

Voices from out of eternity

This is an extract from the speaking notes for “Letters of the Spirit,” a lecture series delivered by Rev. Stefan Jonasson during last summer’s Eliot Institute at Naramata.

SOMETIMES I FIND MYSELF lying awake at night listening to the faint sound of the clock ticking away in the bedroom. As time passes, the clock’s rhythmic beat becomes louder and louder. Oftentimes the beat of my heart slowly blends with the ticking of the clock and it is almost as if the clock and my heart are beating out the same percussionist’s score of some cosmic symphony, as if eternity itself and my feeble little bag of bones had dissolved into one.

Sometimes I also hear voices late at night, against the silent stillness of the room. They are *not* – let me reassure you

– the kind of voices that came to Joan of Arc or, for that matter, the latest mass murderer to get his name in the paper. It is neither the voice of God nor the voice of the devil that I hear in those moments of twilight consciousness. No, they are the voices we all hear, I would imagine, when we are too tired to stay awake and yet too stimulated to fall asleep. They are the voices of memory, for the most part, belonging to loved ones who have gone before, those precious individuals whose influence upon us has been so profound that, were they to walk the Earth once more, we would immediately recognize their forms in the distance and the sound of their voices calling our names.


My great uncle Axel used to tell me “we live in the shadow of history,” admonishing me to remember the voices of those from whom I inherited my values and traditions. I have always felt the weight of this truth and have sought to live worthily in that shadow. But I would go further: we dwell in the midst of eternity. As Spinoza said, “we feel and know that we are eternal,” which is why those voices speak to us with such urgency and power.

Unitarian Universalists like to speak of the “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.” This transcending mystery and wonder

is experienced in many ways – when we gaze upon a beautiful vista, when we are caressed by the excited touch of a lover, when our ears tune in to the songs of the birds or the melodious strains of a violin, when the poems of the heart tumble from our lips, or when the golden silence of creation surrounds us in meditation or prayer. We experience it, too, when we encounter the literature of our living tradition, which speaks to us of faith and love across the distance of time and space. So it is that we may distill the essence of our faith – its eternal qualities, if you will – from the words that come down to us from the treasury of stories and sermons, tracts and tomes which are a part of our spiritual legacy.

So I hear an echo of our eternal nature in the voices of those whose memory is so deeply etched upon my own soul that I cannot escape them, even if I would. And I hear eternal truths tumble forth in the words of insightful women and men, from biblical times right down to the latest book of meditations, whose writings have inspired and encouraged me in my faith.

Our work and witness as people of the free spirit is something we undertake in the name of eternal values and abiding truths, as living embodiments of this living tradition we hold dear. We are strengthened in this undertaking by our rich literary inheritance, alongside the voices of memory, which serve us well as we live in the shadow of history and dwell in the midst of eternity.

When I drift off to sleep and when I awake in the morning, I hear their voices proclaiming the good news of our liberal faith. 

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