

THE NEW FACT ON THE GROUND
All Souls Sunday, November 4, 2007
St. John's Unitarian Universalist Church
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READING: Joan Didion THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING, Knopf, 2005; pages 98-100.

SERMON:

This Sunday is All Soul's Sunday in the historic Universalist worship calendar. All Souls Sunday follows All Souls Day, which follows All Saints Day, which follows All Saints Eve, or All Hallows Eve, known to each and all as Halloween.

Today's Unitarian Universalism results from the merger of the two denominations in 1961. Traditionally Universalists celebrated communion on All Souls Sunday, one of the three times a year they did so. All Souls Sunday celebrates the distinguishing belief of Universalism, that God is love; no one can be separated from god's love. Gay or straight, god loves all, black, brown, red, yellow, white, god is inclusive. Male, female, androgynous all folded in the arms of the loving goddess. We are all manifestations of the Eternal Being of Love. The rhetoric of hate, working to divide us, blinds us to our destiny.

As part of the elements of our Universalist heritage, we recall those who have passed on recently. Friends, family remind us we are connected. Those voices who have reminded us that we are not alone. Those faces who make us aware, in the words of Alice Walker, "that we did not make ourselves, that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps to god, or to gods."

Let me briefly recall their names to memory.

Norma Holt whose generosity included animals as much as human beings;

Harold Van Wagenen who cherished his friends here at St. John's;

Esther Wagner, an inspiration to many women;

Catherine Virginia Cauffield the courageous, beloved daughter of Sam and Joyce Cauffield;

Mark Porter, beloved father of Diana Porter;

Robert Edward Barton, beloved father of Peggy Vaughn;

Marni Sweet, beloved sister of Annie and Larry Brubaker;

Richard Reiman, for whom I still have questions about St. John's heritage;

And,

Jason Keller, whose ministry to St. John's youth will be long an inspiration to us.

Though their voices are quiet, their faces dimmed, we are not alone. We remember them. We stand in unbroken line with their promise and their hopes.

Yet, the fact remains, as Joan Didion wrote in our reading this morning, there is a new fact on the ground. She wanted to know what had brought about her daughter Quintana's death. Had the blood thinners she'd been on caused brain damage, or had she damaged her brain when she fell to the pavement at LAX? Didion writes, "but there in the Café Med with the small balding man spitting on my shoe I realized that the answer to the question made no difference. It had happened. It was the new fact on the ground." (Page 100)

Later in the book, she realizes that in her year of magical thinking she "had been trying to substitute an alternative reel," (184) as if her life were a movie she could control. Control was what she wanted. Control was what her -- our -- magical thinking is all about. We want control.

What is control? I first began to realize how important control is to us when I heard of an experiment in a nursing home. In the experiment, they found out that if patients were given something to care for, such as a plant, they were more alive, vital. They controlled something.

How much control do you have in your life? I have found it interesting to see what kind of hobbies ministers have. Ministers don't have much control over what goes on where we labor: committee meetings, saving souls, helping people realize their potential, or just avoiding life's major pitfalls. Ministers don't have social hobbies like playing bridge or NASCAR racing. Ministers like to throw pots, make furniture. I like genealogy. I have control. In our hobbies, we make up for the lack of control we have in working with other people: If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together, as has been said.

Control! It's a myth, but not quite a myth because most of the time we can drive our cars to church. If we could not drive our cars to church we would not come by car. As Ernst Becker argues in DENIAL OF DEATH, we have the myth of control because we are seeking to address a universe that is ultimately out of control. We know, finally realize that we are not in control, do not live in cosmic gated communities, because there are new facts on the ground. Facts we don't like, don't want on the ground. A friend dies

Just about everybody knew Dick Reiman. He greeted most of us when we first came to St. John's. His passing is a reminder of our own mortality. In the word of John Donne:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend' or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

So we seek control. Perhaps only to be the one who rings the bell, pulls on the rope. With Joan Didion, we affirm that we too shared for most of our lives "the same belief in [our] ability to control events." (98)

One of the most interesting stories, interesting because we can read it at so many levels, it is a very thick story, is Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. Consider the story from the view point of control.

Why did the priest and the lawyer cross the road to avoid the beaten man on the road to Jerusalem? They are afraid, are they not? They don't want, what they do not want? They do not want to be contaminated by the human condition. If they approach the injured man, it would be like approaching the small balding man spitting on Joan Didion's shoe.

She allows him in, perhaps, because she is already living in a year of magical thinking, a place where she knows not what will happen. But she does not welcome him. He is simply a new fact on the ground, as is the beaten man on the road to Jerusalem.

The Priest and lawyer on the road to Jerusalem want to maintain their plan; they have a plan for the day. They have a plane to catch from the Tel Aviv Airport and their donkey is already plodding slowly enough. If they stop to check out the beaten, bloodied man on the side of the road, perhaps the human condition will reach up and grab them.

The Good Samaritan is already grasped by the human condition. The parable is about the Golden Rule: he knows what it is like to have life grab you by the throat and not let you go. He stops; he helps.

Is this an old story? What is the old story? That we want control? Is the old story that we are afraid? Is the old story the one about stopping to help a beaten man on the side of the road? What's an old story?

This past Thursday, in Oklahoma, a law went into effect that would make it a crime, with up to a year in prison, to transport an undocumented immigrant, even if you're saving them from a fire, from a flood, taking them to the emergency room. So we're seeing a level of criminalization that's not just going to chill immigrant communities.

If you see a person who is in a car accident -- and you want to race them to the hospital -- you're supposed to ask them for their papers. If they're undocumented, you're supposed to leave them at the side of the road.

<http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=07/11/02/1336244>

The legislature has criminalized the Golden Rule! We avoid contact with one another. We fear identifying with a stranger. Messy entanglements! We're afraid: we want control! Control is a myth we need; to some extent true, true to some extent because we act on it. Yet never the last word, the new fact on the ground. We are not alone.

In her grieving Didion recalls a line from poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, *it is the blight man was born for, / it is Margaret you mourn for.*"

Didion continues

It is the blight man was born for.

We are not idealized wild things.

We are imperfect mortal beings, aware of that mortality even as we push it away [as did the priest and the lawyer in the parable], failed by our very complication, so wired that when we mourn our losses we also mourn, for better or for worse, ourselves. As we were. As we are no longer. As we will one day not be at all.

....

Time is the school in which we learn, / time is the fire in which we burn: Delmore Schwartz again. [197]

We are all one says the mystic. We are not alone. Sometimes that is what is scary. If we would not be alone, we have to overcome our fear of one another, of what life throws at us, the blight we are born for.

In our rituals of mourning, we seek to reconnect ourselves to life, to others. Various narratives of immortality have affirmed our connections to one another. Eastern traditions teach of reincarnation. Through cycles of births and deaths we can improve ourselves, realize our potential and become divine.

Recently on my daily walk a bumper sticker caught my eye. The big word was RESURRECTION. Underneath was the phrase, "God's recycling plan." Says I to myself, reincarnation is God's recycling plan. Resurrection doesn't keep things moving through. Resurrection of the dead holds promise for traditional Christians that at the End of Days, all will be judged and separated, some sent to eternal damnation and others to eternal bliss. The Mormon view of heaven is a picture of families, generations, reunited forever.

In the traditional Universalist view, everyone goes to heaven, no gloating over the sufferings of the damned in hell.

Today, the view of an after life is weakening. It does not have the power it once had when the Vatican could keep everyone in line by threatening excommunication and eternal damnation. I think that is partly why even supposedly old time religions have developed more political agendas, as the old going to heaven message doesn't hold much meaning. The most it means for people is that they will be reunited with their loved ones, if it means anything, and is not particularly religious.

What kind of immortality can we look to today, what meaning can we find, what sense of connection that transcends our individual lives and deaths is there?

Alice Walker reminds us that as we celebrate our ancestors, it reminds us that the line stretches all the way back. We remember because it is easy to forget that we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight, love and die. We too need to embrace this curious adventure where small bald men spit on our shoes.

The line, the line not only stretches back. If we will it, if we will step into the line, it will stretch forward. Would you not be alone? Then step into the line of those who love and suffer; those who live and die. In the line of the old hymn, step into that unbroken line and make it your own. Then you will not be alone. You will be connected; you will have hope in the struggle to find meaning, make meaning in your day to day lives.

Joan Didion stands in this unbroken line. Much of her book, *THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING* is about her memories, her memories of her life with her husband John and daughter Quintana. Her memories of the deaths of her husband John who died very quickly, and her daughter Quintana who died very slowly.

She closes her book with a memory of a place on the ocean near their home in Malibu:

I think about swimming with [John] into the cave at Portuguese Bend, about the swell of clear water, the way it changed, the swiftness and power it gained as it narrowed through the rocks at the base of the point. The tide had to be just right. We had to be in the water at the very moment the tide was right. We could only have done this a half dozen times at most during the two years we lived there but it is what I remember. Each time we did it I was afraid of missing the swell, hanging back, timing it wrong. John never was. You had to feel the swell change. *You had to go with the change. He told me that.* No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that. [227, emphasis added]

Much of the book is Joan wondering about the wisdom of her husband John, and sharing it with us, her readers. With her daughter Quintana also gone, with whom would she share her wisdom, the wisdom John gave her, the wisdom she gleaned because of her place in the unbroken line, who would she share that with? She shares it with us. She makes us, through her book *THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING*, a part of her unbroken line.

It is in this immortality, in this unbroken line of immortals that we find also Mary Ann Evens, known as George Eliot, who wrote: "O, may I join the choir invisible of those immortal dead who live again in minds made better by their presence." [Hymnal 719]

Let us step into this unbroken line of immortals, making better the lives of all we touch. We are not alone.