

“Point/Counterpoint”

A Series of Readings by Sheldon Kopp
and Reflections by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
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First Reading

Sheldon Kopp was a New Yorker, a psychotherapist, and a writer. It's probably no coincidence that those identities streamed into one person. My first acquaintance with his work was *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!*—a provocative title, a provocative book that surely appeals to the sensibilities of Unitarian Universalists who do have an inclination to question authority. Just recently I came across an excerpt from a work whose title you will hear later, a work published by Kopp in 1979 at the age of 50. I'll give you a clue. The second part of the title is: *An Assortment of Life's Everyday Ironies*. You can decide for yourself whether what you are about to hear lives up to such a description.

In India, old, old stories still are told of a Hindu holy man named Narada who devoted his life to attaining the spiritual liberation of nirvana. Tied to the slowly turning wheel of samsara, he had been trapped too long in the unending cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. He wanted only to free himself from attachment to maya, the illusion that is life, so that at least he might be released from the bondage of everyday existence.

In seeking nirvana, Narada chose bhakti yoga as his personal path. He had set himself a difficult task, but there is no easy way to attain nirvana. ...After years of austere and reverent concentration, the holy man had attained so high a level of spiritual liberation that he invited the fond attention of one of the three aspects of the Universal Lord.

And so it was that one day, in that remote and barren hermitage before the dedicated old man's eyes there appeared the object of his devotion, Vishnu, the Preserver and Sustainer of the Universe. Delighted with Narada's fulfillment of his many vows, Vishnu said to him: 'I have come to grant you a boon. Ask of me whatever you wish, and it will be yours.'

Joyfully Narada replied: 'O Lord, if you are so pleased with me, there is one favor I would ask. I would like you to explain to me the secret of the power of maya, the illusion by which at the same time you both reveal and conceal the nature of the universe.'

Vishnu responded more gravely: 'Good Narada, other holy men before you have asked to be granted that same boon. Believe me, it never works out very well. What would you do with comprehension of my maya anyway? Why not ask for something else? You can have anything you like.'

But Narada insisted that nothing would do but that he should come to learn the power of maya so that he would forever after understand the secret of how attachment to illusion creates needless suffering.

'Very well, then,' answered Vishnu. 'Have it your own way.'...

Reflection: Point/Counterpoint 1

We work hard, believing wholly in the precept that it will “pay off.” Perhaps we tell ourselves that we’re not looking for a reward, convincing ourselves that it is the work itself, the journey, that is the reward. Perhaps we convince others that this is our hope’s fulfillment. Yet there is a desire that haunts us, sometimes just beneath our consciousness. It’s time for recognition! It’s time for a reward. I’ve done my bit. Time for that Spirit of Life, the Holy, God, the entity we have seemed to succeed in impressing, to give us our due in a way that will affirm, really affirm, our discipline.

I think of Sisyphus, the character in that Greek myth, who day after day, year after year, struggled to make it up the mountain with a huge boulder—sweating, denying himself an easier option of accomplishing that task. Even though the boulder repeatedly rolled back down, Sisyphus persevered in a way that would make observers of his cycle of suffering either reverent or wondering if he were just completely nuts. Alas, poor Sisyphus is never greeted by a master who says, “Okay, it’s time for a reward.”

In the tale that Kopp relates, Vishnu, that great Hindu god, appears, and grants Narada a *boon*. What’s a boon anyway? A reward, a payoff, a windfall in the form of a wish that Vishnu will grant anything he wants.

How commonly is it said that a good woman who has lived her life with love and kindness and then dies after a long life goes on to “her just reward.” Some of us might say that. Some of us might hold ourselves apart from the entire notion of “a just reward.” “What you see is what you get, and that’s all there is!” What is hope? What is wishful thinking? What is faith? What is foolishness? Point, counterpoint. Back and forth we go about what’s real and what isn’t. Nonetheless the story continues, and Narada asks what Vishnu didn’t expect. Or did he indeed anticipate exactly what Narada would request?

What if you could have anything you wished for? This was the question I asked our youngsters just moments ago. You heard their responses. Intriguing, yes? What would you answer? What would be your guesses as to what it would mean if you were granted your wish? Does a sacred force or a holy presence exist who does indeed ensure fairness “at the end of the day?” Is the notion of heaven the bookend for which the Garden of Eden is the other bookend? Or since humankind presumably “broke the rules” in the primordial garden, has heaven, perhaps heaven on earth, been ruled out? Legends, myths, epics, all are among the many ways we populate our lives with answers to “the big questions.” Is a good outcome for a good life a given? What’s real? What’s illusion? What’s hope? What’s cynicism?

Second Reading

The story related by Sheldon Kopp continues, with Vishnu just having granted Narada his wish, albeit with Vishnu’s warning:

“Together they left the pleasant coolness of the sheltering hermitage roof, descended the steep wooded slope, and headed out beyond the valley. Under a mercilessly scorching sun, Vishnu led Narada across a barren stretch of desert. It was many hours before they came to a place of shade. Vishnu stretched out on a cool spot on the sand, saying: ‘It is here that you will learn the power of maya.’”

Narada was about to sit at the Lord's feet to be instructed when Vishnu said: 'I am so thirsty. Before we begin, I would like you to take this cup and go fetch me some cool water.'

Always ready to serve his master, Narada took the empty cup and went off over a rise in search of water. Just beyond that dune, unexpectedly the holy man came upon a fertile valley. At the near edge of the abundantly cultivated fields was a small, tree-shaded cottage. Beside it was a well. Delighted at his good fortune, Narada knocked at the cottage door to ask permission to fill his cup from the well.

But the door was opened by a maiden so beautiful that the old man immediately became enthralled. Lost in the enchantment of her eyes, he stood there too dazed to remember why he had come to the cottage in the first place.

But no matter. She seemed as taken with him as he with her. Inviting him to enter with a voice so compelling that he could not refuse, the maiden made him welcome. Introducing him to the rest of her family, she insisted that he stay for dinner. Though he had just arrived as a stranger, Narada soon felt as if he were at home among good and trusted friends. Easily transformed from unbidden visitor to houseguest, he stayed on as one comfortable day followed another. Inevitably, the holy man and the maiden fell in love, and after a time they married.

Reflection: Point/Counterpoint 2

Narada was about to receive what he asked for, understanding of the power of maya. Off they went, Narada and Vishnu, into a cool spot in the desert. Not too many of those I would guess. Just as Narada was about to seat himself before the benefactor of his wish, Vishnu made a request of Narada. Hmm...have the tables turned? "Please go get me a nice cold cup of water." A reasonable request. Ever eager to please his Lord, surely thinking that this would be a quick trip (though maybe not so much in the desert), Narada headed off in search of a well.

Now back up, if you will, just for a moment, from this story. Imagine yourself in a desert. You and your companion have come to a rare cool spot, an oasis we sometimes call it. Your friend asks you to go for a glass of iced tea. "You're kidding," you might say. But your friend is your Beloved, and your Beloved holds the secret to your meaning, which he/she is about to grant. "Iced tea, of course!" How many of you have ever been in a desert? [Responses] What was it like? [Responses] If you would go off by yourself across a sand dune or two, what might you expect? [Responses]

Become Nerada. Off you go over a sand dune or two. You see an oasis, an extravagant oasis—green, fertile—a village no less. Of course it would be completely natural to go to the nearest house and ask for a glass of water; the person opening the door would have a kind face, and you might even find yourself with a glass of iced tea! Ah! And then, you/Narada, notice your new benefactor. You're breathless, blown away by the beauty of this presence. So was Narada, wholly taken in by the beauty of this young woman who answered the door. A cup of water for Vishnu? Ummm....

My mind travels to Homer's Odysseus, striving—presumably striving—to get home to his family. One distraction after another greets him and his crew. The seduction of Circe, with whom they spend a year, the warning not to be taken in by the song of the Sirens, with Odysseus asking his men to tie him to the raft so that he wouldn't give in. So Narada was striving—presumably striving—to return to Vishnu with a cup of water. But wait! Here stands a better offer! What cup of water?

And so Narada stays. And so you stay, not even questioning the wisdom of your choice. Is there a choice? What is choice? What is inevitable? Is either clear or pure? Narada stays on and on: “Easily transformed from unbidden visitor to houseguest, he stayed on as one comfortable day followed another.” Transformation into more comfort than Narada had ever imagined, old holy man that he was...or had been. Perhaps *this* was his boon, though the story holds no indication that he was thinking this. Had there been a meeting with Vishnu? Had he ever been granted a boon, a windfall, of understanding? What cup of water?

Narada and the young beauty fall in love and marry. Do any of us who have ever fallen in love doubt the validity of that term “fall?” When we fall, we're just not in control, and it can feel *wonderful!*

Third Reading

And you expected Kopp to conclude by writing that Narada and his bride lived happily ever after. Listen on...

“Twelve years passed. When his wife's father died, Narada took over the farm. The crops were more abundant each season, and during those years three beautiful children were born to this loving couple. Narada had everything that anyone might want. This was the happiest time of his entire life.

The twelfth year turned out to be a time of natural disasters. An extraordinarily violent rainy season resulted in flooding that destroyed the crops and swept away the thatched huts. One night the farmhands fled. The next morning the torrents rose until even the high ground of Narada's own cottage had to be abandoned.

Their youngest child perched on his shoulder, one hand supporting his wife while with the other he led his two older children, Narada waded out into the swirling, thigh-high waters. Losing his footing in the slippery mud, he lurched forward, pitching the smallest child from his shoulder headlong into the swelling stream. In a desperate grab to try to save the baby, Narada released his hold on his wife and their other children. The baby was swept away in the rushing waters, and the others along with him.

None could be saved. All were gone. How could it be? Narada had been the happiest of men. He had had a lovely wife and three wonderful children. Now all were drowned. He had become the most successful farmer in the whole valley, and now the crops were gone, as were his friends and his home.

...Narada stood dazedly amid the waters swirling up above his knees. Alone and devastated, he knew that everything and everyone he cared about were lost to him forever.”

Reflection: Point/Counterpoint 3

So what is this, Job revisited?

Not really. Then again, what's really?

Narada had it all. He had been granted the wish he had wanted, which was...? He was about to receive it, when someone had a request of him, which was....? Off he had gone into the desert in search of...? Long forgotten. He had found beauty and bliss and comfort and peace and abundance of everything he or we could ever want—an honest-to-goodness windfall. Who would dare say he didn't deserve it? He had labored his whole life as a holy man—disciplined, obedient, faithful. Narada was, we might say, “bliss privileged.” He had in the words of Joseph Campbell, “followed his bliss.” In fact, he married his bliss. He became intimate with his bliss. Yet he had not found what he had said he wished for most of all.

He had it all, and he hadn't realized his wish. He had it all, and he lost it all. How fickle was fate. Or should it be, how fickle are the consequences of the choices we make, the seductions we encounter, perhaps even the happiness we enjoy? Yet, is it any less wonderful, any less happy, any less joy-filled just because we can lose it all without warning? And if we had a warning, would we give up that bliss to avoid that “If, then” warning? Would you let go of the arenas of life in which you experience sublime happiness? If you have ever known your world to turn upside down and inside out so that your very heart wept in grief, would you, if you had known, have foregone the joy you experienced?

Maya—in Kopp's words, “the illusion by which at the same time [Vishnu] both reveal[s] and conceal[s] the nature of the universe.” Would that be your singular wish? What other ways might maya be revealed? Is it within the capacity of human nature to ever understand the nature of the universe? Why? Why not?

Sources:

Sheldon Kopp, *What Took You So Long? An Assortment of Life's Everyday Ironies*, 1979, excerpted in *The Sun*, February 2014, “The Dog-Eared Page,” 22-23, and used by permission of Science and Behavior Books, Inc.