

January 17, 2007  
UUFTC, Sonora

## Reason and Reverence

“Bring Many Names!!” is one of my favorites from our songbook, “Singing the Living Tradition.” But this is the first time I have chosen to sing it at this Fellowship. I know that its frequent use of the “G” word is likely to bring discomfort for some of you. But I have my reasons – related to the subject of this sermon, “Reason and Reverence.” Although I love the song, for me it sets a rather narrow framework for conceptualizing our view of what we see as transcendent. All its imagery is of a “personal god” – male and female, young and old, and so on. What I like about the hymn, though, is that it encourages us to bring “many” names for that which we see as transcendent. Maybe even for the “God we don’t believe in.” And why should we care? Well, I for one, am not willing to abandon the word “God” – or the concept -- to the Fundamentalists – to abandon our feelings of transcendence when we contemplate the mysteries of the universe; or our lifelong search for meaning and purpose in our lives. So I like the fact the song invites us to bring our own names for god – for the words we use to try to describe the indescribable, the unknowable, the unnamable. As the song tells us, that which is “never fully known,” which is “joyful darkness far beyond our seeing.”

As Unitarian Universalists we grapple constantly with ways to express our sense of awe and wonder at the beauty of the cosmos, and our desire to find meaning and purpose in this wild and precious life that we are given. Some of us are atheists, some of us are agnostics, some Buddhists, some Christians, some Humanists, and so on. Together we struggle to make sense of our many different world views and philosophies. And we also understand that “We don’t have to think alike to love alike.” I like the concept of “bringing many names,” because it urges us to engage one another over these questions. It encourages us to try to give names, or at least descriptions to what is ultimately both unknowable and unnamable. And it encourages us to do that together – we don’t just hold on to these concepts – we “bring” them to this gathering, and we share them with one another.

In many ways, our opening song better expresses our theology – “Just as Long as I have breath, tell them I said “Yes” – to life, to truth, to love.” These are the things we cherish as we struggle to give meaning to this life, not to some future life. And yet we can look back to our spiritual ancestors, such as Emerson and the transcendentalists, who were clear about their aspiration to connect with something that transcends our quotidian lives. Although Emerson spoke of the primacy of “Reason,” he defined reason differently from how we would define it today. For Emerson, reason was “the highest faculty of the soul” – not the brain. It was the power by which we apprehend Truth immediately, without the need for calculation or proof. What we would call empirical enquiry, Emerson called “understanding.” But reason, in Emerson’s view, is the intuitive faculty that opens us to our deepest insights into divine and timeless truths. When we are using our reason, for Emerson, we are “drinking forever the soul of God.” Or, as Rabbi Michael Lerner puts it, when we gather together, with our many different concepts of transcendence, we are doing nothing less that “wrestling with God,” much

as Jacob did on the banks of the Jordan River, as he returned to his ancestral homeland after a long period in exile.

And it seems to me that our forebears like Emerson were onto something. I believe it is more that brings us together than a desire for intellectual stimulation and intelligent discussion. And that it is more than a desire for social justice, environmental advocacy, and so on. All of these things are, of course, part of why we are here together, but it seems to me that there is also that element of searching for ways to relate to something larger than ourselves, that we are seeking to “wrestle with God.”

I want to discuss with you today a book that has important things to say to Unitarian Universalists. It is called *Reason and Reverence*, and it was written by William Murray, a UU minister, and formerly the president of the UU seminary in Chicago, Meadville-Lombard. Those of you who read your *UU World* probably saw a brief excerpt from Murray’s book in the latest issue (that came in the fall). Murray is very much a humanist, and he writes out of the humanist tradition. But, as we can intuit from the title, he seeks to add to humanism’s reliance on reason, a sense of reverence.

We have folks in this Fellowship – such as our resident scholar, Lloyd Kramer – who know far more about humanism than I do, so I am not going to delve into the long history of humanism. I do want to mention, though, that Humanism has a long and honorable history, dating back at least as far as Confucius in China (around 500 BCE) and the ancient Greeks. It flourished during the Renaissance, best exemplified, perhaps, by Erasmus. Humanism emphasizes this world over the next world, gives primacy to the use of reason, and encourages critical study of ancient texts, such as the Bible. It holds that humans are beings of ethical and intellectual worth, not morally deprived.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, humanism began to emerge among Unitarians. Two Unitarian ministers, John Dietrich and Curtis Reese, are viewed as having brought religious humanism to prominence in our movement. They were the source of a great deal of controversy in the early decades of the last Century. In his preaching, Dietrich rejected supernatural theism. He believed that the concept of god arose within primitive peoples as a response to fear of natural forces. The idea of god evolved through various stages, up to monotheism. Dietrich believed that humanistic religion would eventually evolve out of Christianity. In 1933, a humanist manifesto was drafted and circulated. It was signed by a number of Unitarian ministers, one Universalist minister, and one rabbi. So humanism became widely identified with the Unitarianism, and humanism was a major strand in Unitarianism, and then Unitarian universalism, all during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

This Humanism had some drawbacks. It was highly individualistic, lacked an emphasis on community, and had little to say about the institutions of Unitarian Universalism. For example, John Dietrich’s ministry almost entirely excluded pastoral care – he did not call on members who had physical or emotional needs. Many UUs felt that this form of humanism placed too much emphasis on reason and ignored the feeling side of human existence. It also seemed to lack a sense of openness to mystery and the unknown. For many, religious humanism, despite its many strengths and contributions to our movement, was seen as being dry, sterile, and overly rationalistic and individualistic.

William Murray, who sees himself as very much a product of the humanist tradition, argues that a new form of religion for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century would add to humanism a language of reverence, a deeper spiritual dimension, and an anchoring in rich and meaningful stories and narratives. I think his ideas are worth our serious consideration

First of all, though, let me say something about what it means, according to Murray, to be religious. I know that the words religion and religious are off-putting to many of us. I think, however, that we might be comfortable with those words as Murray defines them. "To be religious," Murray writes,

does not require that one accept the existence of a supernatural being. To be religious is a matter of one's attitude toward all of life. The religious aspect of humanism consists of an appreciation of the dignity and worth of every person; reverence and wonder at the world of nature, at human creativity, and at life itself; a sense of the unity of all things; joy in human community; and a commitment to a cause that transcends the self.

So, for Murray, it is not so much religion, but religious experience that is important. Relying particularly on the work of John Dewey, Murray says that *religious experience* might refer to one's attitude toward many aspects of human life. He writes:

Those experiences that enhance one's life, that result in a greater unification with the self and of the self with the world, that are profoundly moral in nature, that are transforming, or that lead to a better adjustment to the conditions of life—those experiences are religious.

So let's look for a moment at some of the things that Murray identifies as aspects of religious experience. First of all is to be open to the mystery that lies in us and around us, and to respond to that wonder with feelings of reverence and awe. The more we learn from science about the natural world, the more we often feel awe at its mystery and beauty – gazing at the night sky, holding a newborn, contemplating the intricacy of evolutionary development – all of these can increase our sense of wonder and mystery, and may give to religious experience.

Another aspect of religious experience arises in those moments when we feel interconnected with all other beings and with the world around us. We have all had those moments, I suspect, when we feel our interdependence with the world, rather than our separateness from it. Ancient mystics might have called that a sense of unity with God. Some of us here today might describe it similarly. But we might also describe it as feeling ourselves connected with everything and everyone. Many of us know moments of feeling oneness with the natural world, of being part of wild creatures, the ocean, the sky, the trees, the land. In her novel, *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker's main character describes this kind of moment:

Once when I was sitting quiet it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it.

Religious experience may occur in those moments when we feel a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. We often feel more fully functioning, more fully alive, more creative and fulfilled, when we are devoted to a cause or idea outside ourselves.

Religious humanists find fulfillment in activities that contribute to the well-being of the world, rather than in those that are simply grounded in self-interest. Last week marked the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. This year, many commentators have referred to his speech in 1967 opposing US involvement in war in Viet Nam. And they have remarked how applicable those comments seem today concerning our occupation of Iraq. We need to remember that Dr. King's motivation to work to relieve oppression of people everywhere arose out of his deeply-held religious faith.

A very important aspect of religious experience is finding and building community. We need community with those who share our values, where it is possible to realize greater depth and meaning. We are bound together in good times and bad – we comfort each other and rejoice with each other. We mark important passages – births, deaths, marriages – with celebrations and rituals of passage.

Religious experience may arise for us when we feel deep gratitude – gratitude for the gift of life, for so much with which we have been blessed. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote ; “Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy.” A sense of gratitude is part of the religious dimension of life, and may itself be life-transforming.

And what of a sense of ethics and morality? Some would argue that we need to worship a personal god in order to have a sense of right values. Instead, Murray, argues that our basic ethical principle should be a reverence for all life. This stance would see love and compassion as the main components of our ethical stance. Reverence for all life underscores our sense of the unity – the interconnectedness of all things. As UU minister Richard Gilbert has written ;

Reverence for life gives rise to a moral imperative for love in interpersonal relationships, justice in social relationships, and trusteeship in our relationships with our environment.

Murray proposes that a form of humanism infused with a sense of reverence is a viable – indeed necessary – religion to carry us into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Perhaps my biggest problem with this new religion is the name he gives it – “humanistic religious naturalism.” Not only is that even more of a mouthful than Unitarian Universalism, it also doesn't really tell us much, and it certainly isn't going to inspire anyone. I think the name lies close at hand, however – it seems to me that the title of his book – Reason and reverence – would be a more worthy name. It is informative and it has a certain ring to it.

But what would a religion of reason and reverence look like? Murray cites five necessary characteristics of a new, transforming religion:

First of all is the affirmation that human beings are an integral part of nature. We are not separate and distinct from the rest of the natural world. We are related to all living creatures; we are all composed of the same elements – carbon, calcium, and iron. We are not dominant over nature, we are intimately connected with it.

Secondly, any future religion must affirm humanity's interdependence with, and responsibility for, preserving and sustaining the natural world. Moreover, we must celebrate the sacredness of the natural world of which we are a part.

Third, a religion for the future must take seriously the implications of the discoveries of modern natural and human sciences. This religion should learn from

science and adapt its teachings accordingly. And this religion's mythic story will be the science-based story of the universe with all its wondrous and mysterious significance.

Fourth, this religion for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will include both reason and reverence. It will honor human ability to think critically and constructively, but it will also be based on a sense of reverence. Reverence begins with a deep understanding of human limitations. It protects us from a hubris that would destroy all we have accomplished. Reverence keeps us from acting as if we were gods. Reverence helps to maintain our sense of the oneness of all things.

Fifth, a new religion of reason and reverence must enable us to make our lives more fully human. It should help us to transform our minds and hearts from self-centeredness to a sense of our interconnectedness. It should enable us to see ourselves a part of a larger, sacred unity and to feel a deep commitment to the betterment of the human and natural worlds. It should empower us to transform ourselves from lives of fear, greed, and materialism, to meaningful lives based on love, compassion, gratitude, generosity, justice, joy and hope, and a profound respect for all living creatures.

William Murray offers us an inspiring vision of a religious movement that we can be. May we find the courage, strength, wisdom, and patience to build such a movement. We have much to offer the world!  
May it be so! Blessed be! Amen!