

HOLY FOOLS
Sermon by Audette Fulbright
Sunday, March 31, 2019
All Souls Unitarian Church, NYC

Today's reading is from the article "Holy Fools," by Father Richard Rohr, a globally recognized ecumenical teacher and a Franciscan priest of the New Mexico Province and founder of the [Center for Action and Contemplation](#) (CAC) in Albuquerque, N.M.

"Holy Fools," by Richard Rohr

...It will be "holy fools" who will lead us into a new future and the next generation of church. The holy fool is who the Bible and mythic literature have always presented as the "savior." Holy fools are happily, but not naively, innocent of everything that the rest of us take as self-evident. It is the last stage of the wisdom journey: Jesus in his parables, Francis in his patches, and Dorothy Day obedient to petty churchmen for paramount reasons. Reasonable people will always be able to criticize such fools, but they bring to every exile a whole new way of imagining—and thereby usher in the new age.

The holy fool has lived long and deep enough to know that there is nothing new under the sun as far as the soul is concerned. When the new zealot asks why we can't just throw the whole thing out and start again with gospel purity, the holy fools merely smile. They know it has been done many times before—and needs to be done again—but will not necessarily resolve the problem.

Was Jesus playing the holy fool or just being a curmudgeon when he quoted Hosea to well-informed and well-intentioned believers: "What I want is mercy and not your heroic sacrifices!" (Matthew 9:13, 12:7, 23:23)? The holy fool knows that there is an agenda that is beyond efficiency, rightness, and being in control of outcomes. The mystics call it "union with God." Meister Eckhart put it best of all: "If the soul could have known God without the world, the world would never have been created.

From: "Holy Fools," by Richard Rohr. *Sojourners* July 1994.

I was a dedicated student in college. Although I was there almost five years, I never once took a semester with less than 18 credits, and usually held at 21. At first, it was because I changed majors - theatre, philosophy then education, before settling firmly into psychology. I intended to be a forensic psychologist; indeed, as an undergrad I not only did a thesis, complete with a meta-analysis of treatment modalities of sex offenders, I began doing initial forensic interviews with people accused of homicide. I felt very certain about my path, and after graduation, I planned to take the GRE and head to Baylor, which program I had my heart set on for my graduate work.

Graduation came and went, and yet I did nothing to prep for the GRE. After a few months, I was confused and alarmed... and spinning my wheels. Although I could not explain it, I found myself like a sailboat, becalmed on the water, no wind, just drifting. I worked at jobs that were meaningless. I had no idea at all what had happened to the fire in my belly for my beloved psych work - it had simply disappeared.

Four years later, I had stopped being confused and had begun the soul-searching phase. I had also, quite apart - or so I thought - from my search for my path forward in my working life, begun attending a Unitarian Universalist church regularly. Like some of you, I began quietly: slipping in for worship, trying to find a path into the life of the congregation.

One day, coming home from work, again thinking, “What am I supposed to *do* with my life?” in a state of near despair, I walked into the hallway of our home, and flipped on the light switch. And then the light came on, and I just knew. Like someone infallible had stepped into the hallway with me, placed hands on my shoulders, and said to me directly, I heard it: “You’re going to be a UU minister.”

Over the 26 years of my life to that point, I had never considered ordained ministry. For one thing, in the Baptist, and Lutheran, and Catholic, Methodist and Jewish communities I had spent time in down South, not once had I seen a woman pastor. But on that day in 1996, I suddenly understood. Three months later, I had applied and been accepted at my first choice seminary, and from that moment to this, ministry has been my life.

Further in the article from which Pamela shared earlier, Rohr notes:

HOW IS WISDOM GENERATED? How is the human heart transformed? How does history pass on the saving patterns of God? How is society itself challenged and renewed? If these are at all the right questions, then they send us on a quest toward something that will be communal, express continuity, and have the capacity to hold the essential alchemical elements together. Something that looks like the ever-recurring mystery of church.

Both liberals and conservatives try to make wisdom an object of intellect and will, instead of something that you necessarily wait for, listen for, prepare for, trust in, believe. It is not accidental that wisdom is identified with Sophia, the Eternal Feminine (Proverbs 8-9)...Wisdom is discreetly conceived, prepared for, protected, and birthed.¹

We live in an age when science, accurate information, and the cohering essence of a shared experience of reality is under acute attack. Never before have we endured, as a country, such an unrelenting and broad assault on the truth in the public square. Nothing, from the smallest details of ego to the most vital matters of national concern, is above being the subject of bald-faced lies in the public square, and it is taking a toll on us. More and more, our therapists and caregivers report that on the whole, Americans are suffering anxiety and distress, even symptoms of trauma, from the experience of such a profound breakdown in the simple agreement of what is fact, and what is fiction.

Therefore I want to be very conscious and conscientious as I approach the topic today, the idea I want to place gently before us – the power of the holy fool, the wise innocent, the spiritual traveler who can hear God’s voice in the wilderness. I do not by any means intend to suggest that we set aside, in any measure, the insight and intelligence that comes to us by careful study, scientific rigor, or plain and scholarly observation. After all, the fifth source of our Unitarian Universalist faith is, “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” These are our guiding stars.

¹ “Holy Fools,” Richard Rohr, *Sojourners*. (<https://sojo.net/magazine/july-1994/holy-fools>)

But I do want to invite us into an exploration of our very *first* Unitarian Universalist source: “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

For me, one of the most powerful moments of that direct experience was when I, like the holy fool of the tarot, began wandering off the path I thought I was on, heading toward a career as a forensic psychologist, and found myself instead, one day, called powerfully into ministry -- an experience which I can neither explain, nor deny.

In the tarot, the Fool is always a questionable figure. Portrayed as one besotted more by the realms of spirit, or ideas, or preoccupied by the beauties of the world around her, the Fool appears to be about to walk off a cliff, which could spell her doom.

When I entered college, I was one of those fundamentalist atheists, which are the most common kind. I was pretty angry about it, because I had lost the childish and cruel concepts of God that I had encountered in my youth, but secretly yearned for a God I could believe in. I threw myself passionately into the philosophy of religion, but kept hitting an argument that made me spitting mad: time and again, the greatest religious minds of any age proclaimed, in one way or another, that to believe was to make a leap of faith -- even if one had very sound logic or reason to make that leap. In short, you must have faith to have faith.

That is the cliff the Fool approaches; and it is with faith he approaches it. Perhaps, as in the fool my daughter Ani has envisioned, she has faith that the balloon of faith or love or hope or beauty will carry her past danger. Perhaps the Fool does simply have faith in God. It's hard to say. But we all approach the cliffs in our lives, and something has carried us this far.

In our busy, complex lives, when we may feel unmoored by the lack of consistency in the news of the world around us, it is essential that we find ways to deeply understand both the world around us, in what we should place our faith, and what matters most. In pursuit of this, we should most certainly use our reason, rely on the insights of science, and base many of our convictions on that which can be produced by plain evidence. Yet we should also hold open our hearts for the coming of wisdom: much of what we come to know most deeply, we come to by different roads.

Huston Smith is still, even after his death, considered one of the greatest scholars of the world's religions. He hoped to know the world's great traditions in their best iterations -- what was beautiful, and powerful, and meaning-filled in each tradition. He was also deeply convinced that humans do, in fact, need religion -- and in his later days, was a prophet against the heresy of what he called “scientism.”

Only four letters, “tism,” separate scientism from science, but that small slip twixt the cup and the lip is the cause of all our current problems relating to worldview and the human spirit. Science is on balance good, whereas nothing good can be said for scientism....Scientism adds to science two corollaries: first, that the scientific method is, if not the only reliable method of getting at truth, then at least the most reliable method; and second, that the things science deals with-- material entities--are the most fundamental things that exist. These two corollaries are seldom voiced, for once they are brought to attention it is not

difficult to see that they are arbitrary. Unsupported by facts, they are at best philosophical assumptions and at worst merely opinions.²

Scientism, he argued often, was the fundamentalist belief that only that which can be known and measured by science was worthy of any attention - that is to say, serious “belief.” But here’s a little example he added, to try to explain why, while science is good and valuable, scientism is not:

Imagine a missionary to [a distant outpost, far from the modern world]. Conversion is slow going until a child comes down with an infectious disease. The tribal doctors are summoned, but to no avail; life is draining from the hapless infant. At that point the missionary remembers that at the last minute she slipped some penicillin into her travel bags. She administers it and the child recovers. With that single act... it is all over for the tribal culture. Elijah (modern science) has met the prophets of Baal, and Elijah has triumphed. If only that tribe could have reasoned as follows,...: This foreigner obviously knows things about our bodies that we do not know, and we should be very grateful to her for coming all this distance to share her knowledge with us. But as her medicine appears to tell us nothing about who we are, where we came from, why we are here, what we should be doing while we are here (if anything), and what happens to us when we die, there seems to be no reason why we cannot accept her medicine gratefully while continuing to honor the great orienting myths that our ancestors have handed down to us and that give meaning and motivation to our lives. ³

As much as we need medicine, we need to understand who we are, what our lives are for, how we should live – we need to orient around meaning and purpose. We need to know how to choose what is right and good, and how to set aside what is harmful or wrong. Knowledge matters. So, too, does wisdom. And wisdom is found on the road that the holy fool sets out upon.

But remember, too, that the fool is not just the figure from the tarot. Returning again to its religious roots, “The holy fool, or fool for Christ, is a key figure not just in Orthodox religion but in Russian culture. Holy fools are disruptive; they go around half-naked, act as Robin Hoods, taking from the rich and giving to the poor; and, as Sergey Ivanov writes in *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* (2006), they “provoke outrage by [their] deliberate unruliness.”⁴ The public theologian John Janka reminds us, “It is the prophet’s role to speak the truth at the very moment it is least welcomed. ...The prophetic voice is not employed to announce revisions in the current reality, but to announce a new reality altogether. ...

Jesus was not crucified because he confronted demons in the desert. He was crucified for announcing the dream and living as though it was an accomplished fact.”⁵

² “Scientism: The Bedrock of the Modern Worldview,” by Huston Smith. Taken here from: http://www.worldwisdom.com/public/viewpdf/default.aspx?article-title=Scientism--The_Bedrock_of_the_Modern_Worldview_by_Huston_Smith.pdf

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ “Pussy Riot, Punk, and Holy Fools,” by Harry Eyres (<https://www.ft.com/content/ef9b6884-06f7-11e2-92b5-00144feabdc0>)

⁵ “Spiritual Windsurfing,” by John Janka

That's the thing about wisdom, about meaning and insight: it comes on its own terms, asks no permission, and leaves us changed. It turns us into prophets, calling out a new truth for ourselves or for the world. It comes as we step out onto our spiritual path, transfixed by things ephemeral: the silence of the sangha; the beauty of the world; the meter of poetry; the solace of song; the insight gleaned from holy writ.

Even the worker movement deeply grasped this, as they sang that they needed bread, but roses, too.

How do you seek wisdom? How do you set out on the holy road, a fool for God or for that wisdom that comes from an open heart, and an open mind, that is born in wonder and gives birth to insight and meaning?

Our hymnal speaks of this journey. It says:

Give us the spirit of the child...the child who trusts, the child who imagines, the child who sings; the child who receives without reservation, the child who gives without judgment. Give us a child's eyes, that we may receive the beauty and freshness of this day like a sunrise...give us a child's heart, that we may be filled with wonder and delight, give us a child's faith, that we may be cured of our cynicism; give us the spirit of the child, who is not afraid to need, who is not afraid to love.

Today, may you step forward with the spirit of the child, the light footstep of the holy fool, the call of the prophet, and, with wisdom and wonder, change the world.

Amen.