

Fire from the Ice: the Religious Humanism of the Grateful Dead

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 14 January 2007
Chip Roush

PRELUDE “Mama, mama, many worlds we’ve come, since we first left home...” We begin with a musical excursion, led by Jeremy Treadwell:

{music: 9:30a: *Broke-down Palace* 11a: *Truckin*}

OPENING WORDS In the words of Robert Hunter, “I ain’t often right but I’ve never been wrong It seldom turns out the way it does in the song Once in a while you get shown the light in the strangest of places if you look at it right.” May we indeed “get shown the light” this morning; let us open ourselves to whatever wisdom awaits us.

MUSICAL RESPONSE

(to Pastoral Prayer) “Tell me all that you know... I’ll show you, snow and rain.” Robert Hunter and Jerry Garcia wrote this melancholy lullaby in memory of Janis Joplin. With the understanding that sometimes, it is healing and necessary for us to cry, here is this morning’s musical prayer...

{Jeremy: *Birdsong*}

FIRST READING The Rev. Dr. Midge Skwire, now the Minister Emerita at our West Shore church in Cleveland, was born in the first half of the 20th century. She wrote this essay late in the summer, several years ago.

“What did you do on summer vacation? Our children [will be] answering this question [soon] in classrooms all over the city, but I’m afraid no one will ask me. So I’ve decided to tell you anyway. I learned to hum to snails.

On a lazy Sunday afternoon in July, I sat with my ten-year-old cousin on the rocky shore of the Damariscotta River in Maine. I watched as he patiently held a snail that he had plucked from the rocks—and hummed to it! I didn’t know whom to watch, the boy or the snail, but soon I saw two antennae appear from the shell and the snail began to dance! Of course, I had to try it. It wasn’t long before all the other adults had moved from the porch down to the rocks, each one holding a snail and humming to it. A dance troupe of snails!

Two things struck me about the experience. One was the quiet power of that youngster in teaching us something about our world. He didn’t tell us anything, but allowed us to discover it for ourselves. We forgot our adult anxieties about looking silly and abandoned ourselves to humming.

The other was in the form of a theological question. Is there something out there in the universe humming for us to come out of our shells, urging us to dance? Trying to understand what moves us is one of the reasons we come together in a religious community.”

SECOND READING Robert Hunter was born in California, in 1941. He wrote the lyrics for many of the Grateful Dead’s songs, including this “snapshot” of the band’s early days:

Truckin’ - got my chips cashed in Keep Truckin - like the doodah man Together - more or less in line Just keep Truckin on

Arrows of neon and flashing marquees out on Main Street Chicago, New York, Detroit it’s all on the same street Your typical city involved in a typical daydream Hang it up and see what tomorrow brings

Dallas - got a soft machine Houston - too close to New Orleans New York - got the ways and means but just won’t let you be

Most of the cats you meet on the street speak of True Love Most of the time they’re sittin and cryin at home One of these days they know they gotta get goin out of the door and down to the street all alone

Truckin - like the doodah man once told me you got to play your hand sometime - the cards ain’t worth a dime if you don’t lay em down

Sometimes the light's all shining on me Other times I can barely see Lately it occurs to me What a long strange trip it's been

What in the world ever became of sweet Jane? She lost her sparkle, you know she isn't the same Living on reds, vitamin C and cocaine all a friend can say is "ain't it a shame"

Truckin' -- up to Buffalo Been thinkin - you got to mellow slow Takes time - you pick a place to go and just keep Truckin on

Sitting and staring out of a hotel window Got a tip they're gonna kick the door in again I'd like to get some sleep before I travel but if you got a warrant I guess you're gonna come in Busted - down on Bourbon Street Set up - like a bowling pin Knocked down - it gets to wearing thin They just won't let you be

You're sick of hanging around and you'd like to travel Tired of travel, you want to settle down I guess they can't revoke your soul for trying Get out of the door - light out and look all around

Sometimes the light's all shining on me Other times I can barely see Lately it occurs to me what a long strange trip it's been

Truckin - I'm goin home Whoa-oh baby, back where I belong Back home - sit down and patch my bones and get back Truckin on

HOMILY ONE "the Grateful Dead" How many of you ever attended a Grateful Dead show? How many disapprove of the band and/or its Deadhead fans? How many of you are neutral—neither fans nor particularly against them?

I attended my first Grateful Dead concert in September of 1990, at the Rich Stadium in Buffalo. I was lucky enough to see their last show, in Chicago in 1995, and I probably saw 20-25 shows in between. I occasionally attended two or three shows in a row, camping out or staying with friends, but I never followed the band for an entire tour.

I met some Deadheads who lived down to their reputation, trying to beg, borrow, scam or steal whatever they needed or wanted at the time. I also met some really wonderful Deadheads, who were responsible human beings, who cleaned up after themselves, and who willingly shared their food, their stories and their campfire.

I met one young man who lived all summer in his Volkswagen micro-bus, and spent the winter in India, learning yoga from a guru there. He cooked vegetarian food to sell in the parking lot outside the concerts, and followed his yoga practice every day, and made a pretty nice life for himself.

Just like every other group in our world, there were people who lived with integrity, who understood that we're all in this together, and there were people out to get as much as they could.

The Grateful Dead sang a *lot* about personal freedom and personal responsibility. That's what they meant when they sang: *What in the world ever became of sweet Jane? She lost her sparkle, you know she isn't the same. Living on reds, vitamin C and cocaine. All a friend can say is "ain't it a shame?"* They truly believed it was a person's right to live her life entirely as she chose. The only time her friends could question was when it interfered with their lives, like the Oliver Wendell Holmes quote, "my right to swing my fist ends where the other man's nose begins." Even if they were worried about her choices— and they clearly were, they sang, "she lost her sparkle, you know she isn't the same"— they felt that they could not ethically interfere, that all they could do was to lament, "ain't it a shame?" and try to warn others. Now their stance did change a little, over time, but I'm getting ahead of myself. Allow me to go back to the beginning.

In San Francisco, in the early '60s, a number of pretty-good musicians formed a band called the Warlocks, and played bluesy folk rock around town. Looking for a new name, they opened a dictionary and found an entry, "grateful dead: A song meant to show a lost soul to the other side."

With their new name, the band performed at the Acid Tests hosted by Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. This is where their spontaneous, jazzy style developed. The band rarely played a song

exactly the same way twice, and they stuck to pre-selected set lists even more rarely. Every concert was a totally new experience, for the audience and for the band.

Partially as a result of these concerts, the band adopted a democratic, non-hierarchical style of leadership. Just as anyone could take a song a different direction, as they played together in their shows, each member had an equal voice in their decision-making. Furthermore, they extended this model to the rest of the people involved in their musical enterprise. When the band traveled to Egypt, in 1978, the musicians and the sound technicians and the roadies who loaded and unloaded their gear all took their families with them. It was more expensive, but the band felt it was the right thing to do.

The Grateful Dead toured a great deal, and their fans began to travel, too. Hundreds of fans would follow them from concert to concert, often, but not always, causing headaches for the local law enforcement. The band played for thirty years, until one of their guitarists, Jerry Garcia, died in his sleep at a rehab facility. Some of the individual band members continue to play, sometimes together with other ex-members, sometimes with new bands, but the Grateful Dead died when Jerry did, on August 9th, 1995.

And that brings us back to the band's association with drugs. Because their fans abused drugs in public and disrespectful ways, and because the band— with its emphasis on personal freedom— allowed that to occur, and because several members of the band died as a direct result of their own drug use, many people see the band as a bunch of hedonistic losers, irresponsibly promoting drug use, and poor hygiene and casual sex to our vulnerable young people.

It seems to me there are two issues here: a possible distinction between drug use and abuse, and the band's evolving emphasis on freedom and responsibility.

First of all, it is important to note that many people do *not* distinguish between drug use and drug abuse: for them, taking any illegal drug, in any amount, is abuse. At the other end of the spectrum are people who believe they should be allowed to ingest any food or chemical they choose, without any government interference of any kind.

I find both of these extremes idolatrous; like most things, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. People who are competent and fully informed, who take responsibility for their own actions, who remain productively engaged with society, who are responsible for their families and their own health care costs, and who do not drive or bike or boat or fly under the influence, ought to be allowed to eat or drink or smoke whatever they want.

And people who are too young or otherwise unable to take that kind of informed responsibility ought to be prevented from such risks.

Obviously, I have only grazed the surface of this complex and dangerous topic. For more information, you might go to UUDPR.org— the Unitarian Universalists for Drug Policy Reform— who advocate decriminalizing some small amounts of some drugs, and reversing the egregious attacks on personal liberty and due process waged in the so-called “drug war.”

That said, it is also true that people who are usually responsible in their drug use can abuse drugs sometimes. Worse, they may even become addicted, and that virtually always leads to abuse and irresponsibility.

And as the Grateful Dead became more and more aware of these possibilities, they became more and more adamant that personal freedom comes *only* with personal responsibility.

A founding member of the band, Ron “Pigpen” McKernan, was only 27 years old when he died of complications arising from his excessive alcohol abuse.

Another keyboardist, Brent Mydland, died of a drug overdose in 1990, and Jerry Garcia's health was compromised by his own heavy drug use.

In addition to these members, the band saw many of their friends get in trouble with addiction and drug abuse. In response, they were some of the first rock musicians to sing about the dangers of drugs.

They sang “Casey Jones...better watch your speed” to caution people about the dangers of cocaine use, and their song, “Victim or the Crime” asks “whatever happened to your precious self control?” They even

changed their biographical tune, “Truckin’” singing “all a friend can say is ain’t it a *f-word* shame” to try and clarify the dangers of freedom without responsibility.

Finally, named after their song, “Wharf Rat,” in which the alcoholic main character sings, “I’ll get back on my feet someday The good Lord willing if He says I may... I’ll get a new start live the life I should I’ll get up and fly away,” a whole Grateful Dead-based Twelve Step program developed. The Wharf Rats set up tables at many Dead concerts, to reach out to potential new members, and support their existing associates in their battles with addiction.

At the various Grateful Dead shows I attended, I did occasionally see people passed out or malnourished or just plain wasting their youth on hedonism... *and* I heard, loud and clear, the band’s emphasis on personal responsibility. I am a minister today because I listened to their lyrics. I heard, “sometimes, the cards aren’t worth a dime, if you don’t lay ‘em down,” and I heard “they can’t revoke your soul for trying,” and I got up, and flew away from my old job. Fortunately, thankfully, I received a lot of support from Becky and my family & friends, and I felt like the Grateful Dead were some of the people encouraging me.

MUSICAL TEXT “Reach out your hand if your cup be empty If your cup is full may it be again Let it be known there is a fountain That was not made by the hands of men” Our musical text will be played by the Grateful Traverse Band. Let there be song, to fill the air...

{Jeremy, *et al.* Ripple}

HOMILY TWO “fire from the ice” How many of you have already learned something about the Grateful Dead today? How many have liked at least some of their music? How many of you are ready to go a little further?

If you were to give a cursory glance to the lyrics of the Grateful Dead, you might think that they were all Christians. Just a few minutes ago, I read some lyrics from “Wharf Rat”: “the good Lord willing, if he says I may...”

Within their lyrics, you can find Abraham, the father figure to whom all three of the great monotheistic religions— Judaism, Christianity and Islam— trace their roots, and Abraham’s son, Isaac, and Isaac’s son, Esau. Their songs mention Moses, angels, god, the devil, and Sampson and Delilah. Their song, “Estimated Prophet,” has lyrics about Ezekiel’s Wheel, a biblical “fire wheel, burning in the air,” which some people claim as the first documented sighting of a UFO.

The Dead also sing about Gideon. To tell the truth, I had to look Gideon up. You know, all those bibles in hotel rooms are from a group calling themselves the Gideons, but that group took its name from the figure who shows up in the 6th and 7th chapters of the book of Judges. Like a lot of characters in the Hebrew Bible, he wins a mighty battle, with the aid of God, but then he backslides and worships a false idol and it all ends badly.

At least he made it into a Grateful Dead song.

I said that their lyrics made it sound like the band was Christian. But these characters all come from the Hebrew Bible, what most Christians refer to as the “Old Testament,” so perhaps the band was actually Jewish. There is some evidence for that: in the song “Wharf Rat,” the main character sings “I love my Pearly Baker best... more than my wine... more than my maker, though he’s no friend of mine.” Christian theologians don’t often challenge god that directly; that’s more a Jewish thing.

But, they named a song, and a whole album, “Blues for Allah,” so maybe they were Muslim, or at least monotheists of some kind.

Upon further reflection, that would not be the case, either. They used a lot of nature-based metaphors, like “the four winds” and “wind and rain” and rivers, in their lyrics; and they call for a “water witch spell” in the same song that they talk about some of the biblical folks. In addition to these theistic and earth-centered metaphors, they also use one-word concepts, like “Love” and “Inspiration” and “Mercy” to refer to what I sometimes call the Spirit of Life.

Most importantly, they sing that the Spirit should remain nameless, that no one word, no matter how big or awesome, can describe what is, and was, and will be, and which lures us toward goodness, if we but listen. We just heard Jeremy sing “Let it be known...there is a fountain That was not made by the hands

of men.” If you excuse their gendered language, you’ll hear the Grateful Dead refer to something beyond human beings, which they are careful *not* to name. Next week, we will hear their agnostic lyric,

“I don’t know who put it there. Believe it if you need it, or leave it if you dare.”

Finally, they also sang “shall we call it by a name? As well to count the angels dancing on a pin.” Some scholars in the Middle Ages obsessed over such minutiae. They wrote entire manuscripts debating how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Even if there could be an answer, it wouldn’t really affect our everyday lives, and the debate gets in the way of our communing with that Spirit of Life that beats in our veins and blossoms through our hearts and minds.

In any *one* of their songs, the band used metaphors from one or two common faith traditions to refer to this Spirit. Taken as a whole, their lyrics make it clear that they believe in *something* larger than themselves, but they absolutely refuse to diminish that something by giving it only a single name.

Billions of years ago, Spirit became manifest as energy, which coalesced into matter, which formed atoms and molecules and proteins, which took life, which evolved into intelligent life, which is evolving, in and through us, into wise life. We are the part of the universe with a conscience, and with thumbs. Through us, relatively recently when compared to sixteen billion years, the universe can finally adapt and affect itself, and can think about what it *ought* to do or not do.

The Grateful Dead sing, “you are the eyes of the world.” We are the eyes, and the thumbs, and the conscience of the universe. We humans, who are often smart, and sometimes wise, *can* find inspiration in the strangest of places, when we look at it right. We do know all the rules by know, and the fire from the ice.

Like Midge Skwire’s snails, something is calling us to come out of our shells. Something is calling us to help co-create our universe, with more compassion, and more dancing, and more justice each day.

So may we be.

BENEDICTION Once more, the words of Robert Hunter: “In another time’s forgotten space your eyes looked through your mother’s face Wildflower seed on the sand and stone may the four winds blow you safely home.” May the four winds blow us safely home, and may they blow us toward greater compassion, and greater joy, and greater justice, every moment.

So may we be.