

Half the Happiness, Twice the Longevity
By Don Southworth
July 8, 2007

© 2007, Rev. Don Southworth

One of my favorite television shows of all time was created, written and hosted by a Unitarian Universalist. Rod Serling has always been, in my mind, something of a genius and when I found out a couple of years ago that he was a UU and a long time member of our congregation in Santa Monica I liked him even more. The Twilight Zone, the original Twilight Zone came out when I was still in diapers. But thanks to the miracle of television repeats, and most recently Sci Fi channel marathons on New Year's and the Fourth of July, I have watched almost every episode of the show. Serling was a master storyteller who weaved science fiction, spirituality and human nature into morality lessons that surprise, scare, confuse and inspire me every time I watch them.

For some reason, maybe it was the five or six episodes I saw last Wednesday, I have not been able to get Serling's voice and mannerisms out of my head as I have considered today's sermon. I am not a very good Rod Serling impersonator but here is what I've been visioning as I have prepared to preach this morning.

(In Rod Serling voice:) *"Welcome to a sanctuary in the hot and humid Southeast. A religious and spiritual home for people in a town like many across the land. People who have stopped for a few moments to rest and reconnect with others, who are looking for a bit of comfort, companionship and community. Listening for a few words of hope, of humor, maybe even inspiration from a chubby, balding preacher who looks and sounds like preachers toiling in places of worship like this one each and every Sunday. Preachers who joyfully, painfully struggle to craft sermons each week in the hopes that a word, a phrase, a concept finds its way into someone's heart and mind and help make a positive difference in a life, in a world, that needs hope and inspiration. Most Sundays our preacher's words fall on appreciative but tired souls that need rest more than inspiration, and hearts that need love more than fancy words or clever stories. But this Sunday something different is about to happen because this Sunday these people in their*

shorts and their sandals, their ties and their tie dye T shirts are about to enter the Twilight Zone." (Cut to commercial.)

Now I realize that I am setting myself up a bit with that introduction. This Sunday is my annual preacher's surprise sermon when I don't tell you what I am going to talk about so beginning with a Rod Serling voiceover might have you thinking my surprise is that I have invited an alien to join us or that you will be taken to another planet far, far away where people who are beautiful are considered ugly and people who are ugly are considered beautiful (one of my favorite episodes). But rest assured I have not planned either of those adventures for us this morning (but since we are in the Twilight Zone remember that anything can happen!). As we come back from commercial and go back to Rod Serling you will discover why today is a bit of a Twilight Zone experience.

"We offer for your consideration a question and a poem. A question, a test, that everyone must answer but that few ever truly do. Tell me, the poet and the preacher ask, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

"A cockroach named Archy, sat at his typewriter and crafted a poem of his own to answer the poet's and the preacher's question. Let us turn to his poem and consider his friend, the moth, as we ponder the question, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life...on tonight's edition of the Twilight Zone?"

I found the "Lesson of the Moth" several years ago when reading a treasure chest of a book by the Unitarian Universalist minister, Robert Fulghum, titled *Words That I Wish I Wrote*. From the first day I read it I have been haunted and been challenged by its message. Something that happens to me frequently when I watch the Twilight Zone.

In seminary one of the things that I was a bit fearful of learning was something called "exegesis". I did not know what exegesis was before I went off to seminary but it looked like a scary word when I reviewed my first catalog of courses. When I got to seminary I discovered that exegesis meant to critically analyze and explain the Bible. That scared me even more. Writing a ten or fifteen page paper on a

paragraph from the Bible seemed overwhelming and, I thought, there were many better ways I could spend my time. Eventually I wrote two 15 page exegesis papers and discovered that explaining and analyzing scripture – whether it comes from the Bible or from Mary Oliver’s keyboard– is something that ministers do regularly and, fortunately, is something that I liked to do.

I think of exegesis when I read this poem. I imagine studying and analyzing each stanza, not only with my head but also with my heart. I have got to tell you that I absolutely LOVE this poem and the options it suggests for living. Archy’s decision that “I would rather have half the happiness and twice the longevity” and the moth’s decision that “it is better to be happy for a moment and be burned up with beauty than to live a long time and be bored all the while”.

What is your plan to do with your one wild and precious life? Do you plan to live as the cockroach, who in the moth’s words lives, “like humans used to before they became too civilized to enjoy themselves”, or do you prefer to emulate the moth who wads his “life up into one little roll and then shoots the roll... for it is better to be part of beauty for one instant...than to exist forever and never be part of beauty”?

I can almost hear some of you saying to yourself, “Don, life isn’t such an easy choice to either sit on the sidelines feeling secure and passionless or so full of enthusiasm that we throw ourselves into the fire and risk our lives”. And you would be right.

I know the life and lessons of the moth better than many people do. That is because I am a seven on the enneagram. The enneagram is an ancient spiritual, mathematical, psychological system and framework of understanding personality types. The enneagram offers nine different names for personality types such as the reformer, the helper and the thinker to name just three.

I am a seven which is known by many names, the generalist, the enthusiast or, my least favorite, the hedonist. One writer describes a seven with the qualities of “accomplished, impulsive, excessive, manic, enthusiastic and inspiring”. Listen to one description of my personality type and I don’t think you

will have to wonder much if I look at life through Archy's eyes or the moth's eyes –that is if moths have eyes.

“Sevens see themselves as happy and enthusiastic. They like being happy and make psychological happiness, the feeling of euphoria, the goal of their lives. Sevens cram as many experiences into a day as twenty-four hours will allow. They want constant variety and are always looking for something new and different to amuse themselves. The faster the pace, the better.”

I am convinced that the moth was a seven. So were John Belushi and Liberace. Two people who knew how to throw themselves into the fire and sometimes paid the price.

The enneagram offers, similar to the Myers Briggs test, a way to look at ourselves and, hopefully, understand ourselves a little better. Sevens, like sixes or fours or nines, have healthy and unhealthy ways of living out their character traits. Unhealthy sevens are sometimes called “manic compulsives” or “excessive materialists”, while healthy sevens are called “happy enthusiasts” or “ecstatic appreciators”. I have known the unhealthy life style of sevens, or the moth. I have known addiction and the practice of completely obsessing and throwing myself into something exciting and dangerous, something I wanted so badly that I almost fried myself to death.

That is not how I want, or how I suggest you would want, to answer Mary Oliver's, Rod Serling's, and my, question to you today, **what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?**

But from what I see in the world and in Unitarian Universalism our problem is not having too many people living like the moth. I see far more people living like our friend Archy the cockroach. People who are choosing – or not – to have half the happiness and twice the longevity. People who because of fear, cynicism or inertia sit on the sidelines of life watching it go by. Afraid to step into the fire, afraid to feel passionate enough about something or someone to risk everything – even their very life – to experience a beauty and wonder that they may yearn for but are afraid to work for, afraid to touch.

Joseph Campbell, the author and teacher, could have been speaking about the moth, but he was really speaking about the spiritual quest we are all on when he said, “*But if a person has had the sense of*

the Call - the feeling that there's an adventure for one - and if one doesn't follow that, but remains in the society because it is safe and secure then life dries up."---

What is the fire, the light that is drawing you into your life more deeply these days? What do you see, what do you yearn for that your doubtful self, your unsure spirit, your fearful heart, your loving but unhelpful cockroach is holding you back from? What beauty, what passion, what enthusiasm is waiting for you so that you can live the most precious and wild life possible? A life beyond your wildest dreams, a life that calls you to be more authentic, more joyful, than you have ever been before.

For right or wrong, good or bad, happy or sad, you have a preacher before you that wants to go into that light, go for that flame and wants to lead everyone else around him to go towards it as well. I want to live my one wild and precious life in the game, in the fire, and not on the sidelines, leading people towards the light, towards the dream, towards the life that they yearn and ache to have.

But I warn you, moths can be a real pain. They get in your face sometimes and say “go towards the light”, “be more than you think you can be”, “catch fire with the passion of this religious faith” and often times we want to swat them away. But moths seem to have motors that don't stop, an enthusiasm for the light, for the flame, sometimes even for their demise that can be contagious.

When I think about the lesson of the moth I think about the words of the Unitarian minister and author Ralph Waldo Emerson. “Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.” Enthusiasm, a Greek word which originally meant, “to be inspired by a god”. It is one of my favorite words, and more importantly, favorite traits in myself and other people. Enthusiasm does great things. Enthusiasm builds vibrant congregations. Enthusiasm serves food to the hungry. Enthusiasm raises healthy children. Enthusiasm marches for peace. Enthusiasm fights for justice. Enthusiasm keeps us young at heart. Enthusiasm makes dreams come true. The enthusiasm, the fire, the passion, the light that calls us to be our most whole, our most joyous, our most alive, has been called God by some. It does not matter what we name it; what matters is that we pay attention to the whisperings of our spirits and pay homage to that which ignites and inspires us.

Emerson said something else about enthusiasm. “Everywhere the history of religion betrays a tendency to enthusiasm.” Maybe Archy was a religious cockroach.

A religion that betrays enthusiasm, that betrays the human spirit’s need to catch fire with passion, with wonder, with joy is a religion that will experience twice the longevity, perhaps, and half the happiness. Maybe it is not a surprise that religious communities that are bringing more passion, more joy into their worship experiences, such as the Pentecostals for example, are growing, while more traditional, more staid religions are declining.

I hope, I dream, of a congregation, of a religious movement that inspires passion and fuels the flames of our spirits to reach for that which is beauty, that which gives our lives meaning, purpose and joy.

Because that hope, that dream, that fire not only offers us the best chance to live our own life with beauty, wholeness and joy, but also gives the world the best chance to be healed and made whole. I want to touch that flame of hope, that fire of yearning, that warmth of possibility every time we come together as a religious community, in every morning walk and evening prayer, with every hand we hold and every tear we cry. And I want us to move towards the fire and away from the cold security of the sidelines.

Religions and religious communities should not stifle our dreams and quench the fires of our spirits, they should stoke the embers of our hearts, inviting and pointing us to possibilities that we can never realize alone. Religious communities and traditions invite us to consider, to build, a deep and abiding faith. A faith that helps us overcome the fears of our spirits and the cockroaches that surround us. A faith that may be grounded in trusting ourselves, or the arms of another, that may be inspired by the goodness of life or the goodness of God.

We hold each others’ hands as we tentatively or boldly walk towards the fire, the light that is the hopes and dreams of our wild and precious lives. We turn to each other, we turn to that which we call holy, for comfort, for encouragement, for solace when the flame burns more hotly than we can stand alone. Let us not be a religion – or a religious community - that betrays enthusiasm but let us achieve greatness by encouraging the enthusiasm that the fires of spiritual seeking and yearning produce.

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? And how will Unitarian Universalism, this congregation, and the cockroaches and moths of your life help you live it?

(Rod Serling voice.) "A grasshopper, a cockroach and a moth. A chubby, balding preacher and a congregation of people trying to make sense of a universe full of beauty and pain, fires that illuminate and fires that can kill. Deciding what to do with their one wild and precious life. A little love, a little light, a little hope and a little question to help you on your way as you travel through the journey of life that we call the Twilight Zone."

...May it be so. Amen.