The Language of Reverence

by Rev. Kendyl Gibbons

> *… although the past can teach us a great deal about the human experience of reverence, we will not find our own authentic language of reverence only there. The call for a language of reverence is in the end a call to move forward, not backward. It is a call for creativity, for experiment, a demand that we speak the truth as we know it. It summons us to entrust to one another the stories of those moments that left us with a lump in the throat or a song in the heart; those vigil nights in the hospital that ended in an embracing peace, or the hours of soul searching that ended in remorse and a resolution to do better next time. It is an invitation to build from the wrecked timbers of old ritual the new structures of ceremony that can give shape to our reverence in the most awesome, meaning-laden moments of our lives.*

It was two years ago that Rev. Bill Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, started the big fuss about language. Let me take a moment to remind us all of what he actually said. In a sermon preached at the First Jefferson Church in Fort Worth, Texas, on January 12, 2003, he said in part:

> Given the differences of opinion that needed to be bridged in one document, it's really not surprising that the wording adopted [in our Purposes and Principles in 1984] completely avoided anything that smacked of traditional religious language. [Since then] the Purposes and Principles have become an integral part of our denominational life. Many of our congregations print them on their orders of service. They open our hymnal. They hang in our vestibules. Many of us carry them in our wallets.
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> They serve us well as a covenant, holding out a vision of a more just world to which we all aspire despite our differences, and articulating our promise to walk together toward making that vision a reality, whatever our theology. They frame a broad ethic, but not a theology. They contain no hint of the holy.
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> Now while Unitarian Universalists reject any hint of a creed, we do affirm the importance of the individual credo: we are all charged, individually, to pursue our own free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And I wonder whether the language of our Purposes and Principles is sufficient for that purpose. UU Minister Walter Royal Jones, who headed the committee largely responsible for their current wording, wondered aloud how likely it is that many of us would, on our death bed, ask to have the Purposes and Principles read to us for solace and support. I fear, in words borrowed from former UUA President Gene Pickett, that "they describe a process for approaching the religious depths but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves."

I would like to see us become better acquainted with the depths, both so that we are more grounded in our personal faith, and so that we can effectively communicate that faith—and what we believe it demands of us—to others. For this, I think we need to cultivate what UU minister David Bumbaugh calls a "vocabulary of reverence."

Now David is a Humanist. And he believes that Humanists, who [he says] "once offered a serious challenge to liberal religion, now find [themselves] increasingly engaged in a monologue," largely because of a vocabulary inadequate to engage other people of faith. "We have manned the ramparts of reason and are prepared to defend the citadel of the mind," Bumbaugh writes. "But in the process of defending, 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."[1]

Many Unitarian Universalists, I know, are bothered by the use of the word "God." And I understand that. When I came to Unitarian Universalism I was an ardent, some might say even a rabid, Humanist. If you had told me as a teenager that at age 56 I would be an ordained minister, using religious language in this pulpit, and have a prayer life that centered on thankfulness and gratefulness to God, I would have laughed out loud. The Humanist tradition was mine for a long time.

But we don't have this all permanently figured out at any discrete moment in time. In my case, it was direct experience of something I hadn't counted on—the kind of "direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder" which we also affirm as a source of our faith tradition—that changed my mind. It was in the midst of a crisis—my son Billy, then 15 years old, had overdosed on drugs, and it was unclear whether he would live. As I sat with him in the hospital, I found myself praying. First the selfish prayers for forgiveness… for the time not made, for the too many trips, for the many things unsaid, and, sadly, for a few things said that should never have passed my lips. But as the night darkened, I finally found the pure prayer. The prayer that asked only that my son would live. And late in the evening, I felt the hands of a loving universe reaching out to hold. The hands of God, the Spirit of Life. The name was unimportant. I knew that those hands would be there to hold me whatever the morning brought. And I knew, though I cannot tell you how, that those hands were holding my son as well. I knew that I did not have to walk that path alone, that there is a love that has never broken faith with us and never will.

My son survived. But the experience stayed with me. That is my experience, and my vocabulary for that experience. But "religious language" doesn't have to mean "God talk." And I'm not suggesting that Unitarian Universalism return to traditional Christian language. But I do feel that 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. David

> Bumbaugh observes that a vocabulary of reverence is implicit in Humanism, with its emphasis on human study and understanding of the natural world. Listen to the language he uses:
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> Humanism… gave us a doctrine of incarnation which suggests not that the holy became human in one place at one time to convey a special message to a single chosen people, but that the universe itself is continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, in hummingbirds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms and every living thing.
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> This is religious language, placing us in a larger context, whispering of a larger meaning, and carrying with it implications for how we should live.

Now, personally, I have no quarrel with anything that Bill said here. I know him as a rational, humble, politically astute colleague; an example of what Paul Woodruff describes as a 'reverent leader'. I believe that the event he describes with his son in the hospital was entirely real to him, and I think it's a story that ought to be told, and heard, in the context of our religious community as what it is; a personal testimony of an experienced spiritual life. And I think that Bill should use the words that seem right to him to talk about it. I think he is correct that the process which culminated in our current Purposes and Principles was a political and philosophical one, not a process of spiritual discernment, and speaking for myself I'm quite satisfied that it was so. The bylaws of our Association are not necessarily the place to seek the poetry of our faith, and I don't suppose that most religious traditions would suggest that their denominational constitutions be read at deathbeds. Nevertheless, both Bill and David Bumbaugh—who I also know to be a man of integrity, wielding the words of a poet—have a point, and that is why I believe that Paul Woodruff's small volume on the forgotten virtue of reverence[2] has profound significance for those of us who cherish the humanist tradition.

The heritage of religious humanism has always been about just this point; that the virtue of reverence, and the feelings of which it is composed, are human feelings and a human virtue, and that they exist and function quite apart from the specific content or absence of theological belief. Woodruff is a professor of classics, and he illustrates his observations about the function of reverence in human community by reference to the cultures of pre-Socratic Greece and Confucian China, neither of which is remotely influenced by the premises of Judeo-Christianity. The language of reverence, says Woodruff, is the language of civility, courtesy, and ceremony, by which we express feelings of awe, respect, and shame when those are the fitting responses to our lived experience.

At several points, the author takes care to clarify that these feelings transcend any one theological viewpoint; they may be felt in a context of atheism, agnosticism, or polytheism, just as much as in traditional western monotheism. Such experiences cannot be imposed—you cannot make someone feel overwhelming awe, or profound respect, or ashamed of themselves, if the foundation of that feeling is not already within them. But we can elucidate those feelings; describe them, examine them, even celebrate them. We

can cultivate our capacity to have them, and we can become increasingly discerning about the circumstances within which they are appropriate. To engage in these kinds of reflection is to nurture the virtue of reverence, and that process is made considerably more difficult when we lack a vocabulary for it; when our communities and our culture as a whole have no language of reverence.

I have found that I am not alone among my colleagues in my addiction to the TV program “West Wing.” In reading Woodruff’s book, particularly his chapter on reverent leadership, my mind went back again and again to scenes from this show. There is something wistful in my affection for this imaginary white house staff, in that who and what they are stands in such marked contrast to my perception of the actual present leadership of our nation. And the difference, I suspect, is based not in my agreement or disagreement with specific policies, but in my sense that the members of the current administration are all but wholly lacking in the virtue of reverence. They do not appear to me to hold the office of the presidency, the structures of democracy, the heritage of liberty, the well being of ordinary people, the opinion of the rest of the world, or even human life itself, in respect.

In the fantasy world of television’s West Wing, on the other hand, a community of high reverence plays itself out, with very little appeal to any traditional religion. Yet the concept that there are ideals greater than our own interests and notions to which we owe our duty, that those who have less power than ourselves deserve from us a deep respect, and that certain kinds of behavior constitute personal disgrace, recur again and again. The structures of a formal civility that is almost ceremony, unfamiliar at first, lose their awkwardness as they are seen to embody and sustain the reverent use of almost unlimited power—for it is this quality of reverence that distinguishes leadership from tyranny, and makes fallible human beings worthy of our public trust. It is when reverence has evaporated that patriotism becomes the refuge of scoundrels, and the great symbols of national identity are reduced to nostalgic kitsch and advertising slogans. I have a suspicion that the cast and producers of West Wing win Emmy after Emmy because although we have lost the vocabulary for it, yet we recognize and resonate to the virtue of reverence when it is set before us, even in fictional form.

And we hunger for the expressions of reverence in the high moments of our own lives that will not be fiction. What is there in human experience more apt to incite reverence than a little baby? It is no accident that a helpless newborn child lies at the center of the myth of the one remaining ceremonial holiday of our culture. For to be in the presence of a baby is to confront all the emotions that Woodruff says constitute reverence, all in the same instant. There is the awe at a creative power that we do not control; the infinitely complex coming together of cells and sequences of development that creates a child in a woman’s womb, and the no less complex coming together of love and desire, need and sacrifice, that creates the social reality of a family. There is the demand to cherish and protect what is utterly helpless, the call to do everything in our power that this new life might unfold and flourish in happy safety, to respect a dignity in it that is not earned but inborn. And there is even a sense of shame, when we think about it, that we have done so little to make the world the kind of place it ought to be for such trusting innocence, and

that however hard we may strive to shield this child from all harm, to provide everything that it will need, to be absolute in our care, we know from the start that inevitably we will fail, and in the end will need forgiveness.

So it is that new parents, even those of no particular religious persuasion, find themselves asking helplessly, "Shouldn't we **do** something about the baby?" The old metaphors of baptism ring hollow, yet the sense of reverence remains; the awesome mystery, the poignant protectiveness, the feeling that some kind of sacred promise has been implied and ought to be declared. We long for ceremonies to give weight and dignity to the turning points of our lives, and we stutter for a vocabulary of reverence with which to express the truth of what it is to be human in community.

Thus it seems to me that Bill Sinkford is right; the quest for an authentic language of reverence in the context of a free faith and the heritage of reason is as central to our practice of liberal religion as is the responsible search for truth and meaning cited in our Principles. To live with conscious reverence takes no small amount of courage, in a culture of cynicism, pettiness, and dishonesty. To speak the language of reverence is to admit that there are things in life and in the world greater than ourselves, bigger than our own comfort and self-satisfaction. It is to confess that there are great, true things worthy of effort and sacrifice; things that demand something of us, that we refuse at the peril of our souls.

And there is example enough in the past to give us heart for this quest—yes, even us. For the heroes of our humanist heritage were in some cases people of extraordinary reverence, who spread before us a feast of that language, if only we will hear them still. The visionary Walt Whitman, the philosopher poet Kenneth Patton, the compelling orator Robert Ingersoll, even our own John Dietrich; these were people of profound reverence. Reverence for the truth and for liberty, for the world of nature, for the tenacity of the human spirit, and for the community that we might yet build together. They knew the awe and wonder of a universe far larger than themselves, and of ideals that they would never master; they knew the bitter regret of their own failings, and the ceremonies of respect that discipline those who wield power to the service of justice. They stand ready to help us today, if we will let them.

And yet, although the past can teach us a great deal about the human experience of reverence, we will not find our own authentic language of reverence only there. The call for a language of reverence is in the end a call to move forward, not backward. It is a call for creativity, for experiment, a demand that we speak the truth as we know it. It summons us to entrust to one another the stories of those moments that left us with a lump in the throat or a song in the heart; those vigil nights in the hospital that ended in an embracing peace, or the hours of soul searching that ended in remorse and a resolution to do better next time. It is an invitation to build from the wrecked timbers of old ritual the new structures of ceremony that can give shape to our reverence in the most awesome, meaning-laden moments of our lives.

The language of reverence is no dead hieroglyphic; it is the living speech of our honest wonder, honor, and remorse as these experiences give substance and color to our days. In every UU church, in each community of shared memory and mutual promise, we can give birth to a new language, by telling the truth about our spiritual journeys, and by participating together in these rites of passage that seek to give fresh form to the ageless human impulse of wonder and homage. That same impulse finds expression in all of us, as it has in all generations in the words of the humanist leader Felix Adler, that the place where people meet to seek the highest, is holy ground.

Notes

1. David Bumbaugh "Towards a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence," *Journal of Religious Humanism,* XXXV #1&2, Washington, DC, HUUmanists, Winter/Spring 2001.
2. Paul Woodruff, *Reverence; Renewing a Forgotten Virtue,* Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2002.