Wrestling With The Holy
(inspired by the Whose Are We Program of the UUMA)
Written by Rev Debra Faulk, delivered to Unitarian Church of Calgary, Oct. 23rd, 2011

In June 2010 I was selected to be one of the two ministers from Canada trained as a facilitator for a new program. There were two ministers from each Chapter of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, the UUMA, our continental professional organization - (UU Minister of Canada is both a Chapter of the UUMA as well as our national ministers group). The program is titled Whose Are We: A Theological Conversation. Our commitment following the training was to take the program to our colleagues with the intention to begin a conversation, a theological conversation first amongst the ministers and on into congregations.

What might be a theological conversation you may ask … well just last weekend I was sitting at the dinner table at the regional gathering talking with someone I’ve never met before. He asked where I had gone to school “Vancouver School of Theology” said I and he responded “Oh - that must have been challenging as a Unitarian!” This is not the first time that I’ve been met with such a reaction as if theological education would be of no interest to a Unitarian, a Unitarian call to ministry.

There often appears to be a misconception that theology is only the study of some sort of anthropomorphic deity external to oneself and manipulating everything. This is so far from the reality of theological education, conversation and exploration.

It is about exploring ultimate reality; however one may understand that concept. It is about religion, religion as “that which binds us together”, the religious impulse inherent in all people. It is about the ethical dimension of life and the interdependent web of existence, our connection to it and to each other – so a theological conversation is one that asks some of life’s most challenging questions and invites us into deeper relationship. As Christopher mentioned in his testimonial, it is about struggling with big questions and having a community such as this means we do not have to engage the struggle alone.

A theological conversation explores the riddles and mystery of life. So there we were two ministers from each of the 20 chapters along with the program creators and support staff, about fifty ministers, gathered together for 2 ½ days to engage in theological conversation and exploration. First there was conversation about language for amongst minister there is as much diversity of theological orientation as there is in the midst of any UU congregation, from theist to atheist, and we were asked to agree for the session to refrain from challenging the words and go deeper into meaning.

We shared our individual understanding of why we do what we do, the covenants we make with ourselves and with that which calls us to the work of ministry, the covenants we have with each other, with this denomination and with our congregations or places of service, we grappled with accountability and responsibility, to whom or what, we celebrated what sustains us and how might we enliven the constant discernment process that is so much a part of our lives.

We did all this together in those few days and then brought it to colleagues in our chapter. So for the last year all over the North American continent Unitarian and Unitarian
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Universalist ministers have been engaged in this theological conversation. In fact the opening exercise of the Whose Are We program was also done at the first ever Global UU Ministers Meeting and Theological Symposium in Kerkrade, Holland.

The theological conversations continue and deepen … I mention all this as the preamble to this morning’s topic because it inspired the topic, Wrestling with the Holy is one of the session in the curriculum. As we are in the process of intentional transformation as a congregation and many of us on a personal level as well, we ask big questions; questions about purpose, about meaning, questions about what we give ourselves to, our time, energy and resources, and how we might live true to our values, while seeking to name and uphold collective principles.

This I would suggest is the domain of theology. This is the very stuff for which we seek out a religious community. This process of inquiry and exploration is sometimes a logical process, at times though we find ourselves at the edge of an abyss or at a fork in the road that requires deliberation to move forward, sometimes risking the familiar. We struggle with the options, with the choices; we struggle with being courageous and expressing our authentic selves.

In community we struggle to find a place for our individual ‘me’ in the collective ‘we’ and struggle with being inclusive of all who would seek such a community. One particular session in the Whose Are We program focused on this struggle to live in accord with our highest aspirations, with life’s call to us.

The session began with the reflection that it has been said … that the Unitarian Universalist minister’s experience of Call is a lifelong invitation to wrestle with the Holy. Our ministry often gives public witness to that wrestling. It is a relationship which we cannot ever adequately describe. The following is a metaphorical rendering of that struggle.

JACOB WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL
Genesis 32:24-32
And Jacob was left alone;
and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.
When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob,
he touched the hollow of his thigh;
and Jacob’s thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.
Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.”
But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”
And he said to him, “What is your name?”
And he said, “Jacob.”
Then he said, “Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel,
for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.
Then Jacob asked him, “Tell me, I pray, your name.”
But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?”
And there he blessed him.
Jacob called the name of the place Peniel,” saying,
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“For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”
The sun rose upon him as he passed Peni’el, limping because of his thigh.¹

I know this kind of struggle. I have wrestled the whole night, both literally and metaphorically, with a decision or situation such that when the resolution comes it is a blessing and often this leaves me limping, a little weary and yet recognizing a sacred space or moment in my life. This wrestling with the holy is uplifting and it usually involves connecting with something far bigger than myself, touching into a higher purpose. It is the kind of personal growth and transformation that has me at full attention, present to the presence, it stiffens my spine to do the work of justice in the world, to stand on the side of love.

It is interesting that the part of the human body where the spine and hip meet, the seat of our backbone and where God wrenched Jacob’s body is called the sacrum. The resemblance to sacred in this word for the bone that connects the spine to the pelvis is not accidental: it was believed by certain Greeks with naming rights that the soul resided in this spot: they called the bone hieron osteon. It became os sacrum in Latin, a compound from which we’ve dropped the first part. The sacroiliac joint - the sacrum - what is sacred² – what keeps us upright and moves us forward …

While this biblical text was the introductory reading used at the initial WAW training one of my fellow facilitators shared another rendition that touched me and that we used in presenting the program to Canadian ministers. We first read the Genesis text and then this poem Godwrestling by Rabbi Arthur Waskow:

I wrestled again with my brother last week,  
First time since I was twelve and Grandma stopped us:  
“She won’t even let us fight!” we yelled, embracing,  
But she said talking was nicer.  
Wrestling feels a lot like making love.

Why did Jacob wrestle with God,  
why did the others talk?  
God surely enjoyed that all night fling with Jacob:  
Told him he’d won,  
Renamed him and us the Godwrestler,  
Even left him a limp to be sure he’d remember it all.  
But ever since, we’ve talked —  
We’ve only talked.  
Did something peculiar happen that night?  
Did somebody say next day we shouldn’t wrestle? Who?

¹ from WHOSE ARE WE? A Theological Conversation -A Curriculum for UUMA Chapters by Burton Carley, Minister Church of the River, Memphis Tennessee and Laurel Hallman, Minister Emeritae First Unitarian Church of Dallas Texas
²http://thecorner.typepad.com/bc/2009/05/musings-on-where-my-soul-is.html
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We should wrestle again with our Comrade sometime soon.
Wrestling feels a lot like making love.

But Esau struggled to his feet from his own Wrestle,
And gasped across the river to his brother:
It also feels a lot like making war.

Now with this reading we explore far more of the dimensions of wrestling with the holy.
The holy may well be our brother or sister, a friend or partner, the holy is each of us.
When we wrestle with the holy it is a full body experience; it feels a lot like making love;
and it feels a lot like making war.

This has been my experience, that even the notion of wrestling with the holy is itself a paradox. Oftentimes some shadow aspect is struggling for influence, to be brought to consciousness; oftentimes the wrestling involves a moral dilemma. Remember that image of an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. This too is an image of wrestling with the holy.

I recall a time when my son Daniel was about five or six years old and announce to me that he wanted to kill himself. While on the inside I was freaking out, I manage to maintain a calm presence and finally discovered that he was in the throes of a moral dilemma. His friend from next door was with us when we went shopping that day and had stolen a chocolate bar. I had not noticed and Daniel was in an ethical quandary. He knew stealing was wrong, and had been sworn to secrecy by his friend. Yet his moral conscience would not allow the situation to remain a secret. In his very concrete way of thinking the solution to not betraying his friend was to simply not be there. Daniel was wrestling with the holy.

So we may name the holy our personal conscience, our ethical barometer or moral compass; we may call it the angel on our shoulder; we may call it life calling or some may be comfortable calling it god, we all wrestle with it from time to time. We all must respond to it or live in the shallow end of life.

I wrestled again with my brother last week,
First time since I was twelve and Grandma stopped us:
"She won't even let us fight!" we yelled, embracing,
But she said talking was nicer.

Talking is nicer, and we Canadians are nice, and in many ways nice seems to be our cultural response to these struggles, keeping it all in the head, avoiding the fullness of the struggle, sidestepping any perceived conflict at all costs to the detriment of our personal and institutional well-being, evading the demands of depth.

Any time we struggle with being true to our higher self, to the part of ourselves that is both demanding and uplifting, we are wrestling with the holy. Sometimes it feels like
making love and sometimes it feels like war, we each of us limp a little from the experience and this lets us know that we are fully alive.

May we embrace the holy as a lover, as the beloved, for in this embrace we can be most authentically agents of transformation. May your wrestling with the holy leave you breathless with the recognition of our capacity to love.

Closing Words:
For everything there is a shadow
May I stay open to its wisdom
May that wisdom be present in my life
To remind me of wholeness

May paradox and challenge be
A condiment to the possible
May the shadow, the paradox and the challenge
Take me ever deeper

There to meet love and be blessed with transformation
That grace may live in me
Debra Faulk (May 2011)