

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service  
*Got Spirit?*  
September 4, 2011

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**Prelude**

**Chalice Lighting**

We light this candle

For the light of truth and reason

For the warmth of love and friendship

For the flame of strength and action

And for the vision of tolerance and justice.

**Opening Hymn**

**John Pepper**

Please join me standing as you are able singing our opening hymn No. 157 “Step by Step the Longest March”

**Announcements**

**John Pepper**

Visitors, Welcome! We are happy to have you here.

(Pause)

If you would like, please sign our guest book on the table in the entryway and give your address or email if you want to receive our newsletter. If you would like to become a member, we have an application form also on the table you can fill out and turn in when you are ready.

Next week our own Pam Johnson will speak on Sensory Awareness and the following week Ken Hendrickson will give a talk titled “Science and God’s Space.”

Our special collection this morning is for the Walker County Habitat for Humanity. Please make your checks out directly to them.

Please plan to join us for lunch today at the Golden Corral on 11<sup>th</sup> street. Can I see a show of hands if you are going so we will know how big a table to ask for?

Are there any other announcements from the floor?

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**Opening Words**

**John Pepper**

Please join with me now in a spirit of worship.

Welcome to this place of possibility!

This is love's hearth, the home of hope, a refuge for minds in search of truth unfolding, ever beautiful, ever strange.

Here, compassion is our shelter, freedom our protection from the storms of bigotry and hate.

In this place, may we find comfort and courage.

Here may our sight become vision to see the unseen, to glimpse the good that is yet to be.

*Rejoice Together*, Marianne Hachten Cotter, p3

**Hymn**

Please join me singing Hymn No. 86 "Blessed Spirit of My Life."

**Joys and Concerns**

**John Pepper**

As an expression of our connectedness and community, you are invited to come forward and share a joy, sorrow or concern as you light a candle. Or you may choose to light a candle without comment. Visitors, you are also encouraged to participate.

Please form a line to my left.

(Pause)

I will light one final candle for all those joys and concerns left unsaid.

**Story for All Ages** – *The Tiny Seed* by Eric Carle

**Offertory Statement**

**Offertory Music**

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**Readings**

My first reading this morning comes from the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Tanach, Exodus 3:1 – 5.

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.

So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

My second reading comes from an autobiography, from *Providence: The Story of a Fifty-Year Vision Quest*, by Daniel Quinn

I turned and faced the sunshine, and the breath went out of me as if someone had punched me in the stomach. That was the effect of receiving this sight, of seeing the world as it is. I was astounded, bowled over, dumbfounded.

I could say that the world was transformed before my very eyes, but that wasn't it – and I knew that that wasn't it. The world hadn't been transformed at all; I was simply being allowed to see it the way it is all the time. I, not the world, had been transformed.

I'm trying. Be patient. We've reached the single most important hour of my life, and I have to get it right, have to come as close as I can to getting it right.

Everything was on fire.

I can say it that way, but when you say that something's on fire, you think of the fire as being on it – as a substance that is on the thing.

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That wasn't it.

Everything was burning. Yes, that's better. From within, everything was burning.

Every blade of grass, every single leaf of every single tree was radiant, was blazing – incandescent with a raging power that was unmistakably divine.

I was overwhelmed. In a single second of this, of seeing this truth, tears flooded my eyes and poured down my face as I walked along behind the novices. It was strange to see fence posts sitting dead and silent and cold in the midst of this tremendous, thrumming radiant brilliance.

In this vast, scintillating landscape, my nearsightedness was of no account at all. For as far as I could see, for hundreds of yards, thousands of yards, I could distinguish with absolute clarity each leaf, each blade of grass – no two alike anywhere. Each was crackling and trembling and all but exploding with the raging power that animated it.

Again I describe that power as raging. Look into a furnace blazing at its top capacity. Look into the heart of a nuclear reaction perhaps.

The power that I saw thundering around me makes all our stock images of power seem feeble. But there was no violence or hatred in this rage. This was a rage of joy, of exuberance. This was creation's everlasting, silent hallelujah.

**Prayer**

**John Pepper**

Please close your eyes, look out the window, simply relax in whatever way you center yourself for a time of prayer and meditation. (Pause)

Spirit of my exploring heart, help me walk where deep-rooted questions rise through the firm hard ground, the pathway that has led to war and injustice for centuries. Bare-footed and trembling, let me feel the pain that inhumanity has tramped into the earth. Let me face the unknown, assured that all my questions are natural and blameless. Help me learn how to live peacefully when war and anger rage, how to do justice while greed consumes resources that could sustain us. Bruised and battered, let my feet feel holiness rise through the ground of my being. Let that holiness fill me with confidence, that I might find alternatives to the well-trod roads to destruction. Grant me the wisdom to do as Moses did on that sacred mountain, when he was told "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

(Pause) Amen!

*Be the Change*, "When to Take Off Your Sandals" p9

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**Sermon – *Got Spirit?***

Good morning and welcome!

Spiritually speaking, I've often wondered why it took me so long to find this place. Not just this physical place but this theological and spiritual place. This theological place that I'm talking about questions who we are and how we got here in a manner that I can relate to and often believe in. This spiritual place for me is a place where I can connect what I feel inside to something larger than myself. The answer to that question is simply that I wasn't ready.

After I moved to Houston in the early 80s, I church shopped just as many people often do. First I went to a local United Methodist Church, then I attended the local predominantly gay church, MCC, after that I was a regular at the Unity Church of Christianity, and each time I was looking for the right mix of religion and spirituality.

At the same time I was part of an extended network of friends and we got together monthly for a pot-luck supper. One of the participants was a man by the name of Bob.

When I inquired about Bob I was told he was the minister of one of the local Unitarian churches. I asked, "what are Unitarians?" and I vividly recall being told that they worship trees or something.

That didn't appeal to me. Maybe I should have been a little more curious, but I wasn't. The Reverend Bob Schaibly, the long-time minister of First UU Houston could have been a wonderful spiritual guide and friend, but I missed that opportunity.

I wasn't ready at the time for the inspiration of spirit Bob might have introduced me to, had I only taken the time. My hunch is that we all experience the inspiration of spirit in our own time and in our own individual ways.

Got Spirit? You'll get it when you're ready.

But for now please indulge me while I wander through the spiritual encounters of other people and the significance of those encounters, or at least the significance as I choose to interpret them.

What exactly do I mean when I say spirit? For me it means connecting with something larger than myself. It often feels like a guiding force but it's definitely not a coercive force.

It's something infinite and yet it is finite in that I feel a part of it and I know I'm finite. It binds us all together as one and yet it's extremely loose because I often feel disconnected from it and everyone else. It's manifestation in my life has caused me to read numerous spiritual books and even prompted me to go

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back to school. Sometimes it does feel quite compelling otherwise I wouldn't be up here now sharing with you what I hope are coherent and meaningful thoughts.

I choose to call that spirit God.

Often one of the outcomes of an experience of spirit is the manifestation of inspiration. I used the word "often" to describe an outcome of a spiritual experience because the quality of spirit doesn't always require the manifestation of inspiration.

One such example could be the following. It's now early September and in one part of the country, and possibly around the world, an annual pilgrimage will soon begin. That pilgrimage is to see the changing color of the fall leaves. Having grown up here in the south, I never had the opportunity to see this event until the early 90s when I lived in Pennsylvania. The display of fall foliage was truly a wonder to behold. The hills and the mountains were ablaze in colors of gold and orange and yellow.

Thousands of people every year take time out of their busy lives to go and see this gift of nature. Many of those same people claim that the experience for them is quite spiritual. Is it any wonder? Being enveloped in the embrace of nature can be a powerful experience. Whether or not this annual expression of nature leads to great inspirational activity is anybody's guess.

Nevertheless, spirits manifests itself in a variety of ways and if and when it happens, simply allow it to unfold in its own way.

But what fascinates me even more though are those specific spiritual encounters some people report having and the subsequent inspirational journeys they undergo because of those encounters.

The first reading I shared with you this morning was from Daniel Quinn's autobiography *Providence: The Story of a Fifty-Year Vision Quest*. As a young man in the early 50s, he had plans to be either a painter or a writer and finally settled on the latter. He was awarded a full scholarship at the Writers Institute at St. Louis University. Quinn spent 2 years there and then decided to pursue an entirely different path in life. He decided to become a Trappist monk and applied for acceptance at Our Lady of Gethsemane in Kentucky.

This was the same monastery where Thomas Merton lived and wrote. Quinn was a 20 year old young man who had decided to pursue a life of spiritual reflection and devotion and also one that required almost total silence, because that was one of the practices at that monastery. Quinn was accepted into the monastery as a novice and after three weeks, he had the experience I read to you earlier. Quinn experienced all of nature as a raging power that for Quinn was unmistakably divine.

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His spiritual encounter lasted for about an hour and gradually faded and the world resumed its normal appearance. Quinn felt impelled to share the experience with his spiritual advisor because he felt it was quite significant, but his advisor cut him off after a very brief exchange. This was after all primarily a monastery which expected and practiced silence.

This was also the beginning of the end for Quinn at the monastery. Only a few weeks later the Abbot called Quinn in and told him that the decision had been made and Quinn would need to leave. Tests that all initiates were required to take had finally been evaluated and the results had just arrived and they indicated that Quinn was not emotionally ready for the commitment necessary for a Trappist's life. Quinn was utterly crushed.

He left the monastery, underwent extensive emotional therapy, eventually finished college, and ultimately spent the next 30 years coming to terms with the spiritual encounter he had at Our Lady of Gethsemane. He also achieved one of his original goals of becoming a writer and has published several bestsellers and has even won the Turner Tomorrow Fellowship, a fiction prize for works which present creative and positive solutions to global problems. Having read many of his books and his autobiography, it is evident that the event in the woods has inspired, and will likely continue to inspire Daniel Quinn for the remainder of his life.

Spirit happens, and if and when it does, simply allow it to unfold in its own way.

Buddhist author Thich Nhat Hanh would simply say that we always need to be consciously aware of ourselves and our surroundings no matter where we are and that we should always be present in the moment.

This quality of constant consciousness is known as mindfulness in Buddhist philosophy. According to Hanh, a Buddha is simply someone who is utterly, and totally awake, someone who is awake to each and every moment of life and to all aspects of life. This is no easy task.

The Buddha achieved this consciousness or enlightenment while sitting and contemplating under the Bodhi Tree. It's not surprising to me that the Buddha achieved enlightenment while out in nature.

In his book, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, Hanh describes one of the components necessary for enlightenment. Paraphrasing, Hanh says, "In Buddhism we speak of the world of phenomena. You, me, the trees, the birds, squirrels, the creek, the air, the stars are all phenomena. There is a relationship between one phenomenon and another. If we observe things deeply, we will discover that one thing contains all the other things.

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If you look deeply into a tree, you will discover that a tree is not only a tree. The practice of looking deeply reveals to us that one thing is made up of all other things. One thing contains the whole cosmos. A piece of bread contains sunshine. Without sunshine, the piece of bread cannot be.

A piece of bread contains water from a cloud. Without a cloud, the wheat cannot grow and the bread cannot be. One thing contains everything. With the energy of mindfulness, we can see deeply. With the Holy Spirit, we can see deeply. Mindfulness is the energy of the Buddha.

The Holy Spirit is the energy of God. They both have the capacity to make us present, fully alive, deeply understanding, and loving.”

Hanh is another wonderful example of someone who has been touched by spirit and gone on to achieve amazing things. From Viet Nam, Hanh has survived persecution, three wars, led the peace delegation to the Paris Peace Talks, written over one hundred books, and was even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by none other than the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Hanh’s life has been, and continues to be, a truly remarkable manifestation of spirit right here and right now.

One way to foster a spiritual path and journey is through the Buddhist practice of Mindfulness, and if and when spirit happens, simply allow it to unfold in its own way.

In 1946 a 36 year old nun had an experience with spirit which also changed the world. While on a train in India this young nun began to hear a voice which directed her to live and work with the poor. This experience continued for several months and eventually that young nun left the Sisters of Loreto and moved to the slums of Calcutta to devote herself to the poor.

She acted on her inspiration and today each year in just one province in India the Missionaries of Charity feed 500,000 families, treat 90,000 leprosy patients and educate 2,000 children. In 1979 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Mother Teresa because of her work for the poor in India. Who among us hasn’t heard of Mother Teresa? No one I’d venture to say. She was and is known and loved all around the world.

Sadly, Mother Teresa lived the remainder of her life almost vicariously off of that single somewhat prolonged spiritual experience. We know this because her letters have revealed a profound sadness in Mother Teresa that most were unaware of until just recently. In one of her letters she said, “I am told God lives in me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.

When I try to raise my thoughts to heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. Love – the word – it brings nothing.”

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Now, here is a woman who in her 36<sup>th</sup> year experienced a profound spiritual connection with the spirit of Jesus, who simply asked her to help.

The word “simply” is not a fair descriptor because he asked her to help in the slums of India, where some of the poorest of the poor live and all too frequently die. Jesus asked her to be “the fire of love amongst the poor, the sick, the dying, and the little children.”

According to Mother Teresa’s own letters, she never again experienced the mystical spiritual union she had for those few months in 1946 and 1947. The intoxication afforded by that one profound spiritual experience was indeed been life altering. I use the word intoxication not in its negative sense but as it could relate to a state of unparalleled exhilaration or euphoria. When a person is given an opportunity to know that kind of experience, I’m sure that life is never the same. Astoundingly, she never faltered no matter her own personal doubts.

If and when spirit happens, simply allow it to unfold and I hope you will have the courage to go where it might lead. But please don’t be overwhelmed, all experiences with spirit need not be as extreme as Mother Teresa’s.

They can be very simple and at the same time quite wonderful. In her book *The Preaching Life* Barbara Brown Taylor recalls an experience she had at the age of seven.

Her parents had finally settled on a church and she had come to adore the minister who was a frequent guest in her home. One special Sunday he asked that she sit close to the pulpit, and as she says in her book, “all of a sudden I heard him telling the congregation about a little girl who kept tadpoles in a birdbath so that she could watch over them as they turned into frogs, and how her care for those creatures was part of God’s care for the whole world.

It was as if someone had turned on all the lights – not only to hear myself spoken of in church, but to hear that my life was part of God’s life, and that something as ordinary as a tadpole connected the two.” Taylor goes on to describe a later experience she had when she was struggling with her life and what she should do in her life. She said, “One midnight I asked God to tell me as plainly as possible what I was supposed to do. “Anything that pleases you.” That is the answer that came into my sleepy head. “What?” I said, waking up.

“What kind of an answer is that?” “Do anything that pleases you,” the voice in my head said again,” and belong to me.” That simplified things considerably. I could pump gas in Idaho or dig latrines in Pago Pago, as far as God was concerned, as long as I remembered whose I was.”

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Taylor went on to become an Episcopal Priest, a writer and an inspirational speaker who travels world-wide. Taylor reminds us that we can respond to spirit in whatever we do and wherever we happen to be doing it.

Once again, if and when spirit happens, just go with it and don't be afraid.

Simply said, spirit matters! And in his book by that same title, Rabbi Michael Lerner goes into the reasons why spirit matters to a degree and depth which I could never do here. Lerner says, "I often talk of God as "the Force of Healing and Transformation in the Universe," the Force that makes the transformation from "that which is" to "That which ought to be possible."

He then goes on to connect that to the everyday by saying, "To look at the world as it really is requires noticing the specific contributions you can make, and then to make them, confident that if we each do this we can together heal the planet. Every act of love and kindness counts."

Lerner has described here the spirit behind the inspiration of action consistent with all of the examples I've shared with you thus far.

Lerner himself is part of an ancient Jewish faith tradition full of spiritual encounters. I'm not sure there is a more poignant example of the inspirational power of spirit than the passage from Exodus I read to you earlier. Moses experienced God in a burning bush on that day. God basically informed Moses that he would be the instrument of deliverance for the Israelites from Egypt. He wasn't expecting this overwhelming responsibility and he didn't quite know what to think about it.

Beyond the passages I read to you earlier, Moses went on to complain that he wasn't worthy of God's attention or the tasks he had in mind for him. Moses also complained that there were others, many others, who were much more capable than he. Over and over again Moses continued to offer reasons why God should pick someone else. In each case God assured Moses that he would be equipped to handle the situation. In other words, God told Moses to just have faith and that all of his concerns would be taken care of.

No matter what your personal beliefs are concerning the historical accuracy of the Exodus story, that one story has been the single most powerful story of hope for the Jewish people over the centuries. They have called on the Moses experience in times of distress and persecution to remind themselves of something more powerful than all of their adversaries. But the inspirational power of this story is not just limited to Jewish people; other oppressed people around the world have also used this story to give them hope.

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The African-American slaves in this county who were forced to convert to Christianity also used this same story to give them the hope that they too would be freed from the oppression they were subjected to. The entire Moses experience is simply one of liberation. It is frequently called upon whenever a people, any people, are oppressed. Once again in the 60's and 70's it was used by the African-American community and helped to inspire the Civil Rights movement. It's also at the core of what is now known as "Black Theology."

Similarly, in South America it inspired what is known as "Liberation Theology," which promotes freedom for oppressed indigenous peoples throughout the Americas.

At the heart of both Black Theology and Liberation Theology is the Moses experience and the belief that all people are entitled to freedom in this world, not some world to come, but this world. Does that sound familiar?

Do you hear echoes of statements from our own Unitarian Universalist Principles? You should, because I can't help but believe that the Moses experience had some impact on those principles as well. Both the inherent worth and dignity of every person and justice, equity and compassion in human relations are simply at the crux of the liberation experience and thus the Moses experience.

There is one part of the earlier Exodus reading that I have interpreted a little differently than most other theologians. I can't find my own particular twist anywhere else. This one thought actually provided the impulse for this entire sermon. Once again the passage from Exodus is as follows, "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Most theologians would indicate that this points to the need for a reverence of God. I believe it was God's way of saying, get close, get personal, remove all the barriers that separate us or protect you in the world.

With God or spirit or whatever you choose to call it, no barriers are necessary. In fact they hinder contact. Take off your shoes. Walk barefoot in the meadow or through the rain without an umbrella. Feel God's presence, feel Spirit move you, acknowledge the inspiration or guidance you are encountering.

Whenever you are lucky enough to experience the gift of spirit, get up close and personal and truly attempt to feel the total extent and breadth of the spiritual experience. These events won't happen often and when they do, I strongly encourage you to use every sense at your disposal to make sure you have the opportunity to experience spirit to its fullest. Take off your sandals and feel the spirit's presence.

Now, whether or not you are specifically able to identify an event or an experience which you would define as a spiritual encounter, you might consider accepting the idea or simply remembering that the inspiration that drives you to teach or to protect young children, or that causes you to search for a disease cure or

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dispense known cures, or even the impulse you might feel which leads you to help a homeless person on the street corner, or a stray dog or cat, or any of a number of other such events related to helping or caring about another person or some aspect of the world,

all such inspirational events are spiritual in nature, whatever their origin. This guiding spirit may indeed lead you to deliver a nation from oppression or to simply save a tadpole. All such events are significant and all are worthy in this existence we call life.

Got Spirit? Don't be afraid, use it, follow it and most of all enjoy the ride.

Got Spirit? I'm sure you have.

Namaste!

**Sermon Response**

**Closing Hymn**

Please join me standing as you are able singing our final Hymn, No. 21 "For the Beauty of the Earth" and remain standing for the Benediction.

**Benediction**

**John Pepper**

We are on a spiritual quest – a journey of self-discovery – as we continue our walk with God and discover more of ourselves and our world.

We are reminded through life's daily lessons that we are part of an ordered plan underlying the events of our lives – a divine curriculum of which we are devoted students.

We desire to grow and evolve spiritually, so we are ready to learn what we can from each experience. We are committed to finding out what we can do to apply our newfound wisdom and to practice what we've learned.

Along our journey, we look forward to each day as a gift from God, full of new insights. We welcome each experience for the wisdom and wonders it contains.

**Extinguish the Chalice**

**Beth Williamson**

**Postlude**