Sept. 11, 2005

READING, PART 1

“Origins of the I Ching: The Book of Change”

The I Ching, the ancient Chinese “Book of Change”, may be the oldest book on the planet. It was created by collective hand, by generations of observers, its wisdom passed along first through oral tradition over centuries, until the emergence of written language.

The deepest layer of the book probably came from nomadic Siberian tribes. Perhaps with objects made of wood or bone, or with pictographs on leather or bark, the elders mapped the flow and interaction of natural forces that were continuously changing yet ever recurring. Macrocosm and microcosm echoed each other in the rhythms of stars, tides, and seasons, in the interactions of water, tree, wind and rock, in the characters of animals and plants, in the patterns of human nature, relationship, family and society.

Eventually this wisdom was written down and, like the Talmud of the Jews and other ancient texts, it acquired layers of commentary linking its primordial insights to the current events of the time.

The ancients observed how human dramas rose and fell by the same patterns as natural forces. They saw how the laws of the cosmos could be applied to the arts of agriculture, business, politics, love, war, and religion.

In time the I Ching, the Book of Change, became a tool of divination, encoded in a series of 64 hexagrams.

Each hexagram represents a collection of forces and signifies how those forces relate to one another, describing the trends of human and cosmic transformation. With poetic economy, the Book of Change offers a snapshot of one’s current position in the cosmos and a way of discerning the trajectory of the future. Whether the future leans toward strength or decay—it potential lies hidden in the elements at work in the present moment.

READING, PART 2

“Hexagram 48: Ching/The Well/The Source”

The Chinese characters show a picture of wood reaching into water. Tree roots penetrate deep waters, drawing them upward. Hence, the image of “The Well.”

The Judgment: The town may change. Styles of architecture may change, and politics. But the well does not change. Encampments, settlements, walled cities, whole empires may rise and fall. Yet the Well at the center endures, never drying to dust, never overflowing. With constancy, it has served as a life-giving center, for those who came long before and for those who will come long after.

If you let the bucket down into the well but the rope does not reach the water, or if the bucket has holes in it, it is a great loss, a misfortune, a waste. And so, dear seeker, if you come to be nourished from the well, if you wish to fathom the Source of human nature, make sure your rope is long and your bucket

doesn’t leak. You will need to reach deep down in, and the vessel you have brought must be fit to hold the truth of life.

Come Drink from the Well
Ingathering Sunday
September 11, 2005
Rev. Lilli Nye

Several weeks ago, as I was anticipating this day, I began to ask myself, What brings us here, to this place, to this company? Why are we here? This question was not an admission of meaninglessness, but an effort to refocus myself, to bring myself back to fundamentals—something one constantly has to do to keep from being swept away by urgent and often unimportant things.

And as I contemplated this question of our essential purpose, I began to center on the image of the well, or the spring—the wellspring—as a metaphor for life-giving community and spiritual nourishment.

Markus then met this theme with his selection of the beautiful piece we just heard from the singers, with its text by Longfellow:

So hearts that are fainting
Grow full to o'erflowing,
And they that behold it
Marvel, and know not
That God at their fountains
Far off has been raining!

Now, in the past couple of weeks, we have been exposed so painfully to the destructive, horrifying, death-dealing force of water. And so, to remain with this watery imagery for our service today may seem tactless. Yet, the life-giving necessity of water is not erased or diminished by its darker capacity. They coexist, as with all natural elements. And so I chose to stay with it.

The trip that Tom and I recently took through the Arizona desert of course magnified my awareness of water. It was 110 degrees in Phoenix, and one would shrivel up into a raisin before knowing it in that searing heat.

But as we traveled up north through the state, we also saw the glory of a desert lush from abundant rainfall. The thorny, tough-as-nails desert plants were thriving in a hundred eye-popping shades of green and blue and yellow against the red earth.

When we first set out on our excursion through the state, I was driving, and Tom was accompanying the passing beauty by reading aloud from a book about the local towns and points of interest:

“Up ahead at the 497-mile marker is the last Saguaro cactus to be seen as we travel to higher elevation.” Saguaros are those tall cacti that look like they’ve been ordered to put their hands in the air. They populate the low desert, and indeed, it seemed as if they had marched en masse up to the crest of that particular hill at the 497-mile marker and then come to an abrupt halt as if honoring an invisible line. Not a one is seen after that point.

“And here is Bloody Basin Road. No one really knows why it’s called that, but of course there are several legends…”

“And off there in the distance are the Superstitious Mountains”—with their tales of a lost gold mine, hidden treasure, and mysteriously disappearing Indian guides.

A few miles later Tom says, “We’re coming up on the town of Rock Springs, home of the Rock Springs Café, which offers ‘arguably the best pie in the West.’” We looked at each other. “Let’s go!”

A U-turn off the highway, and soon we were making our way across the dusty gravel parking lot of the Rock Springs Café and Trading Post. We entered the dark little café, which seemed untouched by the passage of decades and fashion trends, and headed right for the pie case. We decided on a lemon custard pie and a German chocolate pie.

And I have to say, it was really good pie. I wouldn’t know if it was the best in the West, but it’s hard to imagine better pie.

Alongside our slices of pie the waitress plunked down two tall, nubbly plastic glasses of ice water, and as I sipped that water I exclaimed, “Wow, that is, arguably, the best water I have ever tasted in my life!” And that wasn’t only because I was thirsty. It tasted like … well, it didn’t taste like anything! It tasted only of purity, and evoked icy mountain springs.

And I realized, as I was marveling over this water, that this is the spring water that the town of Rock Springs is named for, springs filtered through hundreds of miles of underground channels and aquifers, springs flowing up out of the dense rock of the desert.

And I thought, I bet these springs have been utilized for hundreds of years, ever since there have been human beings on this land—and even earlier, counting the plants and animals.

“The town may change, the people may come and go, but the Well, the Source, remains the same.”

The image of water streaming out from rock, or the image of the well with its waters bubbling up from the depths, is so evocative both because of the physical necessity of water, and because of the spiritual and psychological meaning that water, wells and springs have taken on over eons of human history.

The well becomes the center of things, the basis of survival, nourishment, community, and finally a symbol of spiritual knowledge.

The metaphor of the well appears in many of the stories of the Bible, both the Hebrew and the Christian texts. Often it is at the well that meetings of quiet significance take place. In desert lands, among nomadic people, where water is so dear, the well is literally a life-saving presence, and so in the sacred stories of those people the well becomes symbolic of another kind of life, another kind of salvation.

Many spiritual traditions believe in the curative powers of the waters that come from deep inside the earth, and have incorporated pilgrimages to springs and wells into their sacred rituals.

There is a great teacher and translator of Taoist texts, R.L. Wing, who has also translated the I Ching. In her treatment of the 48th hexagram, which has traditionally been called “The Well”—she instead calls it “The Source.” She says that this hexagram represents the profound, inexhaustible, divinely centered source of wisdom and meaning for humanity.

She says the Source contains and is born of eons of collective truth and insight. Although people will journey from religious to political disciplines and back, explore various philosophies or scholarly interests, adopt conventions and fads, and alter their awareness in myriad ways—to be truly fulfilled they will inevitably have to return to the Source of their own nature and penetrate the foundations of human nature.

The text of the hexagram points out that if the well is not penetrated fully, if the Source is not fully understood, there will be ignorance and misfortune. And honestly, how well do we human beings generally understand our own nature? Thus, of course, there is ignorance, and there is humanly generated misfortune.

Let me now return to the first question, why are we here? What brings us here, to this place, to this company, to this faith tradition?

To use the poetry of metaphor, I would say it is to drink from the Well, to drink from the Source: To penetrate the deep and inexhaustible springs of wisdom and meaning for humanity, to come to know our own nature and the foundations of human nature.

Richard Gilbert is a Unitarian Universalist minister who created a rubric or model of the central purposes of church life. He believes there are four basic dimensions to our life in religious community.

First, we are a community gathered to worship, and to celebrate.

We worship by praising what is awesome, by acknowledging mystery, by touching down into what is most profound, and by reaffirming value and meaning.

By celebration we don’t mean that we pass out party hats and noise makers—at least not every Sunday—but we mean the act of honoring and lifting up what is most important. We celebrate by marking the crucial passages and events of life together—birth, coming of age, marriage, death. In some senses even grieving and confessing can be forms of celebration, for they are ways of honoring cherished things that have been tragically lost, wounded, or betrayed. So, first, the church is a community for worship and the celebration of life.

Second, the church is a community of mutual caring and compassion. It is a network of relationships in which we respond to one another and to our world with concern and concrete acts of support in times of need. We will all at one time be givers and at other times receivers. We will be cared for, and will be called upon to care for others.

Third, the church is a community of religious education and growth throughout the lifespan. Here we pass on to our children the values of our faith and help them become independent thinkers and seekers. We explore religious resources for living with integrity. We grow and mature, individually and together, discerning what we believe to be spiritually and morally true.

Which leads us to the fourth and last element: The church is a community of moral discourse and action. We need to help one another make sense of this

intensely complex world. We need others to call us to higher ground, or to help us open our minds and hearts to new understandings. And we are strengthened by collective, shared efforts toward service and justice.

And so we have these four aspects of life in religious community: Worship, Caring, Learning, and Moral Purpose. Now, Richard Gilbert happens to imagine these aspects of the faith community in a visual way. He visualizes worship and celebration as a circle, around which the aspects of mutual caring, religious learning, and moral discourse and action turn. If you look at his picture of the purpose of life in religious community, it looks like a bird's-eye view of a well.

I believe that our practice in Unitarian Universalism is to come to that well of universal human experience and wisdom. We let our buckets down into the depths of life and draw up its essential meanings and truths.

We often do this by exploring the world's different religions, sacred texts, and philosophies, trusting that behind their differences there are universals.

If there be only one humanity, then the common experience of that humanity can be discovered behind difference. If there is only one fundamental nature, then the wisdom within each tradition will illuminate that nature.

Our path is not just a tiptoe-through-the-tulips stroll through interesting religious concepts, not simply a smorgasbord, a cafeteria of religious dishes to be tasted with idle curiosity.

Our path is an effort to know what it means to be a human being:

to seek to understand the human heart and mind,
to penetrate what causes us to suffer,
what enables us to transcend tragedy,
what causes us to hate and oppress,
and what enables us to dismantle hatred and oppression.
It is an effort to know the Divine
in the earth, in the cosmos and within ourselves,
to learn what gives strength, what brings peace,
what enables love to freely flow,
so that our lives may be a prayer and a dedication.

And so dear friends, dear seekers, come to the well, come to the Source to drink. Come prepared with a long rope that can reach the coolest, purest waters. Bring a big bucket that doesn't leak.

Let us meet one another, and our very selves, at the wellspring of life.