

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 11 January, 2014

Experiencing the Sacred

I'm going to say the word "god" a lot today. For those of you who are scrambling to fasten your seatbelts – or contemplating getting up and leaving all together - here's a quick lesson in translation.

Karrana is a Mexican woman who ended up on a fishing trawler that landed in the United States. She had been displaced by guerilla warfare near her mountainous village, "a place so remote that no one who was trying to help her even knew ... [where] she was from."

A couple named Nora and Sam – friends of co-authors Jonathan and Diane Kramer, who tell this story – met Karrana and invited her to stay with them until she could find a way back to her village. Despite her dire circumstances, she is a serene and obviously deeply spiritual woman, chanting prayers in Spanish throughout the day, lovingly caring for the plants, and speaking to the household animals as if they were her children.

Karrana was completely unfamiliar with everything associated with modern plumbing and electricity. Nora and Sam were especially keen that she understand how to use the telephone to call the police, in case of an emergency. Using their Spanish 101, they explained 911 – *nuevo, uno, uno*. Karrana listened attentively, nodding her head and intoning *sí*. But when it came time to review the instructions, and Nora asked, "What do you do if there's a fire?" Karrana ignored the phone, stretched her arms to the sky, tilted back her head, and with a beatific expression on her face, called out, *¡Dios!*

Nora tried again. "Karrana, the telephone; remember? You want to press the buttons, and call 9-1-1: *nuevo, uno, uno*."

"*Sí*," said Karrana. "Now I understand."

“So what do you do if there’s a fire?” Nora asked again.

Beaming, Karrana ignored the phone, stretched her arms to the sky, tilted back her head, and with a beatific expression on her face, called out, “*!Nuevo uno uno!*” And turning to Nora, she said, beaming, “You call him a different name, yes?”¹

Here’s the sermon.

“Spirituality is not ... a belief in G*d. It is an experience of the sacred in the midst of everyday life.”²

Experiencing the sacred: How do we make room for that in our lives?

Sometimes, it just surprises us. It arrives, unbidden, like the guest of 13th century Sufi mystic Rumi in his poem, *The Guest House*.

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.³

¹ Jonathan Kramer and Diane Dunaway Kramer, *Losing the Weight of the World*, pp. 18-21

² Kramer, *op cit*, p. 16

James Martin – Jesuit priest, author, and social media giant – didn’t always live a spiritual life. He grew up, he says, a “lukewarm Catholic,” studied business in college, and worked in corporate finance. And then he was “[cleared] out for some new delight.” This is how he describes his conversion experience:

“G*d met me in an apartment in Stamford, Connecticut, watching TV. I wasn’t praying in church before a statue of Mary... I was tired at the end of the day, a terrible day, had just finished a bowl of spaghetti that I’d heated up, and I was watching PBS. And that’s where G*d met me, because that’s where I was.”⁴

It turns out that what was on TV was a documentary about Thomas Merton, the Trappist Monk. James Martin had never heard of him. But his curiosity was piqued, so he picked up Thomas Merton’s book, *No Man is an Island*. In the very first paragraph, he read, “Why do we spend our lives striving to be something that we would never want to be? ... Why do we waste our time doing things which, if we only stopped to think about them, are just the opposite of what we were made for?”

Father James Martin says, “That’s the line that changed my life, really, and I just thought, well, why? ... I was miserable... I didn’t know what I was doing.... And it felt like [Thomas Merton] was speaking directly to me....”⁵

“Why do we spend our lives
striving to be something that we would never want to be?
... Why do we waste our time doing things which,
if we only stopped to think about them,
are just the opposite of what we were made for?”⁶

“And that ... really was like a thunderbolt,” he continues, [and] ... prompted me to shake things up....

³ Jalīl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, *The Guest House*, trans. Coleman Barks

⁴ from an interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, 12/17/14. Please see onbeing.org/program/transcript/7142#main_content

⁵ Father James Martin in an interview with Krista Tippett, *On Being*, 12/17/14. Please see onbeing.org/program/transcript/7142#main_content

⁶ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island*, paragraph 1

Experiencing the sacred: this is how we make room for that in our lives.

Maybe we'll be surprised, but maybe we'll just have to wait. In a letter to a young poet, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "... I would like to beg you, ... as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart, and to try to love the questions themselves, as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now.

"Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. Perhaps you do carry within you the possibility of creating and forming, ... an especially blessed and pure way of living; train your[self] for that – but take whatever comes, with great trust, and as long as it comes out of your will, out of some need of your innermost self, then take it upon yourself, and don't hate anything."⁷

Live the questions....

So sometimes we're surprised; sometimes we wait, patiently. And sometimes, we enter into discernment, intentionally engaging the questions. Father James Martin says, "[Now,] I always say to young people, what would you want to do if you could do anything that you could do?"

"... Everyone has a vocation," he continues. "... A vocation is your deepest identity.... The most fundamental vocation is to become ... the person that G*d calls you to be. And I think we find that out through our desires.... What touches us? ... What moves us?" When we really engage those questions with our lives – What touches us? What moves us? – we are fulfilling our deepest and highest calling to discern our truest vocation.

In a poem called *Love After Love*, Derek Walcott writes,

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving

⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Letter #4, Stephen Mitchell, trans.

at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give [water].⁸ Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.⁹

As we know from the example of Pope Francis, the Jesuits are unusual Catholics! For one thing, they subscribe to the belief of their founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola, that, as they say it, “The Creator [can] deal directly with the creature.” This is one of our meeting places, Unitarian Universalists and Jesuits: There’s no intermediary between the holy and us. If we make room to experience it, the sacred is right here, available to us in everyday life.

“We’re out in the world,” says Father James Martin. “And yet we have that contemplative stance towards everything, so that every moment is an invitation to encounter the living G*d who wants to encounter us.... The spiritual practice is to wake up, pay attention, and open ourselves to moments of clarity and transformation, and to steer into grace. [This is “contemplation in action.”] It’s a beautiful spirituality.”¹⁰

Beloved spiritual companions,

“Spirituality is not ... a belief in G*d.
It is an experience of the sacred in the midst of everyday life.”¹¹

How do we make room for *nuevo uno uno* in our lives?

⁸ Originally, “Give wine.”

⁹ Derek Walcott, *Love After Love*

¹⁰ Father James Martin, *op cit*

¹¹ Kramer, *op cit*, p.16

Sometimes, it surprises us: “This being human is a guest house.”

Sometimes, we have “to have patience
with everything unresolved in [our hearts ...
and] live the questions.”

And every day, always,
we are invited to the spiritual practice of discerning our vocation
through our desires
– What touches us? What moves us? –
the spiritual practice of contemplation in action,

Invited to feast on our lives.