transform lives, giving them meaning and value amidst the sometime sea of secular senselessness? What is the faith that has sustained me since birth through the many years of my bounty and particularly through this past year when I have been rudely and unexpectedly confronted by my own mortality, when I have been challenged to take stock of my life and give thanks for it?

It is not a faith in the weary out-dated mantra of Freedom, Reason and Tolerance. Perhaps those words resonated and inspired in previous times, but they are weak virtues today.

Freedom? Freedom from what? Have you been persecuted by the state or church recently for daring to believe according to your own conscience? Been to any good heretic burnings lately? Reason? By all means let us not be unreasonable, but are we creatures of the mind only? Have we no heart, no passion, no enthusiasm? Are we no better than a philosophical debating society? Are we not meant to engage the whole person? And Tolerance? What a hollow word, making a virtue of what is usually mere indifference. No, if we continue to proclaim Freedom, Reason and Tolerance as our banner cry, we should not be surprised that the world heaves a weary sigh in response.

I offer you a new Trinity. Personal Authenticity. Religious Community. And Social Agency.

What we offer is personal authenticity in matters of faith. At whichever wells we draw our spiritual water, whichever teachers we learn from and whichever path we follow, we offer the gift of being true to our own deepest selves, fearing not to doubt or to believe. I am occasionally surprised after I have preached a sermon to be congratulated on my courage for having preached as I have. I have never, never in my thirty plus years of ministry, had to summon courage before preaching a sermon, because interpreting life as I experience and understand it, in love and humility, is what as a Unitarian minister I have been called to do. I might incur the displeasure or disapproval of individual congregants, but I need not fear censure from higher authorities for transgressing doctrinal instruction. And you in the pew, you need not acquiesce meekly to my words. Though, I can tell you, I have had some congregants in my time for whom I have fervently prayed that they might acquire some meek acquiescence.

We offer that personal authenticity within the frame of Religious Community. I know it is the fashion today for people to opine that they are spiritual but not religious. If you knew the number of times I have heard that, usually from people who have not had a religious thought since their pet hamster died but who now are wanting something from me, like a wedding. What it usually means, from what I can tell, is that they have an occasional vague fuzzy feeling, but can't be bothered doing anything about it.

Unless you happen to be truly exceptional, and, I'll wager none of you are, it is a nonsense to claim being spiritual without being religious because being spiritual requires work, it requires practice, it requires the repetition of discipline. That is what religious community is. The place and the people in which and with whom to practise your authentic faith, to whom you commit some of your energy, your time and your money as an expression of that personal authentic faith.

We offer Social Agency. How lazy and self-serving we have become by telling ourselves that Unitarianism is all about finding our own truth and nothing more. If the world is not a better place because of your faith, what value that faith? Yes, we are permitted, encouraged, required to find our own truth. But we are also required to do something about it. Above the entrance to many Unitarian churches in Britain are the words "Dedicated to the worship of God and the service of man." We might today quibble about the niceties of that language, but the essential sentiments remain true. We gather to be in the presence of the divine, *and* the service of humanity. You don't get one without the other. It's not an either/or; it is a both/and.

That is a meaningful and relevant new trinity of faith for the present day. Personal authenticity. Religious Community. Social Agency. Through them we are connected to that which is greater than our own small selves, we are sustained by that which abides even as we might personally perish, we are lifted up when otherwise we might remain fallen. It is certainly the faith that held true for me in my recent dark days. This Unitarian faith was for me an absolute rock. The plane might have been going down, but I was sustained in the joy that I have known what it is to fly.

The story is told by a tribe in West Africa of the Sky Maiden. It happened once that the people of the tribe noticed that their cows were not giving as much milk as usual. They could not understand why this should be, so one young man volunteered to stay up all night to see what might be happening. After several hours of waiting in the darkness, he saw something extraordinary. A maiden of astonishing beauty came down from the sky on a moonbeam. She carried a large pail, and she milked the cows one by one, filling her pail and then climbing back up the moonbeam to the sky. The young man could not believe what he had just seen, so he lay in wait again the following night and, sure enough, the maiden appeared again to milk the cows and then return up the moonbeam to the sky. On the third night he set a trap, and when she came down again he sprang the trap and caught her. "Who are you?" he demanded.

She explained that she was a Sky Maiden, a member of a tribe which lived in the sky and had no food of their own. It was her job to come to earth at night to find food. She pleaded with him to let her go, but he was so enchanted by her great beauty that he demanded that she marry him.

"I will marry you," she said, "but first you must let me go back to my home for three days. Then I promise I will return and be your wife."

The man agreed, and three days later, true to her word, she returned, carrying a large box. "You must promise never to look inside the box."

For a while they were very happy together. Then one day, when his wife was out, the man was overcome with curiosity, and he opened the box. There was nothing in it. As soon as she returned, with the intuition only a wife can have about her husband, she knew what he had done. "Yes, I opened the box" he confessed, "but I don't understand why you forbade me from looking inside an empty box."

"I cannot be your wife any more" she said.

"Why?" the man demanded. "What is so terrible about looking inside an empty box?"

"I am not leaving you because you looked inside the box," she replied. "I was sure that one day you would. I am leaving you because you said it was empty. It was not empty. It was full of sky."

When I went home for that last time, I filled the box with everything that was most precious to me to remind me of where I came from. The box contained the light and the air and the smells of my home in the sky. How can I be your wife, when everything that is most precious to me, is mere emptiness to you?"

Having faith is not about what you believe. Having faith is about how you see the world. Is the world mere emptiness, in spite of all there is of beauty and charm and miracle and wonder and delight?

Or is the world precious, in spite of all there is of pain and anguish and bitterness and ugliness? Having faith is about how you see the world.

It is given to us to see only one aspect in the moment,

One fact of the prism,

One colour of the spectrum.

That is enough of joy, but also enough of blindness

To bring humility, and kindle in us faith

That one day we may see life in its fullness

In the constant light of eternity.

Then may we know the whole of love blended in beauty,

Even as here on earth we see, for a passing moment only,

The rainbow with every colour alight in joy.

Meditation & Prayer

We pause for these few moments, in a spirit of reverent appreciation and wonder, to ponder the mystery and the miracle that we are here at all, strange organisms of conscious being on a small planet swirling lonely amidst the enormity of the boundless universe. How or why we came to be here we do not and cannot know, yet here we are, and we cannot but be grateful for this unearned gift of life, this fleeting moment snatched from the eternal.

In all that we do and say, in all that we think and hope, may we be a blessing upon the world as we have been blessed by it. May we strive to speak truthfully, to act compassionately, to love tenderly. May we strive to be our best selves, reverent and kind-hearted. And may we be glad that we are not alone in our desire to live faithfully, but that we are surrounded by others who, like us, seek that which is true and beautiful; who, like us, would have the light of the divine shine within them. People who are beside us right now, fellow pilgrims in faith, with whom we sit now for a few moments in companionable silence, each offering our own unspoken prayers and meditations.