

Their Wish to Fly

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 02 December 2007
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FIRST READING Mirabai was a Hindu poet, born in India in the year 1498. When her human husband died, she refused to follow the custom of dying alongside him. Instead, she tried to live with her family, and finally went on a pilgrimage and spent the rest of her life writing about her great love for the god Krishna. In this poem, she refers to herself, as was common at the time.

I remember how my mother would hold me.
I would look up at her sometimes and see her weep.

I understand now what was happening.
Love so strong a force
it broke the cage,

and she disappeared from everything
for a blessed
moment.

All actions have evolved
from the taste of flight;
the hope of freedom
moves our cells
and limbs.

Unable to live on the earth, Mirabai ventured out alone in the sky,
I write of that journey
of becoming as
free as
God.

Don't forget love;
it will bring all the madness you need
to unfurl yourself across
the universe.

SECOND READING(S) Richard Bach was born in a Chicago suburb in 1936. Before writing blockbusters like "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" and "Ilusions," he was a pilot in the Air Force reserve, and wrote

passionately about his love of flying. Bach and several friends spent the summer of 1967, barnstorming—flying around the Midwest, selling rides in small towns. These are excerpts from his book about that summer, “Nothing By Chance.”

“[A] young man and...woman, each laughing at the other for being so mad as to want a ride in this strange old flying machine... [T]he tall old wheels sped along the ground. Then...it was pure engine sound and wind beating us, and the trees and houses shrank smaller and smaller...Despite their laughter, they had been afraid of the [biplane.]...now they smiled and shouted to each other, looking down, pointing.

Why should that be so pretty to see? Because fear is ugly and joy is beautiful, simple as that? Maybe so. Nothing so pretty as vanished fear.

The air smelled like a million grassblades crushed, and the sun lowered to turn it from silver air into gold...The girl touched her [husband's] shoulder...to point out the church... It couldn't have been too long ago that they had walked out the door of that church into a rice-storm, and now it was all a little toy place, a thousand feet below. That tiny place? Why, it had been so big then, with the flowers and the music. Maybe it was big only because it was a special time.

We circled down lower...As soon as the tires touched, the dream was broken. ‘Thanks a lot,’ the young man said, ‘that was fun.’ ‘That was *wonderful!*’ his wife said, radiant, forgetting to adjust the mask of convention about her words and her eyes. ‘Glad to fly with you,’ I said, my own mask firm in place, my own delight well down within myself and under tight control. There was so much more I wanted to say, to ask: ‘Tell me how that all felt, first time...was the sky as blue, the air as golden for you as it is for me? ... Thirty years, fifty years from now, will you remember?’

They walked away arm in arm, still smiling.”

“‘I was at the little league game when you guys flew over,’ a man said. ‘My boy was going crazy; he didn’t know whether to look down at the game or up at the planes, so he finally sat on the roof of the car, where he could see both.’ ‘This all you do for a living, fly around places? You got a wife or anything?’ Of course we had wives, of course we had families just as involved in this venture as we, but that wasn’t something we thought people would want to hear. Barnstormers can only be carefree, footloose, fun-loving ... colorful people from another time. Who ever heard of a *married* sky gypsy? ...Our image demanded that we shrug the question aside...,without a thought for tomorrow. If we were to be shackled at all that summer, it would be by the image of freedom, and we tried desperately to live up to it.”

“‘No more passengers,’ I said, [as] I patted the biplane. ‘Want to fly her?’ It was a loaded question. The old Detroit-Parks biplane, as I had told Paul over and over, was the most difficult airplane I had ever learned to fly...‘There’s a bit of a crosswind,’ he said cautiously, giving me a way to withdraw my invitation. ‘No problem, if you stay awake on landing,’ [and he was convinced.]... I was still nervous, and felt lonely without my airplane. That was my whole world this summer, circling around up there, and now it was all under the control of someone else. I had just four friends that I would allow to fly that airplane, and Hansen was one of them. So what, I thought. So he breaks the thing up to nothing. His friendship is more important to me than the airplane. The airplane is just a bunch of sticks and wires and cloth, a tool for learning about the sky and about what kind of person I am...An airplane stands for freedom, for joy, for the power to understand, and to demonstrate that understanding. Those things aren’t destructible.”

HOMILY I How many of you have ever experienced friendship that was “indestructible”? How many have had a good friend borrow something, and return it worse for wear, but the incident made your friendship *stronger*? How many of you have wrecked a borrowed car, or stained borrowed clothing, and still had the friendship thrive?

In the book, Paul does crash the biplane, trying to land. He is uninjured, but the plane is pretty banged up. They fly in a mechanic friend, and they all work virtually non-stop for three days, to get it back running.

Through it all, Richard worries more about how Paul feels about the crash, than about the state of his plane.

May we *all* have such good friends in our lives.

I know that some of us do have such friends, because I see and hear you around this congregation. I mean, that *is* the ideal for churches in general, but I do see it lived out, right here in the UU Congregation of Grand Traverse. Not every one of us, certainly. And not all of the time. I don't want to lie to you, or to set unrealistic expectations. And I still say, there is a large number of relatively "indestructible" friendships among us. There are a lot of good people, who care about each other, here. Let the congregation say, "huzzah!"

One element of an indestructible friendship might be that we do not need to hide behind a "mask of convention." Either we've already seen each other in way worse conditions, or we just accept each other for who we are.

How many of you have actually seen the moment somebody put their "social mask" back on? I saw the musician Tori Amos sing on the David Letterman show one night. Her eyes and her heart were completely, wide open as she sang, but when the song ended, and Letterman walked toward her, you could *see* her face harden, and the walls fall behind her eyes.

Like the young woman in Richard Bach's airplane, our excitement and enthusiasm can open us to the world. And like Richard himself, we often interact people with our defenses up.

In the best possible church community, we don't need to always be strong, always be organized, always eat healthy foods with our beds made and our floors swept. Ideally, we don't need to wear our masks, among these friends. Taking that a step further, in the best possible congregation, we are allowed to occasionally need each other.

Bach wrote that if he were "shackled at all that summer, it would be by the image of freedom." Friends, I think that he *was* shackled by his image of freedom. This lifting up of "freedom" above all things is idolatry. We are not independent beings; we are inter-dependent. If we try to be completely free, without any obligations to anyone whatsoever, we miss out on the bonds of friendship that can make life so meaningful.

I have a number of friends who will ask each other three times how they are: "hey! how are ya?" "fine." "no, really, what's up? How are you?" "I'm good." "No. For real. Tell me: how are you?" "You know, I'm a little worried recently..." and so on.

Indestructible friends don't have to be strong all the time; they need not be independent or totally together. Mostly, they are real with each other.

May we be less inclined, when we are with the other people in this congregation, to wear our masks so tightly. May we be shackled less heavily by our own images of independence, when we are together. May we be more real with each other, and may those authentic relationships carry us to greater and greater heights so that thirty or fifty years from now we are still indestructibly friendly. So may we be. THIRD READING Later in the book, Bach writes, "'Give us a wild ride!' they said. They got the standard wild ride; steep turns, sideslips... dives and zooms...All of a sudden, I was surprised [to discover that]...During the minutes we had been flying, I was thinking about moving out...and wondered where we might go next. I wasn't seeing the ride as wild...A revelation, that, and a warning of evil. The summer was beginning to go stale, I was taking even the strange and adventurous life of a gypsy pilot for granted...I pulled the airplane up into a half-roll...and talked out loud to myself. 'Hey, listen, Richard! That's the wind! Hear it through the wires, feel it on your face, beating those goggles! Wake up! This is here and now, and time for you to be alive! Snap out of it!'... 'Never stop being a kid, Richard. Never stop tasting and feeling and seeing and being excited with great things like air and engines and the sounds of sunlight within you. Wear your little mask, if you must, to protect the kid from the world, but if you let that kid disappear, buddy, you are...dead.'"

HOMILY II How many of you remember what it feels like, to be a kid—to run and leap and just cavort with abandon?

I don't think that I can remember it. I know what it looks like—I loved watching the children at Game Night last Friday—but I don't know that I can recall how *I* felt at that age. I have too much experience; I know that I can be hurt, and that I will someday die. Most kids don't yet know those things, so their experience of the world is completely different.

As I grew up, I learned about pain and death and aging and betrayal—and I learned to carry my little mask with me, and to put it on, whenever I thought I might need some protection.

This is a balance, to what I said a few moments ago. I think we *should* take off our masks with each other, as much as possible, and we should *not* get rid of them entirely. We do need their protection, occasionally, as long as we don't wear them too long or too often, as long as we do not disappear behind our masks.

Oh, I still think that Richard Bach is a little too attached to his ideas of absolute freedom. I do not agree that we should “never stop being a kid;” it is necessary to be an adult, at least sometimes. And I agree with him, that if we ever let our inner kid disappear entirely, we're in trouble. Our inner children should be free to take their masks off, if and when it is necessary.

In our first reading, Mirabai seemed to agree with Richard. She wrote that our “hope of freedom moves our cells and limbs.” Also like Richard, she “ventured out alone in the sky,” to try to become “as free as God.” But then she writes, “Don't forget love; it will bring all the madness you need to unfurl yourself across the universe.” When we love someone, we are not free from them. We are, for good and for ill, connected to them. Ultimately, Mirabai rejected the freedom of God for the unfurling madness of love and connection.

May we each find and maintain a balance among the enthusiastic freedom of a child, and the safety of a protective mask, and the loving madness to risk removing our defenses, to connect with others.

FOURTH READING In our penultimate Bach reading of the morning, he writes, “We tramped into the [airstrip] office, and snapped on the light...Stu began emptying his pockets onto the couch from the biggest day's work we'd had all summer...There was \$390...a mirror of 130 passengers, most of whom had never flown before in their lives. You can destroy that pile of bills, I thought, or spend it right up, but you can never destroy the flights that those 130 people had today. The money is just a symbol of their wish to fly, to see far out over the land. And for a moment I, oily barnstormer, felt as if I might have done something worthwhile in the world.”

HOMILY III How many of you have read the book, *Your Money or Your Life*? One of the things the book suggests is to track your expenses for three months, so you know where you really do spend your money. I have a friend who still laughs at me for an entry he found in my expense journal: “found a penny +\$0.01” I may have taken the principle a tad far, okay, but the exercise helps to demonstrate and challenge and maximize our satisfaction from the money we spend.

The book highlights some potential tradeoffs—like some jobs that cost us more than they earn, once you subtract the new clothes, and the drycleaning costs, and the lunches out, and the expense of owning a car, including insurance and maintenance, and the childcare costs. The position may still be worth it to us, and we still make better decisions when we know the true costs of what we are doing.

Our money is just a symbol of our desire to fly. If doing that job, if working with those people, really gives us the most satisfaction, then it is money and time well spent. I've seen articles recently about the “high cost of raising a child.” At least one of the articles seemed to imply that it was a bad return-on-investment. Financially speaking, that may be true, but many parents seem glad to have done it.

And Richard's feeling, at the end of the reading, “as if I might have done something worthwhile” is obviously worth a lot to him. I maintain that most of us are happier— more joyful and more satisfied with our lives—when we feel that we have done something worthwhile. This is the adult version of Richard's admonition, to “never stop tasting and feeling and seeing and being excited.” To be alive and engaged in this moment, to have both freedom and satisfaction, is living life to its fullest.

This congregation does all of that. Just in the last 48 hours, we've had children romping and playing with abandon *and* kids doing something worthwhile, providing gifts for the children at the shelter. There have been adults playing and connecting, removing their masks a little, and forging deeper friendships. And there have been adults doing volunteer work, to make their world a better place, and their lives better, too. Which is why I am particularly excited about the possibility of expanding this building, so we can have even more life-affirming activities zooming and chugging through this space.

After a three-year capital campaign, and after learning that the architect designed a building that we simply could not afford, and after many congregational conversations about what people wanted to do, we have a potential plan that I think is fantastic. It includes a more modest building expansion, and some maintenance and renovation to the existing space, and it bumps up our endowment fund, at least to the point where we can start using the interest from it. The details are not 100% nailed down yet, and the board hasn't even seen the proposal, much less the congregation, so we are a ways yet from deciding to definitely go forward.

And I think it is a brilliant plan, which will keep the worthwhile activities and the indestructible friendships of this congregation going for a long time to come.

Of course, we can always donate to our endowment fund; we can include the church in our will or trust; especially now, we can look into year-end donations to ease our taxes. We can pledge generously, in the upcoming stewardship campaign. Because the time and money we give here is not just a symbol of our wish to fly—it is actually us, flying!

FIFTH READING Finally, we come to the end of Bach's book, after his plane has been banged up pretty severely: "It didn't take a winter to rebuild the biplane, it took two years. Two years of saving dollars and working on the wreck...[two years of good friends, old and new, finding and donating spare parts, encouraging me in my quest]

Very slowly, years passing while I struggled to earn a living with a bargain-basement typewriter, the biplane changed in the square cocoon of its hangar.

And then the day came that the old propeller on the new engine jerked around in a blurred silver streak, and very suddenly the biplane, two years dead, was alive again. ...Up ahead in the roar and the wind, the black rocker-arms clicked up and down, spraying new grease back from their uncovered boxes...

At last, the answer why. The lesson that had been so hard to find, so difficult to learn, came quick and clear and simple. The reason for problems is to overcome them. Why, that's the very nature of [humanity,] I thought, to press past limits...It isn't the challenge that faces us, that determines who we are and what we are becoming, but the way we meet the challenge...

And behind [that,] I thought, lifting the biplane up once again into the sky...friends come to show us the way, when the problems seem too hard to solve alone.

We turned gently about a cloud, and flashed sunlight, a mile in the air, and [set a course for the next town.]"

CONCLUSION Every day is a new town; every day is a different opportunity to face new challenges with the aid of old and new friends. When there is work to do, let us do it together, and where there is flying to do, let us not hesitate to soar.

So may we be.