

January 11, 2015 ❁ Bolts from the Blue

part 1 of a 2-part sermon series

© Rev. Erika Hewitt

“Wake-up calls are simply calls that have become desperate to get our attention. They generally start out as polite requests, gentle taps on the shoulder, whispers in the ear, and they escalate to rude shoves and barbaric yawns only after we have repeatedly ignored them.” ~ Gregg Levoy, in Callings

Readings: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James, 1901
(Lecture IX: Conversion)

Now if you ask of psychology just how the excitement shifts in a man’s mental system, and why aims that were peripheral become at a certain moment central, psychology has to reply that although she can give a general description of what happens, she is unable in a given case to account accurately for all the single forces at work. Neither an outside observer nor the Subject who undergoes the process can explain fully how particular experiences are able to change one’s centre of energy so decisively, or why they so often have to bide their hour to do so. We have a thought, or we perform an act, repeatedly, but on a certain day the real meaning of the thought peals through us for the first time, or the act has suddenly turned into a moral impossibility. All we know is that there are dead feelings, dead ideas, and cold beliefs, and there are hot and live ones; and when one grows hot and alive within us, everything has to re-crystallize about it.

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens (1843)

“I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future!” Scrooge repeated, as he scrambled out of bed. “The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. Oh Jacob Marley! Heaven, and the Christmas Time be praised for this. I say it on my knees, old Jacob, on my knees!”

He was so fluttered and so glowing with his good intentions, that his broken voice would scarcely answer to his call. He had been sobbing violently in his conflict with the Spirit, and his face was wet with tears.

“They are not torn down!” cried Scrooge, folding one of his bed-curtains in his arms, “they are not torn down, rings and all. They are here -- I am here -- the shadows of the things that would have been, may be dispelled. They will be! I know they will.”

His hands were busy with his garments all this time; turning them inside out, putting them on upside down, tearing them, mislaying them, making them parties to every kind of extravagance.

“I don’t know what to do!” cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath; and making a perfect Laocoon of himself with his stockings. “I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! A happy New Year to all the world! Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!”

Sermon: “Bolts from the Blue”

Scrooge is a fictional character, but there are plenty of people in this life (this real life), who will attest that the process of transformation sometimes happens in a slow burn, over the course of years — and sometimes it happens in a single night.

“We have a thought, or we perform an act, repeatedly, but on a certain day the real meaning of the thought peels through us for the first time,” wrote William James over a century ago. “There are dead feelings, dead ideas, and cold beliefs, and there are hot and live ones; and when one grows hot and alive within us, everything has to re-crystallize about it.”

Do you recall a time when an idea, a feeling, a belief, grew “hot and alive” within you, and everything had to re-crystallize around it? If you traced backwards your life’s map and pointed to the sharpest veers, the most unlikely forks, wouldn’t you in fact find moments like this?

In his magnificent book *Callings*, Gregg Levoy writes,¹ “[Wake-up calls] are the means by which new powers and patterns can break into consciousness and new stages of life can be attained... Either we understand that the point of the experience is to reorient us and recognize the call in the calamity, or we attempt to drive ourselves deeper into the status quo, the old equilibrium, and thereby miss the point entirely.”

Call it an awakening, a conversion, a bolt from the blue. John Newton, the British slave-trader who wrote “Amazing Grace,” called it his “great deliverance.” Call it what you like, but be prepared: as anyone who’s experienced a wake-up call can tell you, it can save your life — but in the process you might lose everything else. I think that’s why so many people ignore the signs and signals that shout to get their attention: they know, on some level, that “losing everything” is exactly what transformation looks like.



In the late 1990s, Carlton Pearson was “at the top of his game”² — and the name of the game was church. An evangelical minister, Pearson had been groomed by Oral Roberts,

¹ pp. 232-233.

² This American Life, “Heretics.” Originally aired 12.16.2005

who referred to Carlton as his “son.” As he rose to prominence, Pearson was invited to preach beside the greatest evangelical preachers of the day; he served as an advisor to President George W. Bush; and he grew his Tulsa, Oklahoma congregation into a megachurch where 5,000 people attended worship each week. Pearson had eight pastors on his staff, “all of whom believed that Hell was real, and the only way to avoid it was by being reborn in Christ.”³

This is the fearsome theology that Pearson himself had always preached: unless you’re saved, you’re going to hell. The more he studied the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek, though, the more doubts crept in. And, as Gregg Levoy suggests, the loudest, most desperate-to-get-our-attention wake-up calls begin with “whispers” and “gentle taps,” escalating to “rude shoves... only after we have repeatedly ignored them.”⁴

One night in front of his TV, Pearson received his rude awakening: there, on the news, infants and children were dying of starvation in Uganda while Pearson held his own well-fed baby daughter on his lap. *What a shame*, he said to God, *you call yourself loving but you’ll let all of those people go to hell unless someone preaches the gospel to them and gets them saved.*

In Pearson’s telling, God talked back: *“They’re in hell already... You keep creating and inventing that for yourselves. I’m taking them into My presence.”*⁵

From that night on, this grew into Carlton Pearson’s new truth: “If there was no Hell, then you didn’t need to accept Jesus to avoid Hell. And if you didn’t need to accept Jesus, it didn’t matter if you were a Christian... Everyone in the world was saved, whether they knew it or not.”⁶

What do we call that? Universalism.

How do you imagine Pearson’s evangelical megachurch felt about his Gospel of Inclusion? There was a mass exodus of church members.

By 2004, his 5,000 member congregation had dropped to 200, and Pearson was formally named a heretic. His staff of eight pastors abandoned Pearson, as did his friends and colleagues — including the man he’d looked to as a father figure. “It’s like I died.”

³ <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/304/transcript>

⁴ p. xx

⁵ This American Life.

⁶ TAL.

He lost so much, so quickly, Pearson says, that “if he’d known when he first started preaching the Gospel of Inclusion that it would cost him so much, he would have never opened his mouth... And now that what’s done is done, there’s no way he’d go back.”⁷



What happened to Carlton Pearson? What were the mechanics of his conversion, his awakening? Did God really talk to him? To our rational UU ears, doesn’t that sound just as fictional as the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future leading Ebenezer Scrooge towards his redemption?

Does it really matter?

If we dwell too obsessively on what, *exactly*, happened that night as Pearson sat in front of his TV, we’ve missed the point. Why should we concern ourselves with the model and make of the vehicle, when the real story is his journey from *there* to *here*?

“Living means being addressed,” said theologian Martin Buber; to that Gregg Levoy adds⁸:

Whatever or whoever is addressing us is a power like wind or fusion or faith: **We can’t see the force, but we can see what it does.** Primarily this force announces the need for change, and the response for which it calls is an awakening of some kind. A call is only monologue. A return call, a response, creates dialogue. Our own unfolding requires that we be in constant dialogue with whatever is calling us.



To “be in constant dialogue with whatever is calling us” is a hallmark of the spiritual path. We believe, as a people of liberal faith, that there’s no end to the forces that address us, call to us, whisper in our ear, and invite us to new stages of life and becoming.

Comedian Gracie Allen is credited with saying: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” The United Church of Christ has put that sentiment in its own words: “God is still speaking.” However you phrase it, it’s a statement of faith — and it’s one of the things that distinguishes liberal religion from the conservative and ultra-conservative.

It’s been a bad week for religious fundamentalism. Notice I didn’t say “radical Islam;” I don’t believe that’s the problem. It’s fundamentalism itself — the entrenched beliefs that I’m right; that if you don’t agree with me, you’re wrong; that if you’re wrong you’re no

⁷ Russell Cobb, in TAL.

⁸ *Callings*, p. 2.

longer worthy of dignity and respect, but swift punishment — well, friends, I view holding those beliefs as laying a fire where the flames of evil burn bright.

I believe that the most acute split in today's religious landscape isn't a matter of religious identity, or particular beliefs. The real difference, more and more, is the gap between those who are religiously entrenched and those who are religiously liberal.

In the 1970s, UU theologian and ethicist James Luther Adams⁹ articulated five central characteristics that distinguish liberal religion from religion that's fixed and fundamentalist. These have come to be known as the "Five Smooth Stones."

- ✿ In liberal religious community, we choose to be in relationship, freely and with consent — never with coercion. We don't threaten one another with punishment.
- ✿ We believe that we have a moral obligation to work towards a just and loving community. We choose to put aside selfishness or individualism and focus on *how* we are in relationship with one another.
- ✿ We believe that goodness must be embodied through us. Good things come about not through Divine intervention, but through the work of human hands.¹⁰
- ✿ Liberal religious communities are storehouses and witnesses for "ultimate optimism." We always have cause to hope.
- ✿ We affirm that revelation is continuous. More truth is always unfolding, and we are "in constant dialogue with whatever is calling us."¹¹

These "five smooth stones" are a stance towards life: we are curious, engaged, empowered in asserting that life has meaning. These are the ties that bind us, across differences of language, creed, and ritual, to others who are religiously liberal: Reform Jews, Humanists, liberal Christians, Buddhists, pagans, liberal Muslims.

How do these five smooth stones appear in your life and your choices?

Where do you freely choose to be in relationship?

How do you give up some of your own needs to make those relationships more just and loving?

⁹ In James Luther Adams' *On Being Human Religiously*.

¹⁰ http://www.uuasouthernregion.org/images/Big_Book_2011.pdf

¹¹ Levoy.

How do you bring goodness into the world, through your own work?

When do you find yourself bold enough to express hope for the world and our human family, despite all evidence to the contrary?

And where are you inviting yourself to be changed, slowly or overnight, by listening to Life whispering into your ear?

“Whatever or whoever is addressing us is a power like wind or fusion or faith,” says Gregg Levoy. “We can’t see the force, but we can see what it does.”

As this new year calls to you, may all you encounter see what the forces of life do for you, and within you.

