

United First Parish Church in Quincy
Sermon: “A Language of Reverence for Heretics”, 10/22/06
By: Michelle Walsh

I’ve always liked Quincy’s covenant – not every Unitarian Universalist congregation designs a covenant for itself, let alone reads it in every worship service. Your covenant is so clearly linked to our Unitarian Universalist principles as well, but with your own twists and priorities. I particularly like your second line: “we unite to lift our hearts and open our minds to a larger reality.” I find myself wondering what the conversations went like to arrive at that language – particularly for “to a larger reality.” I understand that it was a very in-depth process for you to create your covenant, and I’d love to hear that story some time.

You may or may not know the Unitarian Universalist’s Commission on Appraisal is about to revisit our association’s covenant – our principles and purposes – their language and function in our denomination. For those who don’t know, the Commission on Appraisal is an independent review body appointed by the General Assembly to examine issues of general concern to the development of Unitarian Universalism. Some of the last reports by this body have been on interdependence and our congregational polity and on our theological diversity. It makes some sense that since we are a covenantal religion – we freely agree on the bases by which we come together – that we periodically review our covenants to see if they are still reflective of who we are and where we are heading.

The reason why your own covenantal language intrigues me, particularly the metaphor “to a larger reality,” is that there is a debate raging about how we as Unitarian Universalists can reclaim a language of reverence for ourselves – a

language that is both meaningful to us personally and capable of use for engaging in dialogue with others. Realistically, we tend to draw what are known as “come-outers” into our religion – people who are coming out of and leaving the religion of their birth for a variety of reasons, but often because they’ve experienced a great deal of woundedness in that religion, and they appreciate the intellectual and emotional freedom of Unitarian Universalism for themselves and for their children. There is certainly a lot of value in ours being simply a “healing” religion.

However, several concerns have been raised that we may be limiting ourselves in this focus. One concern is that we do not tend to keep our children – both because they do not have a strong sense of what it is that Unitarian Universalism stands for and because our Protestant worship forms don’t fit their needs for creative community. Some UU children grow up and find other religions while others do not find much need for church in their life. Those few “come-inners” who stay become very involved in the denomination and often become UU ministers. Some question if we need to explore a more profound language of reverence to bind our communities more strongly for the sake of our children.

Others question our ability to achieve the very ideals we set for ourselves if cannot even dialogue with others using at least some common language – even if this means explaining how our use of particular words is different from how others use those words – at least debating interpretations promote the dialogue! The capitulation of all religious language to the Religious Right is one problem driving these questions. Another is a desire for Unitarian Universalists to be more relevant in the international religious arena on behalf of social justice goals, and even to be

more successful in achieving our lofty goals of being multicultural and antiracist. Instead, the worry is that we will remain a very small American denomination of predominantly intellectually oriented white people who happen to do a lot of good social justice work but in limited ways.

So, in 2003, our current president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Bill Sinkford, challenged us to look more deeply at our language of reverence, including our comfort with the word “God.” He noted his concern that our current seven principles have no religious language in them. Instead they act as a secular code of ethics, which former president of the UUA Eugene Pickett noted: “they describe a process for approaching the religious depths but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves.” The minister who headed the committee creating our current wording dryly noted that he doubted anyone would want to read our principles on their deathbed for solace and support.

As you can imagine, this has stirred a lot of passionate feelings, as well as quite a few books, sermons, and essays. In *Heretics Faith: A Vocabulary for Religious Liberals*, Rev. Fredric John Muir quotes Shirley MacLaine in one of her more sober rather eccentric thoughts: “Consider this: In the Name of God, a Fatwa against Salman Rushdie. In the Name of God, a murder in the Balkans. In the Name of God, the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York. In the Name of God, the Siege at Waco, Texas. In the Name of God, Hindus and Moslems kill each other in India. In the Name of God, bloody warfare between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland. In the Name of God, Shiites and Sunnies are at each other’s throats in Iraq and Iran, as are Arabs and Jews in the Middle East. In the name of

God a doctor is murdered because he believed in a woman's right to choose. *In the Name of God, what is going on?*"

Yes, indeed, the Name of God appears pretty dangerous. Yet we're being asked to consider *playing* with this word, as well as others, in new ways. I myself still struggle with God language for the very same reasons that Shirley MacLaine talks about – yet I'm aware that there are times when I am fond of that word as the greatest poetic expression I have for ultimate value, beauty, and the sheer complexity of life and the universe itself. It is a word that seems to capture better than any other word my relationship to feelings of wonder, awe, transcendence, and mystery – some of those same feelings mentioned in the first of our living tradition sources.

Learning to use and think of the word "God" as poetry and metaphor seems to be the key – a large, oversized word that can point to "a larger reality" but one which always eludes our grasp. The mystics in all of the world religions understand this well, but many of us get caught instead in "misplaced concreteness" – that tendency to think of God in anthropomorphic terms, generally as an elderly white male who is eternally unchanging and somehow all powerful, all knowing, and all good. UU minister Laurel Hallman has argued that we need to understand all religious language as *poetry*, as linguistic relational systems that can only *point* to the depths of human experience. We as Unitarian Universalists can then act in the same way as the great mystics of our world religions – we can expand on the great variety of possibilities in our understandings of religious experience by creating cognitive dissonance in juxtaposing words not normally placed together.

For example, did you know that the hymn we sang today, **Bring Many Names**, was written by a Methodist but rejected by the Methodist church because it was considered too radical in its language for God? How could we hold in one song images of God as a strong mother, warm father, old and aching, and young and growing? What a service we did when we decided to include Brian Wren's hymn in our hymnal!

The biblical tradition is actually quite rich in images for God – God is the whirlwind in Job, God is the Word in John, God is king, father, mother, shepherd, lover, rock, wind, light, etc. The biblical writers had a much better grasp of the idea that the experience of God must be conveyed through metaphor or not at all – Jewish writers called God the One Who Must Not Be Named.

What do we make of this? Can we open to other ideas of and images for God language? Or do our experiences of the misuse of that language and Shirley MacLaine's painful cry of "What in God's Name is going on?" ring still too close to home. Rev. David Bumbaugh honors Bill Sinkford's call for a reexamination of our language of reverence, but, as a humanist, he disagrees that traditional religious language is the route we need to go. Bumbaugh argues that we need a new religious story to bind us and that this can be found in the story of the Universe, of the Cosmos and Gaia – the earth as a self-regulating, living entity within the universe.

Bumbaugh writes: "The mapping of the human genome has reminded us again how clearly we are part of the Gaian system of life. We share more than 90 percent of our genes with other primates; our genome structure is not markedly different from that of fruit flies or mustard plants. We are intimately related to

every living thing that creeps, crawls, or flies; to every living thing that is rooted in the earth and reaches for the sun; to every living thing that inhabits the dark depths of the ocean. We are but one form life has taken, one expression of Gaia's living process."

He continues: "In a curious way, we carry with us in our bodies the very environment in which we evolved. The heat of our bodies is the heat of the stars, tempered to the uses of life. The salt in our blood and in our tears is the salt of the ancient oceans, encapsulated and carried with us, generation upon generation, into strange and distant places and circumstances. The past is not dead. It lives in us. The evolutionary universe, the ancient environment, the emergence of complex life – all this is recapitulated in every moment of our existence."

Wow – that's an appealing image, isn't it? And Bumbaugh's words embody a very sophisticated level of poetry and metaphor – albeit one based more in the scientific and pagan traditions from our living tradition sources. UU theologian Thandeka argues that we need to open ourselves to the wide variety of religious imagery that arise from our affective, emotional lives and experiences. Poetry and the existential language of the imagination start with our personal connection to the pulse of life. Our religious language reflects the self's experience of integrity, coherence, congruity and integration across a lifespan – and this may mean being open to God language for Jews, Christian, and Muslims or Sunyata for Buddhists, or Gaia for Pagans, or the Universe for Humanists. If we close off our ability to hear each other's language and experiences, we close off our ability to be fully

human with one another and the humbleness that comes from knowing that none of us has the complete sense of that “larger reality.”

This may mean then being open not only to explore the great variety within our own community and congregation, but truly being open to what religious language means to those outside of our denomination and being able to dialogue with others. Can we learn to play rather than be reactive? Can we learn to be open and to listen first rather than immediately judgmental? Are there ways that we can talk about “God” and what that language potentially means for us in its similarity or difference with others? Can we begin to play with other religious language, too? Sin, salvation, redemption, resurrection, sacredness, hope, grace, holy, the divine? There is nothing inherent in any of the above words that means they have to have one concrete meaning forever associated with one religious doctrine.

Many of these words were taken from Latin and made into religious language. Take the words holy and healthy – they come from the same latin root meaning whole – to be made whole again. This is a psychological process as much as a religious one. Are there things in this life that we can regard as holy because they help us to be or become whole again? Salvation comes from the root meaning to save – are there things that save us at times? Sacred is related to the word holy – to make something holy. If our first covenanted principle is the inherent worth and dignity of every person, can we say the sacred worth and dignity of every person? If our seventh principle affirms our respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, can we also call it a holy web and begin to look at sin and

salvation as related to the brokenness of this web and the need to redeem the web, but in a thoroughly humanistic manner?

I am reflecting to you a way to begin to play with this language but in a new form. There are many in our denomination striving to open up this discussion, and you may find this an exciting prospect or a nerve wracking one. We can probably be sure as Unitarian Universalists that it will not be a dull one. But on behalf of our children and on behalf of the social justice goals for which we strive, it may be a very worthy struggle. May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.¹

¹ The Shirley MacLaine quote was drawn from *Heretics Faith: A Vocabulary for Religious Liberals* by Rev. Fredric John Muir (a UU) and all other quotes and references were drawn from *A Language of Reverence* edited by Dean Grodzins (a series of essays by contemporary UU's).