

Living With Reverence

A sermon preached at the UU Church of the Lehigh Valley

August 7, 2016

the Rev. Libby Smith

Reading: "A Pilgrim's Progress" Mary de La Valette

I do not have to go

To Sacred Places

In far-off lands.

The ground I stand on

Is holy.

Here, in this little garden

I tend

My pilgrimage ends.

The wild honeybees

The hummingbird moths

The flickering fireflies at dusk

Are a microcosm

Of the Universe.

Each seed that grows

Each spade of soil

Is full of miracles.

And I toil and sweat

And watch and wonder

And am full of love.

Living in place

In this place.

For truth and beauty

Dwell here.

Sermon:

The poet Oliver Wendell Homes, who was himself a Unitarian, once described in a letter to a friend why he went to church. "It does me some kind of good, I think," he wrote. And then he added, "There is a little plant called reverence in the corner of my soul's garden, which I love to have watered about once a week."

I've been playing with language this summer as we walk through this series trying to name and clarify what I, as a religious liberal, understand religion to be, and what the primary defining characteristics and experiences of a religious person might be. Last week, I talked about "wrestling with the Holy," and the importance of freeing people in our congregations to play with religious language without fear of ridicule, to make room for people who seek to explore and name a personal, experiential kind of relationship with spirit, divinity, or God.

One of the great strengths of our Unitarian Universalist tradition is that it grants us enormous freedom in term of our theological perspectives and expressions. This is also one of our greatest challenges. Because some of us explore the ultimate reality of our lives in the context of God, and our need to address and to relate to that great holy mystery. And others explore the ultimate reality of our lives in the context of the natural world, its cycles and rhythms, its beauty and complexity. Still others find their deepest meaning in the human

community and its rich, interdependent relationships. And of course, for many of us, some combination of these and other images and symbols speak to our hearts and our souls.

I call this a strength because it makes room for a wide range of different world views, and teaches us respect and appreciation for the differences, within our congregations, and beyond them. It allows each member the integrity of their own spiritual journey, while still providing a community of fellow travelers who share the passion and excitement of that journey, that search for truth and meaning, and how best to live our lives.

I call it a challenge because it means that often we have little common language to describe our journey or our experience. We are constantly having to translate from one religious language to another, to define our terms and offer alternatives to those who might prefer different terms. This can really slow us down.

So I find it especially important and helpful to identify and claim those common religious experiences that are not linked to the specifics of our theologies, but that I understand to be fundamental to all religious journeys, whether they be theistic, naturalistic, humanistic, or some combination of them all. And for me, reverence is one of the most powerful of these.

The first time I preached to you, I quoted my colleague Galen Guengerich as saying that religion is constituted by two distinct but related impulses: a sense of awe, and a sense of obligation. This morning, my focus is on that sense of awe.

All of us have known moments of standing in awe before the beauty and complexity and sometimes even before the pain and sorrow of our experience. We know a sense of wonder or amazement that leads to a deeper appreciation of and gratitude for our lives. Reverence has been defined as a feeling or attitude of deep respect tinged with awe. (repeat). This experience doesn't depend on any particular belief system. It's common to all faiths and I suspect to all cultures. And I believe it to be fundamental to the spiritual or religious life.

For many of us, that experience of reverence hits us most easily and naturally when we turn out attention to the natural world. We don't have to work at cultivating reverence when we're confronted with the beauty of nature. It happens almost automatically. That makes nature a great place to start in terms of cultivating a practice of reverent living.

I want to read you a description from a piece that was published in the UU World magazine a number of years back, called "Primal Reverence," written by my colleague the Rev. Kendyl Gibbons:

Somewhere the planet has a show-stopper for you that takes your breath away and makes you tug on other people's sleeves to make them see what you see . . . for me it is waterfalls. I could stand all day, dumb-struck by the vision of such endless abundance. The living energy of creation poured out unceasingly before my eyes, seeming to promise a truth that something in the world, and therefore something in me, is never and never can be exhausted. It makes me want to weep, want to dance, want to fall on my knees and be one with whatever that is, in everlasting praise. (UU World, Summer 2012)

Kendyl describes herself as a humanist. She's not much interested in the idea of a

relationship with God or holiness in the way a theist might describe or experience it. But she describes a profound religious experience of reverence, of gratitude and of connection that transcends any specific theology. As she herself says, “The primal experience of reverence in and for the natural world preceded theology of any variety. It is an organic human experience that requires no supernatural explanations.” And, she argues, we need to come together to celebrate it and to affirm it in one another.

We all have this organic human experience. It may very well be our attempts to express and understand it that lead to many of our more specific religious expressions and symbols. But that initial experience of reverence is beyond theology. It's an experience that can connect us with other people of faith, across the boundaries of many faith traditions. It gives us a common language.

For many of us, steeped in the scientific understandings of the world, its origin and its workings, the experience of reverence allows us a depth of spiritual response that doesn't contradict our intellectual understanding of the world. It allows our head and our heart to be coherent. The response of reverence isn't in conflict with our scientific knowledge. In fact, I often find that the more I come to understand something, the more in awe I am of its complexity and majesty.

Of course, for some people, knowledge does get in the way of reverence. I remember years ago when I was driving with a friend and admiring a stunning sunset. I said something like, “Wow, that's amazing.” And he said something like, “No, it's just the way the light reflects on the particles in the air, and in fact it's partly the pollution that makes the colors so vivid.” And I felt really sad, because he was missing the point. Everything he was saying may have been true, but that sunset was still amazing, and he couldn't see it.

Reverence doesn't require us to credit any particular source for the beauty that stops us in our tracks. Two of us could look at the same sunset, or the same rainbow, and one of us might thank a creator God while the other marvels at the refraction of light through water droplets and our ability to perceive the results as beautiful. And we are both experiencing reverence – that feeling or attitude of deep respect, tinged with awe.

When we're confronted with things like sunsets and rainbows, when we encounter what Kendyl Gibbons describes as a “show-stopper that takes your breath away and makes you tug on the other person's sleeve to make them see what you see,” when we are knocked over by beauty, reverence comes easily.

But reverence as a spiritual practice asks us to pay attention, to seek out the things that could evoke our reverence if we noticed them, but that are less obvious, more subtle. Evelyn Underhill, the British writer who wrote widely on religion and especially mysticism, once wrote “For lack of attention a thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day.”

A thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day, just because we're not paying attention. We're not aware. We don't notice what's right in front of our eyes. There's a lovely passage in Annie Dillard's book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* where she describes coming around a corner just in time to witness a mockingbird, in a stunning free-fall of a dive, plummeting toward earth and then spreading her wings at the last possible moment to make a perfect, graceful landing. Musing on how the whole thing almost went unwitnessed – how she almost missed it, and

there was no one else there to see – Dillard writes, “The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed, whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.”

So to cultivate reverence, we have to try to be there – to pay attention, to be aware of the world around us. How many times have you seen someone walking in a beautiful place, but instead of looking at the scenery, they're staring at their smart phone? If Annie Dillard had been answering a text, she would have missed that mockingbird.

But it goes beyond that. Because if we embrace the idea of living with reverence as a true spiritual practice, then the ultimate goal is to experience reverence for all of life. The ecologist Thomas Berry wrote: “Every being has its interior, its self, its mystery, its numinous aspect. To deprive any being of this sacred quality is to disrupt the larger order of the universe. Reverence will be total, or it will not be at all.”

Total reverence. That's a tall order. And I fall so far short. There are many beings that don't inspire my reverence at all. I remember walking with a friend when I was in college, on the loading dock behind the entrance to the dining hall where we both worked. Someone had tipped over a garbage can, and there in the rotting refuse on the concrete was a teeming mass of maggots. And my friend, who was a biology major, was amazed. He was down on his knees for a closer look, trying to teach me about their life cycle. And I didn't want to hear it. I didn't want a closer look. I was not reverent in the face of those maggots.

But I have found that reverence can be cultivated, that I can learn to feel reverent about things when it doesn't start out that way. A few summers ago I practiced on Japanese beetles. I was out on Star Island, a UU conference center where it's easy to feel reverent, because you're in the midst of rocks and ocean and brilliant skies and sunsets. Reverence was one of my themes that week, and I'd been practicing my awareness by taking time to stop and gaze at the beautiful roses that grew outside one of the old stone buildings. Instead of walking mindlessly past them, I would stop, look, smell and appreciate those roses. The complexity of their petals -- folded tight one day, opening half-way the next, full blown the day after that – filled me with awe and gratitude. I was one with those roses.

But I was not one with the Japanese beetles that were eating my roses. I'd flick them disdainfully off the rose so I could better admire its beauty and practice my sense of reverence for life. And half-way through the week, I realized I was kind of missing the point. At least, part of the point. I was being regrettably selective in my willingness to appreciate and stand in awe. So one morning, instead of getting irritated and flicking the beetle away, I stopped and watched the beetle. I watched it move. I admired the majestic metallic sheen, its iridescence. I wondered if the petals it was eating tasted sweet to it, the way they smelled to me.

I can't say I actually felt reverent in the presence of that beetle. But I stopped disliking it. And I began to imagine that reverence might be possible. And I certainly developed an appreciation that enriched my week.

And all of this is reminding me that I need to try to do the same thing with the slugs that are eating my eggplants. And that will be much, much harder.

Like any spiritual discipline, the cultivation of reverence requires constant practice. We begin with what is easy and obvious – those natural wonders that hit us over the head, that we can't fail to notice and admire, or the people whose courage or honor or sacrifice amaze us. Then we move on to what is still easy, but less obvious – the things that require a deeper attention in order for us to notice and appreciate them. And finally we learn to experience reverence even when it's not so easy, when our sense of awe and wonder and gratitude does not seem to come naturally, but requires our conscious cultivation, our active choice to expand our horizons of what can evoke our respect, appreciation and awe. As Kathy Huff wrote in our meditation words, "Praise all. Praise all."

In this cultivation of reverence, we are reminded to pay attention, and we are moved to gratitude for what we find. And in the experiencing of that reverence, we feel more deeply our connection to the world we inhabit, and our place within it.

And in closing, I want to say just another word about that connection, the way that reverence connects us to the world and deepens our sense of place. I said in my first sermon that part of being religious includes recognizing that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. And so I want to return to Kendyl Gibbons' words as she described her response to waterfalls: "The living energy of creation poured out unceasingly before my eyes, seeming to promise a truth that something in the world, and therefore something in me, is never and can never be exhausted. It makes me want to weep, want to dance, want to fall on my knees and be one with whatever that is, in everlasting praise."

Kendyl doesn't have to believe in God to describe a profound experience of faith here, faith in the renewing power of life, something that can sustain and comfort and inspire. We all need that.

Recently I was talking with a therapist and mindfulness teacher about a variety of difficult situations, in my own life and in the lives of people that I love. I used the expression "I need to find a way to hold all these things." And she challenged me gently, asking whether instead of feeling that I had to hold all those things, could I feel instead that somehow I was being held by some larger reality? Well, when you don't have a conventional theology, when your understanding of God or holiness is not personalized, that can be tricky.

But then I hear again Kendyl's words: "The living energy of creation, poured out unceasingly before my eyes, seeming to promise a truth that something in the world, and therefore something in me, is never and can never be exhausted. It makes me want to weep, want to dance, want to fall on knees and be one with whatever that is, in everlasting praise. "

And I think that perhaps the cultivation of reverence gives us our link to something larger, a context for our lives. By deepening our sense of connection and place, we find experiences that allow us to be held, whether by the love of god, or by the love of other people, or, by the power of life itself, that something in the world – and therefore in us – that is never, and can never be, exhausted. Praise be.