

Preoccupied

A reflection delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hendersonville, Sunday, Nov.20, 2005 by the Rev. James M. McKinley

Halloween is now history for another year. Two birthdays have been celebrated in the McKinley household in the interim and Thanksgiving arrives this Thursday. In case by some very slim chance, i.e. you are from another country or planet, you haven't noticed, Christmas, Hanukah, Solstice, and other members of the holiday season are just around the corner. It is your patriotic duty to Holiday shop this Friday and you may want to join several of your neighbors and the city of Hendersonville by getting your decorations up too.

We are now entering the home stretch of the holiday season. It is a time where many other voices enter the world of our thoughts and the schedules of our days. Voices of things to do, places to go, people to pay attention to. Voices of memory, anxiety, grief, expectation, sadness and yes joy too. The people, oh the people. They may be present and engaging. They may be distant and distracting. They may be gone and memories or they may be present in the absence of someone to keep you company or accompany you in your expectations of what these social gatherings were or should be. The time and cultural messages are so full that it is especially hard to be alone. This time of celebration can also be a time of emotional tenderness and. It can be depressing.

Whatever our situation we tend to be noticeably preoccupied, even more so than usual. For over two weeks people in meetings have been warning not to schedule anything else until after the New Year. Our calendars have been pre-occupied. We are gearing up. Something outside of us has taken over. Last Sunday during the announcements I was thinking about something else and missed what Paul said about Thanksgiving dinner. When I asked about it I used a common phrase for mental misses, "I spaced out."

Many times the preoccupation is not what I want. It is not creative immersion but it seems that the me, I am or want to be has been taken over by events outside myself. Preoccupied takes on the exaggerated sense of being taken over. I've even thought of it with the image of being taken over by an alien. Taken away from myself. "I spaced out."

You may have heard me tell the story from approximately three years ago, when Hannah was seven or eight. I left her in the car as I went into the store to run a quick errand. I could see her the entire time and the car was locked. It isn't something that I recommend but I did it in the juggling of the moment. I know it's not something any of you have ever done and that is a good thing. When I got back in the car, Hannah asked me firmly, "What is your name?" Jim McKinley. "What is my name?" Hannah McKinley. "What is my birthday?" laughingly I told her and then asked "Ok. What was that about?" I just wanted to be sure that aliens hadn't switched you." She was running her own security check.

A small aside, parenting is my only real experience of being taken over by an alien – and I am not the mother. But in becoming a parent this being from somewhere else came into my life and took over [need better words here] bringing lessons of love and work and joy.

I realize that over the years I have settled into a pattern around this time of year of giving "my annual Mindfulness Sermon." Some little reminder or moment then gets carried throughout and underneath all services or reflections. But it is this time of year (or somewhat earlier) where such intellectually auspicious titles like "It's Only October and it's Already Christmas," or "I Didn't Recycle Plastic Bags Today." rise to the surface. They are practical because the seasonal situations we are in are impractical. They are not routine and the daily is often overfull. Religion, however, is not a how to manual. I cannot preach to every individual situation. Religion is an orientation, a reminder of what is foundational beneath the many layers of our lives, a glimpse of constancy, no

matter the distractions. Religious holidays bind us back to the ground of being. I could preach from differing perspectives about God's love, Jesus' love, the light and the goddess in preparation of what's to come, but I always return to mindfulness – and the breath – our breath – my breath. There is nothing more basic. I breathe, therefore I am. I consciously follow my breath to quiet my mind, to reoccupy me – no one else – Committee adjourned – no other moment. It is and remains the same every day as long as I can do it.

Breath in. Breath out. Bring my mind back to quiet. Back to now. Mindful. Right here. Right now. Mind – occupied by me. The paradox –which is a thought for now, not then –is that this mindful reclamation of me also places me in the oneness of everything, where there is no me. Breath in, Breath out. As your thoughts wander and wonder all about as they will, just bring them back to your breath. Back to your spirit. Back to the gift of life that is you.

It's so simple, but not easy apparently. And as much and as easily as Buddhists refer to it as our true nature, we fight doing it. Your thoughts are doing it right now by all means of discounting what you are hearing. I can't meditate. I've tried. I've heard this before. It's just not something for me. Breath in, Breath out. You can do that. You just did.

Even the worried and determined avoidance of mindfulness can be its own preoccupation. I am not here to preach through the wall of resistance so much as put these offerings in front of it and maybe try to go around it. It is your self to be after all, not mine. Besides there is more than one way to reclaim ourselves – mindfully. Ways to find mindful moments, mindful practice. Part of mindful practice may not be to sit but to notice and value some of what we may ignore and discount in our hurry and harried importance.

This Tuesday I thought back over events in a typical twenty minute walk with my dog, just to see where I or someone else reflected right being. Times where we were grounded and settled into the

moment amid, or in the face of, anxieties, distractions, preoccupations, preoccupying forces. Moments where we got the aliens of the past or the future to leave so that we could not only occupy a moment of now, but settle in for a bit. We could take a breather of belonging. Different approaches. Different frames. Mindful moments.

It's now been two years since Obi wan Kenobi entered my life as a year old brown spaniel. He does me many favors not the least of which is to get me outside in my neighborhood because I have to walk him. And he also is an introduction into conversation with my neighbors. For 3 of the four sides around the block the streets are so lightly traveled that I can walk him off leash just using whistle control. Obi was born to be a pointer for bird hunting, but in this life and neighborhood he is a pointer of squirrels. Although I don't really know what he is thinking, his pursuit of squirrels seems to have a singleness of purpose. He is not easily distracted. There is a mindfulness there. He stalks and points and if things go well he only runs them when he thinks he can head them off at the tree. He has never caught one and I think I've seen him hesitate a little when he got too close.

But the main point for this morning is what he does after he freezes in a point only to watch the squirrel move too close to the tree or even begin to climb it, or what he does after chasing the squirrel at a dead run only to have it dart up the tree just ahead of Obi's jump. What does he do? He shakes it off. Literally. The shake begins at his head and within a little more than a second travels the length of his body all the way through his tail. With that shake he's reoccupied his walking looking self and he's off seeing and smelling again.

Obi does the same thing after stiff legged hair raised greetings of dogs he doesn't know or isn't sure about. When they part ways, he doesn't take their energy with him, he shakes them off. And reclaims himself for whatever is next. [shake] Maybe this is a form of mindfulness we could try. Just shake it off.

We round the corner. Our neighbor, Skip, is just getting out of his car and I ask him how things are going. Skip is about my age, maybe a little older with three children, the oldest of which is 11, my daughter, Hannah's age. In one of the earlier rounds of Pardee Hospital restructuring Skip lost his job. He's been without work for awhile. His wife has a good job but he's still been at loose ends at a time in your life when that is not particularly easy. What seems too easy is how quickly the fears and doubts of such a situation can occupy our being.

On several walks I have seen Skip on his front porch reading his Bible. He shares that he's finding calm and direction for the day. I can feel the truth in what he says. It's his way of grounding himself and placing himself in foundational wisdom larger than himself. For those of you who may need another letter of reference here, Skip is also a thoughtful occasional writer of both social and politically liberal letters to the paper. For Skip the Bible study and reflection is part of mindfulness practice. It's part of how he keeps his occupation of himself not how he keeps himself occupied. About 6 weeks ago Skip's wife was offered a good job in Hickory. One they couldn't turn down. They've been in the turmoil of decisions, school changes, house refurbishing and sale, and finding a new home all the while with his wife commuting to the new job in Hickory. Today he shares that they have found a new house and will be moving in the week between Christmas and New years. That's during his son's school break. Skip says something like "God helped it all come together so well." Then he tells the truly heart warming story of the timing of the sale of their house for what they were asking and that day finding just the right house after weeks of looking. It was just right for them, but it seemed bigger than they thought they could afford. They made their offer and it was accepted. And now they are all excited about their new possibilities even as they have to move away from our neighborhood. I am happy for Skip and his family. I also appreciate the groundedness and reassurance that worked for him and his.

Obi and I head on up the hill to Keith park, a small open space of lawn and tall oaks in front of spacious houses. While Obi focuses on squirrels I take a moment to look up and I focus on my breathing. The fall light and Carolina sky make the leaves and branches distinct and noticeable. Everything seems tinged with sunshine. I reoccupy myself, my day, my own mindfulness and settled appreciation. Obi shakes. His collar jingles.

We finish the walk and just as I enter the door the phone rings. The person on the other end lets me know that there's a meeting to schedule and work to do. We talk about multi tasking, multi tasking in this time of year and the added layers of relatives coming to town. We hang up and we both move on to other scheduling.

Am I preoccupied? Well yes and no. Am I busy? Yes. Have I been taken over again? Not exactly. I have the events of the morning to refer to. To call me back when I need them. They and my breath keep me together. They also call back to mind the useful notion that is a key part of mindfulness, the notion of engaged witness. Noticing the thought or emotion mindfully but not being it, not having it take over your body and person.

It is one thing to be angry. It is quite another to notice yourself feeling angry. It is one thing to have the anxieties of the holidays and all they bring complete with recriminations for how you are not handling them well and not doing whatever it is right – it is one thing to have anxieties and emotions and schedule pile up in an internal train wreck – it is quite another to notice that you are in the holiday season again, notice that you are in your holiday season again and in your reactions again. Notice and return to your breath. It gives you a chance to be a little more yourself watching yourself react again and a little less the preoccupied self taken over by the complex emotions of these days. Engaged and participating but witnessing less than becoming all that comes your way.

I know that today I am not addressing those very real bugaboos of functioning that come around this time of year for some more than others – Seasonal Affective Disorder and depression . I'll address

those more clearly in the real dark of January when I talk about the essence of human nature. Suffice it to say, both make it especially difficult to reach through not only our mind but our chemistry and biology to a grounded, equanimity of being. But in the last several years, simply naming them as complexes of symptoms that come with the territory have helped us be better the engaged witness, mindful of what we can do and mindful of what isn't us foundationally. We are better able to reoccupy ourselves in the face of it all.

Preoccupied? Not when I can help it. Occupying my self is part of my spiritual practice. In the front of our hymnal are listed the principles that we agree to affirm and promote. They are not what we believe but they reflect some of what we believe foundationally. The inherent worth and dignity of every person. That's fine but why can't I feel this truly in myself more regularly? We believe in the use of the democratic process. Everyone has a voice. Fine, but not on the committee in my head.

I belong because I am. I am breathing. The fact that we are a radically incarnational faith can be confusing. The holy is here among us and we also help the holy into being by our doing. Many of us struggle in our head for the comfort of faith that says we belong to life. But beneath our doing is the incarnation that is us, this interconnected, breathing being. Participating in society yes, but also participating in the love of life, the love of god as Skip understands it. We are this interconnected, breathing being –that just is – that's justice. We inter are. I enter am. Breath in. Breath out. It's you. It's me.

Part of the paradox and difficulty of the holiday season is that we are entering the time of the real. Celebration and joy and light come with grief and loss and darkness. It is part of this package of who we are. And on Thanksgiving we each in our own way, experience a moment of gratitude for the gift we have been given, broken as it may seem but ours none the less. We each occupy our own gift of life as part of a larger gift of being. And for that and this we are grateful. Breath in, breath out. Shake off the committee

in your head and be present – be occupied in a moment of gratitude. Give thanks. Be thanks.
If only for a few breaths. There are more where those came from.

What's your name? [have the congregation answer]

What's your birthday? [have the congregation answer]

Ok, you're real.

Have a good Thanksgiving.