

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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“Feet As Light As A Doe’s”

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Feet As Light As A Doe's

Not too long ago, one bright, crisp Fall day, I had the pleasure of meeting Maggie the dog, who plays soccer really, really well. She is so sure that you want to play soccer, too, that she sends the ball right to your feet, and even when you kick it back as erratically as I did, she beelines for that ball and hits it right back to you, or to someone else. The first time I met Maggie the soccer dog, I was completely, utterly, amazed and impressed.

The next time I saw Maggie, she was with her friend Celeste, another dog. Maggie did not want to play soccer with Celeste, however, who was not as good a shot as Maggie, nor as good at soccer as the humans, (okay, so Celeste was probably better at soccer than I was), but Celeste was extremely eager to play, and she had one advantage. She could run like a gazelle, like a deer, so swift and graceful, so light in the air, yet sure-footed. We had almost as much fun watching Celeste zip quickly and effortlessly through the field, as we had watching Maggie play soccer.

Celeste's beautiful body, moving lightly and gracefully, reminded me of the Habakkuk verse which we heard earlier, and which I want to comment upon more in a few minutes. First, though, I want to tell you a very different story about lightness.

In Ancient Egyptian mythology, there is a story that is popularly depicted in a picture – our family has a papyrus of it from our trip to Egypt in 2000. The story is of a soul's journey through the trials of the underworld, and the scene on the papyrus depicts part of that journey, the judgment of the deceased, in an extraordinary way. The heart, or some say the soul, of the deceased is placed on one side of a balancing scale. On the

other side of the scale is a feather – representing truth and justice. If you can balance the scales – not too heavy and not too light, but mostly, *not too heavy*, as you are being weighed against a *feather*, then you are nearing immortality.

I was surprised and enchanted with this idea that a light heart was deemed so important for one's wellbeing. Usually, we just think of a light heart belonging to a carefree person, probably an irresponsible, fun-loving rogue, and that hardly seems to be the grounds for such a positive judgment. Of course you can be carefree and still responsible, free of cares because you are in a place of peace and well-being. The heart in this Egyptian myth is as light as those lovely intangibles, truth and justice, that it is balanced against. The heart is light because the soul has been truthful and just. The heart is light because it is not weighed down by regrets of living untruthfully and unjustly. This is the lightness for eternity, surely.

A couple of years ago, I read A.J. Jacobs' book, *The Year of Living Biblically*, in which he tries to follow all the rules in the Bible for a year and he finds many difficulties with this, but even some of the simple ones really trip him up, like the one about not lying. In fact, he came up with four examples of lies, white lies that he told all on one day, and he was already on day 37 of his year-long experiment, trying not to lie among other things. Being truthful can be a challenge.

Of course, 'not lying' does not encompass the whole gist of what it means to live truthfully. Simply, when we do not hide from the real, in ourselves and in the world, when we acknowledge what is really true about our lives, then we are living in the way of truthfulness. Our minds and hearts do protest, however, and become slippery servants of the false, trying to find instead the way of avoidance, denial, false comfort, and non-

culpability. Ever found yourself slipping around in some of that false stuff? We've all been there, right? How much more comforting, free and life-affirming is the way of truthfulness. How very light it feels to live truthfully.

Do we really consider what it means to live justly? Sometimes it's as simple as bringing your own reusable bags to the store – ecojustice – or voting for someone whom you believe stands for justice. Justice may involve being advocates for the rights of all people to love in the way they choose, or helping to insure a good education for all, including English as a Second Language. Doesn't living justly mean being deliberate about all kinds of ways we spend our time and talents and resources, such that the world is more fair because we have been involved with making justice?

And couldn't we also imagine our spirits being balanced against other intangibles than truth and justice, some which are just as light and compelling – what about hope, creativity, compassion, faithfulness, peace? When we seek these feathers of the soul, our spirits are light.

When is *your* heart light, as light as a feather, as light as truth and justice? What would it take for your spirit to be light? When do you want to bound through life as lightly as a deer running through the woods?

I did not read you the rest of the psalm of Habakkuk, which is chapter 3 of the book, but it is not light, and is rather depressing. The times it describes are difficult, with war, disease, drought, etc. I wrote a paper on this passage when I was in theological school, and it happened to give me my only small claim to fame as a “Biblical scholar”. (Not really) My professor, Bill Holladay, who was truly an impressive Biblical scholar, renowned for his research and translations of Isaiah and Jeremiah, one of the most

respected commentators in the field, liked one tiny little piece from my paper – the dating of Habakkuk. I managed to coordinate it with a verse in Jeremiah, as well as other material, to suggest the date of 601 B.C.E., the year of an extreme drought. He footnoted my paper in a couple of his scholarly writings, so that is my only miniscule bit of Biblical scholarship that has survived.

Back to the passage we read. At the end of a great deal of difficult imagery that suggests awful suffering, we hear the words that I began with, “God is my strength. He makes my feet as light as a doe’s, and sets my steps on the heights.” Or, you may have heard it in this more familiar, traditional, translation, of the last two lines, “He makes my feet like hinds’ feet, he makes me walk on my high places.”

Ah, divine security and trust, the lightness of faith in God. That is the usual understanding, but not what I believe is the only or the best meaning to be found in this passage. Whether you believe in God or not, or in God’s ability to reach into your life and be an agent for the good, there is something else going on here in the depths of this passage that I want to lift up.

When we cannot drag ourselves out of the trough of despondency, we yet may be lifted up anyway. In a dark, dry, heavy time, as portrayed earlier in the book of Habakkuk, or felt often among many in these recent times, or at any time, it is easy to forget that change is always possible. Habakkuk advocates that we can always find the heights, and live again in lightness. And when these glorious possibilities break through into our lives, we are astounded. We probably realize that we could not get there on our own. Minimally, we need beloved community, and/or a real faith in the future, and maybe we also need a miracle.

This is African American History month, and I want to raise up the miracle of having elected an African American President in this country that is yet still troubled by racism. One of my favorite interviews in the election night coverage was with an older African American woman who had protested for civil rights at Selma, and she said that having a black man elected president was a miracle – she really expressed so well what I and others felt in our own amazement at this reaching of the heights of justice. Part of Habakkuk’s message is that the heights are always there, waiting for our feet to lightly tread upon them. Miracles are all around us if we would but lift up our spirits. You might even go as far as Albert Einstein, who said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is.”

Several years ago I traveled to Belize and took a walk in the jungle of a farming project that had been set up to research medicinal plants. They gave us guides to follow and at one place it pointed out a very poisonous plant that we were not to touch. Then it directed us to look a few feet away at another plant that had the antidote. The guidebook said that in nature the antidote is usually right next to the poison. A little like immunizations – we don’t want to get a dreaded disease so we take a little of it into ourselves which gives us the antibodies to fight the disease. When our lives suffer from poisons of the spirit, when we fear the disease and darkness all around us, the antidote is nearby, the immunization of the spirit is always possible.

Habakkuk says that we are able to be light and find our heights, the way the Red Deer doe would, which is the most likely animal being referred to, according to the Biblical scholars, and this is probably actually a mixed message. First, we are brought out of the despair and up to the heights and that seems as though pure lightness and hope

has arrived. The Red Deer doe is graceful, gentle and sure-footed, yes, but actually seems not to be at its best in the heights, being an animal of the forest. The deer may go to the heights to find food, and is able to negotiate the rocks, but will not be the graceful image that we see running through the woods and across the fields.

We go to our heights of lightness and joy, but we are not going to be able to stay there, comfortably, and find a footing, so to speak, unless they are also our heights of nourishment, of ideals. We will probably not be able to let go of the disaster and distress that we have been feeling, unless we can find the heights that have a lightness, such as in the Egyptian myth – the lightness of the feather of truth and justice, the lightness of peace and hope, the lightness of sacrifice and love. These are the heights we can find.

Will our way always feel light? As light as a doe's? Well, yes, if you realize that the doe's feet are not totally light on the heights either. We may stumble and drag a bit, but the ground is steady and holds us, no matter where we are, and that is part of the meaning of this passage. Habakkuk would likely agree with the 20th century theologians, including our own Unitarian Universalist James Luther Adams, when they tried to make modern sense out of the understanding of God and used phrases such as "Ground of Being".

If you are able to tread on *your heights*, it is because you are *well grounded*. And some would believe that this grounding is bigger than themselves. This is the ground of the universe, of the interdependent web of all existence, of the Holy, upon which we stand and feel supported simply because of Being-ness itself. We need to notice that there is a Ground of Being, a surety that we can have faith in, and that may not be at all connected to the idea of God for you, or it may be, but it is the foundation of going

forward into the light and onto the heights – believing that it is possible because there is a place for our feet to tread upon. There is a ground, a firm place where we are held, even in the dark and poisonous times – there is an antidote, a reality of truth and justice and goodness that grounds us and gives our spirits a place to find lightness.

What I want to know is: how is your heart? Is it light enough to keep your feet light, no matter where they go? With feet as light as a doe's, we are set on our high places – what a miracle. Blessed be.