

## "PAPER BAGS AND CALABASHES"

Sermon delivered to Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship  
on Sunday 27 November 2016

Do you have a cardboard box of "good stuff"? Do you have a box which is what you'll grab to take with you if your house ever catches on fire? Do you have a worn paper bag of bits and pieces - "love in a paper sack"?

Think back over the years. Are you aware of any sins of omission - of failures to seize opportunities which you might now be ready to grasp - failures to see what was really there - what was really being offered to you in the equivalent of Robert Fulghum's daughter's tattered lunch-bag?

Are you aware - or prepared to admit - that you may have rejected, through sheer insensitivity, goodness only knows how many tentative offerings of open-hearted trust?

If it is important to try to see more accurately what is really there in situations and in other people, it is surely also worth asking, too, what qualities we may be failing to recognise in ourselves.

Is it a genuine awareness of our actual limitations that sometimes makes us say, with Moses, "who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?" Or might it be, quite as often, a failure to recognise and trust our own potential, to trust our latent powers? We need a keenly discriminating eye, if we are to distinguish realistically between the various perceptions and possibilities which face us.

My friend and colleague, the late Rev Pat Womersley, told of the Sunday, many years ago, when she was told by two newcomers that they had seen flames and smoke encircling and rising above her head, while she conducted the service. She said she was somewhat shaken at the time, but the memory of that incident had helped to keep her aware of the extent to which people may dress up ministers, for example, in robes as splendid, and fantastic, and as non-existent, as the Emperor's new clothes in Hans Christian Andersen's well-known tale.

That particular story can present us with some quite challenging questions.

I expect that most of us have at some time been thrust into a position we feel unable to live up to; or have felt that other people must surely be able to see through our veneer of competence and confidence; or have realised that, at some moment of crisis, perhaps confronting tragedy, we are simply naked, vulnerable souls, no longer able to cover up or disguise our ultimate helplessness.

Or perhaps we have recognised that, having committed ourselves to a certain course, we feel we must continue inexorably, like the Emperor. Even when he **knew** that the people had seen the reality of his situation, he thought within himself, "I must go through with the procession."

"And so," the story ends, "the chamberlains held on tighter than ever, and carried the train which did not exist at all."

Are we always alert enough - and willing enough- to realise when it is time to end some practice that is simply carrying us along by its own ritualistic momentum?

How much of value is **really** there, in our community of faith - in our religious life? How much are we simply kidding ourselves?

Whether or not we ask ourselves such questions, the secularists and materialists remind us of them often enough. The majority of people in today's society seem to see nothing meaningful or significant in church life and organised religion. For many people, such things can be explained away as mere self-deception, a metaphorical dose of opium, a comfort blanket, or a guarantee of respectability.

Sometimes this attitude can rub off on us, causing us to question whether all our hard work is producing anything of tangible or measurable value.

If this mood takes hold, it can be easier to side with those who are convinced there never was any burning bush; it can hard to maintain, with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, that

"Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God."

In her sermon on 4 September 1996, during the Annual Conference of the Ministerial Fellowship at Great Hucklow, Pat Womersley told a story which provides the second part of my title for this sermon.

According to this Zulu myth or folk-tale, there was once a young peasant farmer, who kept a few cows and managed to live comfortably enough on the milk they provided. But gradually he realised they were yielding less and less, and even the early-morning milking was a poor one.

One night, as he sat up late, racking his brains about what to do, he looked outside his hut and saw a group of beautiful sky-maidens, sliding gracefully down shafts of moonlight, dancing and singing and playing - and stealing milk from his cows to put in their calabashes before they flew back up to heaven. They were so beautiful he felt that life would not be worth living if he could not see them again.

The next night he lay in wait, and when they came again he managed to capture the most beautiful maiden of all. She begged him to release her, but he said he would not set her free until she agreed to marry him. She gave her promise, but insisted that she must first return to her home in the sky, to fetch some things she could not live without.

She duly returned, but before she married him made him promise that he would never look inside the large calabash which she had brought wither, wrapped in many layers of cloth.

For some years he kept his word, and they lived very happily together. Then, one day, when she was out, he felt bored, curiosity overcame him, and he unwrapped the calabash and looked inside.

To his disappointment, it was empty. He said nothing to his wife when she returned, but she sensed that something had happened, and eventually he admitted that he had broken his promise and had . looked, but had found nothing.

At this she was overcome with grief, and told him that she would have to leave him: not, she explained, because he had broken his word, but because when he had looked inside the calabash, he thought it was empty, whereas in reality it contained all the things that were dearest to her: some of the blue sky from her home in the heavens; breaths of its freer, purer air; memories of the family she had left; and other precious gifts from the world she truly belonged to.

Because he could not see or value these things which meant so much to her, he and she could have no meaningful relationship, and she must leave. And so, the young farmer was left - alone, and poorer than ever.

Pat reflected on the insight which that story gave her into the nature of ministry: a suggestion that what ministers have to live and work with is a kind of paradoxical, creative tension, between recognising and acknowledging the emptiness, the apathy, the dryness or blindness of the spirit that can pervade and impoverish situations, relationships and communities, as well as our personal **inner** worlds, while at the same time being aware, receptive, ready to take off our shoes in reverence at any moment, as we catch a glimpse of what may after all be there, waiting only to be appreciated for what it really is - flame that is not consumed, within the most unprepossessing person; or the pearl of great price hidden in the scruffiest paper bag.

We need the discrimination to know whether we are seeing nothing because there is truly nothing to be seen, or whether we are seeing nothing because we are unaware, insensitive, unperceptive, or lacking in spiritual insight.

And maybe even more, in our communities and within ourselves as individuals, we need to work for the reconciliation, or the integration, of the Zulu farmer - the materialist, the earth-bound provider, the realist, the doubter - with the sky-maiden - the idealist for whom the spiritual dimension is utterly real.

Could we not, Pat asked - could we not envisage a different ending for that story? Perhaps it would have been possible for the farmer to have asked his wife, right at the outset, just **what** she had brought with her from her strange and distant world; and, though difficult, maybe it would not have been impossible for her to have communicated something about the special significance of all those things that mattered so much to her.

Pat was speaking to a congregation of colleagues, of ministers, and her story spoke to many of us. But it is rich in meanings, and it seems to me that it provides an insight into the nature of our human condition as human beings - all of us, not just ministers.

All of us have to live and work with a kind of paradoxical, creative tension. Is there any one of us who is unable to recognise and acknowledge the apathy, the emptiness, the dryness or blindness of the spirit that can pervade and impoverish situations in which we find ourselves; our relationships with other people, whether they be family, friends, colleagues, or neighbours; the communities in which we live and work and laugh and love; our own personal **inner** worlds?

Is there any one of us who is unable to recognise and acknowledge the spiritual dimension of our lives; the need to be always aware and receptive; the need to be ready to take off our shoes in reverence at any moment; the ever-present possibility that we may catch a glimpse of what may after all be there, waiting only to be appreciated for what it really is?

Is there any one of us who would deny the possibility that the flame that is not consumed may burn within the most unprepossessing person; or that the pearl of great price may be hidden in the scruffiest brown paper bag?

All of us need the discrimination to know whether we are seeing nothing because there is truly nothing to be seen, or whether we are seeing nothing because we are unaware, insensitive, unperceptive, or lacking in spiritual insight.

All of us need, in our communities and within ourselves as individuals, to work for the reconciliation, or the integration, of the material and ideal, the real and the spiritual, our doubts and our beliefs.

Can we develop our sensitivity to the sky-maiden's treasures? Can we try to communicate to others something of the special significance of the things that matter most to us? Can we earn the trust of other people? Can we be willing to trust them?

Robert Fulghum's daughter dared to open her heart and share her greatest treasures; yet her father almost betrayed her trust when he failed to understand the value to her of the trifles she had offered him.

Just in time, he glimpsed something of the reality he had missed; and when he took the trouble to ask, with genuine respect, what those little oddments meant to her, it was possible to mend and ultimately strengthen their relationship.

As we approach Christmas, the season of giving, the material gifts, the toys and the money are important ways in which we can share some of the affluence we enjoy with others who have much less.

But, equally, important - important in other ways - is what Robert Fulghum's daughter gave to him: "love in a paper sack". May we learn to say to others, as she said to him: "Here is the best I've got. Take it - it's yours. Such as I have, give I to thee."

I finish with a little poem by another late colleague, Rev Colin Wicker:

The more you do unselfishly,  
The more you live abundantly;  
The more of everything you share,  
The more you'll always have to  
spare; The more you love, the more  
you'll find that life is good and  
friends are kind. For only what we  
give away

Geoffrey R Usher

From Robert Fulghum: "It was on Fire when I lay down on it"



**THE CARDBOARD** BOX IS MARKED "THE **GOOD** STUFF. "

As I write, I can see the box where it is stored on a high shelf in my studio. I like being able to see it when I look up. The box contains those odds and ends of personal treasures that have survived many bouts of clean-it-out-and-throw-it-away that seize me from time to time. The box has passed through the screening done as I've moved from house to house and hauled stuff from attic to attic. A thief looking into the box would not take anything—he couldn't get a dime for any of it. But if the house ever catches on fire, the box goes with me when I run.

One of the keepsakes in the box is a small paper bag. Lunch size. Though the top is sealed with duct tape, staples, and several paper clips, there is a ragged rip in one side through which the contents may be seen.

This particular lunch sack has been in my care for

maybe fourteen years. But it really belongs to my daughter, Molly. Soon after she came of school age, she became an enthusiastic participant in packing the morning lunches for herself, her brothers, and me. Each bag got a share of sandwiches, apples, milk money, and sometimes a note or a treat. One morning Molly handed me two bags as I was about to leave. One regular lunch sack. And the one with the duct tape and staples and paper clips. "Why two bags?" "The other one is something else." "What's in it?" "Just some stuff—take it with you." Not wanting to hold court over the matter, I stuffed both sacks into my briefcase, kissed the child, and rushed off.

At midday, while hurriedly scarfing down my real lunch, I tore open Molly's bag and shook out the contents. Two hair ribbons, three small stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil stub, a tiny seashell, two animal crackers, a marble, a used lipstick, a small doll, two chocolate kisses, and thirteen pennies.

I smiled. How charming. Rising to hustle off to all the important business of the afternoon, I swept the desk clean—into the wastebasket—leftover lunch, Molly's junk, and all. There wasn't anything in there I needed.

That evening Molly came to stand beside me while I was reading the paper. "Where's my bag?" "What bag?" "You know, the one I gave you this morning." "I left it at the office, why?" "I forgot to put this note

in it." She hands over the note. "Besides, I want it back?" "Why?" "Those are my things in the sack, Daddy, the ones I really like—I thought you might like to play with them, but now I want them back. You didn't lose the bag, did you, Daddy?" Tears puddled in her eyes. "Oh no, I just forgot to bring it home," I lied. "Bring it tomorrow, okay?" "Sure thing—don't worry." As she hugged my neck with relief, I unfolded the note that had not got into the sack: "I love you, Daddy."

Oh.

And also—uh-oh.

I looked long at the face of my child.

She was right—what was in that sack was "something else."

Molly had given me her treasures. All that a seven-year-old held dear. Love in a paper sack. And I had missed it. Not only missed it, but had thrown it in the wastebasket because "there wasn't anything in there I needed." Dear God.

It wasn't the first or the last time I felt my Daddy Permit was about to run out.

It was a long trip back to the office. But there was nothing else to be done. So I went. The-pilgrimage of a penitent. Just ahead of the janitor, I picked up the wastebasket and poured the contents on my desk. I was sorting it all out when the janitor came in to do his chores. "Lose something?" "Yeah, my mind."



"It's probably in there, all right. What's it look like and I'll help you find it?" I started not to tell him. But I couldn't feel any more of a fool than I was already in fact, so I told him. He didn't laugh. He smiled. "I got kids, too." So the brotherhood of fools searched the trash and found the jewels and he smiled at me and I smiled at him. You are never alone in these things. Never.

After washing the mustard off the dinosaurs and spraying the whole thing with breath-freshener to kill the smell of onions, I carefully smoothed out the wadded ball of brown paper into a semifunctional bag and put the treasures inside and carried the whole thing home gingerly, like an injured kitten. The next evening I returned it to Molly, no questions asked, no explanations offered. The bag didn't look so good, but the stuff was all there and that's what counted. After dinner I asked her to tell me about the stuff in the sack, and so she took it all out a piece at a time and placed the objects in a row on the dining room table.

It took a long time to tell. Everything had a story, a memory, or was attached to dreams and imaginary friends. Fairies had brought some of the things. And I had given her the chocolate kisses, and she had kept them for when she needed them. I managed to say, "I see" very wisely several times in the telling. And as a matter of fact, I did see.

To my surprise, Molly gave the bag to me once

again several days later. Same ratty bag. Same stuff inside. I felt forgiven. And trusted. And loved. And a little more comfortable wearing the title of **Father**. Over **several** months the **bag** went with me from time to time. It was **never** clear to me why I did or did not get it on a given day. I began to think of it as the Daddy Prize and tried to be good the night before so I might be given it the next morning.

In time Molly turned her attention to other things ..  
. found other treasures . . . lost interest in the game .  
. . . grew up. Something. Me? I was left holding the bag. She gave it to me one morning and never asked for its return. And so I have it still.

Sometimes I think of all the times in this sweet life when I must have missed the affection I was being given. A friend calls this "standing knee-deep in the river and dying of thirst."

So the worn paper sack is there in the box. Left over from a time when a child said, "Here—this is the best I've got. Take it—it's yours. Such as I have, give I to thee."

I missed it the first time. But it's my bag now.