

5/15/11 Sermon

"Christian, UU, Proud and Out"
Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

Former Unitarian Universalist Association President John Buerhens wrote, "We religious liberals haven't merely shot ourselves in the foot by abandoning all the most powerful language and imagery of our culture. We have shot ourselves in the mouth, where it is fatal." Walter P. Herz, UU minister and author, expanded on Buerhens' thought, saying, "Our efforts to communicate with the culture at large are a failure because people do not find our language authentic. We must use the common religious vocabulary - *with our own liberal religious meanings.*"

Strong language to be sure, judged exclusionary by some and inflammatory by others, most notably by our humanist brothers and sisters among others who fear a "creeping creedalism."

As you might expect not all humanists speak in opposition. David Bumbaugh, Unitarian Universalist minister and religious humanist, has called this language a "Vocabulary of Reverence". Bumbaugh writes, "We have manned the ramparts of reason and are prepared to defend the citadel of the mind . . . But in the process, we have lost . . . the ability to speak of that which is sacred, holy, of ultimate importance to us, the language which would allow us to enter into critical dialogue with the religious community."

While I find myself in agreement with these ministers, I am also compelled to acknowledge that the theological language of faith has also been used to shame, judge, control, and oppress. Such religious words as God, Grace and others, are potent because of the images they create in our mind and the visceral effects they can have on us. Such words are unavoidable in our culture because they are embedded in the core of our civilization, pulsating at the very heart of our being.

Reflecting on the power and effect of these Old and New Testament words and stories of our childhood, I believe we can reclaim their wonder without their hurt. But, to do that we must become translators and de-constructors, opening ourselves to re-imagining and redefining the meaning of these emotionally charged words and images to better reflect our current theological understandings and needs. The stories they tell are stark, vivid, lush, useful and instructive, particularly when centered on the vagaries of human relationships. If we are unwilling to return these words to their original majesty, we risk becoming irrelevant. If we are to engage in a meaningful conversation with the mainstream of religious people in this

country, we are challenged to move in from the margins of religious life and then out into the world with a story of hope and "Good News" that is Unitarian Universalism. The magic inherent in our unique message can effectively use traditional language yet still honor our diverse members and origins.

Our words are like all ideas and thoughts; they can take on the effect of reality on an undifferentiated or literal mind. The biblical myth of creation, where the world grows out the spoken word is an example of this.

These Old Testament tales, these myths, are wonderful stories, yet many of us still struggle to coexist with a language formally used to maim and wound. Such stories and words challenge us to remain open to the nuances and possibility inherent in language. Grace can be about being full, full of the spirit, of the transcendent, or nature itself. Prayer can be any ordinary action that transforms us by being in the moment and through intentionality and mindfulness. Washing the dishes or feeding the cat then becomes a meditation of the heart. God can be a spirit or human potential, or what we experience around us that transports us beyond ourselves. If you are uncomfortable with traditional language, substitute a different crazy word like *banana* to describe what you feel when you see a sunset or a newborn child. The key is to try and feel and experience that which transcends. Religious conversation calls Unitarian Universalists to be more than just tolerant of theological perspectives different from their own. It challenges us to embody and embrace our Seven Principles and Six Sources; acceptance of one another and the encouragement to spiritual growth; and to support our individual, responsible search for meaning and truth.

The reality of being a Unitarian Universalist is having to deal with and honor a diversity of people and spiritual paths. While we struggle to find our own truth in a world that is dangerous and constantly changing, we have affirmed our faith and principles using all-inclusive language that is devoid of any traditional religious language. That may be fine for the humanists, but what about the theists and others? It also begs the question of how we might engage the "religious right" in dialogue.

We can choose to use this traditional language, as do the fundamentalists, but with a bias pointed towards liberation and justice, and not oppression and literalism. To say *no* to what denies or destroys is also to say *yes* to what affirms, builds, creates. God and the very laws of nature can serve as "the everlasting yes of existence". The idea of God can then become a Naturalistic Goddess, not God the Father, but a force in nature, the everlasting yes of existence. Understood in this manner such words possess a primitive, mystical incantational power that can not be denied.

William Ellery Channing, the early 19th century Unitarian theologian, tells us to "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good... Do not shrink from the duty of searching God's word for yourselves, through fear of human censure and denunciation." Mindful of Channing's admonition, these traditional Biblical words and other descriptive words from our humanist, atheist and pagan traditions are an appropriate part of any conversation around issues of faith. The goal of a minister is to balance the use of such words and to make religious terminology accessible and empowering to believers and non-believers alike.

Words are a form of action, capable of influencing change. Their articulation represents a complete, lived experience." If we are to move into a place of healing we need to think about reframing and deconstructing these "forbidden words of faith." For too long some of us have been held captive and terrorized by them. The fear of using the traditional language flows out the fear that we will sound like those in a mainline Christian or orthodox religious tradition, or the fear of what other Unitarian Universalists might think of us. Reaffirming such language can revive liberal religion with new understanding, to address the needs of many people, in many tongues. The message of hope we Unitarian Universalists can bring to the world must not be lost because we do not, or are unwilling to, speak what is an alien language to many of us.

Our commitment to inclusive language is not out of some misguided idea of political correctness; rather, it flows from our genuine and fundamental expression of values articulated in our seven principles.

Whatever your religious heritage, many here have suffered from the exploitation of abusive religious language. These words are highly charged because of the power we invest in them. Words that remind us of an experience of shame can be virulent in the emotional scars they leave. Such words hurt and maim precisely because they have been wielded like a saber, to cut deep into our psyches. These linguistic wounds have festered for some since childhood, a time when we lacked the necessary tools or power to protect ourselves against their assault. Even today, in an unguarded moment, we can be humiliated and allow ourselves to be diminished by the misapplication of these "words of terror".

Each of us can choose to hold to a religious faith built on hope. Words only have the power we give them. The shame we once felt does not have to devastate us today. We can redefine the forbidden words of our childhood, if we remain open to the nuances of language and to the possibilities of new understanding. Surely we can embrace such words and not tremble before

them. These words are rich in meaning and texture and are, *a priori*, devoid of judgment and guilt. If the poetry of liberation and a message of hope are rooted in traditional theological language, religion can still lead us to wholeness and holiness. Then we can finally recover the beauty, power and original intent of such words, and return them to their rightful place in our liberal religious lexicon. As Unitarian Universalists we have a special obligation to make our religious language inclusive, and not just Christian or humanist. Ours is (rightly) a self-proclaimed inclusive religion.

Look at our hymnal. It uses "As They Were Written" hymns and songs from many traditions. We are not lying when we sing a hymn that is not in the language we would ordinarily use; rather, we are searching for/grasping at the fundamental truth that lies within and behind the language. We can look behind a word such as *Grace* for its real meaning. Grace can simply be the power to redefine what religious words mean, and in so doing we can recapture reverence.

I resonate to UUA President Sinkford's words when he wrote, "I am not advocating that Unitarian Universalism return to traditional Christian language. But I do feel we need some language that would allow us to capture the possibility of reverence, to name the holy, to talk about human agency in theological terms - the ability of humans to shape and frame our world guided by what we find to be of ultimate importance."

May the words that you use and the meanings that you give them, point you to the holy. May your words serve to heal and never to harm. May your wounds open you to the ways of compassion for others. And may the poetry of religion, these words of faith, be an invitation to the transcendent, opening you to Grace, regardless of your religious heritage, and not to shame.

Let it be!