

Sermon presented to the
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by

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“THERE WILL BE NO WIND, SIR”

I've been thinking a lot lately about a woman I used to date twenty years ago. Her name was Karen, and it's probably a testament to the vagueness of our relationship that I don't remember her last name or much of anything else we did together, outside reading and talking. I do remember, both of us having been ardent admirers of Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, that we were convinced we were members of the same karass, the pre-birth familial attachments Vonnegut's hero invents to provide everyone in the world with family. We used to sit talking with the soles of our feet pressed tightly together. This was the way karass members communicated, you see.

This isn't the reflections of an aging Lothario, or it's not just that. Most of you are aware that, as part of my start into seminary, I'm auditing a course in US Religious History. It's not a bad class, and I'm actually cheered that the teacher—who seems to be getting better as a teacher the further on we get—has asked the class to visit a religious community outside our usual haunts in order to have a better, more contemporary view of religion in modern-day America than we can get just from readings and interpretations. This led me to visit The Temple of Eckankar last weekend, a belief system I haven't given much thought to in 20 years.

This is why I think of Karen. I'll tell you a little about her. She was slightly older than me, very thin and frail, a flutist who dueted with her sister. We met during my first marriage while we were both English tutors at college, and before long we were taking lunches together. Her marriage had already dissolved. Then my marriage fell apart and after about a year during which we had no idea where the other one was, we fell into one another again at the Laundromat and realized there was no reason not to date.

From Karen's perspective, although it wasn't until later that she told me, this was a foretold meeting. She was a follower of Eckankar, or Eck, which is a system of beliefs attributed by Sri Paul Twitchell to a series of Past Masters stretching back centuries and codified in several books and novels by him written during the 60s and 70s. He claimed they were a rediscovery of ancient mystical truths, a sort of gnosis or secret teaching, passed down from master to adept over time, until his own, at which point he was the 971st Eck Master.

Many of Eck's tenets are lifted almost directly from Hinduism and Buddhism, from its certainties of previous lives to the practice of reinvigorating karma. Twitchell

claimed to have studied with several masters, and while there is reason to doubt his actual meeting with these worthies—or even of their existence—there is no denying that he did a lot of reading and absorbed quite a bit.

This is all karma. Karma of course is the notion that events occur for a reason, that nothing in life is willy-nilly or extraneous. This is a very comforting thought for many people, from believers in Eck to the three Abrahamic traditions. The thought that you get what you put out suggests there is no such thing as wasted time, wasted movement. Everything happens as it happens for a reason and the reason is whatever happens next in the sequence, all of it working up to, well, whatever happens at the end. “All will be well and all manner of things will be well,” and all that.

I’m not certain whether I believe this any longer. At one time I’d have said I decidedly did, and maybe I still do to some extent. Anyway, that’s not really the point. Karen believed that our getting together again, and in a more physical and romantic way, was predestined and she found lots of rationale for that in her readings, some of which she passed on to me. At the Eck service I attended last weekend, I heard a lot of phrases and words like “there is a divine love,” and “you have earned the right [through several lifetimes] to the lesson that god’s love is the way through fear,” that I recognized from the readings and Karen’s conversations. It was all very comforting.

I don’t remember whether Karen ever said she was in love with me, and I’m pretty certain I didn’t tell her I loved her, but I wanted to. Not because I was particularly taken with her, although she was pretty in a China doll sort of way, but she also had ex-husband issues and eating disorder issues and one of the last times I saw her was to visit her at the hospital where she’d gone for treatment. But I wanted to love her because I

wanted very much to be in love again. I'd been smacked upside the head by love and wanted another crack at it. Love and religion have this in common: the greater pain they cause us, the more we want another go at it.

Different story, same theme. In 1770 a ship carrying a fellow named John Murray ran aground off the coast of New Jersey, which was a lousy place even then to be stuck. Murray trundled off in search of provisions and came across a farmer named Thomas Potter. Potter was an illiterate but deeply religious man who built a rough church on his property and had invited many traveling preachers to preach there, usually with himself as sole attendant, in hopes of hearing a faith he could wholeheartedly embrace. Sort of a reverse Diogenes, in that instead of carting around a lamp looking for an honest man, he'd built his own lighthouse to draw them to him.

Potter asked something along the lines of, "you got anyone onboard is a preacher?" Lo and behold, John Murray had been a Methodist lay preacher in England, but had given it up having espoused some ideas the church found heretical. Potter asked, "will you do me the honor, sir, of preaching at my chapel?" Murray said no. He didn't do that kind of thing any longer, and besides, he had a ship bound for New York, and as soon as the wind changed he'd be off, hopefully before Sunday. "There will be no wind, sir, until you have preached a sermon in my little chapel," Potter assured him.

A little background here on John Murray courtesy of Jack Mendelsohn: "In the 1760s, in England, the espousal of Universalist ideas brought about the excommunication of John Murray, a zealous lay teacher and preacher of Methodism...Murray was successful in business, married, and the father of an infant. Through the influence of James Relly...Murray became a convinced Universalist. He must have wondered about

the wisdom of his conversion. His seemingly solid life fell apart. Death took his wife and child; his business failed; he was imprisoned for debts. By the time he won his release, he was in a deep depression. He resolved to bury himself in what he thought of as the wilderness of America and never to preach again.” Mendelsohn calls the “series of circumstances...providential” that brought Murray to find himself strolling along the Barnegat Bay shore. I’m sure it seemed to Murray as if providence was working against him. In my life, I call such moments “little ‘screw-yous’ from god.” Okay, I don’t really use the word “screw.”

There wasn’t a wind and Murray preached to Potter. History doesn’t record that there was anyone else in attendance or what the sermon was, at least, not in any of the places I’ve looked. But apparently Murray’s doctrine was precisely what Potter had been waiting to hear. He consecrated his little chapel and the building provides the foundation for the contemporary Murray Grove Retreat Center. For his part, Murray’s sermon reawakened his own love for preaching, and when a sailor arrived soon after the service ended with news that the wind had shifted, the ship was back in the water, and they were ready to sail, he took his meeting with Potter, the lack of wind, the sermon, and its reception as the work of God’s Providence, and he sailed on to New York city where he preached to a large, enthusiastic congregation, and began the late 18th century version of the evangelist circuit, up and down the east coast.

I’d like to take a moment to ask a question almost no one seems ever to have asked: whatever became of Thomas Potter? In all the references I’ve found, he just slips quietly into oblivion after that sermon, and we don’t even know if he continued demanding of people that they preach in his little chapel or if he started preaching the

ideas of Murray himself or if he decided he was simply done with the whole thing and packed it in, never to listen to another sermon there again. John Murray is conspicuously silent on the future of Potter. He takes on the mantle of Coleridge's infamous Man from Porlock, a visitor about whose existence we don't know anything except his role wakening Coleridge from his dream about Kublai Khan and Xanadu.

Charles Howe, author of *The Larger Faith*, the history from which I've been taking this information, claims "it was perhaps the only miracle in Universalist history!" (This is complete with exclamation point.) Because Murray's sermon was one of the first and probably the first important Universalist sermon in the US, I'd like to say I've read the sermon and give you some feedback on it, but despite my searches I can't come across the actual text. Given the tendency for many itinerant preachers of that time to preach extemporaneously, it probably existed in notes Murray made later on, and even those are lost to us. But I can tell you the message Murray preached, which was the same that got him ousted from the Methodists: that god is too good a creature to damn forever his imperfect creations, and eventually everyone will make his way from whatever level of hell he might be damned to up to heaven. "Give them not hell but hope and courage," he is later to famously write. Man needs to keep his eyes lifted no matter what he stumbles on.

This is the basic tenet of Universalism: that everyone is deserving of redemption. Again, that's a comforting thought. Consider it: Hitler is deserving of redemption. John Wayne Gacy is deserving of redemption. The bully who stole your lunch money in sixth grade every Thursday, and who, when you stood up to him, beat you nearly senseless and so taught you an important lesson—standing up for what you believe gets you a bloody

nose and bruises—even that guy is deserving of redemption. In Eckanakar, this is the proof of the pudding, that we can't possibly screw up so badly that god's love can't eventually win us over.

Now I like this idea, and it certainly seems Murray's story bears some aspect of it out. That is, the notion of providence, the idea that there is no waste of time, that everything happens for a reason and it's not beyond god's power to so arrange events that, random as they seem, there is a pattern to them that leads inexorably to the preordained conclusion. This is the idea of predestination, that every occurrence, from the most horrid war to the slightest sparrow breaking wind, has its part in the Divine Plan. What better story could we have, particularly as it's a part of our own ecclesiastic history, since Murray's Universalism is the precursor of the Universalism that joined with Unitarianism in the 60s to lead directly, inevitably, inexorably to our own congregation.

Wow. If there had been a shift in the wind just a few degrees Murray's ship might have avoided the New Jersey sandbar or sailed right past it, and this all might never have happened. What better proof could we have of god's providence? Except, of course, that it may not have happened at all. It's a good story, and like all stories that have neat endings, it's pretty. But the only record we have of such a meeting, given that Thomas Potter was conveniently illiterate and so left no diary or journal himself, is John Murray's autobiography. And just like the supposed meetings with Swamis and Rishas that Paul Twitchell claims to have had, whether or not it's true depends on how much honesty you're willing to grant the reporter.

This is an important point among spiritual memoirists and preachers—our veracity is in direct correlation to how much you want to believe us. Among nonfiction

writers there's a controversy regarding the veracity of the things we write. Some writers claim that, unless you can document such and such a comment or event, you can't write that it happened. On the other extreme, there are the writers who contend everything is fair game, and caveat emptor. Between them are people like me, who claim that there's a larger truth beyond veracity, that even if such a meeting and series of events between Potter and Murray happened or no, it points out a larger truth: that we need to be open to the possibility of extraordinary events happening from humble beginnings. Or as John Banville puts it, of distilling "truth out of mere facts."

As a contemporary example, we've all heard how George W. Bush has repeatedly claimed his sobriety and subsequent gubernatorial and presidential victories were divinely mandated. This is a similar thing, this predestination idea: god's perfect order depends on a George W. Bush sober and in office to bring about whatever his divine plan might be. Oddly, the little snippets of political conversation I heard at the Eck Temple were pretty dismissive of Bush and Republicans in general—with all the hugging and touching and long hair I saw before the service began it was like I'd stepped into a little enclave of eastern hippiedom—but the notion that his presidency is divinely inspired would cohere with their ideas of the inevitability of god's plan and the necessity, the duty we have to give in and let god have his way.

This brings me back to Karen. I don't remember whether we ever talked about being together for long. I don't even remember how or why or, honestly, even if we broke up. She may be out there somewhere still waiting for me to phone her, although that's not very likely. I can't say either of us had any illusions about our future together. There may have been some holding out for such, but it was probably more on my part

than hers, since even with the whole Eck thing and the bulimia and the ex-husband issues, she was still considerably more stable.

But I'm going to pretend, just for a moment, that there was. That somewhere she is waiting for me to return. We live, most of the time, on the edges of things, anticipating events. Phone calls, work, church, going to bed. Invariably we're disappointed, as Polish novelist Gustav Herling has written, "I came to the conclusion that if hope can often be the only meaning left in life, then its realization may sometimes be an unbearable torment." Or as Sri Harold Klemp, the current Living Eck Master and a man who looks as if he'd be more comfortable at the post office sorting mail than leading a multi-million member religion, has said, "There's no status quo—we're moving forward or we're moving backward."

Pretty bleak stuff. I'm not certain how much of any of it I buy, and when I look for a commonality—I'm always looking for commonalities; I suppose that's my job in life—I ask myself what do these things, John Murray's story, Eck and my relationship with Karen, George W. Bush's conviction he is placed in office by god, have in common? Perhaps it is their relative unlikelihoods. None of them is terrifically possible, although granted none of them is patently impossible either. But each has a better than average chance of being apocryphal, if not out-and-out falsehoods.

Perhaps the thing they have to share is hope. A sense that there is something greater out there, wherever "there" is and wherever "here" is, than what is currently in vogue. The wind will change. We will attain high office. The mystery will be opened to us. It's pretty to think so. But as it stands I don't think it's very practical.

“Give them not hell but hope,” Murray says. Hope is the thing with feathers, Emily Dickenson reminded us; it’s a fragile, precious thing. That’s the hope of the birds outside my window that I’ll fill their feeders this morning before I leave, and it entirely depends not on whether I’m a good man or not but whether I have the time or the inclination. I don’t agree. A hope like that can hold up to life and the things it throws at us. A hope like that can’t live in a society of sixth graders copulating in shop class, of hundred year old women being mugged, of car bombs and kidnappings, child molesters and cuts in social services. I think hope is cast iron. It’s solid and hard and built like a Green Bay linebacker. The hope Sri Harold Klemp and Eckanakar holds out is like a shield, warding off what we might think of as common sense and they see as pessimism; the hope of George W. Bush for his own providence is a club. The hope I had for my relationship with Karen was a dead thing ultimately, something that lay in my hands and it was years before I chose to drop it.

But the hope John Murray espouses is something else again. It’s built of steel and concrete with rebars running through it and has rough sanded places where the grain shows through. This hope is the thing that says we can’t go on, but we’ll go on. We have nothing and no one else. At the risk of sounding coarse, we must provide our own wind.