

GOD'S DOG: IN WHICH WE MEET WILEY COYOTE AND HIS WIFE

March 10, 2013

It occurred to me, as I began thinking about this service, that I have only three more weekends to minister to this vibrant growing congregation. I thought of the rich heritage of our Unitarian Universalist philosophers and writers, of the hymns that this non-musician loves to sing, of all the not-yet-explored ideas, and I sighed.

So I picked #21, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, one of my most favorite hymns, for our use today. It calls forth and expresses gratitude for all of creation in such a lovely manner.

However, when I started searching for more inspiration, what I found was—Coyote. “I have not introduced this congregation to one of the best known gods in Unitarian Universalism,” I thought. Thus, inspired by our upcoming pledge drive and Coyote’s somewhat perverted wisdom, I bring you *God’s Dog*, as experienced by the Rev. Webster Kitchell.

Kitchell introduces Coyote by saying, “Coyote came into my life unbidden, unwanted, un-yearned for. I had given up on God. I was living my life, and God was doing whatever God does.” This loss of God seemed to make no difference in his life as a parish minister of a UU congregation in New Mexico.

“So,” he wrote, “I was surprised to have Coyote enter my life. ... There are coyotes and there is Coyote. I met a coyote in the desert, but before the day was over, I met Coyote, the Trickster.”

Kitchell had gone to Ghost Ranch. He was to meet some people, hike to Chimney Rock to greet the sun on the solstice, then gather for a sundown ceremony. As he was hurrying to meet his comrades, he met a coyote.

“We saw each other at the same time,” he says. “We stopped and looked into each other’s eyes. It seemed to me we held the gaze for a long time. Then the coyote crossed my path, headed home after a night on the mesa. I went up the trail to the sunrise.”

That evening a shaman held a drumming vision ceremony, and Kitchell, who describes himself as an “intellectual philosopher therapist sort of minister,” had a vision, of a naked male child with blond curls standing before imposing closed doors. After talking with the shaman, he came to a surprising conclusion. He said,

“I came to the startling possibility that I might be ready for a spiritual renewal, and that Coyote might be my spirit guide. My left-brain was shocked. But my right-brain was enthusiastic.”

Kitchell read up on Coyote, the Trickster, and was not really surprised when he materialized in his study as Kitchell was struggling with a particularly difficult theological question. From that point on, Coyote guided Kitchell as he explored the kind of questions that ministers explore, especially UU ministers. Questions regarding progress, and the universe and death and what it all means.

One time they tackled ...*Money and What It Will Buy*. Kitchell knew that if he wished to summon Coyote he could go to the local donut shop and order coffee and donuts. When he did so Coyote materialized and promptly ordered a dozen donuts, six lemon and six raspberry filled. Kitchell said that he needed to talk about money “as a spiritual issue, an emotional issue. You being spiritual, I thought you might have some ideas.”

Coyote allowed as how, as long as Kitchell was buying....

“One does not need money to survive,” he began. “Animals survive without money. Your primitive humans survived without money. ...Even today most people could survive on a lot less than they think they could. They might feel underprivileged doing it, but that is a spiritual disease, feeling underprivileged.”

“Why do *you* think humans use money,” I asked.

“From my observations, humans buy things to show they’ve got money. After they’ve bought the things, they don’t have the money. So they really buy things to show they have money left over after they have everything they want. People who live on subsistence can’t play the game.”

They continue their conversation, and Coyote points out that “there are many money games ...humans play. Some are healthy, some are unhealthy. Some of them are spiritually nutritious, sort of whole-wheat oat-bran money games. And some of them are like these donuts; delicious, but in the long run unhealthy.”

“The unhealthy ones are games involving taking up more space than one human needs. Using more of the earth’s resources than one human needs. Using money to control other people’s lives, other people’s spirits. Using money to buy people and exploit people.”

Healthy games, he said, is investing in human capital, and pointed to the G.I. bill.

Kitchell admits that he benefited from the G.I. bill, and adds, “Even today my youngest son is spending a year after high school in a program that will give him experience and skills in community organizing...”

“Wow!” says Coyote. “They’re training him to be a coyote? This country needs some smart young trained coyotes! This country with its fat, complacent, self-centered

population that has given up on the democratic process, given up on caring for life's losers, given up on idealism and community and commonwealth.”

Kitchell writes, “I was stunned. Incredulous, I asked, ‘You mean you *care*?’”

Despite his embarrassment Coyote admitted that, indeed he *did* care. “You humans hold the future of the planet in your hands. Furthermore, he added, “I look at your congregation and I see some hope.”

It turned out that Coyote had read the poster with our seven principles on it that was posted in the foyer of the church. He added, “I think if the animals ever came to church, they'd come to your church.”

Kitchell was moved, but he pointed out that they had strayed from their topic, the spiritual side of money choices.

“Not so,” said Coyote. “When you humans place your bets with your discretionary money, you put your money where your spirit is.....” He continued at some length, elucidating the benefits of liberal religion as practiced in UU churches.

He had really paid attention to the Principles and Purposes. He ended up saying: “Your church says the way to respond to God's love for us is to love your fellow humans. When you get love, pass it on! Spend it! Like Money! Don't hoard it! Put the love you receive to work by investing it in other people. That's what we deities do and you humans used to do before you got civilized. ...You know, ... I wish I had some money so I could contribute to your church.”

This was a remarkable statement for Coyote. It seems he found a \$5.00 bill in the street that morning, and he paid for Kitchell's lunch that day. He felt good, for it was his opportunity to share, and share generously.

We have learned that when we can share generously, we actually feel better. As Emmy Lou Belcher, formerly of Traverse City, now pastoring at Naperville, Illinois, pointed out,

People with generous spirits—

Laugh more often, and with delight,

Have happier and more exciting lives,

Live longer and have more energy,

Are enthusiastic about life and its possibilities,

Have lower blood pressure and stress levels,

And radiate health as well as smiles to those around them.

Generosity is literally good for us—physically good for us. And we can all be generous. When Coyote shared out of his limited, very limited, supply of money, he was very generous. Jesus of Nazareth said that the widow's mite was valued as much, if not more, than the wealthy man's lavish gift. Generosity is measured not in how much one contributes, but by the spirit in which you approach giving.

If you give \$1000 reluctantly when you have great wealth, the gift will be appreciated, but you will miss out on the joy of generous gifting. If you give \$100 out of a very limited income, and do so joyously, you are indeed generous.

Emmy Lou Belcher coined the phrase, "The generous, laughing spirit." I really like it. I picture a female sower, who scatters seeds on fertile soil. Indeed, those who contribute generously to worthy causes are planting seeds that will grow and develop into programs and institutions that serve humanity.

"The generous, laughing spirit".... May she enter our hearts and guide our actions.

One must make choices based on our values and priorities. Coyote learned to appreciate, even love, the fragile humans who gathered in the UU congregation of Santa Fe, New Mexico. On a pleasant afternoon, he and Dona Coyote materialized in Webster Kitchell's study. Kitchell and Coyote had spent the previous day discussing the nature of humanity, and whether one could reasonably find and hold onto hope for the species and the world. Coyote had sneered that he had no fear for the world—the bacteria would always survive the human onslaught. Kitchell hoped for better.

When Dona Coyote accompanied her husband the next day, Kitchell knew it would be a challenging conversation.

They started with a debate over whether optimism or pessimism was a more appropriate attitude toward the future. Dona Coyote pointed out all the failures of humanity, and claimed that the truth of life was tragedy, pessimism and cynicism. Kitchell asked her to explain.

She replied: "You Unitarian Universalists are a moral Corps of Engineers. You insist on bringing your bulldozers of optimism and reason-ability and convenience and scrape away centuries of mythic consolation for life's tragedies. The surface layer is the consolation provided by Christianity. Below that in spiritual archeology is the Native American spiritual layer which says the sun cannot travel across the sky without a human death to send it along its way. All those wonderful religious insights came out of the experience of living humans, the reality of life's beautiful hardships and the search

for solace in the pain. You want to replace that ancient, wild, spiritual beauty with some shallow, cheap optimism about the future!”

Kitchell was somewhat daunted by her passion, and he agreed that civilization was a fragile thing. But he defended his faith.

“...we UU’s don’t say, ‘Well, it can’t be helped.’ We say, ‘Let’s look at the past as a model for the future and acknowledge how fragile the environment is—”

Dona interrupted, “Don’t try to tell me you UUs have learned anything. I don’t see your congregation riding bicycles or buses!”

“She had me cold,” said Kitchell.

Dona Coyote continued her attack, saying that progressive ideas only make matters worse and that “progressive optimism only ignores the awful brevity and fragility of every life..”

“Not true, Dona Coyote!” objected Kitchell. “Not true! Our gospel is that people can take charge of their lives, and collectively. Through responsibility and reasonableness and cooperation we can build a better life. ... This is the only life we get, despite the promises of some of your fellow gods. Yes, of course there is tragedy, but we still think we can make life better, decade by decade. We think that’s what life is about: compassion and justice and progress.”

She was not convinced, but Coyote spoke up. “My dear,” he said, “...my dear, these humans are evolving. They are learning new things. They have abandoned relying on prayer to save them. They are trying new ways of living together. I know the people of this little congregation. They are gentle with each other while arguing about all the gutsy stuff humans deal with. In their hearts they respect each other and life. They listen. I admit they don’t sing as well as we do, but they have other ways of sharing their gladness in each other. I think they are evolving.”

There was more discussion, until Kitchell said,

“Dona Coyote, we are alone and unprotected by the gods. We are without an operating manual in a cosmos.... We are storytellers, we humans. We live by our stories. We are starting to tell a new story of the cosmos and how it came to be...of how planet earth became such a beautiful and rich place. We are starting to tell a new story of humanity—an adventure in freedom of the spirit in open democratic societies. We hope our new story also tells of physical science and social science saving us from a future that looks so grim. ... Perhaps with intelligence and awareness we can self-limit ourselves and also do justice and love mercy.”

They sat quietly a moment, then Dona Coyote said, “Well, my lover boy knows you better than I do. I still think you get the prize for arrogance thinking you can improve on what the gods created. But OK, keep trying! If you pull it off, I’ll turn in my trickster credentials and eat your donuts!”

“And with that she dematerialized.”

Kitchell needed hope. Coyote needed hope. And, in the end, Dona Coyote needed hope. As do we all.

This small church is a source of hope to many. It is a source of hope to me, and I think to most of you. It needs our support and love. It reflects our values. Let us support it, even as we draw strength from it.

Shalom and Salaam.

Blessed Be and Amen.