

**First Unitarian Church of St. Louis  
July 15, 2018 Worship Service  
Norma Vogelweid**

***VOWS OF THE INTERIOR LIFE  
NO MERIT. VAST EMPTINESS. I DO NOT KNOW.***

**SERMON SCRIPT: *VOWS OF THE INTERIOR LIFE***

“Norma, you keep busy, don’t you.” It was this 4th of July in the History Museum, a random encounter with a man I randomly run into twice a year. Spoken from his conviction that I and others were living fuller lives than he, the comment was a compliment. Heard from my personal commitment to the interior life, the comment was a slap.

The first reading was about the Buddhist Tibetan master Patrul. I read the account of his life last spring. The passage I shared had been consoling me when I started mucking about in the inner silt to birth this worship service. The book of Patrul’s life tells that he had abandoned the eight worldly concerns. Among those are ordinary hoping for praise and fearing blame; hoping for fame and fearing disgrace. As the incident shows, despite Patrul’s aspiration to be free of worldly concerns, he continued at risk to judgment – so he flipped out in front of everyone when he read Khyentse’s words of adulation. He knew right away they could go straight to his head if not reflected upon. Praise had not stopped being dragons for Patrul, as it is for me. Compliments can raise expectations that I fear I can’t meet. Praise as well as disapproval can drive my naturalness into hiding and shrivel my confidence.

Unlike Patrul I have not sworn to abandon the eight worldly concerns – however, I have committed myself to Vows of the Interior Life. Awareness of having done this first crystallized for me in 1981. I read these words in Studs Terkel’s book, *American Dreams: Lost and Found*. A woman he interviewed had a pillow embroidered with this:

*A man will know when he’s chosen by the gods for a life of quest. The restless urge within him is an eagle in his breast. Let him turn from the seeking, and the eagle will eat his heart. Rest? There is no rest for the seeker with an eagle in his breast.*

A life of quest – a life of quest expressed my vows of the interior life then. After fifteen years sitting in a pew of First Church my sense is that you have your own version of such vows, consciously or less so. Why do I venture to say this? Because Unitarian Universalism is a home for those who have chosen to unbuckle the safety harness of dogma and certainties; chosen to seek a symbolic life, an inner reality of their own. A spiritual journey of their own.

This sermon exposes how I'm journeying. As every summer, I am grateful to you, for this opportunity, precious.

\*\*\*\*\* *I want to footnote everything you are going to hear: While it is grounded in my own experience, the sermon is fertilized with the writings of John Tarrant and Helen Luke. Tarrant directs the Pacific Zen Institute and has taught koans for over 30 years. Luke was a writer, Jungian counselor, and much more. Some books are cited on the back of the Order of Service.*

The search for a symbolic life ... an inner reality, a journey of one's own. ... An impossible question can conjure up a turn in a journey ... open a fissure ... raise up a brick wall ... bubble up quicksand. Impossible questions pulsate inside koans. Koan is a Japanese word that when used in English is usually taken to refer to some sort of riddle or odd question. A koan actually has its origin in sayings or records of conversations between people interested in the secret of life. All of this was new to me until last April when I borrowed the book a library book *Bring Me the Rhinoceros*. John Tarrant's book of Zen koans.

In the introduction Tarrant explains that koans beckon towards the unpredictability of the mind ... beckon towards approaching life more as a work of art. The surprise inside the unpredictability of koans is the one that art offers: not chaos, but beauty. The beauty of a profound change of heart. This change of heart, Tarrant assures, comes with a freedom of mind and an awareness of the joy and kindness underlying daily life.

Once I got past the first two koans, the needle on the compass I use for my spiritual journey did this (motion of finger spinning). I read through all the koans. I returned the library copy, bought my own *Bring Me the Rhinoceros*, and started from the beginning again.

A koan in the book that set off vibrations within my body, like a mallet hitting a gong sets off sound waves, was "Bodhidharma's Vast Emptiness," today's second reading.

“I have funded many monasteries; what merit have I earned?” asks the emperor. “No merit,” said Bodhidharma.

“What is the main point of this holy teaching?” “Vast emptiness, nothing holy,” said Bodhidharma.

An odd thought came to the emperor: “If I’m an emperor, how can I also be a person?” So he asked, “Who are you, standing in front of me?”

“I do not know,” said Bodhidharma.

Bodhidharma went away without carrying even one opinion about the emperor.

Tarrant explains that the method from around 1300 years ago was to consider that everything going on for you is connected to that koan. Everything you think and feel, every reaction you have. No merit; Vast emptiness; I do not know; No opinion – a voice whispered: “Inside this koan are your Vows of the Interior Life.”

Interior Life. Over ten years ago I read a collection of essays by Helen Luke entitled *Kaleidoscope*. Taking Luke’s book off the shelf was an intuitive move in mucking about in creative silt. In one essay Luke asks: “What are the three great visions that are the foundations of the interior life?” Her study led her to believe that the answer is the same for all religions, east and west. Using the vocabulary of her Christian education, she stated them as:

- **Poverty** – Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven
- **Chastity** – Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God
- **Obedience** – Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth

The spiritual dialect used in the Bible is typically inaccessible to me. I recognize the sounds, but the meanings are elusive. It’s like when I’m with friends from England and one speaks in an unintelligible regional dialect. Living with the koan “Bodhidharma’s Vast Emptiness,” along with Tarrant’s comments and Luke’s comments, broke the language barrier in understanding these three Christian Beatitudes.

**No merit ----- Inner Poverty of the Spirit**

CONSIDER

Tarrant elaborates:

What are you really achieving when you try to make an impression? If you didn’t do things for merit and advancement, or if you didn’t act with motives at all, what would life

be like? At work? In bed? Alone in a room? Even alone in a room you can be consumed with wanting other people to see you in a good light. Can you imagine how things would be without that kind of wanting?

Luke elaborates:

give up the claims of the ego to any kind of specialness. To give up specialness is the very reverse of giving up uniqueness. ... Poverty of spirit is richness in the Spirit, which can be known only by one who has found his or her unique individual meaning and accepted anonymity in the context of society.

**Vast Emptiness, nothing holy ----- Chastity**

CONSIDER

Tarrant elaborates:

What is the mind like if it's not occupied with plans and schemes, and fears that the plans and schemes will fail? What if your unexamined beliefs were to fall away and you were to live without them, and also to live without the thought that you had given anything up?

Luke elaborates:

True celibacy is the state of being whole, one-in-himself, so that he no longer seeks unconscious parts of himself in his relationships, whether with wife, friends, or enemies.

**I do not know ----- Obedience**

CONSIDER

Tarrant elaborates.

If you were to put aside what you know because of what other people told you, how much of what you know do you truly know for yourself? If you look for the origin of your thoughts, of your life, of your universe, can you find it? Can you find where this moment comes from or where it goes home to?

Luke elaborates:

Rare quality of unconditional obedience, each man or woman to his or her own deepest vision of truth, does inherit the earth. Such a person will be profoundly involved in all the changes and chances of his life, content to live with his doubts, to risk mistakes and failure as wholeheartedly as he embraces his certainties.

The revelation of connections between Bodhidharma's Vast Emptiness and the Christian Beatitudes was fascinating in a flirtatious way. On the other hand, living with Bodhidharma's Vast Emptiness is an intimacy without protection.

Tarrant has noticed that a koan can evoke in a person the delusion, the belief system that seems to belong with a particular koan. The inner disturbance, painful thoughts, can mean that this is how pain appears to you. Imprisons you. Such a koan can show you everything you don't like about your own consciousness. And, if you are interested in freedom, it might lie in this direction.

Judgment is one way pain appears in my life. Not only external judgment – praise and disapproval. There is also the judgment that I've programmed my mind to churn out. Who am I without views? How would life like be without opining about everything even if only to myself?

So I decided: "Norma, let this koan be connected to everything you think and feel, every reaction you have." Instantly disposable reactions such as when I'm writing at Kaldi's in Demun, a deep voice ordering attracts my eyes and I hear myself judge: "How can that man think his mustache is attractive?" DING: NO OPINION. Then there's reactions fueled by heartache such as when a close friend's only child, her 30-year-old son, totally breaks off relations with her. My mind wants to ruminate "How can this happen?" DING: NO OPINION. Just compassion. Literally. I say these words literally in my mind. Not in a "gotcha" tone. Rather in neutral or maybe a playful one. Since May I have been doing this.

Noticing what my mind's up to, paying attention is what my practice of meditation enables me to do. Sitting meditation and walking meditation train me in leaving thoughts just as they present themselves, not grab them, nor push them away. The nature of such training is the same nature as my routine in the lap lanes of a swimming pool, the same as my routine to build muscle strength for doing a headstand. The result is that little by little – and I mean little by little – space is pushing in between thoughts. Space allows noticing to happen more often when I'm not formally practicing. Meditation is sacred work.

"Norma, you keep busy, don't you." Ouch, keeping busy is what meditation weans me off of. I fumbled a reply. In the foyer of the History Museum I couldn't adlib an elevator-speech on my aspiration not to keep busy.

During the late afternoon and evening hours, doubts about how to be alive – doubts both very particular to me as well as existential ones – capsized me into cold seas, adrift. Perhaps, the buoyancy that kept me afloat came from the koan softly changing my heart, coming with a greater freedom of mind and awareness of the joy and kindness underlying daily life. I rededicated myself to the interior life.