

The Clouds of Our Unknowing
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Like a bird on the wire
Like a drunk in a midnight choir
I have tried in my way to be free

Leonard Cohen, 1969

A bird on a wire... You know, there was the cartoon that was published years ago. Three frames, as I remember. In the first frame, several birds were perched on a wire between two telephone poles. In the second the image is exactly the same but the telephone wire is missing. The birds are now floating where they were perching in the previous frame. In the third frame, the chattiest bird leans over to its nearest neighbor in confession and he says, "I gotta tell ya, I still don't understand this new wireless technology."

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. The title of this morning's reflection is *The Clouds of Our Unknowing*. The words are borrowed from a book about centering prayer (or contemplative prayer) that was written by an anonymous author in the 14th century and was called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. I first heard this language in seminary back in Berkeley, not in connection to this book but in connection to the biblical story of Moses at Mount Sinai.

I look forward to reading *The Cloud* at some point but this morning's reflection has less to do with centering prayer and more to do with tightrope walking, more to do with being a bird on a wire, more to do with finding and keeping our balance at great and dizzying heights. James Baldwin writes,

I felt myself in the middle of a turning wheel. It felt like that, as one might feel at a circus, with all its shifting, multicolored, terrifying lights, and with all that sound; or as one might feel walking on a tightrope, with all the lights and sounds and people, mortally, hideously unbelievably beneath; everything depending on what one was able to achieve of balance.

—James Baldwin, 1968

Now, he had no idea what was happening to him—not James Baldwin but Moses. Moses didn't know what was happening to him. How on earth or in heaven could he possibly have known—having never done such an incredible thing before, having never climbed a mountain in order to see the face of God? In Exodus, it is explained that the people wandered the wilderness until they came to the mountain call Sanai. It is written,

Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings...'

God said, “if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession.”

So, Moses went before the elders and shared what God had said on the mountain and the elders and the people responded all as one. They all agreed.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak to you and so trust you ever after.

According to the rest of this passage, one has to prepare for this. One has to get good and ready before having a holy encounter—the theophany, as they say...or the appearance of God. Without the right preparation, there can be consequences.

Appearing in my Bible, like the warning of a cosmic surgeon general, there is a “Special Note,” there is commentary about Exodus, 19:10-13. It reads, The appearance of God is dangerous for humans requiring careful preparation and safeguards because of divine holiness. Holiness means that God is separate from humanity in two ways. First, God’s sacred character is separate from the profane world of creation. But sin introduces a second separation, that between pure and impure. The result of this two-fold separation is that God, who is sacred and pure, becomes dangerous in the presence of humans, who are not only profane but also impure.

The language is so striking, isn’t it? The warning concludes, Inappropriate contact with God carries the threat of death. Proper preparation includes ritual consecration and cleansing of the people, the washing of clothes and the leaving of a clear boundary between the mountain and the people...

I grew up thinking that language like this was heavy-handed, that God was always serene and only appeared in ways that were safe and gentle. That’s what I wanted to believe, at any rate. It’s still hard for me to think of God as dangerous. It seems incongruous somehow.

I have always been resistant to preparatory rituals. I have always been reactive about them—doubtful and skeptical...sometimes rebellious even. I got over it with the help of a Sufi teacher from Afghanistan. Sheik Yasir Chadley. I have shared stories about him before.

In preparation for the recitation of the Fatiha in the beginning of the Muslim prayer, Yasir taught me about the ritual of wudu. Wudu is “the Islamic procedure for cleansing the body.”¹ It is a ritual of purification. It is an act of ablution. It’s beautiful but I was still doubtful, unconvinced of its usefulness. And so, I asked Yasir about it. I asked my teacher to help me understand. I shared my resistance from my liberal, Unitarian Universalist point of view. I said, “Yasir, can I ask you a question? I’m struggling with something.”

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wudu>

He said, “Yes, of course.” He invited my questions. I had the sense that he deeply loved me, that he deeply loved all of his students. That could have been my projection. I don’t know. What I know for sure is that I loved him very, very much.

So, I start talking. I tell him that the God that I imagine is not so orderly and so uptight as to require me to be perfectly clean before God hears my prayer. I tell him that the God that I imagine can accept me as I am and does not need these kinds of cleansing rituals. I thought I had him cornered but I really didn’t.

He said, “I don’t think that the Holy doesn’t need these rituals, Leon. I think that you need them.” That got me. I realized immediately that I had mistaken my personal conviction for my faith. I mistook my hubris for the holy. I helped me to see that. Peter told us, “Be clothed with humility, for God resisteth the proud.” Matthew said, “Blessed are the merciful” but, somehow, I had missed to point. It was good to realize that. Understanding what the holy was not help me to see things more clearly, more dearly and more nearly. That was so helpful to me. It was what I didn’t know—and, maybe, really couldn’t know—about the holy that strengthened all my habits of belief. A country blues artist sings,

Hold my knees on the ground, Lord, help my faith
My disbelief is killing me, I surely need Your grace

—Kelly Joe Phelps

That line really touches me. I’m powerfully affected by it, by the idea of being killed off by my own disbelief. It’s cool and fascinating...maybe because I learned to be so skeptical about spiritual things. I don’t regret my cynicism. I respect my doubt. But I’m also aware that my attitude sometimes doesn’t serve me well.

Maybe it’s not such a bad idea for us to prepare for spiritual things...whether we are climbing up the mountain, gently washing our good souls clean or walking into heaven here on earth...like Petit did. Into the darkness, we used to sing, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord,” back in the 70s. I wonder now if Petit did as well.

Philippe Petit walked into heaven back in 1974. He didn’t ascend to heaven. He walked there on his own and he did so by using six tools of preparation—passion, tenacity, faith, improvisation, inspiration...and, of course, the most essential tool of all. I love the way that he chose to tell the story. He says,

Intuition is a tool essential in my life... On the high wire, within months, I was able to master all the tricks they do in the circus... I was starting to invent my own moves, [starting to] bring them to perfection. But nobody wanted to hire me. So I started putting a wire up in secret and performing without permission. Notre Dame, the Sydney Harbor Bridge, the World Trade Center. And I developed a certitude, a faith that convinced me that I will get safely to the other side.

Without that faith, he would not have been able to take the first step. Intuition was his most essential tool. Intuition is “the ability to understand something immediately, without the need for conscious reasoning.” It’s something we know from instinct, from that part of us that’s still wild.

Somehow, Philippe Petit knew that he could do this wild and crazy thing, knew that he could walk across the sky 1,792 feet above the streets of New York City. He'd spent his life preparing. "Nonetheless," he said,

...on the top of the World Trade Center my first step was terrifying. [] I lift the balancing pole. I approach the edge. I step over the beam. I put my left foot on the cable, the weight of my body rested on my right leg, anchored to the flank of the building. Shall I ever so slightly shift my weight to the left? My right leg will be unburdened, my right foot will freely meet the wire. On one side, a mass of a mountain, a life I know. On the other, the universe of the clouds, so full of [the] unknown [that] we think it's empty. At my feet, the path to the north tower—60 yards of wire rope. It's a straight line, which sags, which sways, which vibrates, which rolls on itself, which is ice, which is three tons tight, ready to explode, ready to swallow me. An inner howl assails me, the wild longing to flee. But it is too late. The wire is ready. Decisively my other foot sets itself onto the cable.

I am terrified just reading this. I have a fear of heights. Is anyone with me in this? A friend once explained it to me. He said, rationally, "I really don't think that it's the height of things that you are most afraid of." He said, "I think that you're really afraid of falling down and getting hurt or, possibly, even dying."

So, I reassured my friend with clarity. I said, "Oh, I'm afraid of that as well." But Philippe Petit, the high-wire artist... He was not afraid. He said so himself. He was utterly terrified. He and I have that feeling in common. He and I differ, though, in how we choose to act on what we feel, in how we chose to take the next step. For instance, I do not choose to walk across the high-wire. It's not my thing. He, on the other hand... He feels deeply compelled to do such things. Both of us are listening. Both of us are students of the music of intuition. With his first steps, he recalled that on one side, there was the mass of a mountain, the life he knew and on the other side, there was the universe of the clouds, a universe that was so full of [the] unknown we think it's empty. Philippe Petit is able to step into the clouds of unknowing with a kind of certainty. He said, "Faith is what replaces doubt in my dictionary."

Faith is what replaces doubt in my spiritual dictionary as well but it doesn't lead me out across the high-wire. The faith that I know does not always surrender to gravity, does not often surrender to gravity...but I'm still not walking across the wire. I simply have not been properly prepared. The faith I know leads into mystery...and sometimes, that's just as terrifying.

Today is September the 11th in the good year 2022. It is the 21st anniversary of tragedy that we refer to as 9/11. For the fury of that day, the towers that a tightrope artist used to walk into heaven no longer exist. The world that used to be has changed.

You say 9/11 and something falls within us each time that it's mentioned. Some of us may be feeling this falling right now...if our heart are out in the open, if they are in that touchable place. It's hard to keep the heart out there for too long a time—out where it can be touched or tapped or tipped over or tumbled or torn.

Perhaps too well, men know how to prevent such things from happening...even in the face of catastrophe. Especially in the face of catastrophe.

Do you know Keith Olbermann? [] Keith Olbermann is a sportscaster. He's good at his job. So, he's pretty well known. He's familiar to many of us. In 2001, he was living in New York City and back then, he told this story. He said that after the Twin Towers fell...

The following Monday, when they opened Wall Street, the streets were ringed with men with machine guns. There was still smoke pouring out of the pyre of the World Trade Center. After about four hours of walking around downtown, a cop recognizes me and he says, "How are you, Keith?"

I said, "I'm alright. I'm alright. How are you?"

He says, "I'm worried."

I said, "I'm worried, too."

He said, "I'm worried about the Mets."

And I sort of snapped out of it. I said, "You're worried about the Mets?"

He said, "Yeah, well, the season resumes tonight and I'm really worried. They're in Pittsburgh. Do you think they have enough to get back in the Pennant race? I mean, they were doing so well. Can they catch the Braves?"

And I said, "How on earth could that possibly matter?" We're standing and there's smoke coming up from behind us!

And he says, "Well," he says. "It doesn't matter. Of course, it doesn't matter. I've got 300 friends dead. It doesn't matter." He says, "But tonight at 7:00 and all day the rest of today, I can look forward to 7:00 where I can put my feet up and pretend it does matter."

Heroes push us up...lift us up to the next level. Heroes come in all types and sizes—baseball players and tightrope walkers, poets and presidents, writers and first-responders, comedians and historians...and sportscasters in this case, I guess. I'm now a big fan of Keith Olbermann.

In late October of 2001, two weeks after American military forces had entered Afghanistan, Howard Zinn, the highly respected and world-renown historian, spoke at the University of Vermont, up in Burlington. He shared an interesting story that I'd like to share now with you. He said,

I was talking to my barber the other day...because we always discuss world politics. And he's totally politically unpredictable, as most barbers are, you see. He said, "Howard," he said, "you know, you and I disagree on many things, but on one thing we agree: War solves nothing."

We've had a history of war after war after war after war. What have they solved? What have they done? Even World War II, the "good war," the war in which I volunteered, the war in which I dropped bombs...

I came out of that war...the war in which I was an enthusiastic bombardier. I came out of that war with [an idea that] developed gradually...[the idea was]

that war corrupts everybody who engages in it. War poisons everybody who engages in it.

What do you think of Howard's idea? I can tell you what I think about it. I don't find it bitter. Some people but I do not. I think that it demonstrates a kind of bravery that is rare and spiritually beautiful. I think that it demonstrates a kind of faith in the future that unfolds with uncertainty. I think that his idea is a product of incredible preparation.

As a bomber in World War II, he was given a terrible order and he followed it. The order was to bomb a village that was not in Germany, but in France. As he explained,

We thought our bombing missions were over. The war was about to come to an end. This was in April of 1945. [The war ended in early May.] This was a few weeks before the war was going to be over and everybody knew it was going to be over. [There] was a little pocket of German soldiers hanging around this little town of Royan on the Atlantic coast of France. The Air Force decided to bomb them. Twelve hundred heavy bombers—and I was in one of them—flew over this little town...

It was the first use of napalm in the European theater. He said, I did it, like most soldiers do, unthinkingly, mechanically. [I was] thinking, "We're on the right side and they're on the wrong side. And, therefore, we can do whatever we want and it's OK. Only afterward, only really after the war, did I...begin to think about the human effects of bombing.

What I find most impressive about Howard Zinn's idea is the preparation that went into it...because he wasn't just saying these things flippantly. He had spent more than half of a century thinking about them. Howard Zinn did what only true heroes do. He faced himself honestly and squarely...and he made peace in the world in the most profound of ways. I love the way he told it. He said,

Later, I visited that village, about 10 years after the war. And I went to the library, which had been destroyed and which was now rebuilt, and I dug out records of the survivors and what they had written about the bombing. [] I spoke to people who had survived that and whose family members had died. And they were very bitter about the bombing.

Howard Zinn, then, wrote about that experience.

These days, writers like Howard Zinn are hated and feared by some of us—hated by those who are not ready for how powerful his ideas have become, feared by those who are unprepared for his level of compassion and insight. At the same time, others of us are ready for the power and prepared for the compassion and the insight. We are ready and prepared...hungry for it, even. Through people like Howard Zinn, we know is that we are on our way. We have lifted the balancing pole and we have approached the edge of things. We've placed both feet on the cable and we have stepped into the sky. And now, we face the clouds of our unknowing and it's beautiful. God only knows what will happen next but I have a feeling that

we'll be pleasantly surprised. Philippe Petit, the tightrope sky-walker... He was certainly surprised...and by a little bird, a dove of peace. As he says,

Years ago, I was invited to open the Israel Festival by a high-wire walk. I chose to put my wire between the Arab and the Jewish quarters of Jerusalem... I thought it would be incredible if in the middle of the wire I stopped and, like a magician, I produce a dove and send her in the sky as a living symbol of peace.

[So, there were 80,000 people there...and there was tension.] Because all those people...for the most part, considered each other enemies.

So, I start the walk [and I stop in the middle.] I make the dove appear. People applaud in delight. Then, I send the bird of peace into the azure. But the bird, instead of flying away, lands on my head!

So I try again to send the dove into the air. But this time, the dove lands on the end of my balancing pole. [Instead of admitting that I was improvising because things were going wrong,] I just take a bow. Then, I bang my hand against my balancing pole to dislodge the dove that cannot fly. This time, it lands on the wire behind me. And the entire valley goes crazy.

I feel like that dove sometimes...like a bird that cannot fly...and so did Leonard Cohen, if I hear his song correctly. Maybe, we all feel that way sometimes...trying our best to fly, trying to find and keep our balance and trying in our own ways, to be free.

So, happy birthday, Howard! I hope it feels good to be 100! Feel free to join us out at Silver Lake. We're heading down there after church. We're jumping in. We're gonna fall into something beautiful.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.