

## **Reincarnation 3 – Self-Acceptance**

Jerry Jacoby

Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains

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### **READING before the Sermon**

From *The Feminine Face of God: The Unfolding of the Sacred in Women*, by Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, Bantam Books, 1991, in Chapter 6, “Tools for the Sacred Garden: Part I,” Kindle location 2124.

“Underneath the question of whether spiritual life is easy or difficult, far deeper than that question is the truth of how a woman actually lives her life. The important issue, one woman told us, is not how to develop spiritually but how to live authentically...

“Repeatedly we found that until a woman becomes interested in what is real and true in her own particular life, until she wants personally to ‘taste and know how good the Lord is,’ she can pray and practice and perform rituals with great sincerity and discipline without ever coming to the reality beneath the forms. Until this happens, as Joseph Campbell observed, the myth we are respectfully worshipping on Sunday will not be the one that’s really working in our heart.<sup>3</sup> But once we are willing to embody the sacred in our lives, our maturing can proceed. We can say in effect, ‘I already know I’m a child of God. The question is, how can I be an *adult* of God?’<sup>4</sup>

“As Marcia Falk, a poet and professor of religious studies, tells us, ‘...we’ve been stuck in a childhood relationship with a parental God figure, but we can’t afford to be there

anymore. Far from being arrogant, what this means is taking responsibility, so that we can really, deeply celebrate divinity. Which is a better gift to your parent? To fulfill your own life and to care for the lives around you ... or to remain in constant dependency? The sick parent will prefer the latter, but that's not my notion of divinity; I don't want a sick parent for God.'<sup>5</sup>

“It is when we want to become an adult of God that we look for tools to cultivate the sacred garden. Until this point, we have no need for tools because we are eating spiritual convenience food, the products of someone else's cultivation.”

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<sup>3</sup>Tom Collins, “Mythic Reflections: An Interview with Joseph Campbell,” *In Context* (Winter 1985): 53.

<sup>4</sup>This is a paraphrase from Marjory Zoet Bankson, *Braided Streams: Esther and a Woman's Way of Growing* (San Diego: Lura Media, 1985), 70.

<sup>5</sup>Susan Schnur, “Reshaping Prayer: An Interview with Marcia Falk,” *Lilith*, 21, (Fall 1988/5749), 12.

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## SERMON

In my first sermon on reincarnation last August 1<sup>st</sup>, I reviewed the evidence supporting reincarnation.<sup>1</sup> In the second on September 12<sup>th</sup>, I pointed out that this is a legitimate theory in psychology, because it can be tested, and I proposed such a test.<sup>2</sup> I believe that if a person is intellectually honest, they will go where the evidence leads, even if that means discarding a lifetime of beliefs. Others seem to disagree. Several members of this community have told

me they don't see how reincarnation can be true, because it's just not logical. Believe it or not, I'm okay with that. I can live and let live, just as long as no one tries to tell me I haven't had the experiences that in fact I have had.

Moving on, I'll begin today on a personal note. My wife, Jan, and I separated on September 16, three and a half months ago, over this issue. It had been our habit to spend twenty minutes or so in the evening just before bedtime talking about our day. About a week before the sixteenth the topic of reincarnation came up once again. From experience, I knew that an appeal to the evidence was fruitless, so I got up from the sofa and retrieved my Bible. Turning to Matthew 17, I quoted the following few sentences. The context is right after the experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, and according to the legend this conversation occurred between Jesus and the disciples on their way down the mountain:

“And the disciples asked him, ‘Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’

“He replied, ‘Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him ...’ [Emphasis added.]

“Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.”<sup>3</sup>

I closed the Bible and said to Jan, “It's clear from this story, as well as a couple of others, that Jesus believed in reincarnation. The question is: Why don't you?”

Jan didn't have an answer to my question, and there was silence between us for about a minute. Then, without a word, she got up and went to bed.

In order to maintain any kind of serenity through the last four months, I've had to strenuously work my Al-Anon program. There are many things I cannot control. I have to frequently remind myself that, in fact, the only things I can control are my attitude, my behavior, and what I chose to focus on. I am also working on the aspect of the program

about detaching with love. I'm pretty good at detaching with indifference, but the "with love" part is still challenging. I have come to understand that there are things that some people find too difficult to accept, no matter what the evidence, and no matter what it really says in their sacred literature. There's probably a theological rationalization of some kind to the effect that Matthew couldn't possibly have really meant what he clearly said. Or perhaps that story is simply excised from any lesson or sermon, because its implications are too uncomfortable.

I made a personal decision many years ago to go where the evidence leads. And the evidence, I believe, is overwhelming that reincarnation is a fact of our existence. The implication is that we are immortal spiritual beings currently having a human existence. Further, the testimony of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people is that the purpose of our human experience is to learn lessons and/or, in the words of Gail Johnson Vaughn on the CD *Reclaiming Grace*, to experience what can only be experienced by having human bodies.<sup>4</sup> In the words of Helen Keller, "Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood."<sup>5</sup> It would seem, therefore, that the first generic less we all have to learn is acceptance—self-acceptance of our bodies just the way they are.

I want to emphasize that acceptance of some situation does not mean approval of that situation. Nor does acceptance mean that we must like it. Acceptance simply means that we stop trying to change it. According to Chérie Carter Scott, "Acceptance is the act of embracing what life presents to you with a good attitude."<sup>6</sup>

When I was 29, my brother and I were horsing around on some playground equipment in a park in Boulder, Colorado, where he was going to graduate school. I did something incredibly stupid and injured my lower back. Now, forty-one years later, it's called arthritis.

And I don't like it one little bit. But I have accepted the fact of the condition and do exercises nearly every day as well as take four Move Free® tablets daily. Consequently, I live a nearly pain-free life with a high level of mobility. Once a few years ago, just to see what would happen, I tried life without the exercise and the tablets. In about a week I could barely walk. So by accepting the fact that I have arthritis in my lower back, I could then take constructive action and adapt to the situation with a good attitude.

However(!), acceptance “does not mean submission to a degrading situation. It means accepting the fact of a situation and then deciding what we will do about it.”<sup>7</sup> If a situation is not safe, for example, then the most appropriate action may be to flee and seek safety. In our society we handle violence by calling the police and letting them deal with the violent one. But in this example, the first thing to admit is that the situation is indeed not safe. The Al-Anon literature asserts: “I have a right to free myself from any situation that interferes with my having a decent life and pleasant experiences. Every human being is entitled to live without fear...”<sup>8</sup>

There's a sign on the wall of many Al-Anon meeting rooms with the title, “The Three A's: Awareness, Acceptance, Action.” Between the acceptance and the action there needs to be a pause where we consider what action is appropriate. But this consideration process is not meant to be an excuse for inaction. A mediocre plan well executed is better than a perfect plan carried out an hour too late.

Behold, I tell you a paradox: Before there can be change and growth, there must first be self-acceptance. An alcoholic with long-term sobriety wrote, “Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy.”<sup>9</sup> This claim does not sound logical, but he was telling his own experience, so logic

be damned. A therapist working with real people in the trenches of addiction counseling says the same thing: Before addicts and alcoholics can recover and make a healthy life for themselves, they first have to accept their addiction.<sup>10</sup>

William James observed that “At bottom, the whole concern of both morality and religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe. Do we accept it only in part and grudgingly, or heartily and altogether?”<sup>11</sup>

If the writings of Michael Newton and Brian Weiss are too troublesome to accept, try the testimony of the mystics. In the forward to the book *Entering the Castle*, Ken Wilber summarizes the seven claims of mystics everywhere. The first claim is that we—all of us—“have an outer self and an inner self.”<sup>12</sup> The outer self, of course, is what we all can see. In many such classifications the outer self used in this over simplified one includes our minds, sometimes called our middle self. The inner self has a variety of names: true self, higher self, spiritual self, and the witness are a few. Hindus call it the Atman. Philosophers like big names, so they call it the transcendental self. In Hawaiian it’s “the *aumakua*, the higher spiritual, ancestral source-self.”<sup>13</sup> People with a Christian background call it the soul.

I’ll quote a portion of a paragraph by Wilber:

At this point, the contemplative mystics make one of their most controversial claims, so controversial as to seem almost psychotic, and yet they do so in one thundering voice the world over; they make this identical claim from every known culture, at every known period of recorded history, and in every known human language, and they do this so consistently and so unanimously that this claim is very likely the single most universal spiritual claim that humanity has ever made: The closer you get to your true self, the

closer you get to God. And when you totally realize the true self, it is seen to be fully one with, even identical with, God or the Godhead or spirit itself, in what the Sufis call the supreme identity.<sup>14</sup>

I claimed in my previous sermon that reincarnation is a legitimate theory in psychology, because it can be tested. Wilber's claim can also be tested. What we need is a roadmap, or even just a sign post, that tells us, "That way." Quoting Wilber again, "Well, I will tell you the final thing that I personally love about genuine contemplative mysticism: It is scientific—in the sense of experimental, experiential, and evidential. Try Teresa's seven-step interior experiment as taught in *Entering the Castle*, and see for yourself. It's an interior scientific experiment."<sup>15</sup>

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In her sermon on August 23, 2009, entitled "Living Authentically,"<sup>16</sup> Rev. Meghan pointed out that we can all become who we really are, that is authentic, responsible adults. But—there always seems to be a "but"—change and growth can be frightening. She raised a question in her sermon: "What if we let go of everything that isn't ourselves and discover that we don't really like who we are underneath?" She didn't answer that question. My answer is encapsulated in a radio advertisement I heard roughly thirty years ago. The only part I remember was the last sentence: "If you don't like how the world is, then fix up your little corner of it."<sup>17</sup> And my little corner includes not just my physical environment, but also my body, my mind, and my spiritual self—all aspects of me. This idea is the same as was put forth in the reading. I CAN live authentically in my little corner of the world. I CAN take responsibility for my actions. I CAN do the best job I know how. I CAN study and learn how to do my job, whatever it is, better than I did it last year or even last month. And I

do not have to be perfect. When I make a mistake, I CAN admit my error and then make things right. These things we can all do.

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I am not a Christian. I rejected modern Christianity many years ago. Nevertheless, when we recognize that the gospel writers were not writing history as we understand history, and when we set aside the literal meaning of the words, looking instead for the metaphorical meaning, there are important, vitally important, truths that can be found. Late in his ministry, Jesus said to his disciples, “I do not call you servants any longer ... but I have called you friends ...”<sup>18</sup> In biblical times—thus the social and historical context—the difference between servants and friends was crucial to the meaning of this passage. Servants walked behind their master, following in his footsteps. This is the image of our being children of God or children of nature. Even the *Desiderata* declares, “You are a child of the universe ...” We’ve heard it since childhood and grown up believing it, engrained in our psyche.

Overcoming such psychological programming is often very difficult. When I was in high school my baseball coach sat beside me one day during practice and said, “You run like a fire hydrant: too long in one place.” I instantly internalized that message. The objective facts that I had never been picked off first and had never been thrown out stealing second were entirely beside the point. I was “slow” and that was that. I didn’t realize until I was in my early fifties that I had been wrongly programmed. And then it took years of working with myself to first accept that I had been programmed to believe I was slow and then replace that programming with something constructive. And this was a simple problem compared to how we’ve all been programmed to think we’re children of the Universe.



The disciples, after being servants of their master for three years, according to the legend, were now called friends. And here is the valuable truth contained in the story: Friends walk down the path side by side; they are equals. And thus friends make their own tracks. Ultimately, they make their own paths. The disciples had grown up and become adults of God.

I believe that we are all called to grow up. “Which is a better gift to your parent? To fulfill your own life and to care for the lives around you ... or to remain in constant dependency?”<sup>19</sup> In one sentence Marcia Falk explains what is inherently wrong with modern Christianity. The god—with a little “g” because it is a false god—of modern Christianity is a sick parent, because modern Christians are supposed to remain forever in a state of dependency. Furthermore, the preachers for that god are sick, too, because they encourage their parishers to remain in a state of dependency on that false god. The real God, the Creator God with a capital “G”, that Michael Newton discovered and told us about in *Journey of Souls*, wants us to, and has set up conditions to help us, mature through the stages of faith I told you about in my sermon on October 4, 2009,<sup>20</sup> and become adults of God: Real men and real women, genuine and authentic, fully accountable and responsible for ourselves and our actions, continually fixing up our little corners of the world. And when my corner meets with your corner, and when our corners meet with the corners of others, then we become co-creators with the real Creator God of a better world for all of us.

Amen! And may it be so.

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4. *Reclaiming Grace: vocals, lyrics & music by Erin Gailsdaughter*, copyright 2002.  
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6. Quoted in *If Life Is a Game, These Are the Rules*, by Chérie Carter Scott, Broadway Books, 1998, p. 5.
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16. Rev. Meghan Cefalu, “Living Authentically,” a sermon delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains on August 23, 2009, available on the UUCM website, [www.uugrassvalley.org](http://www.uugrassvalley.org).
17. This radio advertisement was on the local radio station at Los Alamos, New Mexico, ca. 1980. It followed the seven o’clock morning news and was “brought to you by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.”
18. John 15.15, NRSV.
19. Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, *The Feminine Face of God: The Unfolding of the Sacred in Women*, Bantam Books, 1991, in Chapter 6, “Tools for the Sacred Garden: Part I,” Kindle location 2124.
20. Jerry Jacoby, “A Personal Journey to Diversity,” a sermon delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains on October 4, 2009. See the UUCM website, [www.uugrassvalley.org](http://www.uugrassvalley.org), click on the sermons button, and scroll down.

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