



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Following the Footsteps of a Hobbit”

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Centering Thoughts:

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort. J.R.R. Tolkien, THE HOBBIT

“Well done! Mr. Baggins!” Gandalf said. “There is always more about you than anyone expects!” J.R.R. Tolkien, THE HOBBIT

Reflection:

(This reflection followed an abridged enactment of THE HOBBIT in celebration of the 80th anniversary of its first publication by J.R.R. Tolkien)

Bilbo answered a call. We often think of calling in terms of vocation or God calling Biblical prophets to go speak for God. Gandalf, not God, called Bilbo, but like Moses who first refused God’s call, Bilbo first refuses to join the dwarves’ quest. He cites the comforts of home, the importance of not being late for dinner, of respectability, and of it not being in the nature of a Baggins to go on adventures. Also like Moses, Bilbo finally agrees. During the journey, he faces many discomforts and dangers. And, something unexpected happens.

When he started out, Bilbo didn’t consider himself a burglar. He didn’t consider himself brave or heroic. He wasn’t a soldier or warrior. He wasn’t even worldly because he’d never traveled beyond the Shire. But something stirred within him and he felt the urge to go adventuring. He felt called to see the world and to learn if he was the hobbit Gandalf knew him to be.

As each danger confronted Bilbo and company, he found within an answer to each predicament. When he needed to face the dragon and find its weakness, Bilbo called forth the courage to face it. Facing known danger is the hardest task he, or any of us, would ever do. The dwarves stopped doubting his value to their quest. A grocer no longer, they respected his creative leadership and bravery.

As Gandalf observed, Bilbo returned home a different person. His experiences matured him, gained him self-confidence, and taught him the true value of the comforts he had once taken

for granted. Tolkien conveyed his belief that evil and sorrow were necessary to appreciate goodness and joy. One without the other was meaningless. Our moral choices give our lives meaning, as it did for Bilbo.

Bilbo also gained a new understanding of the value of friends. The adventures he shared and their dependence upon one another gave him deep relationships he'd not had before. The stories of their experiences and the role he played filled his remaining days.

Bilbo is an archetype of the mythical reluctant hero. Bilbo's responses to life's challenges serve to inform us how we are to live. He's just like you and me, an average being called to do something unexpected, but who rises to the occasion. He proves to us that we can be that person, too.

In our own lives, we're called to do the unexpected. When we answer the call, even reluctantly, we gain something, too. I'm sure you can recount a time you surprised yourself with an accomplishment you, or someone else, doubted you could do. Completing these gives us a certain satisfaction and we build our own self-confidence, thus making the next challenge a little easier to face.

Tolkien's myth may be an unreal fantasy filled with monsters, miracles and magic. But its truth is very real. Let us take Tolkien's warning and not value our comfort so much that we make our lives smaller than they need be. Let us answer the call to adventure, the call to serve something beyond ourselves. Let us all be the hero of our own life stories.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Have you reluctantly agreed to do something, and then, after it was over, been glad you did it after all? What changed your attitude, and did you discover something new in yourself?
2. What comforts in your life keep you from exploring new challenges or relationships?
3. What treasure might you be holding onto, and should you let it go? What might help you do that?