

Oh what a Beautiful Day!

Appreciating the life lessons learned from living with European HoneyBees

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On Sunday, June 18, 2017, I was visiting Niagara Falls with my family for Fathers Day. Upon pulling into the parking lot at the Niagara Parks Commission Botanical Gardens, my wife spotted a wild swarm of honeyBees. That serendipitous moment changed my life and has led to six years, so far, of a growing passion for these incredible creatures and the valuable life lessons that they set forth. Join me as I share some perspectives on the teachings of Bees, how they often align with the seven principles, and why it is important to cherish all moments in life, whether they are the moments that are oh so sweet, or even those moments that sting!

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Reading for Story Time:

If Bees Disappeared

By Lily Williams

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Hello UU Brooklyn and thank you for having me to your congregation on this beautiful December day!

I asked Lucy if I could speak to you in December for a couple of reasons, firstly, so that I could be finished most of my farm chores planting the garlic crop for next season; and also so that I could mostly be finished preparing the bee hives for winter with a windbreak and some extra insulation so that they can stay a little warmer until spring. But I also liked the idea of speaking in the month of December because we are quickly approaching the Winter Solstice on December 21st, a special time that has always

been recognized at my UU congregation in Mississauga, as I am sure it is here..

You see, in the community of a bee colony, the solstices represent very important dates to them as well, because the Bees use the sun as their calendar and recognize the changing of the seasons by measuring the changes in the amount of daylight and darkness. It is at the solstices that the Bees recognize what lies ahead for them, as Bees are very good time keepers and planners... which makes me think of the first teaching of the Bees that I would like to share with you. Bees like nothing better than to create order where there is uncertainty and to be prepared for the unknown that awaits before them. This habit reminds me of some of the same reasons that humans tend to seek out spirituality, to create order and to avoid uncertainty in our lives.

So, as we approach the winter solstice, the Bees in their wisdom won't be looking at the shortest day of the year, all 8 hours 55 minutes and 44 seconds of it, the way that many of us humans like to mark it on our calendar, as the start of winter, but instead will be looking at it as the last day of their previous season. On December 22, as the day reaches 8 hours 55 minutes and 46 seconds, just a slight 2 seconds greater, the Bees, already

knowing that the days are beginning to grow longer, will start to consider their preparations for the next season ahead. It is with this sense of anticipation and preparation that I am reminded of a second meaningful teaching of the Bees that I want to share with you, which is that while the past prepares the foundation for the future, there is no power in dwelling on what has already come and gone, instead there is great strength in looking forward and setting a goal for what lies ahead. Because, while anyone's future may always be uncertain, placing great care in the work we do today is the best predictor of success for tomorrow, or even for ten years or one hundred years from now.

Now, I will be the first to admit that I might not be the best planner or goal setter for the future, and as it was, today's talk approached me much faster than I would have liked, and I had prepared much less than I thought I would have to get ready. So, the other day, with a sense of apprehension, I looked over the few photos, notes and ideas that I had jotted down in a jumbled fashion wondering why I had even suggested that I would come to talk to you...

When I looked at the sum of what I had wanted to say here today I realized that I wasn't even sure what it might be that you all

wanted to learn, or how to go about telling you what I think you should maybe know...

But it is often at times like that, when I feel confused, unsure, without direction, or even sad... that I will walk over to the Bees to contemplate what's at hand, because the modern European honeybee holds the wisdom of approximately 80 - 150 million years of evolution under their wings! And so I will just sit down and have a chat with them...

Instead of guessing or feeling confused about what to say, I went to the bee yard and asked the Bees what they would like to share in the ways of their wisdom, traditions, and their specific take on life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness... and in the ways that they usually do, they answered... Buzz, Buzz, Buzzzzzz...

Now, you might all be sitting here as a congregation considering if you've just made a big mistake inviting a speaker who is really just a little bit crazier than the average UU'er, seeing as how I am admitting to having conversations with Bees, but in fact there is a long standing history of beekeepers consulting their Bees for wisdom, especially in times of uncertainty or tragedy. This is when

a beekeeper must go through the process of “**telling the Bees**” of the situation or problem at hand...

Perhaps even a few of you may have seen a headline as recently as at the passing of the queen that the royal bee keeper was tasked with “**telling the Bees**” of the queen's death: knocking on each hive to say, *‘The mistress is dead, but don’t you go. Your master will be a good master to you.’*

The centuries-old tradition of “telling the Bees” comes from a superstition that if Bees are not informed of their master’s death, they will stop producing honey or even worse, leave the hive. The custom has strong Celtic roots, but is also prevalent through folklore in most of Europe, parts of the United States, and elsewhere across the globe... In the Celtic mythology, it is believed that the Bees are messengers between this world and the spirit realm and that by “**telling the Bees**” a person could communicate with the spirits... And overall, the tradition of talking to Bees has been captured in historical works of art dating as far back as ancient Egypt, and the phenomenon continues to this day.

Now, this is not to say that you will have elaborate dialogues with insects or that they will respond and provide you with instant spiritual enlightenment, but it does bring me to a good third point to share with this congregation about being a UU'er and our practice of seeking spirituality, and my thought on that is, it is less important to seek a specific god and actually more important to contemplate the unknown while spending dedicated time to seek spirituality. The act of seeking answers to spiritual questions is more rewarding than whatever specific deity you might actually seek them from. Just as the act of Bees seeking the nectar from a variety of flowers, as long as they are nice and juicy, is sweeter than if the Bees just sought the morning dewdrops off any old plant. And in my humble opinion, it does not matter if you seek direction from Bees, a christian god, an egyptian goddess, or otherwise, as none are likely to actually speak back to you in any direct fashion, but the mere contemplation of what is possible, or of that which must be answered, is what will lead you to the true insights that will align with your own personal soul.

Mentioning the soul, I'm reminded of a powerful line that I read just recently. It was: "We don't have a soul, we **are** a soul, we just have a body". In this, beekeeping lends me another powerful reminder. The keeper, usually alone, armed with just a whiff of

smoke, must contend with tens of thousands and sometimes even hundreds of thousands of reminders about who the real boss is. A typical beehive, with approximately 50,000 - 80,000 soldiers in an average summertime colony, can be triggered to sting with just a single wrong move... So in consideration of the potential consequences a beekeeper faces, we must be sure to act in quiet contemplation and calm consideration of the task at hand. I've found something soulful in that quiet contemplation, a reminder that I am a soul, **but with every sting**, that I just have a body...

The fact that beekeeping might even be described as a soulful practice actually strikes at the very core of how important beekeeping is to human culture. We have all probably heard that Bees pollinate 30% of everything we eat, and more like 70% of everything we eat that is really tasty, like fruits, nuts, and the most flavourful vegetables, but the recognition of how important beekeeping is to human culture, not just to human's food, has just this week approached another new pinnacle as the act of beekeeping is currently being considered by the UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Committee, which is debating designating Beekeeping, along with 53 other significant cultural initiatives such as: the "**traditional tea-processing techniques and associated social practices of China**", and the "**knowledge of**

the light rum masters of Cuba”, as ***Human Treasures***. These treasures are defined as - ***a living heritage, which, transmitted from generation to generation, gives communities a feeling of identity and continuity considered essential for the respect of cultural diversity and human creativity***... Well, well, well... doesn't that just sound a whole lot like Unitarian Universalism!!!

I'd like to give one last example of how bee's exemplify spirituality. In many spiritual and religious practices, the rituals, sermons, and ceremonies that take place serve the purpose to pass along knowledge between leaders, members and even between other congregations. Humans have a strong oral tradition that allows us to do this quite efficiently, at weddings, at funerals, at birthdays, at bat mitzvahs, and at sermons like these. The Bees, without language, still manage to pass along enough important information within the hive to run a complex social structure that can thrive year to year, decade to decade, millenia to millenia.

However, Bees, without the use of language to convey their messages, must instead open up their many senses for effective and purposeful communication for their survival. And as with the Bees, so goes spirituality, where much of what is to be gleaned

from the practice is to come from **opening all of your senses**, both practical **and magical**, to what is being offered before you. Just by practicing the habit of paying attention to all of our senses, a great deal can be experienced and learned in prayer, worship, community and through the gift of life.

So important are all of the senses to the success of unlocking spiritual enlightenment, finding your true meaning, and achieving an everlasting life, that I now ask you just for a brief moment, to practice mindfulness. Now when I say mindfulness, I am not asking you to purge every single thought from your mind, but instead, to awaken your consciousness to all of the stimuli and flowing information that currently surrounds you.

Just take a brief second, take a deep breath in and out, in and out, in and out, and then consider one last news story that I would like to share with you.

A recent study has explained through science that Bees, when they swarm, which is in fact the mainstay of their natural reproduction cycle, actually produce an electrical charge greater than that of a storm cloud! The Bees really are all a buzz!

This discovery actually stemmed from the discovery that individual Bees carry an electrical charge, which is actually what helps pollen stick to them and makes them such good pollinators, but then when the scientists studied a swarm of Bees all together, they noticed the synergy of all the Bees didn't just produce a single charge per bee, but in fact the charges all started to accumulate into something much greater, a swarm of Bees carries the same proportional charge as an average size storm cloud!!!! This reminds me of everyone here today at the congregation, where as individuals we all bring a charge, but when joined together we amplify each other's energies into something much, much greater.

Now, for one last little tid-bit that I'd like to share with you about what Bees have taught me... I'd like to just briefly take you back to the moment where I mentioned my uncertainty about coming to chat here today, and bring to your attention **how important serendipitous moments are in life**. In the bio that I shared for before attending here today, it mentioned that the first Bees that I ever received were a wild swarm. Now, but for a chance decision to go see Niagara Falls on fathers day back in 2017, and a chance decision to park in the parking lot where we parked, did Bees first come into my life. And, but for chance did I happen to

see the Facebook post that this congregation was looking for someone to speak about Bees. And if not for serendipity, out of all the different posts where people are seeking bee speakers, and these posts do come across fairly often for retirement homes, schools, rotary clubs, etc., would I, for the first time that I have ever offered to speak in the capacity of a beekeeper, also happen to be a UU'er unknowingly answering the post of a UU congregation. And, as I had pulled together notes and a few pictures for this chat, but for chance would I suddenly realize, already after going over my materials multiple times, that for no particular reason, other than the ***interconnected honeycomb of life***, did I happen to be wearing **my Unicamp T-shirt** in two photos from my 2022 beekeeping season, at one point in the early spring when I collected a wild swarm to re-home, and then again at the zenith of the beekeepers season, during the annual honey harvest.... And it is serendipitous moments like these that you will want to pay attention to, as these are the moments where life, the universe and everything in-between are talking to you, guiding you, and answering your call to your own awakening in this sweet sweet world.

Thank you for your time and have a Beautiful day!