

# “REVERENCE”

The First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

May 6, 2007

The Rev. Ken Sawyer

A few years ago, the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Bill Sinkford, stirred up a lot of discussion by suggesting that we UUs needed “to cultivate what UU minister David Bumbaugh calls a ‘vocabulary of reverence’” – or what came to be referred to commonly as a language of reverence. Sinkford said he was “not suggesting that Unitarian Universalism return to traditional Christian language.” But when he attempted a super-concise definition of Unitarian Universalism, it was, “one God, no one left behind.”<sup>i</sup>

In a subsequent sermon, the afore-mentioned Mr. Bumbaugh expressed “frustration that Sinkford used his words ‘in support of his argument for a reengagement with traditional religious language and concepts.’ Bumbaugh proposes instead a humanist language of reverence ‘rooted in the vision of reality and of humanity’s place in the world that is emerging from the natural sciences.’”<sup>iii</sup>

Whether from a humanist or a theistic perspective, though, there seemed to be agreement that reverence is a good thing for UUs to have. I want to say so again today, especially in light of a recent survey taken among members of Protestant denominations, ranging from the most conservative to mainline traditions, some of which are pretty liberal, like the UCC, although naturally not us.

The survey was trying to determine what contributes to growth in churches. Growth is a big thing these days among Protestant churches, as it is among us as well. The evangelical churches compete to see who can grow faster from a preacher and three congregants to 30,000 worshippers a Sunday, we wish we could do better than the very small growth that is ours continentally, and mainline churches wish desperately they could figure out how to slow or halt or even reverse their dramatic declines.

The survey asked a lot of questions of church-goers to see which answers were most common from people in churches that were growing, and which from people in churches that were not growing or in decline. The #1 correlation will come as no surprise: churches were least likely to grow which were experiencing conflict. Church fights do not attract new members, keep existing members as well, or incline visitors to return.

But of all the questions that were asked, the #2 correlation for lack of growth was the reported experience of reverence in the church’s worship services. You heard that right: for Protestants, at least the majority of the ones in this large study, one thing you do not want in your church’s worship is reverence.

I think maybe it equates in some people’s minds with piety, churchiness, the religion of an older and staid generation, those people who liked federal meetinghouses and nineteenth-century choral pieces and lugubrious hymns and social high-mindedness. Those people who want reverence, they may still be going to church maybe up in New England or other old places, or even drive into downtown Houston or St. Louis to join with dozens, maybe even hundreds of others for worship at the UU or the Second Presbyterian Church – but in a survey their opinions will be overwhelmed by the tens of thousands who show up to worship at mega-churches on the outskirts of town, in buildings without steeples but with the words to the hymns electronically displayed, as well as the preacher magnified when the time comes.

Most people who have reported on these places -- and this includes UU ministers who have visited them – say that they often do a remarkably good job at doing what they do – and that

what they do is much different from the fundamentalist Christian churches of earlier times, with their stern, judgmental messages and, yes, some aura of reverence.

We all know those churches and their vocal leaders still exist. But the new mega-churches include many which do not focus on contentious social issues like abortion, homosexuality, stem cell research, or Darwinism. No, what they want to provide is a positive experience, an uplifting experience, a good experience for the whole family, and for everyone of every age and color.

True, same-sex relationships will not be honored, and if pushed on any of these points of social concern, most of the pastors will come down on the other side than we do. But that's not what they provide as their regular fare; that's not why people come on Sunday morning, any more than they come for reverence.

They come because it is a friendly and enjoyable place. They are greeted in the parking lot by someone whose lay ministry that is. They may get a latte at the Starbucks in the social room before heading off for a meeting of the men's group, or perhaps a discussion of an international relief effort, after putting their children into the morning's program; and after the service, maybe they stay for some basketball or bowling, or a church outing.

And the service itself, with 15,000 people seated arena-style with those big screens behind the stage, and the 200-member gospel choir: it is a feel-good occasion, with zippy hymns and as a message, the sunny side of Universalism writ large: there is a loving God, who wants things to go well for us, the task at hand is being a good and loving person and parent and partner, there is help to be had in the Bible, and we know that thanks to Jesus things are going to be ultimately okay.

In our own modest way, we try to do many of those same things, even if we don't have a ministry of parking lot greeters. And I do want our worship to be of practical value as we all try to live good and loving lives, and leave you feeling strengthened and more hopeful.

But I may not achieve that by being unremittently upbeat, nor by evading social issues we care about, albeit on the other side than theirs. And not all the hymns I pick are zippy. In fact....

I should note that this more lively style of worship has its strong proponents within Unitarian Universalism, too, including members of this congregation who wish we would get with it and sing simpler, peppier songs that don't require a hymnbook. At the General Assembly two years ago, the closing worship was done in this style, and to some degree last year's was as well.

It is thought that such worship will contribute to our own growth, drawing in some of those tens of thousands of people who want something more or other than reverence. Many who attended at GA really liked it, although some acknowledged that it was weak on substance and as a steady diet it might not be very spiritually nourishing, at least in some deep ways. Where was stillness, or peace, or reverence?

Reverence. Among the words in the "language of reverence" I was brought up with as a Unitarian was "reverence" itself – alongside wonder, awe, and mystery. Other words that one might use if one so chose were god, holy, sacred, and even miracle, in the Walt Whitman sense that all life is a miracle, or that life is shot through with the miraculous, the natural but incredible. And of course there were words from everyday life that also had and have for us a religious import: freedom, justice, reason, tolerance, love. Words that were not ours were sacrament, communion, sin, salvation, redemption, justification, or election.

"Reverence" in the tradition had its own meaning among us, I think, and still does. It is not veneration, reverence to or for any one thing except maybe for life itself, in Albert Schweitzer's phrase – "reverence for life" -- that we were taught in Sunday school, or reverence for all that is holy. Our words of reverence link up and reinforce each other. Life is this wonder, this miracle, and it elicits awe, and the name of that response – knowing that something creates awe and rightly so, is sacred to us in some sense – is reverence.

Looking around the internet at some of our UU church websites one can see the importance of reverence to us as a prime religious value. The statement of purpose of our church in Kirtland, Ohio, includes the simple declaration, “Our foundations are reason, reverence, and freedom.”

The statement of purpose of the Theodore Parker UU Church in West Roxbury says, “As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that each person should have the freedom to discover what is true according to his or her personal understanding. At the same time, sharing with others in a loving and diverse community encourages us to grow towards our best selves. While we draw upon the world’s spiritual, philosophic, and scientific traditions for insight, a reverence for life forms the essential foundation and purpose of our faith. It awakens a sense of awe for the beauty around us and calls us to work for peace and justice in the world.”

It is not just a philosophical affirmation. It is also an aspect of the central act of a religious community like ours, which is its worship, whether at special services like weddings or memorial services or on Sunday morning: the awareness that what we talk about when we talk about the love that binds two people in marriage, what we talk about when we reflect on a life in its passing and at such times on life itself and on death, what we try to bring to mind and acknowledge and honor on Sunday morning is that there is a dimension to human life – a richness, a depth, an importance, a holiness if you will, a profound mystery, an awesome reality -- that can create in us a feeling maybe beyond all words. But the word with which we make our try is reverence.

Needless to say in a room of UUs, there are other times and places when and where one can experience that feeling, as in nature or at certain remarkable moments in human relations. But before closing let me note that reverence can be recognized in another way, as a vital quality of civic life, as the classics professor Paul Woodruff does in his book from 2001, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, from which for the rest of our time, having had my say, I am going to offer quote after quote.

Woodruff thinks “Reverence has more to do with politics than religion.”<sup>iii</sup> It “is the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have.”<sup>iv</sup> It “begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control – God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all”<sup>v</sup> – and the possibility of “civility and all of the graces that make life in society bearable and pleasant.”<sup>vi</sup>

It is, in effect, a profound form of humility, and he notes that religion is not always the best place to look for that. “Reverence is a matter of feeling, and as far as feelings go, it doesn’t much matter what you believe....

“Reverence must stand in awe of something.... What could it be? Something that reminds us of human limitations.... [This does] not amount to religion or even to spirituality. For a lover of art, the Something might be a monument of ancient art.... For a reverent scientist, the Something could be the final explanation for the universe.... For a reverent statesperson, the Something might be justice, conceived as an ideal, dimly grasped and much disputed, by which we should try to regulate our poor systems of law.... The Something could be nature, or the universe. For many people, the Something will be divine. But if the Something is justice or nature, the reverent person may be an atheist or, as some say, a non-theist.

“Small as it is, this kernel of belief makes a profound difference to how people behave and how they feel. We may be willing to sacrifice many of our beliefs to the march of science or to the goal of harmony among religions, but we should never abandon the feelings that keep us humble and respectful of each other.”

Or this: “Reverence crops up in so many different systems, with religion or without – so widely, in fact, that there can be no core of required beliefs beyond an inarticulate trust that there is something of which we must stand in awe....

“If you ask the poets of reverence, ‘What must I believe in order to be reverent?’ they will fall silent. But ask them, ‘What must I *not* believe? Then they have an answer: ...Do not believe that you are supreme in any way; do not believe that you alone know the mind of God... Such violations are common – and are sometimes even considered essential – in some organized religions; that is why being religious is not the same as being reverent. When violence breaks out between people of differing religious beliefs, reverence has fled the scene.”<sup>vii</sup>

“The voices that call in the name of God for aggressive war have lost sight of human limitations. They have lost reverence, even when they serve a religious vision...

“When Agamemnon waited on the beach with his ships and chariots and with the men who hungered to capture Troy, the winds remained hostile, and he asked a diviner what he should do. He had faith in his diviner, and the diviner had faith in his power to speak for the gods. He said he knew what the gods desired -- the life of the king's daughter. And so Iphigenia came, summoned to her wedding in all the veiled finery of a bride. At the altar stood her father with the priest. But there was no young husband, only the great sharp knife poised to end her life.

“The poet Lucretius tells this tale ... to be the introduction for his work of philosophy. He ends with the strong line, ‘so great is the power of religion to lead us to evil.’ He gives us Iphigenia to stand for all the huge unholy cost of war when it is driven by men who believe they know what the gods want. But he does not mean to condemn everything that falls under religion. Lucretius may be hostile to some kinds of faith, but he begins his work with an invocation to the goddess who stands for Nature. He too is a poet of reverence.

“Reverence runs across religions and even outside them through the fabric of any community, however secular. We may be divided from one another by our beliefs, but never by reverence. If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent.”<sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Christopher L. Walton, “Talking about Reverence,” *UU World*, Mar/Apr 2005.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 4.

<sup>iv</sup> Woodruff 8.

<sup>v</sup> Woodruff 3.

<sup>vi</sup> Woodruff 5.

<sup>vii</sup> Woodruff 132-3.

<sup>viii</sup> Woodruff 15.