

## **On Reverence**

March 25, 2007

FUFON

### **READING/MEDITATION**

“The Ponds” written and read by Mary Oliver (CD)

#### **THE PONDS**

Every year  
the lilies  
are so perfect  
I can hardly believe  
their lapped light crowding  
the black,  
mid-summer ponds.  
Nobody could count all of them-

the muskrats swimming  
among the pads and the grasses  
can reach out  
their muscular arms and touch

only so many, they are that  
rife and wild.  
But what in this world  
is perfect?

I bend closer and see  
how this one is clearly lopsided-  
and that one wears an orange blight-  
and this one is a glossy cheek

half nibbled away-

and that one is a slumped purse  
full of its own  
unstoppable decay.

Still, what I want in my life  
is to be willing  
to be dazzled-  
to cast aside the weight of facts

and maybe even  
to float a little  
above this difficult world.  
I want to believe I am looking

into the white fire of a great mystery.  
I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing-  
that the light is everything-that it is more than the sum  
of each flawed blossom rising and fading. And I do.

## **SERMON**

I stand before you this morning in full awareness of the ministerial presence Rev. Steven Epperson from the Unitarian Church in Vancouver had as he spoke from this very pulpit last Sunday. His topic was “Reconnecting with the Sacred”. Many of you have asked for a copy of his sermon. I have been assured that as soon as it is in print form, he’ll send a copy. I’ll pass it along.

Over the past week I have heard discussion, questioning and pondering about various aspects of Rev. Epperson’s sermon. One of the recurring issues seems to be one of language. How can Unitarians use words like ‘holy’, ‘spirit’, ‘god’, ‘sacred’...? We listen intently until one of those words is spoken and it is like we’ve been stung by a bee. Some of us feel a tingle and others go into a massive allergic reaction. We get so distracted that we miss the larger message.

Today, I want to talk about another of “those” words. I want to talk about reverence. It is my hope to challenge and shake loose any preconceived notions you might have about reverence. I know from experience that we often suppress words or ideas that are painful, unjust or conflicted. In the case of reverence, it might seem to belong to someone else – to another group, to another religion.

But reverence can belong to each of us, even if we don't always know it. In his book "Reverence", Paul Woodruff says reverence is a forgotten virtue; although we frequently use the term 'irreverent' – especially towards politicians, comedians or people whose behavior is edgy or outside the norm. We don't use 'reverent' very often. I know I don't. When I think about reverence, nuns, monks and Buddha come to mind. Reverence is not a present term. It does not occur to me to use the word 'reverence' for everyday activities or people.

In ancient Greece as well as ancient China, reverence was considered a core human virtue, along with justice, wisdom and courage. Reverence was cultivated, but it was not earned or learned. Nor did it come from religion, although it may exist within religion. I often wonder as we dismiss, discount or ignore the creeds and dogmas other religions if it is the underlying reverence that attracts us.

Virtues reach deep in our inner being and are a larger truth than a particular culture or belief system. While virtues such as reverence are self-derived, they are only seen in relational contexts. They are developed and survive best in a close-knit community.

Everywhere, life provides ample opportunity to practice virtues, including reverence. Woodruff states that a "virtue is not under your conscious control, and if you give it up, no act of will can bring it back to you. (This

is one of the lessons from post-traumatic stress.)” Socrates believed that every lapse in virtue damaged the soul.

According to Woodruff, reverence has three elements: awe, respect and shame. Reverence is a virtue that arises from our emotions. “Reverence is the capacity for a range of feelings and emotions that are linked; it is a sense that there is something larger than a human being...; it is often expressed in, and reinforced by, ceremony.”

If it is true that reverence is based on feelings and emotions, then it might help explain why the word ‘reverence’ is missing from our religious vocabulary as Unitarian Universalists. To understand why, we must go to the roots of the Unitarian and Universalist traditions. For those who might be new to our fellowship, the Unitarian and the Universalist churches came together and formed an association in 1961, hence the term ‘UU’.

Historically, Unitarianism is built on the strength of the mind. Intellectual capacity is separated from intuition, emotion and the body. In her essay *New Words for Life*, Thandeka reminds us that William Ellery Channing, the nineteenth-century Unitarian minister who gave Unitarianism its platform, believed that “human essence is the mind”. On the other hand, Hosea Ballou, a contemporary of Channing, preached a Universalist message of the unity of the mind and body. It is no wonder that our churches today struggle with balance between lecture and ritual!

So how do we work with this inherent tension in our Unitarian Universalist tradition? If, in Thandeka's words, Unitarian Channing supported the concept of an "independent, disembodied mind—an autonomous self—as the essence of human nature" and Universalist Ballou "affirmed an inter-relational self, one in which the feelings of the human body co-determine the state of the human mind", we are left with contradiction.

There is an old debate and goes back to 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses* to the church door in Wittenburg, Germany. Luther not only protested the practice of religious indulgences – relics and money offered to the church in exchange for fewer days in purgatory – he argued for the use of individual conscious to determine doctrinal certainty. People should rely on their own conscious instead of receiving all the answers from church authorities.

A few years later, Friedrich Schleiermacher became the father of liberal theology when he established a living non-doctrinal foundation for creedal belief. Schleiermacher spent most of his life trying to explain a religious change of heart he had when he was fourteen years old. He concluded that "all religious claims entail anthropomorphic projections. All religions are culturally determined. No religious claim is the absolute truth." According to Schleiermacher, all religious experience is a feeling, "the feeling of

being inextricably connected to everything and everyone.” He extends his premise by stating “all human knowledge is mediated by human feeling”.

Philosopher Immanuel Kant responded. Kant insisted that the basis for liberal faith was not feeling, but reason. Where Schleiermacher used reason and feeling, Kant focused on reason alone. In other words, it was Schleiermacher’s head *and* body or Kant’s head *over* body.

So we come to today and we still have the predicament – what to do with virtues such as reverence that rely on feelings and emotions. The foundation of Unitarian Universalism rests on the free use of reason. Our tradition is defined by intellectual critique but on the surface it doesn’t contain the element of reverence.

In his book *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* Mark Taylor realizes that this reliance on intellectual critique has left him as a spiritual wanderer with no foundation to call home, always a drifter, always “suspicious of stopping, staying and dwelling”. This might seem harsh but it has the sting of truth. When is the last time you tried to explain our faith to a newcomer or a neighbor?

It is no doubt true that Unitarian Universalism offers more theologies than any other religious people. If you need proof, look at the hymns and readings in our hymnbook, the hangings on the walls, and listen to the

person next to you. We acknowledge multiple religious and non-religious sources for our faith and value the diversity that brings.

What I think we are ultimately seeking is recognition that reason, science and the intellect can be compatible with feeling and emotion. The mind is not separate from the body. Many people in our societies today have thrown away traditional religion. Canada and most of Europe have become secular nations. But in surveys, a strong majority of respondents indicate they are interested in spirituality. We are becoming a society of spiritual seekers.

My understanding of spirituality is one of wholeness, where the body and mind are engaged together in a responsible and meaningful manner. Emotions drive many of our responses and the intellect helps us to interpret and understand. At times, one aspect will dominate the other, but in the end, balance is necessary.

Reverence gets us away from pure intellect and calls us to engage our feelings and emotions. We can analyze it, but reverence is a virtue that is derived from the deep recesses – not of the mind, but the body.

Think of a beautiful sunrise. We can explain in scientific terms, but we can only be present to the feeling of awe – of something transcendent. Rainbows are the same. And birthing. And death. And the rain – have you

ever listened 'into' the rain? To a single drop? To the motion of the molecules? To the beyond?

In the reading this morning, reverence in the form of respect for others was discovered among the community of monks. Mary Oliver reminded us that upon close inspection, nothing is perfect. Yet she is seeking. She says...

Still, what I want in my life  
is to be willing  
to be dazzled-  
to cast aside the weight of facts

and maybe even  
to float a little  
above this difficult world.  
I want to believe I am looking

into the white fire of a great mystery.  
I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing-  
that the light is everything-that it is more than the sum  
of each flawed blossom rising and fading. And I do.

When I think about reverence as respect and look around at my life, I begin to see many examples. Here at church I often see Dawn who braves the weather and the roads as she kicks her motorized chair into turbo speed to be here in community. I see Art and Olive contribute their keen intellects to our community. I see Bill and Joan reminding us of our environmental responsibilities. I see Martha and Sam, Wendy and Rob and many more doing the things that keep our fellowship running. I see

Elisabeth making her way through our archives. I see Mary greeting visitors and Meg offering tea and coffee. I see all the wonderful energy around the children's religious education program. I go to board meetings, committee meetings and other functions – even a day of spring-cleaning. Everywhere we are doing rituals of community.

On Sunday morning, we come together to celebrate what it means to be together. We celebrate not only our relationships within community but we also engage our intellect. We might still be stung every now and then by words that are outside our UU vocabulary, but I am hoping that reverence is a word that we are willing to reclaim.

For it is in being reverent that we acknowledge our highest ideals in others and in self. It is in reverence that we find our place. It is in reverence that we connect. It is in reverence that we are alive. It is in reverence that we transcend.

Blessed be and amen.

### **BENEDICTION**

May we celebrate in wholeness of body and mind.

May we reclaim the virtue of reverence in our lives.

May we celebrate community as we go forth.