

*Seeking the Source*  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo  
Sunday, April 8, 2012  
Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

**Reading:** From C Otto Scharmer. *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*

One day I was hiking in the Alps, in Val Fex, a small valley near the border between Switzerland and Italy, right next to Sils Maria, where the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche used to write. This area is a special place in Europe because it is the watershed for three major rivers: the Rhine, flowing to the northwest; the Inn, flowing to the northeast; and the Po, flowing to the south. I decided to follow the Inn to its source. As I hiked upstream, I realized that I had never in my life followed a stream all the way to its source. In fact, I had never seen what the source of a major river really looks like.

The stream grew narrower and narrower until it was simply a trickle, and I found myself standing near a pond in the wide bowl of a valley, encircled by glacier-covered mountaintops. I just stood there and listened. With surprise, I realized I was at the center of countless waterfalls streaming off the mountains. They were making the most beautiful symphony one can imagine. Stunned, I realized that there was no such thing as a single point of origin. I watched the source all around and above me, streaming off the circle of glaciated mountaintops and then converging in the small pond. Was the pond the source? Was it the circle of waterfalls? Or was it the glaciers on the mountaintops? Or the whole planetary cycle of nature: rain, rivers flowing to the ocean, and evaporation? (p. 165-166)

**Sermon:** *Seeking the Source*

One summer day a few years ago, a friend and I were hiking in the Missouri Ozarks, when we came upon a small stream that emptied into the Huzzah Creek near the Red Bluff campground. We had some time to explore, and we realized that neither of us had ever in our lives followed a stream all the way to its source.

We began working our way up the slope alongside the stream, accompanied by the sweet trills of birdsong and the ripple of the water where it danced and splashed its way along its rocky bed. It was a beautiful late-summer day, and I actually thought, "Isn't this lovely, following a stream to its source, what a great sermon title that would make!"

We were accompanied also by the labored sound of our breath as we clambered over boulders and fallen trees, plunged into thickets of brush, working our way through the increasingly rough terrain. As we followed the stream, both the hillside and the banks became steeper, the thickets of nettles and brambles became less and less penetrable, until finally we resorted to walking in the stream instead of along it -- but still we persevered.

The rocks were moss-covered and slippery, and the danger of a sprained ankle became increasingly evident. The trills of birdsong were replaced by the drone of the occasional mosquito and the percussive sound of hands slapping away biting flies. The humidity of the Missouri summer became increasingly oppressive as the woods closed in and the air became more still. As the stream diminished, it became harder and harder to find safe footing on the slimy rocks. Finally, we reached the point where there was hardly any stream at all, just a sort of muddy bank that was clearly impassible -- so much for my vision of the clear Ozark spring bubbling up from the limestone bedrock -- there simply was no single source of the stream.

Arriving back at the campsite, sweaty, scratched and bitten, with a blister on my heel from walking a couple of miles back to camp in wet shoes and socks, I reflected on our discovery that there was no single point of origin, perhaps no such thing as a single point of origin, that our little Ozark stream was part of the whole planetary cycle of nature: rain, streams flowing into creeks and rivers, rivers to the ocean, and evaporation, the cycle beginning again and yet again.

It is this human urge to find the source, our search for truth and meaning, our yearning to make sense of a complex and sometimes baffling reality, that lies at the heart of both religion and science. The search for the source is foundational to the ancient religious traditions in which our Unitarian Universalist faith is rooted – we refer to them as the six sources of our faith, ranging from our direct experience of transcending awe and wonder – or our direct experience of mud and slimy rocks as we clamber up a streambed – to the sacred teachings of all wisdom sources in all times. And one of the core principles of the UU tradition is the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, our right and responsibility to follow our questions and our wonderings, the streams of our experience, to the source from which our lives flow.

Today we celebrate the Christian holy day of Easter, commemorating the life and resurrection of the teacher we know as Jesus. The name of the holiday, Easter, derives from the name of the Assyrian goddess Ishtar, or perhaps the Teutonic goddess Oestra, the Norse goddess Ostara, or perhaps Astarte from ancient Greece – all divine symbols of abundant fertility and the birth of new life, making the holiday a celebration of rebirth and resurrection, regeneration, new life springing from the source, with the vitality of a greening spring that promises a fulsome summer and abundant harvest.

This sermon was written with two 500-page books open in front of me. One tome is Otto Scharmer's mystical-sociological guide to organizational leadership through what he calls presencing, engaging our mind, heart and will at their deepest source. The other book is Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker's study of the roots of early Christianity, in which they found that the original Christian teachings saw paradise, not as an afterlife which one may aspire to reach only after death, but rather as an earthly reality to be created in real time by human action, by acting from our deepest commitments and understandings in the world.

It has become increasingly clear to me as I have worked with people for many years, that our concepts, our understandings of reality, are central to everything we do. Concepts and understandings, though they do not seem to have any independent reality of their own, are the source from which we generate our choices and actions, as well as our explanations for why we make the choices we do, why act as we do. We can decide to change our actions, but unless we transform the conceptual base that lies at the source of our actions, the change will not permeate and will not hold.

Our Religious Education Director, Sonja, referred to this in her sermon last month, as the difference between acting from the *inside out* versus acting from the *outside in* – from our own inner source and core purpose, or acting based on social norms and conventions. When we act from the inside out, from our center, our source, from our inner self, our actions are much more powerful. Sonja talked about the importance of attaching our “why” to what we do, knowing and articulating our mission and living it out in our actions. This is the same conversation we have been having here in church in recent weeks about our core purpose, the glowing coal that lies at the center of all that we do, individually and collectively. The conceptual frameworks offered by Scharmer, and by Brock and Parker, hold important keys that can inform our search, the connection to our own source, our core purpose, the essence of our self, and how we are present in the world.

One core premise is that we can and must make a difference in the world; that paradise is not some future otherworld that waits for us to arrive through right belief or through the redemptive power of a sacrificial act. Paradise is the world we create through our committed action. Brock and Parker's detailed historical analysis shows that in the first thousand years after the crucifixion, Christian teachings focused on the life and teaching of Jesus rather than on his death as a redemptive act. The core of Christian teaching in those early days was on Jesus' revolutionary ideas of creating paradise in the here and now, of loving your neighbor, caring for those in need, resisting empires of dominance and exploitation, creating and entering into a world of harmony and abundance through our actions, our generosity, the quality of our relationships with each other.

As Brock and Parker say in their book, those ancient conceptions of paradise “offered experiences and visions of justice, of the goodness of ordinary life, and of a vibrant peace. Paradise was described in terms recognizable as earthly life at its best. In these descriptions, it could be experienced as real – not as a permanent state of being, but as aspects of life itself. It flourished where people took responsibility for the well-being of all, and respected and protected the great cycles of life that sustain human life. . . . this legacy of paradise would feed a movement of resistance [to imperial power] led by a rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth. Like a tree planted by the water, his movement took root, moistened by the waters of paradise and shaded by its trees and vines. In the long genealogy of paradise and its call to humanity to live justly and ethically, Jesus was yet another branch of this great, sheltering tree. . . Eternal life was possible here and now because of the presence of divinity in the world . . . this power of love in community, this companionship of Wisdom, was the infinite source of life. . . .In the cross-cultural brew that produced early Christianity, the assurance of paradise was an inebriating grace, a life-giving recipe drawn from many ancient sources . . . [It] fueled Christian resistance to Roman oppression and sustained love for the world. . . . the banquet of abundance was spread for all. From feasting in Paradise, [the early Christians] took strength to embody ethical grace in the world – the world that God so generously loved.”

This is a vision of Christian teachings that is abundant and life-giving, justice-seeking and empowering, one that I think many Unitarian Universalists can embrace as part of our heritage of faith. This radical Christian teaching is one of the sources from which we draw as we follow the streams of our experience in our search for truth and meaning. That vision of an earthly life that is abundant and life-giving, justice-seeking and empowering, begs the question: how do we go about creating that paradise in the here and now? Where does that transformative power originate, what is the source? Otto Scharmer, the author of *Theory U*, offers a concept that he calls “presencing.” He described presencing as going through “eye of the needle, or the process of turning inside out and outside in . . .”

His description continues, “In ancient Jerusalem, there was a gate called ‘the needle’ which was so narrow that when a fully loaded camel approached the gate, the camel-driver had to take off all the bundles before the camel could pass through. Referring to this well-known image of his day, Jesus said, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.’ Likewise, [at the deepest source of our presence] there lies an inner gate, which requires us to drop everything that isn't essential. What is it that constitutes this eye of the needle . . . for groups, organizations and communities? It is the connecting to our authentic or higher self, to our capital-S Self. If this connection is established, . . . when we succeed in keeping that connection to our deeper source of knowing alive, we begin to better tune into emerging future possibilities. Acting now, from a ‘different place,’ we are able to begin to operate from a different source. We envision, prototype and embody the new.” We step into our capacity to create Paradise, here and now.

Scharmer's story that I read earlier tells of hiking up the stream, only to find that the source he sought was really multiple sources, many waterfalls from many points of origin, so many that the thought of a

single source makes no sense – the source is actually infinite and cyclical, the entirety of the natural world, extending over the entirety of time. “Metaphorically speaking,” he says, “presencing is the capacity that allows us to operate from this extended notion of the source, to function as a watershed by sensing what wants to come forth and then allowing it to come into being. In other words, by bringing the water from the surrounding waterfalls to a single point, the pond fills and spills into the river, bringing it into being. . . .

The root of the word presencing is es, which means "to be," that is, "I am." Essence, yes, presence, and present (gift) all share this same Indo-European root.” Being fully present, presencing, is fully to be, to live from our deepest gifts, to step into the future as it unfolds, to live into the “Yes!”, to generate the present from the unfolding future, moving from the deepest source within, our true self. That is the creation of paradise, that is the co-creation of the world into its highest possibility.

The early Christians believed that their churches were a center for that process of creating paradise; they believed that by coming together in community they achieved a greater transformative potential, a more powerful presence to live into a vision of a just and abundant earth than any of us can create on our own. That is church at its best, a power that brings out our lives at their best. That is a potential into which we can dream for this church, and for ourselves.

In this time of eastering, this fertile time of resurrection, the rebirthing of the world in spring, I wish for us each and all a time of powerful new beginnings in the hope of a fulsome summer and an abundant harvest. May we experience that power of presence, may we create paradise where we stand, that our lives may connect to the source we seek and may we quench our thirst in the clear mountain spring of peace, hope and justice, and may we sing the alleluia of joy in our new beginnings.

#### Sources:

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