

“Take It To Heart”

Rev. Annie Holmes

I have been called a hopeless romantic more times in my life than I care to recall. Often it has been said to me in a way that said; either I am missing something important in my life that the speaker of course understands in a big way, or that I, as well as my romantic leanings are not helpful in the face of reality. And yet, I am a person who has resisted the trends of woo-woo if you please. I, as many of you, am poised on the brink of wanting to believe the unbelievable and also wanting to stay rooted in reality, whatever that may be.

We were raised, most of us to be scientific, linear thinkers. Plotters who go about the task of empirical thinking that takes us to a sum total of the parts, that will always add up to a reasonable sum. Well, it doesn't take one person long after the age of reason to see that our minds, this world and reality is not what we were first taught or even in our wildest imaginations imagined.

I want to appear to people to be mature, poised and reasoned, but my friends, I also know what I saw, and I used to live with a ghost. Yes, a real, live, well, not alive, but a ghost! She visited us in Kenosha, Wisconsin in the 100 year old house my former partner and I lived in for 5 years. My son was living with us at the time and strange things began happening in the house. I would be in the living room, alone in the house, and in the bathroom clear on the other side of the house the water would start running and the bathroom door started slamming. Then the pictures, in the morning would all be turned to one side. I smelled something very foul in one corner of our bedroom. We pulled up the carpet and even the floor boards, but nothing was there. Then, one night I saw the outline of a young girl who was crying standing at the end of my bed. When I got up, she was gone. Telling my son about it in the morning, he said, “Oh, that's Margaret.” Like we had had her over to dinner or something. “What do you mean?” I demanded. “Well,” he said, “I've seen her for months. I was playing Ouija with some friends the other night and asked who she was and she told me her name was Margaret and that 25 years ago she died of leukemia in this house.” It was like having another teenager living with us; leaving the water running, causing havoc when she could, just letting us know she was there. So, Margaret lived with us, appearing one other time to me, until Ben left for his own apartment. Then, as fast as she had been there, her presence was gone.

In the 17 years since I saw Margaret last, I have told this story many times and I have gotten mixed reactions. Some people smile condescendingly, some people nod knowingly, some people laugh out loud, some people are silent. Some of the reactions have to do with people's familiarity and ease with the spirit world, and some reactions have to do with people's resistance to the parts of life that are clearly outside science, reason and the empirical mind.

What have done with the experiences that clearly do not fit a pattern we expect life to follow? How does your mind react to new information? How do we decide what to believe? What is truth for you? Is truth made and not found? In my dealings with life and things that seem real and cannot be explained, I have come to the conclusion that some pieces of reality cannot be

analyzed or measured or quantified, but they are meant to be felt, acknowledged and lived.

As Unitarian Universalists do we, out of fear, hover in the in between, in that awkward position between faith and disbelief? So many of us have put off faith in what we had been taught, but have we taken the time, the patience, the struggle, the fortitude to build a new faith system that fits us now? And as other people ask us what it is that we believe, the reason may be not so much to belittle our experiences, as to avoid the intricate trouble of having to reach a verdict for themselves. Faith takes time. Finding faith in something takes patience, strength of character, and all that. Everyone believes something. Are you open to new faith filled experiences or do you only allow yourself a view of the world as deep as a microscope?

Chip Brown, in his book, *Afterwards You're A Genius* explains very carefully his faith journey. He is journalist for the New York Times and very critical of all things woo-woo, as he called them. Anything outside the analytical, logical, systematic and reasoned, was verboten to him. Then he got sick, heart sick over a lost love and in desperation and depression he went to his first psychic. This led Chip on a road of discovering what it was that he truly believed. It is a delightful book, full of humor and the best summary of the medical profession and its likenesses and differences from the growing existential, spiritual and utterly unscientific world of the paranormal, the psychic, and the intuitive. As the traditional psychotherapies were not going to help him, or so he felt, he would have to, as he put it, "... develop a knack for hovering in that awkward position between faith and disbelief." He took up the quest of discovering the difference between blind faith and militant faith and a militant disbelief.

Brown postulates that health is not simply the absence of disease, but a condition that could be actively cultivated. As the world reached out up from out of the Dark Ages into the Enlightenment and the age of reason, unfortunately putting medicine on a plane with science, seemed to sacrifice the art that had been the medicine of treating the whole person. As William Blake reminds us; "As a person is, so they see." If the body was a machine, therefore it could be treated like a machine separate from the spirit, the soul of a person.

And because so much of health; spiritual and physical has been something that we have been told is given to us from the outside, or from above, it comes as quite a shock and it is hard to do justice to, the disorientation one feels when you realize your eyes are not just taking pictures, but making them up, and your mind is not just reading stories, but rather constructing them on its own. And then you meet your first ghost and know that your life, your perceptions, your very foundation for reality is now rooted in new ground.

Jung is quoted as saying, "The gods have become diseases." And when that realization happens to a person and they know there could be another way of viewing even divinity, in their solar plexus, and a change is made, true faith, lasting spirituality and peace is finally created in someone's heart. Out of the disorientation one feels when they really realize their health is their own job, their faith and spirituality is their own creation, who appears in their life? None other than the monk and the clown come into play. These symbols are the signs of a truly creative psyche. And the question must be asked by every person on a faith journey, is my faith system the reconciling of the monk and the clown within me?

Using the symbols of the monk (the institutional religious system we may have been raised in) and the clown, (the jokester, the trickster, the wisdom of the questioning, and the making light of), oh yes, the idealists and religionists call what is finally found — is the soul or the true spirit of a person. Hindus call this revelation, prana or breath. Pacific Islanders call it mana.

Cabbalists call it astral light. Chinese Chi. Japanese Ki. But once the soul is discovered, not by the church, not by the clergy, but by the individual, — true faith, a true faith that lasts a lifetime of challenges and new material is born, never to be confused again with science, math or method. Because religion and science become forever interfused with one another, and the woo-woo, or that which cannot be explained in science, math or method is no longer in conflict with the spirit, but the spirit is seen in the math problems, grace is found in medical discoveries, and awe is suddenly found in the eye of the scientist. Reason no longer wrestles with the spirit. They can now abide each other, support each other, help each other, love one another.

Because, you see folks, all anyone, the scientist or the psychic or the doctor or the shaman is trying to find, is answers, meaning and ultimately truth. The best news of our day is that basketball coaches can now find a way to have their team meditate before they play and see the difference it can make in the team's performance. Military generals are reading the *Art of War* by Sun Tsu and seeing how ancient Eastern thought is valuable. The Tao te Ching is the fastest selling book on college campuses, and yoga is no longer a foreign word in people's vocabulary.

We are, right now, today, a part of a very unique but not necessarily new trend in the world. And this trend is a spiritual awakening. It happens every 50 years or so, mostly when a baby boom generation becomes adults, there is a shift, an opening in the literal, cold world of reason and the spirit peaks out its head and says hello to the world once again. People who scoffed at Reiki and healing touch just 20 years ago, are now asking for it. Acupuncture and holistic medicines and organic foods are no longer scorned, they are now getting top dollar. Medical doctors who almost rejoiced in having no bed side manner are now being called to task to care for the whole person with their medicine, not just the body, but the spirit of the person, their outlook, their inner life is also taken into account.

Rene Descartes, in the 1600's was the first we know of to call the human body a machine. Aristotle said beings unfold under the guidance of an immaterial psyche. Darwin demolished Aristotle's idea that growth of an organism was guided by a final cause or purpose. Under his "natural selection," organisms were simply the products of random events and had no purpose other than to maximize their number. And George Schmidt in 1982 went further by saying "Life is a series of complex chemical reactions. To understand the power of life, you must understand the principles of chemistry." Life in many quadrants of thought over the ages has been reduced to the known and the measureable. Life was simply the properties of matter, no vital extras were necessary. Concepts of soul or anima were deemed silly when pinned on a virus in these schools of thought.

The real crux of this discussion is; Where does one go for answers? You will go somewhere, I assure you. But which altar will it be? The altar of science and reason solely? The altar of pure spirit and psychic intuition only? The altar of money and possessions, degrees and well,

anything to keep us from our deeper selves? But we need to remember we will go somewhere for answers. And all I'm asking of you today is to be open and free and knowledgeable as you pick that altar. Is it a balanced altar? Is it an open, and willing to change and adapt kind of altar? Will it hold both your inner and outer lives? Will it hold your body and your soul? Can it hold the dream world as well as your check book?

We go through stages of faith. And I have found M. Scott Peck's four stages helpful in determining where I may be in this journey, and when people are trying to tell me where they are to give me some further tools. Some of you may have heard this before, but I find them so informative that they bare repeating.

Stage One: The Chaotic stage, the person here feels antisocial when it comes to matters of religion or the discussion of spirituality. The person in this stage will feel uncomfortable when people begin to talk about their faith, they may even get up and leave the room rather than have to engage in the conversation. When asked about their own faith system, they may laugh, fidget or get downright angry.

Stage Two: The Fundamentalist stage, here the person can tell you the date, place and time of their rebirth. These people feel everyone must believe the same way they do in order to convince themselves that what they felt spiritually was correct. Why does this stage seem to be a rising trend in the religious world? The definition of fundamentalism agreed upon by many is the unlikely combination of fear and the utter conviction that they have THE religious answer for the entire world.

Stage Three: The Skeptical stage, this approach to religion is the approach this person will probably make to all parts of their life; science, philosophy, medicine, banking, relationships etc. This is often a paranoid stage where the person takes a limited view of all things having to do with the soul or the realm of religion. Often religion and church are seen in a negative light. Peck believed this stage was different than the **Chaotic stage**, in that people in chaos were still open to change. And skeptics often are closed and therefore change is harder for a person in this stage.

Stage Four: The Mystic/Communal stage, in this stage a person is ready to open their spiritual side of life and the awakenings of the spirit within them and others in their religious community. They are ready to try new things, they want to talk about religion and spirit and the varied meanings they have. They are engaging and engage others in their discussions. Curiosity, interest, awareness and attention are strong in people in this stage. All aspects of spirit are worthy here and there is a passion to know more. Chip Brown moved from skeptical to Mystical/Communal in his journey and in his book we find Chip moving from a closed person to one who is aw.

Peck reminds us that we will probably move from one stage to the next but not necessarily in this stated order. And the stages are not static. In fact, in his studies he found that most people in chaos moved right to the mystical stage and jumped over the other two. Why do you think that might be? He also found that people steeped in the middle two stages often never moved from those stages throughout their whole lives. Why do you think that happens? He reminds us

to be vigilant at finding out what is at the basis of our own responses, negative or positive to topics of religion. Stage Four is the beginning of a new way of viewing church. There resides in stage four, a sense of peaceful settling in of a person or community, where you can be who are in the religious world without constantly trying to convert others. It is understood that by your very presence and the way you live your life, people are “converted” to a new way of thinking simply because you were true to your own identity. Can institutions and world religions go through these stages? Where would our church be? Where would some of the fundamentalist from any religious tradition be?

I must admit I was pretty blind to the world of the spirit before Margaret the ghost came into my life. It was by no means a scary experience. Even seeing her at the end of my bed did not freak me out. I have spent many years since then not laughing at other people’s experiences, or even questioning them, because I have been brought to a new altar, and there with the bones of my old faith, I have laid Margaret and her life and her death and her brief time with me down to rest. I like to think of myself as part of the new spiritual awakening that is happening in our country, and that I am reminded is not so new. This same fascination with the paranormal, the psychic, the spirit world happened in the early 1900’s as that baby boom generation was also reaching adulthood. We are as a human body, a machine, but not only. We are in our psyches, spirit, but not only. So, let us all willingly walk this tight rope between science and woo-woo and find a balance that will keep our altars open and ever expanding. I have found myself much more open to the power of the spirit in my healing. And as I have opened myself up to new ways of dealing with old problems, I have been amazed at the results. As the combination of our souls and our bodies are our very life itself, spread a wide cloth to include both in your faith and your healing. Keeping the faith is much more than closing the door on those things we can’t understand. Margaret’s memory will always be with me to remind me, the mystery is so much more than I ever imagined. And may it also be for you.