

This is Spirituality: Waking Up!
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When I lived in Canada, one of my favorite movies was “A Paper Wedding,” a French Canadian film. It came out in 1990, but its subject matter is still timely.

In the film, Geneviève Bujold plays Claire, a university professor. She’s pushing 40, still single, and not completely happy about that. Her sister, a lawyer, persuades her to marry Pablo, an immigrant from South America (presumably Chile) who works in Canada as a dishwasher.

This is indeed a “paper wedding,” undertaken to enable Pablo to stay in Québec – he’s on the verge of deportation. The plan is that there will be a civil ceremony, and then the two will part company. No fuss, no bother, no need for Claire to leave her married lover.

Of course, this well-laid plan goes awry. A zealous immigration official gets onto Pablo’s case, convinced that the marriage is a fraud. He becomes Pablo’s “Inspector Javert,” and makes it his personal mission to see that Pablo is deported.

As a result of his pursuit of the case, Claire and Pablo are forced to live together – and not only that, but to get to know each other well enough to make a good case before the immigration judge!

You can guess what follows – at least in part. I’m not giving anything away by telling you that the two, over time, fall in love. The beauty of the film lies in its subtlety, in the way it shows the gradual development of tenderness between two strangers. As love develops, surface impressions fall away. Superficial categories, like “neurotic professor” or “immigrant dishwasher” disappear. Each awakens to the beauty of the other.

At the film’s end, some people know exactly what has happened between Pablo and Claire. They see the depth that has developed, the bond that has been made. Others persist in seeing only surfaces; they haven’t a clue as to what has happened. (I won’t elaborate on who’s who, for that *would* be giving the plot away!)

Now, perhaps one should be cautious about reading too much into a film. But when I thought about “A Paper Wedding,” I began to see the film as a metaphor for the life of the spirit.

What do I mean by this? Well, nothing overtly “dramatic” happens in the film, save in a place or two. On the surface of things, not much seems to change. But at a deeper level, something important and profound is going on. A situation is transformed. Two people become real to one another. What had been covered up is made known. Furthermore, some see it clearly – and some miss it completely.

Many people associate the life of the spirit with the “supernatural,” the “otherworldly,” the “occult.” They see “spirituality” as somehow divorced from ordinary reality – prettier, perhaps, more pleasant. They may even make a distinction, between *reality* on the one hand, and *spirituality* on the other.

But I’d like to suggest that no spirituality worth its salt divorces us from reality. The authentic life of the spirit never takes us out of “the real world.” Rather, it immerses us in reality, puts us more intensely in touch with it. Or, perhaps it’s more accurate to say that we’re already immersed in the real world. All we need to do is WAKE UP to reality – to see the depth of things, rather than the surface.

Of course, assertions like these invite philosophical conversation. Just what constitutes “reality,” anyway? Is it only what we see with our eyes, and hear with our ears, and touch with our hands? Is it only what we can measure? Or speak about with precision?

For Hindus, if I understand correctly, this is precisely what is *not* real. To a Hindu, the visible, tangible, measurable world is illusion, *maya*. In contrast, most people in the West, at least in the last few centuries, have equated reality with what can be seen, touched, and measured. In fact, some of the major currents of UU tradition are rooted in this point of view.

Certainly in our everyday language, we tend to speak of reality in those terms. Some even go so far as to imply that reality is the *least* pleasant dimension of existence. Think of the phrase “cold, hard, reality,” for example. Or, “Back to the real world!” – something a person might say after hiking to the top of a mountain, or spending the day by the sea, or attending a transforming workshop or retreat. Often, it’s said with a sense of letdown or resignation.

But what if “reality” is right there on that mountaintop? What if it’s the force that grasped us as we walked by the ocean? What if it *is* the truth uncovered on that retreat?

Let’s take it further. What if that mountaintop reality is with us all the time? What if it’s with us as we walk the streets of our city? As we work and play and fight with our families? As we dig in the garden, scrub the kitchen table, or work at our computers? What if it’s right here, right now, among us? What if the holy is embedded in our day-to-day existence, and all we have to do is wake up to it?

But let me be clear about something. I’m not suggesting that we’re supposed to walk around on an endless spiritual high. I’m not suggesting that life is supposed to be one long series of mystical “peak experiences.” I’ve had such experiences, and I’m guessing that others here have had them, too. Unitarian Universalists aren’t always comfortable talking about them – but we’ve had them, I would guess, as much as anyone has.

There are people who think those highs are the whole point. They enter spiritual practice deliberately seeking such experiences. But whether or not they have them, they set themselves up for disappointment.

If they *don't* have the highs, they think they're doing something wrong, and either become anxious or quit altogether. And if they *do* have them, then they get attached to the experiences, seeking to replicate them. Either that, or they fall prey to pride – the #1 deadly sin.

One way or the other, there's attachment – which is always spiritually hazardous. As one Zen master has put it, "If you are *trying* to attain enlightenment, you are creating and being driven by karma, and you are wasting your time on your black cushion." If we have a peak experience during meditation, it's best to count it as a gift, be thankful, say a blessing – and then let it go and move on.

Awakening is both more ordinary and more wonderful than the mystical highs. Spirituality is really nothing more than being fully alive in the midst of the day-to-day. It's about being fully present to this very moment we're in. Ellen Stephen, a sister with the Order of St. Helena, and a great spiritual director, says that the point of spirituality is simply this: WAKE UP! BE THERE!

The awakening comes in different ways for different people. It probably depends on what we need to be most awakened to. Those of us who, on the Myers-Briggs, are off-the-scale Intuitives, our feet firmly planted in the clouds, probably need to wake up to our senses - what meets us through sight and sound, taste and smell. Meanwhile, those of us who are Sensates, down-to-earth types, grounded in sight and sound, may need to wake up to their inner, intuitive life, the life of the imagination.

Awakening also comes in different modes. Sometimes, it's sudden. BZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!! goes the alarm clock, and we're jolted from a deep sleep. A powerful experience shakes us from complacency, and our lives are never the same again. We may have a crisis, which in the words of Maria Harris, "allows newness to break in."

But awakening can also be slow and gradual, as when the dawn seeps into consciousness on a lazy weekend morning. It can happen in layers, as with the slow opening of a bud. And our lives can be a long series of small awakenings.

One awakening came to me when I was a divinity student, living in Boston, with my parents 90 miles away on Cape Cod. Because of the church schedule that year, I had no choice but to take the bus on Christmas morning, if I wanted to be with my family for Christmas.

That prospect did not thrill me, to say the least. This was before Boston's South Station was renovated. The bus terminal was as grubby as a bus station could be. It was cavernous, bleak and drab, with pigeons flapping around, the smells of cigarette smoke

and stale, bad coffee hanging in the air. At Christmas, it would be even worse, with a few tacky, dusty decorations, and station attendants crabby because they had to work that day. “What a downer!” I thought to myself, making my way to the station.

The outward appearances were just as I’d imagined – or slightly worse. And since I’d arrived neurotically early, I had almost an hour to wait around. But quickly, I realized something. The station was different today! Yes there were the pigeons, and the ancient, faded decorations, and the smoke and bad coffee. But somehow, it wasn’t the same.

There were about a dozen people around the station: the coffee shop attendant, the policeman on his beat, various travelers, a few homeless men in rags. No one talked much. And yet, there was a warmth, a glow – and it filled the grimy, high-ceilinged station. I sensed something there, invisible, yet just as “real” as the discarded Styrofoam cups on the floor. It drew everything and everyone into a golden web of community.

Was this “the Christmas spirit” at work? Or is it that the “Christmas spirit” opened our hearts to something that’s there all the time? I’m reminded of Jacob, in Genesis, who awoke from his dream and said, “Surely the Holy is in this place, and I did not know it.” And Jesus, who said, “The Kingdom of Heaven is in your midst.” I think as well of all the great spiritual teachers of the world, who’ve said, at different times and in many ways, WAKE UP!! BE THERE!!!

To see the world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower...

To awaken to the music that plays beneath the hum of daily life,

To awaken to the love that’s all around us, if only we pay attention,

May we be blessed with such awakenings,
and may they bless us, all our days.