

The Language of the Heart
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: “Only God I Saw” – Baba Kuhi of Shiraz (11th century Sufi mystic)

**In the market, in the cloister – only God I saw.
In the valley and on the mountain – only God I saw.
Him I have seen beside me oft in tribulation;
In favor and in fortune – only God I saw.
In prayer and fasting, in praise and contemplation,
In the religion of the Prophet – only God I saw.
Neither soul nor body, accident nor substance,
Qualities nor causes – only God I saw.
I opened mine eyes and by the light of his face around me
In all the eye discovered – only God I saw.
Like a candle I was melting in his fire:
Amidst the flames outflashing – only God I saw.
Myself with mine own eyes I saw most clearly,
But when I looked with God-s eyes – only God I saw.
I passed away into nothingness, I vanished,
And lo, I was the All-living – only God I saw.¹**

Two weeks ago I delivered the sermon, “Drop Everything and Listen.” I spoke about the hunger for spirituality and the discipline that we must learn to listen to the voice of God, the Spirit of Life, and the Power of being. If we do not listen we cannot hear the voice of the eternal. I said, “Listening is the apprehension of meaning and presence when sound is uttered. Listening is the discernment of the persona that utters the sound, the word, the song, the cry, the laugh, and the sigh.

¹ Baba Kuhi of Shiraz, “Only God I Saw,” *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*, Eknath Easwaran, editor (Tomales: Nilgiri Press, 1991), p. 51.

Listening is the comprehension of power and grace in the voice of another, even the voice of the Sacred. To listen is to abandon your self, and especially your voice, to the other and the Holy Other.”²

Last Sunday I spoke of the tension that we often feel when the heart and mind collide in matters of faith, especially in times of conflict and tragedy. The problem is that we train our minds to think logically but reason does not always supply the answers we need in moments of disease and death. We need to train the heart to trust the love of God to carry us through every diagnosis, even unto death. We cannot expect God to deliver us from the inevitability of death, but can we so trust God to deliver us from fear? Do we engage the daily discipline of prayer and contemplation that schools the heart to entrust our lives and the lives of our beloved to the Great Unknown?

This morning I want to expand the theme of training the heart by speaking about the language of the heart. If you are training the mind you have to learn the language of science, mathematics, logic, rhetoric, and philosophy. Likewise, if you are training the heart or the soul, you have to learn its language as well. Now some of you might jump to the conclusion that I am speaking about reading the Bible or repeating the

² Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine, “Drop Everything and Listen,” University Congregational Church, June 14, 2009. You can find this sermon at www.ucchurch.org at Sermons.

prayers of the Church. I do that regularly in my daily spiritual discipline. But there are times when my soul does not respond. Sometimes the language seems tired. I have heard it so often that it does not resonate in my heart on a particular day. But even if it did, I would hope that my soul would be more polyvalent.

You see, the healthy soul is a polyvalent soul. When something is polyvalent it has many values, or meanings, or appeals. In medicine one can speak of a polyvalent vaccine, meaning that the vaccine can treat more than one strain of a disease. The English language is polyvalent. I love the English language, but we have to know which part of the English language do we mean? We could think of contemporary American English or that of England and Australia. While we can generally communicate with our English or Australian friends we know that our common tongue has different meanings and tones. Or, we could try and read the English language in various periods of time such as Medieval England or Renaissance England and discover its polyvalence. The English language is wondrously polyvalent. And yet, how much richer would my love of language be if I am able to fully engage French, or German, or Spanish. Likewise, the human heart is more fulfilled if it is polyvalent.

Let us set aside for the moment, and I do not mean minimize or diminish, the Daily Office and the *lectio divina* of common Christian spiritual discipline. Where might we find values, meanings, and appeals to the human soul that expand its capacity for the awareness of God, compassion for others, and courage to do the work of God's justice? Where are the sources that enlarge the human heart with worth, purpose, and engagement? What are the polyvalent expressions of God's truth, love, goodness, and beauty? Let me name several that are important to the growth and maturation of my soul. These are not set in order of priority because there are days when my heart resonates with one or the other.

Nature is one of the strongest spiritual influences on my soul. I do not mean a romantic view of nature, but the whole scope of nature's power in life and death. I marvel at the beautiful sunsets in the Westering Kansas sky. The glory of dawn with the reveille of birds awakens in me the majesty of life and I break into a big smile of thanksgiving. I wonder at and fear the sharp banks of black wall-clouds and straight-line winds. They remind me that I am not in control and teach me humility.

Let me tell you about my six-year-old gelding, Dusty. I have mentioned him to you before. Dusty is a Paint horse that had been

generally neglected for the first four years of his life. He had walked on the wild side, having sired two foals. He was not gelded until he was four, so he was used to the nightlife. Last summer I sent him off to boot camp and he came home much improved.

Soon after I got him home our trainer and I were working with him on a lunge line in an open field. Dusty broke to his left and made a mad dash to freedom, kicking up his hind legs. He hit me hard on my right thigh. I am lucky he did not break my leg. Had it been my head or gut you would be hearing murmurs like, “That was a stupid way to die,” or “I didn’t think he knew what he was doing.”

Hear are some things you should know about Dusty. He is very curious. If I am working in the corral he follows me and watches intently everything I do. When I was ratcheting the base of a hay feeder Dusty came up behind me and pulled the knot on my carpenter’s apron causing it to fall off. Dusty is very affectionate. He always comes to the gate for petting and hugging, especially if you have Honey Nut Cheerios in your pockets. When he is in the pasture and I whistle for the horses to come up for grain Dusty runs. He nuzzles. And when we are riding the other horses he is very jealous and insists that I work with him in the round pen for a few moments so he can have some attention too. Like all horses,

Dusty is often fearful of new places, new routines, and new people. You can lead him to a luscious new field of grass but he will be reluctant to enter it because he has not ever been there before and it is not part of his routine. You see, the day that Dusty kicked me I had taken him into a new field. His training had always been in the confined space of a round pen. I made a mistake that day by not respecting the natural cautiousness, even fear, of horses.

The training of Dusty is on going. Everything I do with him is a teaching moment and the biggest question is whether I am teaching good habits or bad behavior on both our parts. In the round pen training began with getting Dusty to trot in the direction that I chose. At first I was pleased to see him trot in one complete circle without stopping or breaking. That required a lot of praise and reward. The next week we worked on two rounds, then three and so on. We work on stopping and going in the opposite direction without delay. And when he stops he must turn into the center of the pen and face me. This summer we are working on saddle and reins. It will take all summer.

What has this got to do with my spirituality? It trains my heart to be patient. You see, Dusty is training me to take the time to learn with him and understand him. He is training my soul to remember the

importance of lavish praise and reward. He is not the self-directed taskmaster that I am. He requires love, patience, and firm but gentle discipline. I have to share with him the courage to enter new places or new relationships.

My soul needs that training because the lessons that Dusty teaches me are the lessons I need for my marriage, my children and grandchildren, and the members of my church. They are the lessons I must take into the hospice home, the Christian Education classroom, this pulpit, and every meeting I attend in the administration of the church.

If you think I am talking about better training skills or management techniques you have missed the point. I somehow doubt that the Board of Trustees would appreciate being haltered and trotting around in circles in a round pen. No, I am talking about the heart of the executive, the soul of the father, and the spirit of the pastor. Skills mean nothing if the hands of compassion do not work them.

This is the work of nature in the training and equipping of my soul. And next to nature is the education of my heart in literature and poetry. You cannot read Charles Dickens or Fyodor Dostoyevsky without a greater appreciation for the travail of the poor and the human struggle for conscience. I worry that I do not spend enough time in the hearts and

minds of the literati. They help me discern wisdom and often give me the words I need to hear and understand the majesty of life. While I read the prayers of the church and the Bible every morning I always include the poets. These past few weeks I have been sauntering through a new collection of Mary Oliver's poems in her book, *Evidence*. Listen to this poem, "Then Bluebird Sang," and see what your heart sees and hears.

Bluebird

slipped a little tremble
 out of the triangle
 of his mouth.

And it hung in the air
 until it reached my ear
 like a froth or a frill
 that Schumann

might have written in a dream.

Dear morning
 you come
 with some many angels of mercy

so wondrously disguised
 in feathers, in leaves,
 in the tongues of stones,
 in the restless waters,

in the creep and the click
 and the rustle
 that greet me wherever I go
 with their joyful cry: I'm still here, alive!³

³ Mary Oliver "Then Bluebird Sang," *Evidence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), p. 12.

If you are an English major or a literary critic, put down your censorial pen and turn off your pettifogging mind. We are not writing a review for *The New York Times*. We are training the heart. Mary is sharing with us what the Bluebird and the stones and creeks are teaching her about the recognition of life. They are teaching our hearts something about awareness and thanksgiving. Hers is an example of how we practice the presence of God in the humble setting of a morning walk. Her ears invite us to listen to the voice of God in all that surrounds us. That is soul work! We are called to the consistent heart work that expands our humanity and makes us extraordinarily humane.

If I had more time I would share with you other examples of my polyvalent soul. I would speak of music, dance, film, and theatre. I would testify to the power of the fine arts in the instruction of my heart. They are seasoning my heart with a variety of flavors that tantalize my capacity for tolerance, wisdom, and just the sheer joy of being alive. They coach me on the expressions of beauty and truth. Who could watch the second half of *Les Miserable* and not be profoundly moved by the sweep of human tragedy and nobility? A day with Van Gogh is a day with the Author of Life.

And I hope you understand that within each of these polyvalent themes a polyvalence of expressions is possible. I lifted up theatre and specified one play. But that musical was first a book and also a movie. There are many other genres of theatre. Van Gogh's waving wheat fields or swirling stars does not captivate some people. But Thomas Moran or contemporary American painter Cindy Betzer Pharis may transform them.

Let us take this one step – a deeper step – further. Much of what I have suggested is the experience of an observer. What if you decided that you would write you own poem or short story? What if you decided to take a class in drawing or painting? How would you be transformed if you spent time in the field with a naturalist and learned how to distinguish the song of a bluebird from a meadowlark? Yes, I mean to say that immersing ourselves in the creative expressions of life are means by which the soul is trained. We discipline our hearts on canvas, film, and stage. We train our spirits with song and dance. We engage the powers of life and death in fields, rivers, oceans, and mountains.

Because the human soul is unique and hopefully polyvalent we cannot make judgments about another human being's "spirituality." It is very much like grief. Every person grieves in his or her own way and we are foolish to be impatient with him or her because they do not express

their grief the way we do. I am reminded of a lesson that H. Richard Niebuhr taught me a long time ago. Niebuhr wrote that I can know my relationship with my neighbor. I can know my relationship with God. I cannot know my neighbor's relationship with God. As soon as I dare to presume such knowledge I betray myself as arrogant, intrusive, and judgmental. So it is with another person's spirituality. Given the polyvalent nature of the human soul we can only respect the variety of its expressions and adaptations. So it is that on any given Sunday morning the prayers, children's story, readings, hymns, chancel choir music and sermon, may or may not resonate with any particular congregant. I cannot worry about that. The Spirit blows where it wills.

I hope I have made it clear that spirituality does not mean sitting in a cell in sackcloth, flagellating yourself, and mumbling the rosary. The Spirit has many voices, colors, and rhythms. Not all of them will speak to your heart. Very few of them will serve as your teacher. The question is whether your heart is open to those who can engage you, expand you, and transform you. Which will you allow to ripen your soul, so that when God breaks open your heart many will wonder at the sweetness of its fruits?

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