

“Like the Sun and the Moon”

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Yesterday was Yom Kippur, Day of Atonement for all who adhere to the faith of Judaism, and the final day of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, also known as the High Holy Days.

While in the framework of Judaism the Days of Awe were concluded for this year, I wonder if times of awe are ever concluded. What is the calendar of that which is perhaps the prime religious experience, neither the monopoly of belief nor the monopoly of doubt? She or he who has never been overcome in a moment of awe has most likely neither noticed nor analyzed. The wonder of the cosmos prevails whether or not we are transported in grasping an infinitesimal fraction of it. The wonder of a microorganism prevails whether or not we are drawn magnet-like into a scale of observation we humans long deemed impossible. A microorganism, a micro-miracle, we might proclaim, awed.

That which surrounds us and that which inhabits us are not all about us, and yet it is what we are all about. Our myriad filters of knowing and believing periodically constellate in experiences that simply blow us away. Is such an experience one of faith or knowing or wishful thinking or raw observation? Yes, yes, yes, and yes.

It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown! We observed a snippet of this series of cartoons created by Charles Schulz, animated by Bill Melendez, produced by Lee Mendelson, and savored by children of all ages since it made its debut on CBS in December of 1965, almost 50 years ago. How many of us saw that first showing? How many of us have seen it at all?

As I lifted the words and mood of its creators, with due attribution, of course, I also adapted it. Beginning not at the beginning, but with Linus taking up his pencil to write a “Dear Great Pumpkin” letter, we can perhaps empathize through the mood in which we approached the Dear Santa letters we once wrote or the Dear Santa letters our children may have written or write, or at least with the wishful hopeful thinking that Linus poured into his epistle to the Great One!

Is Linus a “true believer?” No, he has his doubts, nudged along by his more or less friends, like Charlie Brown who simply concludes, “We are obviously separated by denominational differences.” How ever many times Charlie Brown gets written off, this is his chance to be the cool one, smarter than thou a.k.a. Linus.

Do we doubt that the sun rises every morning and sets every evening? Do we doubt that the moon rises and sets, though clouds sometimes shroud our view, along with the position of the earth relative to the sun and the moon? Consider the poetry and sacred narratives evoking the sun and the moon. Consider that both have evoked a demeanor of astonishment, reverence, worship even. Recall the words that Kayla spoke earlier this morning, words written in a journal over 170 years ago by Hendry David Thoreau perhaps a year before he set up residence near Walden Pond:

“We think the ancients were foolish who worshipped the sun. I would worship it forever if I had grace to do so.”

My guess is that Thoreau didn't give a swat about clarifying whether he was speaking literally or metaphorically. He freely permitted himself to be drawn into the embrace of life. This included a penchant for play that the children of his also brilliant but far more restrained friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, simply relished. When Thoreau left his rustic bungalow on Walden Pond in 1847, he moved directly into the home of the Emersons, invited by the senior Emerson to be caretaker and companion for his wife Lydian and their three small children while husband and father left for a European tour. (I know, much would be made of such an arrangement in our own day, but it was not our own day.)

Edward Emerson was three at the time. Seventy years later, he authored *Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend*.

“In childhood I had a friend, . . . a free, friendly, youth-seeming man, who wandered in from unknown woods or fields without knocking . . .”

Young Henry played games with his younger friends, did magic tricks, and told stories fun and fanciful.

“As the children grew older,” recalled Edward who had been one of them, “he led them to choice huckleberry hills, swamps where the great high-bush blueberries grew, guided to the land of the chestnut and barberry, and more than all, opened that land of enchantment into which, among dark hemlocks, blood-red maples, and yellowing birches, we floated in his boat, and freighted it with leaves and blue gentians and fragrant grapes from the festooning vines.”

From what vantage point, I wonder, did the elder Emerson, Ralph Waldo, write, on the occasion of Henry's early death at 44 of tuberculosis, these words:

“ . . . I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry-party.”

Edward Emerson was ever grateful to have had one such as Henry David Thoreau preside over his huckleberry parties. As Thoreau recorded in his journal: “If I am not I, who will be?”

Would the young Henry have joined Linus and Sally in the pumpkin patch?

Does the Jewish paleontologist affirm scientific knowledge in celebrating a New Year, 5,775, marking the 5,775th anniversary of the earth itself? Does she/he nonetheless celebrate the sweetness of the New Year and enter the reflective time that comprises the High Holy Days?

What outcomes are expected from these ten days just passed? What outcomes were expected from young Henry's story-telling, magic tricks, and “huckleberry hikes?” Not quite a shower of toys from a bag carried by whatever, whomever. Linus' more or less spiritual sojourn is an imperfect analogy, but I have a hard time resisting comparison with his wishes and hopes and how he went about acting on them with young Henry's wishes and hopes as he recorded them in his journal on July 6, 1845, the second day of his life at Walden:

“I wish to meet the facts of life—the vital facts, which are the phenomena or actuality the gods meant to show us—face to face, and so I came down here. Life! Who knows what it is, what it does? If I am not quite right here, I am less wrong than before.”

The sun, the moon, the huckleberry patches, the sound of the loon on a summer night, the echo of his flute sounding across the pond...all were gifts of countering convention and not knowing what would come of it. Do any of us know what will come of it if we choose early on or at midpoint or in the riper seasons of our living a path that is counter-convention, a path that our family and friends perhaps deem folly?

I’ve tripped over my own feet more than once as I took paths that were consistent with convention and resistant to convention. I’ve known my share of folly. There are no guarantees, no ordained outcomes. But there are epiphanies that I never would have known had I not surrendered to hoping against hope that this or that would happen and leapt across a chasm or two in the direction of likelihood. How sincere is my pumpkin patch anyway?

It’s confession time. The outcome of the story of the Great Pumpkin is not as we rendered it this morning. In the “authentic” version, Linus falls asleep in the pumpkin patch, long ago abandoned by Charlie Brown and Lucy and even Sally, when Lucy, in a rare moment of conscience, gets up in the middle of the night and goes out to the pumpkin patch to bring Linus home. The Great Pumpkin has not appeared. Little Linus rubs his eyes and goes to bed.

“Well, another Halloween has come and gone,” observes Charlie Brown the next day.

“Yes, Charlie Brown,” responds Linus, before announcing with crescendo conviction that NEXT YEAR will be the year. He’ll “find a pumpkin patch that is real sincere” and “The Great Pumpkin will appear” and “I’ll see the Great Pumpkin.” With all his fervor, Linus walks off with a sigh, mumbling under his breath, “Who am I kidding?”

So what about a different ending? What about the earlier reflections of Kayla on different endings and why they matter? Isn’t a different ending, especially one where the Great Pumpkin does appear, a sellout to “wishful thinking?”

I think not. What appeared in my chosen ending was to Linus the Great Pumpkin. Have you ever seen a Harvest Moon? Have you ever seen a Harvest Moon that was “pumpkin orange?” Have you ever seen a sunrise in brilliant, burnished amber, bringing you breathless into the day? Call it the sun. Call it the moon. Call it the Great Pumpkin. No bag of toys, no promises fulfilling the I-hope-you-will-do-this-and-that of your letter, but an epiphany that startled you out of your wishes and expectations that X would happen. Suddenly Y happened. And Y – or the sunrise, or the moonrise, or the golden globe of a Harvest Moon, or an experience bursting the boundaries of your anticipation – happens and all you can do is succumb to awe. From time to precious time, we are graced by the wholly unexpected that is wondrous to behold. We are embraced by awe and the sense that we are on a threshold of transformation.

So may it be. Amen.

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