

## Dancing with the Mystery

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Hebrews 11:1

This Scripture reading from Hebrews can be understood as a response to the anxious questions of life. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It is an invitation to live into the mystery of faith and life. It carries within it two words which are most elusive in the world of questioning...**Assurance and Conviction.** They are words designed to lessen our anxieties, and provide us something firm on which we can rest our weary questioning minds and spirits. I don’t know about you, but there are times when I am absolutely assured about very little, and my convictions are usually accompanied with statements like, “On the other hand,” and “Yes, but...”

We live in a world of mystery, and the older I get the more mysterious it becomes. Albert Schweitzer once said, “The highest knowledge is to know that we are surrounded by mystery.” If we accept this truth, living in the faith of assurance for things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen, it seems that certain things should become central to how we view life and how we live life.

*First of all is patience*...I spoke about this a couple of weeks ago when I talked about the gardener and the barren fig tree in the Gospel of Luke. A number of years ago now, our daughter graduated from Indiana University. Since she is our

only child, she is a bit spoiled, but she is very bright. I was never sure, however, until I saw the actual diploma, that she was going to make it through college. You see, as bright as she is, she had a difficult time applying her *smarts* to her school work. When given a choice between a party and studying for an exam, she would always choose the party...As she expressed one time, her favorite sorority on campus was “Tap-a-Keg of Brew!” I spent many a night filled with anxiety worrying about her...When is she going to get serious about life? Will she ever think of anyone but herself? When, dear God, will her “teachable” or “awakening” moment come?!?!

As I have reflected on her high school and college life, my daughter reminds me a lot of myself. If I had a chance to go out with my friends or to a party, the school work would have to wait. It was not until the latter part of my college career that I became serious about my studies, and began to have intelligent conversations with my parents. As I proceeded in the academic process, my father would say, “I knew you had it in you.” I liked hearing that, and I enjoyed making my parents proud.

Sitting in the rain at the football stadium of Indiana University, I looked down at my daughter...one of thousands graduating...and said to Elizabeth, “I knew she had it in her.” Knowing of my impatience throughout Lisa’s growing years and academic life, Elizabeth turned to me with a look that said, “Yeah, right!” I guess that the , “I knew she had it in her,” was always covered with a few layers of

anxiety and impatience. But I really did believe in her! At least, in retrospect, I think I did.

A friend of mine has a T-Shirt that says, “The older I get the wiser I was!” We tend to forget our own foibles, mistakes and impatience. Upon reflection we were always more poised, more patient, more loving, more knowledgeable than was actually the case. Life is like that. Each of us is a very good editor of our lives, our own *revisionist historian*. In the end, I suppose that this is the only way that we can stand living with ourselves.

And so the first element of a faith which is “the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen,” is *patience*. *A second element is a sense of adventure*. Alfred North Whitehead has written, “Without the high hope of adventure, faith degenerates into the mere appendage of a comfortable life.”

Near the end of H.G. Wells’ story, “The History of Mr. Polly,” Wells reflects upon what it was like to have lived a full life having almost never experienced adventure. Mr. Polly is dying, and the author reflects: “And it seemed to him now that life had never begun for him...*never*. It was as if his soul had been cramped and his eyes bandaged from the hour of his birth. Why had he lived such a life? Why had he submitted to things, blundered into things? Why had he never insisted on the things he thought beautiful and the things he desired...never sought them,

fought for them, taken any risk for them, died, rather than abandon them. They were the things that mattered. Safety did not matter. A living did not matter, unless there are things to live for.”

In “Waiting for Godot,” there is this question: “Do you believe in the life to come?” The sad response: “Mine always was...”

A sense of adventure, which encompasses a sense of spiritual expectancy, is necessary for us to know a faith which is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.

Finally, weaving throughout the practice of patience and living within a sense of spiritual adventure, is *the element of trust*. It is a trust that whatever happens...whatever obstacles or openings that come our way, we will find a purpose in God’s pattern as it unfolds before us. Without this element of trust that God IS, and that there is a meaningful purpose in my life on this earth, the only logical recourse is *hopelessness*.

Bertrand Russell was a philosopher and an atheist. The hopelessness of humanity from his position of atheism was beautifully expressed in his book, *Mysticism and Logic*. He writes, “Humans are the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving...their origin, their growth, their hopes and fears, their loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations

of atoms...No fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave...all the labors of the ages, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of human achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a Universe in ruins..." Russell closes with these words: "Brief and powerless is human life...on them and all their race the slow sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way."

These are powerful words, and we must conclude that if God is NOT, then Russell is right. But as persons of faith our hope resides in a spiritual realism that does not overlook the problems of humanity, but does not let them stifle our faith...*the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.*

And then there are the words of Bertrand Russell's Quaker Mother-in-Law, Hannah Whitall Smith, who wrote the following to her son, Logan Pearsall Smith:

"I do not preach much, as I am sure thee will give me credit for, but I just want to say that but for my unswerving faith in a God of love and wisdom, and my absolute certainty that God cares for me and mine, I should have been crushed with despair long ago. Life has not contained much trouble for thee yet, darling son, but

when it comes, remember that thy mother has assured thee that there is comfort and peace in the grand fact that God IS.”

And so we live in a world of mystery, and yet as Quakers we affirm a faith of assurance and conviction. By practicing patience...by living with a sense of spiritual adventure, and by trusting in the grand fact that God IS, we can claim a faith of assurance in things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen. Such a faith is exemplified in a life of unhurried peace and power, and in the words of the author of *A Testament of Devotion*, Thomas Kelly, such a life is... “simple...It is serene...It is amazing...It is triumphant...It is radiant. It takes no time, but it occupies all our time. And such a faith makes our life programs new and overcoming. We need not get frantic...God is at the helm. And when our little day is done we lie down quietly in peace, for all is well.”