

Theophony II

(Theophany means an appearance of the Divine on earth)

By Tess Baumberger

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A gentle breath moves
White faceted sands of snow
Off the steepled gray slate
Of the staid stone church
And through this sybillant air.

The sun composes ethereal harmonies
For their scattering swirling dance -
Miniature dervishes seeking mystical union.
They move slower as they near my window,
Beckoning with their ease.

For God is here, as well,
In this small town New England town,
On this blue February morning,
She sparkles among the gathered sky dust
That foams the evergreen bushes.
She skims the silent walks
To my office next door the church.
Here she grumbles with the radiators
And tingles in my fingertips
As they tap the combination
That will liberate this poem.

She answers yes to creative possibility
so long as it is loving, wild,
and no to each unreasonable demand.
She refuses to take sides
because she is so round and free.
She hones life on the scalding edge of death
That it may our shackles remove
And all prison bars destroy.
She breaks down the rocky walls we build,
And provides blueprints for new bridges.

Oh she loves, she frightens, she inspires.
She dares us to let go of the solidity
Of what we've always known
And revolve like hazy snowdrops
In the winter air,
Evolving into spring.

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For a few months now, in sermons and in life, I have been contemplating values and virtues that could help us cope with these difficult times in our world. There is a great deal of uncertainty and fear. More and more people are losing jobs, and so also their financial stability. Violence tears at the fabric of our common humanity, poverty and starvation tug at the heart of all who care. These are difficult times.

Such times may remind us of past difficulties. When we look back at adverse times in the past, we may see them as periods of great change, for worse or for better. On the one hand, dealing with difficulty can make people shut down, close up their hearts, withdraw from others, and retreat into their private pain, all in hopes of preventing further hurt to themselves. It sometimes happens that this is how we respond to adversity.

On the other hand, positive change can also emerge from adverse times and circumstances. Difficulty can push or even force us to re-examine our selves and the way we live. As people or things we cherish fall away from us, choosing to let them go can free us to enter into the all of life more fully. It can free us to live in new ways.

Difficult times can sow the seeds very positive personal, spiritual, and emotional growth. Sometimes adversity makes our values shift so much that we are made new. We form a new identity, and begin to live in ways that are more open to connection with others, more ready to engage with a sometimes heart-breaking world.

Last Sunday I spoke a little about the early women ministers in our tradition, ordained in the late 1800s. These women, especially those called to serve churches in the harsh prairie states, withstood great adversity. They used the difficulty of their lives and of their parishioners' lives as the stuff of transformation both in the accepted ways of doing church and in the received theology of our tradition.

This week I'd like to explore the wisdom of three more contemporary Unitarian Universalist men. All three faced the adversity of terminal illnesses. Through confronting the reality of death each gained great insights into life. All three wrote books that capture the wisdom they acquired through this facing this reality with courage and honesty.

Let me start with the man you have most likely heard about, professor Randy Pausch. Videos of his "last lecture" at Carnegie Mellon University made a big splash on YouTube, and his book has been a national bestseller. Both book and lecture talk about how you can achieve your childhood dreams by the way you live your life. Both lecture and book capture, with humor and humility, the legacy Pausch hoped to pass on to his children, to his students, and to anyone else who wants it.

Pausch was a software engineer so his wisdom is both practical and analytical. He recommends dealing with adversity from a position of power rather than a sense of victimization. Pausch says that complaining and whining waste energy that you could use to change your situation - good kick-in-the-pants advice. He says that brick walls show us just how much we want something. In breaking down or through such walls, he advocates the values of teamwork and humility, hard work and perseverance.

Pausch gleans advice for teachers from the "head fake" in football. A head-fake is when you move your head one way so your opponent will

think you're going that way, but then you actually move in a different direction. An educational "head fake" involves teaching people things they don't realize they're learning until well into the process. Stealth teaching.

From Captain Kirk in the original Star Trek TV series, Pausch extracts wisdom about leadership. Like Captain Kirk, good leaders delegate. They have the passion to inspire others. Leaders never say they're better at everything than those they are leading. Indeed they use, acknowledge and appreciate others' expertise. Good managers establish the vision and set the tone, which is an important of church leadership as well.

Pausch extols the joy of living your own dreams, but says as life goes on you may find even greater pleasure in helping others pursue their dreams. He enjoyed bringing very different students together to see what they could accomplish through collaboration. He learned, when doing this, never to set the bar too low, or to set it at all for that matter.

In essence, Randy Pausch's last lecture and book are what's known as an ethical will. An ethical will is a way to communicate your values, blessings, and life lessons to your descendants. This is a tradition that goes back thousands of years in the Jewish tradition, when most such wills were spoken rather than written like they are today.

The Reverend Forrest Church's last book is both an ethical and a theological will. Church served All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in New York City for some thirty years. He has written several books, including "Lifelines" which helped me through a rough patch. Like Randy Pausch, Church wrote his last book while coping with terminal cancer, knowing he would die within months.

In his book, *Love & Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*, the Rev. Church delves into themes he sounded again and again, during the course of his life and ministry – love and death (three words are also the title of a Woody Allen movie). Along with other experts in the field, Church says that religion is our response to our very human awareness that we must someday die.

The Rev. Church claims that our awareness of death prompts the big religious question, “What is the meaning of life?” For him, this is where love enters in. He writes that if the goal is to live a life worth dying for, then love is indispensable. What gives life meaning is how much love we leave behind when we die.

Church says that the measure of our grief when we lose someone else is the same as the measure of our love for that person. He further writes, “...when we ourselves die, the love we have given others is the one thing death can’t kill.” Not ever, in his view. Eternity, he writes, is not a length of time but a depth of time. We enter into that depth when we meet one another in the fathomless sacrament of love.

And if we dare not enter that depth? He writes, “Only our unspent love dies when we die, love unspent because of fear.” He wisely states that love takes courage, the courage to risk the pain of grief. He asks us what is worse - grief, or love unloved at the end of our lives?

We can free ourselves to love by forgiving others as well as ourselves. He writes,

“Because we and our loved ones manage to devise so many ways for fear to bind our hearts – fear of intimacy, fear of disappointment, fear of embarrassment, fear of confrontation – because our fear of pain or possible pain manifests in so many guises, we often hurt each other without really meaning to. We hurt one

another and ourselves by learning, over the practice of a lifetime, how to protect ourselves from pain. ...only one solvent can loose our hearts from self-protective captivity. Only love. And only a forgiving heart, one capable of accepting and bestowing forgiveness, is open both to give and receive the saving power of love.”

There is a great deal of wisdom in Forrest Church’s last book, but this message about love and forgiveness is the heart of it for me. Certainly it is important to invest some time in causes that ennoble you and will outlive you. He says that and it’s true.

It is important to finish your unfinished business so you can live without the burden of regret and so when the time comes, you can die gracefully. It is important to let others finish their business with you.

It is good to help others die, and from watching them do so, to learn how to live. But the most important thing is to form in yourself a forgiving heart so you can enter the deep sacrament of love again and again, fulfilling your potential for loving others and loving this fragile world throughout your life. In this book, the Rev. Forrest Church leaves a luminous legacy for all who can receive it.

As great as Rev. Church’s book is, and it is wonderful, my favorite of these books of wisdom is Phillip Simmons’ *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*. The youngest and possibly least well known of these three men, Simmons taught literature and creative writing before being diagnosed with ALS (also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease) at the age of 35. Like Randy Pausch, he had young children at the time.

Given five years to live, Simmons survived for seven and so had more time than the other two men to compose his thoughts on living with the reality of death. He spent some of that time in the Lakes Region of New

Hampshire, where he attended Starr King Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Plymouth. He writes of life there with great sensitivity.

His book of essays is poetic and beautiful – his training in creative writing clearly showing through. This book is down to earth and folksy in some places, erudite and mystical in others. It is as full of self-deprecating humor as it is of spiritual depth and wisdom.

ALS is a terrible disease. Your body gradually stops working, but your mind retains all its clarity. This means Simmons literally had to learn to fall. He says the fact THAT we fall is a given in this life, it's HOW we fall that matters. By honestly facing his increasing physical loss, by learning how to fall, Simmons settled on a paradoxical approach to loss. He writes, “... we deal most fruitfully with loss by accepting the fact that we will one day lose everything. When we learn to fall, we learn that only by letting go our grip on all that we ordinarily find most precious – our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves – can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom. In the act of letting go of our lives, we return more fully to them.”

He says that life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery that is ultimately unsolvable. Sometimes our experiences bring us to the cliff edge of this mystery. Each time this happens we have the choice either to back away from the edge, bitter and confused, or to leap forward into its awesome embrace. Simmons says that this mystery asks that we fully and consciously live in it. “That is all, and that is everything,” he writes, “We can participate in mystery only by letting go of solutions.” He says this is the first and hardest lesson of learning to fall.

As he journeyed into loss, consciously practicing the art of “living and dying” Simmons looked to religion for inspiration, because, in his words “...it is with religious language that human beings have most consistently,

rigorously, and powerfully explored the harrowing business of rescuing joy from heartbreak.” Religion helped him, in other words. So did humor.

In an essay in praise of the imperfect life, Simmons writes that he’s become suspicious of perfection. It’s easy to see the Divine in beauty, he claims, the challenge is to see it in ugliness and suffering. To illustrate, he talks about spring (aka mud season) in New Hampshire – a time of beautiful beginnings and terrible squelching mess. He writes, “We need the mud, it seems, for our mud seasons give us the pleasure of self-pity, which for most of us ranks between bowling and sex.” Then come the black flies. More self-pity!

If we dispense with the self pity perhaps we may come to see Source not only in the daffodil, but also in the yucky mud and the teeming, biting bugs. God is not just in the milk and honey of the Promised Land, she is also in the bare, scalding sands of the desert. If we desire always to be elsewhere, in some perfect future, then we will never really inhabit this day, which could be our last. We may never really live in this imperfect paradise of ours.

Simmons writes that we must look at the world both as lovers and as scientists. Both are important ways of encountering the world, but first and primarily, he says, we must look upon all of creation (including our enemies, and mud, and black flies) as lovers of its fragile beauty, its searing hardship, and its enduring splendor.

And so, he concludes, learning to fall means learning to dwell in the imperfect present moment. We can learn to do this by practicing meditation, loving awareness of what is going on within and around us. We can quiet ourselves inside as we knit, or take a walk, or play with a child. The important thing is to be quietly aware of the present.

Simmons says we'll know when we're dwelling in the present moment because it "enlarges, draws past and future into it, until we are dwelling not just in the moment but in the whole of life." Simmons reasons that if eternity includes all of time, then we are living in eternity right now.

If I may combine the wisdom of Phillip Simmons with that of Forrest Church, perhaps beneath the surface of the present, the mystery of eternity lies interwoven, in its fathomless depths, with real, true love, the love that we give with the full knowledge that we must someday lose its object. This is the kind of love we leave behind when we die.

By letting go of solutions, by letting of everything we hold most precious, Simmons says, we enter into life more fully. By practicing inner quiet and living in the present, we can widen the lens through which we ordinarily see things, so that we may perceive "the world in a grain of sand," as William Blake once wrote, "and heaven in a wild flower."

In the past ten years, Philip Simmons, Randy Pausch, and Forrest Church, three Unitarian Universalist wise men, have been brought to the cliff edge of the mystery of death. Each of these men chose to use the stones surrounding that adversity to build bridges, instead of the walls some would build at such times, in order to protect themselves from the pain of loss or hardship.

Across the bridge, from deep in the mystery, they brought precious gifts for our epiphany. We can take courage and inspiration from what they so richly bequeath us – practical advice, theological revelation, and gorgeous spiritual insight.

I think wisdom is a quality some people find by turning the lead of adversity into its own kind of gold. As Phillip Simmons says, religion can be part of this alchemy because it has captured within its language and

rituals and stories the wisdom of generations who have rescued joy from heartbreak. Religious communities can help us learn to forgive, to love, to live in the imperfect present.

And imperfect it is. These are difficult times. But as Philip Simmons says, it's not that we fall that distinguishes our age from any other. What might distinguish us is how we fall, because that is what matters. We will all someday die, and if we have lived a life worth dying for, we will die in a better, more peaceful way. One lesson of these books is that life is short and uncertain, and that we must seize the moment and do the best we can with the gifts we are given.

And it seems to me that, as minister and congregation, we have been given the gift of this opportunity to share a ministry together. And I've been wondering, what shall we make of it? Six weeks from today we will have a special service, in the afternoon, an "installation" service that celebrates the commitment we are making, as minister and congregation, to spending this time together.

Now the received wisdom for ministers new in congregations is to take it easy the first year or so, watch and wait and not to take many risks. And so far that's what I've been doing. A few weeks ago I said there is, at times, a fierce unrest within my soul and it has been stirring lately. I spent some time thinking about that during my study leave, while reading these books that encourage us to seize the day and do what we feel we are called to do.

I thought back to my first settled Unitarian Universalist minister. We asked him what his dreams were for the congregation and he wouldn't say, for the longest time. He kept saying that it didn't matter what he wanted, it was what the church wanted that mattered. And he's right. And yet, as a

lay leader I really wanted to hear about his dreams for his part of our ministry together. When he finally told us, we were excited by his ideas – we hadn't thought of many of them before. It didn't mean we did do them, but we'd consider what he had to say. Some we did accomplish, others not.

All this is to say that today I'd like to ignore the accepted wisdom and share some of my dreams with you today. I'd like to start us dreaming about what we could do together with gift of this ministry we will share. Where my dreams and yours meet each other and the needs of the community, that's where we'll do our best and most exciting ministry together.

One dream I have is for this to become a teaching congregation. Seminary students in our tradition must spend some time in a parish setting as part of their training – one year full time or two years half time.

Teaching churches must offer a stipend and provide an intern committee. Teaching congregations have to be good at welcoming someone new, offering good support and feedback, and also at saying farewell to beloved interns. They must also have a minister who is willing and able to supervise. I have always wanted to do this! I think you would be a great teaching congregation, and with seminaries right in Boston and Cambridge, we would have good choices of interns.

The benefits would be that we would have regular, fresh infusions of new ideas and energy. We would have another person at hand to preach, teach, and do pastoral care. Most importantly, we would be able to witness a very formative period in the life of a minister.

In doing all this, we would serve the wider denomination by helping train the ministers that we then send out into the world. Believe me, ministers always remember their internship churches fondly as the first

places they served. If you like this idea of becoming a teaching congregation, we could build up to it in the next few years. It does mean a financial commitment but the denomination does offer some help to churches working toward this goal.

Okay, so that's one dream. The other is to use some of my skills that are itching for expression. When I chaired the Public Policy Committee for the New Hampshire Council of Churches, I discovered that I'm good at helping people, as individuals and as groups, find what is most important to them – their core values and principles. The way I did this was to have people take one hour to share what inspired them to do this work. Some talked about a particular scripture, or a book or other experience. It was touching and revealing to hear what inspired people, and helped to build a sense of the group. I listened for the values and took copious notes. Then based on my notes, a few of us drafted a statement of values and principles.

Once I help folks articulate their core values, I'm good at helping them find creative and effective ways to live out those values in the wider world. It's like Randy Pausch said, as I grow older I love helping people live out their own dreams. In writing the statement of principles for the Public Policy Committee, it became clear that there were three main areas of interest - poverty, peace, and ecology. It seemed they could do more work if they formed working groups in each area, where they could use their expertise, passion, and connections to be more effective. Then they could meet together across groups once in a while to share accomplishments and strategies. That's what happened. They went from being a group that tried to be all things to all people, without much success, to being a group that formed coalitions with other groups and were able to accomplish much more.

One thing you said you wanted in a minister was someone to help you prioritize so you can be more effective in your work, without wearing yourselves out. My dream is to use a similar process with you, asking first, “What are our dreams? What do we most value? Why do we do justice work?” From that we could write a statement of principles that could help us consolidate efforts and prioritize future proposals.

Then we can talk about what we already do, and might do in the future to bring those dreams and values to reality using the particular gifts and assets that we share as minister and congregation? How have we, and could we, fashion our passion and energy into effective outreach? To me a transparent justice/outreach program would look like this – pretty much everyone in the congregation would be able to articulate our core values, and say how we’re living them out in our community.

I’d love to pursue this vision with you because I have a passion for justice work. To me religion is not just about personal spiritual transformation. As important as spirituality is in life, our religion also calls us to take that transformation out into the world. Mere spirituality lacks the dimension of justice, and without ethical action spirituality seems, well, kind of selfish. These are times that call for selfless action to build the common good.

If hope there is in this sermon, it may be this – that people have survived much worse times. We too will survive. It’s not that we fall that distinguishes our age from any other. What might distinguish us is how we fall, because that is what matters. That is what says something about who we are and who we want to be. By working together as minister and congregation, we may emerge from this time made new, transformed beyond the recognition of our today eyes, our lead spun into gold. So may it be.

Amen.