

TWO WINGS AND A PRAYER
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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It was just after the Battle of Midway, in World War II. Lt. Robert Maxwell Black and his crew had just completed a strafing run on a train, and were heading home, to their aircraft carrier. They look out—

Oh Lord, enemy aircraft coming up fast—evasive action, quick—return their fire!—we’re hit, all instruments are out!—got one of them—another hit!—heavy damage to the fuselage, practically cut us in half—got the other!—but—another hit—the right motor’s gone, wing’s nearly hanging off—OK, boys, we’re heading home by dead reckoning, we can do it!

Meanwhile, on the carrier, hope is nearly gone for the Black Angel and his crew, and the dark silence of loss has begun to settle on the ship. Suddenly, “Friendly aircraft on the horizon!” is heard, and the carrier crew watches unbelievably as the wreck of an airplane staggers, lunges, sputters, closer and closer. Landing net at the ready, the incredulous men hear the cough of the engine using its last drop of fuel as it descends over the ship. It clips the tower in its erratic descent and half of the fuselage falls off. It bounces, shudders, and is still. Lt. Black and his crew emerged with very big smiles on their faces.

Life magazine called the miraculous return “flying on a wing and a prayer.” (The “prayer” part was probably at least somewhat suggested by the well-known fact that Lt. Black was a devout man, a Mormon given to writing letters home and making himself useful while the other Navy men caroused.)

This morning we make our little joke about “two wings and a prayer”—because we are breaking ground for the construction of two Religious Education *wings*, and we are a church.

But the wing-and-a-prayer idea works as one of those metaphors for life.

Take the literal “wings” part. Without the actual machine of the airplane, constructed, inspected and maintained by ordinary people doing their day-to-day work, of course Max Black and his men wouldn’t have had a chance. Nearly destroyed as that one bravely-laboring engine was, it was entirely necessary, for the crew to get back as they did.

The “wings” of our own lives—the mundane, routine aspects of our existence—support and guide us and keep us going, too. We have jobs to earn money to sustain ourselves and our families, to pay for the non-routine things we love to do. We go grocery shopping and we prepare meals, that the body will be fed. We pay our bills so that the practical parts of our lives continue to run smoothly.

The “wings” of religious institutions are much the same. We run capital campaigns and pledge drives for the yearly operating budget, because we have buildings to build and staff to pay and insurance to keep up and committees to fund and mortgages to meet. Many dozens of people regularly do the work of seeing that we function smoothly. [Did you know that it takes at least a dozen people to plan, prepare and conduct a Sunday service?]

Those everyday, boring old details of life—the airplanes that keep our daily lives flying—are vital, foundational, and it behooves us to tend to them.

At the same time, it's the prayer part for which we live. I would guess that Max Black found their successful return nothing less than a miracle. I would imagine that Lt. Black was, in fact, praying and praying mightily during the flight, seeking contact and guidance and help from that ineffable Whatever that surrounds us and breathes into us, and makes us holy humans. I am almost sure that that he would have called it God, but the name doesn't matter: a prayer is a connection with the Mystery that is greater and more whole than we are.

A prayer brings reverence into our souls, and we see how we can be better. Our prayer life lends wings to our souls.

As individuals, we do the mundane work of keeping our planes flying so that we may be freer to pray—to spend time doing things that we know contribute to forgiveness and peace and justice. Things that help us aspire to our souls' highest and deepest dreams. Things that help us make love more likely to thrive in our world. Things that bring us closer to God.

When our souls take flight, we can pay more attention: To the truth in a friend's eyes. To beauty. To the calling of our own precious still, small voice. To our children's antics and joys and woes.

My daughter, Betsy, who lives with her family in Australia, phoned the other morning about 6:30—she had waited until the middle of the night, her time, because she didn't want to make me rise too early. In tears, she sobbed, “Mom...” and blurted out a serious problem they are having with their 16-year-old son. (A problem I had with her and her brother when they were about that age.) We talked for a half hour or so, me crying too, part of the time, then both of us laughing, both realizing—and saying—how very much we love each other.

That “prayer” of a conversation [I doubt if Betsy would accept that description too readily] lets me know why I pay the phone bill.

It's the same thing in church. It's the same thing for us, the congregation of this Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. It's very exciting to have raised enough money to meet most of the bills another year, and to be heading into our second phase of building. It's also a lot of work and can be downright annoying, when it seems as if leadership harps on the mundane subjects.

But we do it because we hope to increase the odds that love will thrive in this world. We do it because we want newcomers to feel at home in a place where their souls can take wing. We remember why we do it when we look around us and see the precious faces of our friends: these are the people with whom we have wept as we said goodbye to yet another beloved member; these are the people who have done the excruciatingly-hard work of honest relationship—falling into deep misunderstandings with us, then walking and talking it through to the other side; these are the people who have cared enough to stand beside us even when we've been wrong or stupid or immobilized—who have challenged us and nurtured us until we could emerge once again into clarity and love.

These are the people who have brought us closer to God.

This past June, several of us at the UU General Assembly were fortunate enough to hear a young adult speaker who shared her convictions about what is at the heart of life and of Unitarian Universalism:

It's a blessing each of us was born.

It matters what we do with our lives.

What each of us knows about god is a piece of the truth.

We don't have to do it alone.

For the wings of our ordinariness, and for the wings of our souls' flight, may it be

so.