

## Light Shines Through Open Doors - Reflection – Jan 19, 2020 - Michael Trew

First of all, I would like to thank Rev. Peggy for asking me to say something because I think that it pushed me to consider “what is it that I do have to say”? Today, I decided to talk about my own spiritual journey. It is this journey which has put me here, standing in front of my church family.

In other places, this would be termed as me giving my Testimony. I can say that I will really not know what to do if I hear calls of “Praise the Lord” or “Hallelujah” from you, so if you feel so moved... please use your inner voice. Deal?

I grew up in the United Church, like many of you. I grew up with the Bible stories, the Sunday school lessons, the music, even a couple of rounds of summer church camp in Little Manitou Lake, Saskatchewan. For some reason, when many of my friends stopped going to church, I kept on going to the age-appropriate church groups. And then they kind of petered out... so I joined an Anglican church youth group (ok, there may have been a girl involved), and ended up back in the church choir.

All this is preliminary to what I consider two critical shifts in my life that helped set me on this path to here and now.

When I was in high school, I was pretty clear in my own mind that I wanted to be a biologist... a marine biologist as it happens – exactly what all good prairie boys would aspire to, right?! I recall a girlfriend in high school telling me that she didn't want to get involved with me because she didn't want to be married to a doctor... and I assured her with gusto that I had absolutely no inclination in that direction, whatsoever.

When I hit first year university, it turned out that the only additional class that I needed to take which I would need for pre-Med was physics, so ... what the heck! And then I heard something about the MCAT; the Medical College Admission Test which was done each fall. My parents were happy to fund this so, once again, what the heck!

Long story short, when I look back on getting into Medicine - *without any focused ambition...* it looked to me like a number of doors were opened for me... What to make of this; chance, or my unconscious wishes, or maybe something from a larger realm...? When I do look back, my sense is that this was not happenstance, but a directed series of nudges through doors which I had not seriously considered. To me, it was an orchestrated, directed spiritual path.

Which brings me to a question; “how do we know what we know”? When I explain this sequence of events, it really does not sound like a miracle, or a mystical experience. It does not sound like the only real explanation is a spiritual one, but that is my firm conviction.

Perhaps this is the moment to remind you all that I have made my living for 38 years as a psychiatrist, which includes identifying crazy thoughts as delusions when that is the case,

usually as the result of significant mental illness. So how is it that I can call some things delusions and refuse to classify my own experience as magical thinking... that is, other than pure self-interest?

About 120 years ago, one of the founders of modern psychology, William James, described the inner spiritual life in a book called "The Varieties of Religious Experiences". Among other things, he described that these experiences are often hard to put into words... the term he used was "ineffable". He also noted how such experiences were relatively passive – they happened to you rather than being conjured up at your own will. And he spoke about there being something which we learned from them, using the term "noetic" to identify this sense of knowing. It is this "noetic" sense which I think I identify with... the sense that "this much I know; this was not just chance". I did not jump, I was pushed.

Ok, one event in a life; either a chance event or something special... easy to doubt, especially over time.

Then I came toward the end of my medical school training and I launched into the practical year of Clinical Clerkship, or as they called it at the time in Saskatchewan: Junior Undergraduate Rotating Student Intern – our JURSI year. The lowest point on the medical totem pole. Lots of demands, and little status. Well, after a few months, I was in a melancholic state when I was "half-past gynecology", mid-October of 1976. I was not looking forward to a medical life... I was kind of burned out. So, I approached my Pharmacology prof. I wanted a job in research to take a year away from all of this craziness. He was not really keen on me taking a year off of the medical training escalator, but he did have a project and was willing to put in a grant application for me to be a research assistant for a year for him. Good, this would get sorted out by March.

So, by the time March came, I was feeling better about medicine in general, and really didn't care what the outcome might be; I just wanted to know what the next year of my life might look like. My thought was that "March" meant the beginning of March... but of course in the world of research grants, this didn't come out until about March 29<sup>th</sup>. And of course, the grant did not come through... meaning that I didn't have a job. Well, in about 10 days, I had been picked up by the Dept of Medicine in Calgary because they got extra funding for two more residents... and I was committed to come to Calgary – kind of like getting picked up by a hockey team - undrafted.

Again, is this just the way life is sometimes, or is this a divine presence nudging me to a future that I could not see well enough to aspire to? In personal review, it has seemed like another series of doors; some closing and others opening up for me to step through; doors that I did not even know were available for me, let alone being a direction that I would shoot for. My Calgary life began.

Still well in the future would be a career in psychiatry rather than internal medicine, setting foot in St. David's rather than staying in the Anglican church, ... and meeting the woman truly beyond my dreams.

Do I see these steps as "pre-ordained"? I find such a question beyond my ability to imagine. But I do have this strong sense that I am where I have been meant to be, even if I am not too clear on where exactly I am going.

Being given the gift of a sense of spiritual direction at some few points in my life, what do I make of it all?

I think that there are two ways in which we come to know something: by personal experience, and through the experience of others.

For me, the Bible stories, and the ideas of so many who have come before... not the least of whom are John Spong and Marcus Borg have helped shape my beliefs and understandings. They have helped me recognize others who have experienced spiritual moments and spiritual movements in their lives. They have had "epiphanies" – moments of enlightened understanding of their experience of God... the connection to something so much greater than themselves. They have felt the heat of the light which has shined upon their lives.

Often the interpretation of their experiences has been conflicting and confusing... but the experience itself, is nonetheless undeniable. Enough of these have been passed on to show that it is not just an aberration, a quirk of nature, and the results have been such that we cannot deny the blessing of it all. Jesus did say that "by their fruits they shall be known". Good things coming out of inexplicable events are not easily denied.

So, I grew up with the stories, but also my own mind. I went on to have experiences which I have a "noetic" sense of reality for me... of being directed by the Spirit through doors that I hardly knew existed. For me, these have seemed to be more apparent in retrospect than at the time, but this has made them no less real.

I have little trouble in seeing the Creator in the world around me (and thank you to Julian of Norwich for reminding me that this is not a new idea), and I have the personal experience of the Spirit moving in my life. I know in my heart that there is something beyond this daily life we experience. I believe there is something beyond this life after my body cries "uncle" ... I have little sense of what that 'beyond' looks like, but I also don't worry about that right now, that time will come. In the meantime, we do what we can with the life we see.

My final question for this morning is "why come here" to St. David's? Why trouble getting up on Sunday morning? Why give my money to this institution which seems right now to be past its prime? Why bother?

Well, this is the one place that I do not have to explain that I do believe in something beyond the material world. I do not have to apologize for my belief in the Spirit which seems to hold a key place in my understanding of my life. I do not have to apologize for getting up to meditate and pray – although not as often as I might. I do not know what is the impact of my prayers for family, friends, and the world. I do not know what the meditations change, but I do know that I feel more grounded, more at home in myself when I do this regularly.

So how to end this? How to summarize?

So much of my life, and the live of the world at large, I do not really understand. But I do believe that I have experienced something of the sacred in my life... little bits, important bits, enough bits to tell me that there is something worthy to seek. Something which will unfold for my view in the ... fullness of time. There is so many of the “why’s” and “how’s” that I do not understand, but that is just the way the world is... something for me to accept.

And I invite you to accept your own experiences of the Spirit as real. I invite you to believe that there is a Spirit alive in the world which truly wants something from you and your life; something loving and worthy. I believe that if the Spirit sees it worthwhile to nudge me and my life towards something, and probably does so repeatedly, then the same applies to each of us.

Maybe there will be a time that the Spirit will not have to sneak up on me from behind to give me a nudge.

Maybe there will be a time when I can just say “here I am Lord”.

May it be so for all of us.

Amen.