

Great Awakenings, Then and Now
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Last week I fulfilled a promise to a seminary classmate and visited her in Bangor, Maine. Rev. Becky serves the Unitarian Universalist Congregation there. It was terrific to see her. I had forgotten that 20 degrees Fahrenheit feels like. It feels cold! People in Maine are very pale, which may account for the large number of tanning salons I noticed. People in Maine are very short. I rarely feel like a giant, but at the airport security checkpoint I noticed that I was taller than 80% of the people in line.

Entering the building of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Bangor was a different experience, too. The building is huge, red brick, multi-story, with wood pews, high ceilings, an elevated pulpit, a choir loft, a pipe organ, and stained glass windows. Jesus is portrayed in one window – “angry Jesus,” according to some congregants. I looked Jesus in the eyes and felt sadness, not anger. In the sanctuary, there is a baptismal font and a small Christian altar. Diagonally across the sanctuary, the congregation’s Pagans have set up an earth-centered altar.

The Unitarian Universalist Society of Bangor as such dates from 1995, when the local Unitarian church and the local Universalist church consolidated and began meeting together in the Universalist church building. The Unitarian church in Bangor began in 1818 and was once served by Rev. Frederick Henry Hedge, friend of Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. The local Universalist church began in 1833, and its first building was dedicated in 1852, 100 years before our building was dedicated.

That building burned in the Great Bangor Fire of 1911, which only destroyed half of the town. The river running through town prevented further destruction. Rev. Ashley A. Smith had been installed just a few weeks earlier. Though he was new in town, he had his wits about him when the flames approached the church. He removed the congregation’s Bible and carried it to his home a few blocks away. When the fire approached his home, he put the Bible in a bag and

buried it in his back yard. The Great Fire destroyed Rev. Ashley's home. The Bible survived. It was dug up, unwrapped, dusted off, and ultimately placed in a glass case in the foyer.

The Unitarian and Universalist congregations in Bangor date to the time of the Second Great Awakening. What's that? You did not know that there was a First Great Awakening, much less a Second Great Awakening, a Third Great Awakening, and, some would argue, a Fourth Great Awakening? Yes, it's true. "The term **Great Awakening** is used to refer to a period of religious revival in American religious history. Historians and theologians identify three or four waves of increased religious enthusiasm occurring between the early 18th century and the late 19th century. Each of these "Great Awakenings" was characterized by widespread revivals led by evangelical Protestant ministers, a sharp increase of interest in religion, a profound sense of conviction and redemption on the part of those affected, a jump in evangelical church membership, and the formation of new religious movements and denominations."¹

"The First Great Awakening began in 1720 . . . Leaders of the Awakening such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield had little interest in merely engaging parishioners' minds; they wanted far more to elicit an emotional response from their audience, one which might yield the workings and evidence of saving grace. They also wanted to see people who were noticeably moved in the audience and stood out amongst the rest."

"The Second Great Awakening was strongest in the western states, following the revival at Cane Ridge in Kentucky, and also in the "burned over" district of upstate New York . . . The abolition movement emerged in the North from the wider Second Great Awakening 1800-1840. The Third Great Awakening in 1880-1910 was characterized by new denominations, very active missionary work, and also the Social Gospel approach to social issues."

The Great Awakenings of the past energized evangelical Christians. Our religious forebears generally looked askance at dramatic displays of emotion. For the first 200 years of this country's existence, our reasonable religion has tended to come down on the cool, reserved, some would say inhibited end of the emotional spectrum. Imagine emotional intensity as a spectrum with a fulcrum in the middle, a teeter totter, if you will. In the past 20 years, the

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Awakening.

position of our religion's emotional intensity teeter totter has shifted. Emotional warmth is ascending, and emotional coolness is descending. [gesture]

Some of us on the ascending end of the teeter totter are saying, "It's about time! To be alive is to feel. There is something wrong if I feel less alive inside the congregation than I feel outside of it. I want to be moved, and I want to move others. Love is a force for good in the world, and we need to feel love and express love." Some of us on the descending end of the teeter totter are saying, "Let's not be hasty. The actress Joan Crawford had a point when she said, "Love is a fire. But whether it is going to warm your heart or burn down your house, you can never tell."

After all, powerful feelings are processed in the most primitive part of our brains. It's called the reptilian brain. The reptilian brain distinguishes between friend, foe, and food. Thank goodness for evolution of more sophisticated parts of the brain, parts that can reign in some emotions and goad other emotions forward. Distinguishing between friends, foes, and food is a fine place to start, but living a fully human life requires more finesse." In the "Time for All Ages" this morning, we heard the story of "The Emperor and the Seed." As with all good stories, this one allows for more than one interpretation. "The Emperor and the Seed" can be interpreted as a cautionary tale about consequences of being carried away by feelings of greed, fear, or pride.

And so the teeter totter is in motion. This movement of the teeter totter is neither cause for gnashing of teeth nor for popping of celebratory champagne corks. Instead, let us rejoice that we live near a playground with such a fun teeter totter! Let us rejoice that so many others live near the playground. We have people to play with! If we were all alike, we would all be on the ground bound side of the teeter totter. That would be no fun at all.

We are theologically and philosophically diverse. We share no creed. We forego external religious authority. Our conscience is our guide, and personal experience shapes our conscience. So much rests upon interpretation of personal experience! Interpretation of personal experience is more art than science. We come together in congregations to learn how to interpret personal experience in ever more balanced, expansive, and nuanced ways. Then we are empowered to bring more happiness, justice, compassion, and wisdom into the world.

Given this connection between conscience and personal experience, our feelings matter! It is true that a mature religious sensibility cannot be reduced to any particular feeling or feelings. Nevertheless, attending to our individual emotional lives is vitally important. I invite you to take a moment and reflect. How do you relate to your own emotional life? What does it look like? What image would you use to represent your relationship to your own emotional life? What does that image say to you?

I will share my image, though first I need to teach you a word from the Floridian dialect of English. As many of you know, I lived in Florida for eight years. In Florida, I was introduced to roofovers. Roofovers are essentially small, freestanding roofs supported by four spindly poles. Roofovers protect cars or boats from direct sunlight. Roofovers have no walls. Gusty wind and torrential rain are not deterred by a roofover.

I had fallen in love and moved to Florida to live closer to my beloved. After a decade of identifying as lesbian, I had fallen in love with a man. To my great disappointment, after a few years, the relationship unraveled suddenly and traumatically. The baroque details are not particularly interesting. The unraveling was occasioned by that standard plot twist found in soap operas across the globe – a betrayal that came out of the blue. In the midst of anger and disappointment, I wrote this poem, “Roofover My Heart.”

The fragile awkwardness just might
do the job, might let me drip
and listen, though
Elements Come In Side Ways.

The second coming out is a revelation
is not the expected sky
I tell myself and
I tell you
as we stagger to roofover.

We have the barest of protection from emotional storms. The roofovers of habit and psychological protection that we adopt in our emotional lives may deflect direct sunlight and light rain, but gusty wind and torrential rain are not deterred. Yet storms may bring their own rewards. In the six months or so following the unraveling of that relationship, I experienced a significant spiritual awakening, a Great Awakening of my own. Such awakenings are often

called ineffable because they cannot readily be conveyed in words. Through imagery in the mind's eye, through influxes of energy that felt like getting sick, through music in the mind's ear, I came into clearer contact with what I might call the "it" aspect of reality.

As background, through earlier Great Awakenings, I had come into contact with the "I" and "We" aspects of reality. Up until that point, I had assumed that the subjective and intersubjective aspects of reality covered all bases. Then I encountered It, and realized in the unfolding of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness, there is besides a sense of unity with all things, a sense of encounter with an Other, an It. Paradoxically, feeling the anger, disappointment, confusion, and grief of a failed human love relationship opened me to experiencing a profound metaphysical insight.

Consequently, I move through life with a different internal stance, a stance that feels like deeper humility linked to greater openness to surprise. There is an old joke about the spiritually enlightened person who is at the baseball park. This person says to the hot dog vendor, "Make me one with everything." If I were at the baseball park talking with the hot dog vendor, I would say, "Make me one with everything, and make me one without everything."

Remember the Bible now encased in glass at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Bangor? The Bible that had been buried in a bag under ground while the Great Fire burned above? Too often, we treat our emotions like that Bible. Sometimes we give them lip service, we acknowledge them, especially the emotions that feel good, but other times we bury them, not wanting to feel uncomfortable, not wanting to risk disapproval by others. Our emotions do not deserve to be buried, nor do they deserve to be encased in glass. They are expressions of energy, of life force, and they are ours to surf, ours to navigate.

Congregations as well as individuals have emotional lives. That "we" aspect, that intersubjective aspect of religious life is very important. In part, that is how we feel inspired and how we inspire others to help make the world a better place and ourselves better people. We are very fortunate to have with us Rev. Dr. Thandeka, a Unitarian Universalist minister, scholar, and theologian. She will be working with us over the next couple of months to explore ways to increase the spiritual energy of the congregation, which may lead over time to higher membership and greater

financial support so that we can more effectively impact the world outside our walls. I was among the team working with her yesterday. We are in for a treat!

Great Awakenings can be ours. We have the potential not just to fall asleep but to “fall awake.” May we become ever more skillful in distinguishing between friend, foe, and food. May the roofovers our hearts protect us just enough, but not too much. May it be so!

[Play “Fall Awake” by Stuart Davis on CD.]