

2004-10-3 Are we a Cult?
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
to celebrate our life with gladness,
and to praise the gift of another day.
In a world of trouble, worry and grief
we come into each other's presence
so we may together cultivate hope
until it blossoms in our day. And so we say:

Living our lives with purpose and gratitude, moved by the beauty of the world and claiming justice for all who live upon it, we open our hearts to greater loving, healthier knowledge, deeper compassion, and hope of peace.

Sequence

This is our earth. It drops through heaven like a pearl in a glass of plum wine.
There are no other earths that I know of.
There are no other skies that we have mapped. This is our earth.
The Oneness who gave birth to it remains nameless. There was no midwife then to bring us word of the birth-cry. We only rejoice that it is.
This is our earth.
Ice caps its head. Glaciers clasp its feet.
Warm wind, like the breath of a lover,
breathes around its breast.
Mountains thrust up to the clouds, bringing joy.
Storms blow across its shores, bringing fear.
Silvery fish capture sunlight and haul it down
into the deeps, as on shore, valleys spread
with ripening pumpkins. Cities teem with the
poor and disenfranchised in the shadow of
golden towers. Children live and also die.
Highways throb. Monks sit in silence. Mothers
work. Crickets chirp. Teachers plan. Engineers
design. Fathers write letters. People marry with and without the blessings of law. People cry.
They laugh, and brood, and worry and wait.

This is our earth. There are no other earths.

Before its wonder, philosophers fall silent. Before its mystery, poets admit their words are shadow, not light. And all the great names religious teachers have left to us...Ishtar, Allah, Lord, Shekinah, Suchness, Wakan Tanka, Ram, Great Mother of the World... suddenly fall silent. And so we too fall silent, entering the time where words end and reality begins...

silence

We will go hand in hand through the world,
as we have done always...and so we lift up the
names of our companions, alive on the earth or
alive in our hearts, aloud or in silence, to mark that we do not go alone through the trouble of
the world.

naming

May we stay together, warmed by the coat of
music we will soon wear, talking no more
when talk is trouble too. May we dwell in peace.

Readings

The First Reading is a poem by the Unitarian Universalist poet, May Sarton, written some 25 years ago.

My image is this garden in autumn.
A tangle of late asters, unpruned roses.
Some to be frost-killed, others still to open.
Some failures visible, some wild successes.
The rich disorder sprang from a design.
But who can hold full summer to a line?

We have what was planted, and something more.
We have what was planted, and something less.
Salvage, invent, rethink and re-explore
The garden child and the child wilderness....
Each day I recognize their fealty
To that self whom I am slowly learning to free.

This self has lately come to solitude,
Who long demanded love as source and prime.
Now the wild garden and the ragged wood
And the uncharted winter's fallow time
Become the source and the true reservoir:
Look for my love in the autumnal flower.

The Second Reading is a well-known, but not terribly often well-understood, ancient legend out of the Mideast. Most everything the average modern person knows about this story has been distorted by popular culture and sexist religious education, and in any case has little to do with the world-view of the original editor or composer, called by scholars today the Yahwist. This story was written down in final edited form sometime around 500 years before the beginning of our era. It's found of course in the Book of Bereshith, or Genesis, which is in the Bible. This is a much longer reading than usual, although I did edit it down some. Adam is the Hebrew for earth-creature, since in the story, the creature is fashioned out of red earth, in Hebrew Adamah. Adam is not a personal name. This is from chapters 2 and 3.

At the time the Eternal made everything, there was, as yet, no plant on the earth, for there had been no rain. So a spring surged up to water the earth till it was a rich humus, and from this humus the Eternal fashioned the first human being, breathing life into the nostrils of the new earth-creature. *This* is how humanity began.

Then the Eternal planted a pleasure garden and placed the newly formed earth-creature into it to cultivate it. The Eternal caused trees to spring from the earth, every kind you can imagine, both ornamental and good for food. At the very center of the garden the Eternal planted two trees, the Life-tree and the Knowing Everything Tree.

Said the Eternal to the earth-creature: "Please, eat from all the trees in the garden, save from the Knowing Everything Tree, for on the day you eat of it you will surely die." Then the Eternal said: "It's not right for the earth-creature to be alone. I shall find some sort of partner for this creature." So from the same soil the Eternal shaped all the wild things we call animals, and the birds in the sky, and then brought them to meet the earth-creature. But not one of them proved to be a suitable partner for the human.

And so it was that the Eternal threw the earth creature into a trance, and cut away the flank of the human, and closed skin over it. Then the Eternal took this flank, and formed it into a creature called female, and presented her to the other half, a male, who immediately exclaimed "At last! This is a creature like me, bone for bone, flesh for flesh." They were both naked, but neither knew any shame in that.

Now the dragon was more clever than any other animal. The dragon asked the woman, "Is it really true what I hear? The Eternal won't let you eat from any tree in the garden?" "Oh, no!" cried the woman. "We can eat any fruit we wish, except, of course, the fruit from the tree at the center of the garden. If we do that, we die." "Oh, you will *not* die," said the dragon. "The Eternal knows very well that as soon as you eat of the fruit of that tree, you yourselves will become divinities, knowing everything."

So when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree looked delicious, she took some of the fruit and tasted it. She took some to her husband, and he ate it too. Immediately they saw themselves as naked, so they stitched fig leaves together to make themselves coverings.

(*precis*: The Eternal found out what happened, and the man blamed the woman and the woman blamed the dragon.) So the Eternal spoke to the dragon:

“From now on you shall crawl, legless on your belly, and women shall hate you and try to kill you every time you slither across the dirt.” To the female the Eternal said: “Everything will feel like double the work-load from now on...even childbirth shall be called ‘labor.’ You will waste your time pining for your husband, who will reward you by claiming mastery over you.”

To the male the Eternal said: “Because you ate of the tree I warned you about, your work to eat off the land will now be difficult. You’ll labor hard and be thankful to eat any stinking weed that comes your way. Sweat shall run down your forehead before you eat a single piece of bread. And soon you will crumble back into the dirt from which you were first made. For you were made from humus, originally, and to that humus you humans shall return.

The man, who claimed the name Mankind for himself, called his mate Lifegiver, for she would be the mother of all the generations after her. Soon the Eternal said, “Look, the human race is like us now, knowing everything. What if they go now and harvest fruit from the Lifetree too, thus living forever? So the Eternal saw fit to send them away from the pleasure garden, yet still to cultivate the ground from which originally they had been taken. And at the gate of the garden were stationed winged sphinxes with a flaming sword which turned in every direction to protect the path that might lead to the life-tree.

Sermon

When I arrived in California to attend seminary, there were still three weeks till school started. All my friends and family were back east. I had met only one neighbor, very briefly. And so I felt very, very lonely.

On my second day in Berkeley, a young woman spoke to me cheerfully at a bus stop. She had a wonderful smile, and bright eyes. She talked easily with me, which I liked. She invited me to a street dance later that evening. I thought it would be nice to go and meet new people, so I went. Everyone organizing the dance had bright eyes and wonderful smiles like the young woman. After we danced some Virginia Reels for a while, the leaders invited us all for some hot chocolate in a grove of gum trees near by. With wide smiles they told us that they were part of a group called “The Creative Community Workshop.” They claimed to be finding new ways “to cultivate neighborliness” in a cold and impersonal society. They invited us to participate with them. “Nice idea,” I remember thinking. *But*, by that time, for some reason, those smiles were *getting* to me. The bright eyes began to annoy me. I grew more and more uncomfortable with all this “joy.” A little critical voice in my head kept chiding me: “But Belletini, you fool, isn’t happiness what life is all about? What’s wrong with a little joy?”

Later that night I talked to Eileen, the neighbor I'd met in my building. I asked her if she knew anything about the "Creative Community Workshop." Her eyes spilled over with tears at once. "Ah," she said, "they have my daughter. They are a devious front group for those people they call 'the Moonies,' you know, the Unification Church."

I felt thunderstruck. Seems I had just had a brush with one of the most famous so-called "cults" of the 1970's, the Unification Church, the brain-child of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon. And since that incident, I've often wondered, "What kind of world is this, where you have to be suspicious of *happiness*, for God's sake?"

Ah, yes, what kind of world is it indeed?

I brought this library book to show you. You know, as actual evidence that I am not making this up.

It's the umpteenth revised edition of a book first written by the late Dr. Walter Martin in the early sixties. It's called "The Kingdom of the Cults." It's sold millions of copies. And it's VERY influential in conservative Christian circles.

It lists Unitarian Universalism as a cult. He puts us among the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons (or Latter Day Saints), the Unification Church, the Bahai's and the Seventh Day Adventists. Unity is there too, as well as the Swedenborgians and Scientologists. (He makes it clear he doesn't think Roman Catholics are really Christian, either, but has the good sense not to list that 300 million member organization as a cult.)

The book accurately describes our history, and our rich Socinian European heritage. But then it goes on to describe the "Unitarian illusion." This is "belief in evolution"; and in the "higher biblical criticism" and in "reason, as an approach to religious ideas." This makes us a dangerous cult, it says.

Dr. Martin's book proceeds to define cults for his conservative companions. "First and foremost," he writes, "cults are characterized by close-mindedness." "Second," he continues, "cultic belief systems are characterized by genuine antagonism on a personal level." Third, he speaks of cultic "dogmatism" and "pronounced intolerance." Fourth, he speaks of the "extreme isolationism" of all cults.

I'm in trouble here now, aren't I? Don't you see it? If I respond to Dr. Martin by telling him that I think my own way is true, and *his* way is false, then I can be accused of points number 2 and 3: I come across as merely "antagonistic" and "dogmatic."

But, if I choose to ignore him, if I pretend there are no massive bookstores everywhere in this country and Canada selling his work by the millions, then I can be justly accused by his point number 4: “extreme isolationism.” No matter what I do, I lose, and, by default, end up being your cult leader up here the pulpit.

Worse, I will get a kick from the rear ranks if I attack his theology. Some will tell me, “Now, now, you have to be tolerant of differences in belief; that’s part of our tradition, isn’t it?” Well, yes, it is, but I assure you, “tolerance” never meant for our noble ancestors that you had to refuse to state your real conflicts with other religious teachings at severe variance with your own. Such a flabby definition of tolerance actually goes *against* our 450 year history. Tolerance is a method of initial approach, not some awful new theology of complete relativity.

So basically, no matter where I turn, I cannot “win for losing,” as my father used to say. Dr. Martin’s book will accuse me of being “dogmatic” on one side, and some extreme relativists, disguised as religious liberals, will charge me with “intolerance” at my back.

So, since this is the day set aside to celebrate the birthday of the great Indian philosopher Mahatma Gandhi, I will try something a bit Gandhian to get out of this mess. Gandhi preached against violent solutions to conflicts. But he was *not* passive or weak about such things, as his uneducated critics try to imply. No, Mr. Gandhi insisted that *all* conflicts...which are essential to human progress... must be faced and fought... but *without violence*. And in this case, one way to fight with words non-violently is to try and fight like a seasoned martial artist. Instead of hitting back, they often pull back, or even fall back, with the thrust of punch, thus letting the attacker fall face forward on the floor by the weight of his or her *own* violent force.

So this morning, I will not meet violence with violence. I will talk of our Unitarian Universalist cult with pride instead of shame and defensiveness. I will not curse the late Dr. Martin and spit on his grave with anger. I will simply go with the force of his punch and agree.

First, however, I need to point out something that even Dr. Martin can’t argue with, namely, that words change a lot in fifty years. Language is like that. When I was a child, in the Roman Catholic Church, the word “cult” was a perfectly *good* word. It meant any series of prayers or devotions addressed to a particular saint, so that there might be a cult of the Virgin or the cult of St. Joseph. When my grandmother sat in her big chair and said her rosary, she was simply and sweetly reciting one of the rituals of the cult of the Virgin; believe me, my sweet grandmother was hardly Jim Jones or a double for that guy from Waco. No, *cult* simply meant “set forms of practice to cultivate the spirit.” It came from the Latin word “cultus” which means “care” in the sense of devotion. And “cultus” itself was a verb form of “colere,” which means exactly that: “to cultivate,” as in cultivating a garden, or a friendship or even a deeper spirit. A cult, therefore, (before the cynical “de-programmers” grabbed the

word and shrank it down into its present meaning of “a bunch of brain-washing religious fanatics with foolish ideas”) meant simply this: “any pattern of deliberate words, rituals, acts or songs by which one could cultivate one’s own spiritual life and make it deeper.”

One’s own spiritual life? Yes, any practice you do deliberately or habitually that brings out your sense of thanksgiving for what is and can be. Maybe it’s a walk, some attentive gardening, Sunday worship, choir practice, a covenant group, or other identity church group, a BREAD meeting, a centering poem, or a time of deliberate silence. Maybe it’s an hour of mantra, meditation or prayer; maybe you are reading one of the ancient scriptures not for knowledge, but for wisdom. All of these are signs of a deepening life, a spiritual life where one’s *spiritus*, the Latin word for breath, can slowly come to beat a steady, paced and fearless rhythm in the world. Any of these practices might, in short, help us not to take our lives for granted, help us pay attention to the obvious, not the frantic. They re-root us in the earth, so to speak, and set our feet back on the earth, the humus, unshod, like Moses on “holy ground.”

Such practices might be called a Unitarian Universalist “cult of humility,” from the Latin word for ground or earth, *humus*. Dr. Martin does not like these contemplative exercises which he sees as “subjective” and “experiential,” and thus contrary to what he calls the *objective* word of God.

But I disagree.

I think our UU cult of spiritual practice in all of its variety and simplicity helps each of us to live balanced lives, turning from dog-eat-dog competition, and from our unwarranted sense of failure. Our cult of humility reminds us we are made of the exact same elements that make up the soil beneath our feet, and the turning leaves above our heads. Our cult reminds us we are not gods or goddesses striding over the earth with transcendent power, but rather, part and parcel of the earth. Our cult reminds us, in fact, that we *still* live in the ancient, mythic pleasure garden, if we would but notice that the flaming sword and sphinx that guards the gate to Eden is nothing but our dualistic, wrong-headed belief that we are separate from the earth, not of it.

Did you notice that the myth in Bereshith says all this? The first human, originally bi-gender, was cut in half by YHWH and separated into male and female. Total equals. The work was simple...to cultivate the pleasure garden, in Hebrew, Eden, and in modern English, I’d say “planet Earth.” They were to work in the soil which was their origin. The story depicts them as animated by the breath of the Eternal...mere “inflated dust”...and is this really any different than the picture we get from modern physicists who speak of us as an awful lot of empty space strewn with the dust of structured atoms?

But these two equals in the garden desired more than a life of cultivation. These humans wanted to be divine, walking over the humus from which they had been made without noticing the connection. When they no longer wanted to breathe sure and steady, but rather

lose themselves in the intoxications of claiming to magically and mystically know everything without any more effort than nibbling a fig, everything instead was thrown out of kilter.

Sexism began at once...the man blaming the woman. The “why me” attitude also began...the woman blaming the dragon. Resentment began at once... cultivating the garden was no longer a joy, but drudgery. The privilege of work degenerated into misery. And, alarmingly, childbirth, once a welcome marvel, became a painful reminder of the sexist superiority unrighteously claimed by the man over the woman. And the noble dragon has now become a mere asp filled with poison...the environment itself becomes something not beautiful, but terrifying.

The story of the first two humans in Genesis is the story of what happens when someone claims that they are distinct from the earth; heavenly; not humble; divine, not mortal. These legends were crafted from far more ancient Sumerian legends about the lost paradise of Dilmun. The versions in Genesis were put together at a time when many of the competing religions proclaimed escapist magical ecstasy as the goal of religion, not facing the daily difficulty of relationship. They were written when the class system dictated that work was drudgery for mere peasants, not a privilege for everyone. They were written at a time when women’s roles were shifting in the fall of great empires, and the life-giving powers of a woman were no longer considered a gift but a nuisance and a pain.

The myth of the book of Genesis has been interpreted in a sexist, cruel way by men like Dr. Martin and his companions for some hundred generations. But a scholarly, and thus Unitarian Universalist, interpretation suggests that our biblical version was actually written as a *critique* of inequality between the sexes (both on the Hebrew side and on the Canaanite side). It’s a call to partnership, not domination. Dr. Martin says that such “higher criticism,” our usual Unitarian Universalist methodology makes us a cult. Well, so be it. Ours, however, is a cult which cultivates our humility, not our arrogance. Ours is a cult *of* cultivation, of spirit, of our relationships, and of our common world. Our cult also invites us to consider ourselves as gardens, which might be cultivated by demands for systemic change in our unjust, unequal world.

Cultivation is not always a reliable process, says the poet May Sarton. “Some failures visible, some wild successes.” To cultivate a garden, or a friendship, or one’s own spirit, offers no guarantees, only opportunities...in Sarton’s words: “To salvage, invent, re-think and re-explore.” And each day, she recognizes that these opportunities, the gifts of cultivation, help form, in her words, “*that self whom I slowly learn to free.*”

There you have it. The spiritual life of Unitarian Universalists, the cultivation, or the cult, of humility, earthiness, rootedness...is all about helping to set us free. Free of the desire to be the final divinity. Free of thinking we know it all, and free from every thoughtless or systemic foolishness we have ever had about gender, race, sexuality or the sacred. The spiritual life of a Unitarian Universalist is not in a hurry...you can’t, after all, *rush* a garden,

can you? “Look for my love,” Sartre writes, “in the autumnal flower.” The love she finds then is the love of the earth, of our labor, and of our children.

I still want to answer the question I asked earlier, “What kind of world is this anyway?”

I *don't* want to answer with the 1975 disciples of Sun Myung Moon with, “It's a place where your happiness is measured in smiles and the devious cleverness of your front organizations.” (But I also don't want to go around damning the Unification Church as one of those cults, just because I disagree completely with its theology and practice. After all, my new definition of a cult will have to be this...a cult is only a small religion that some other, usually more powerful religion, doesn't happen to like. And anyway, can't “brain-washing” and chicanery of the kind popular culture associates with the dreaded word “cult” be found in *any* religious organization, including huge conservative Evangelical churches with nifty architecture and big budgets in central Ohio? I say that Jim Jones and that man in Waco are just Pat Robertson, Oral Roberts and Dr. James Kennedy written in letters of fire, that's all.)

And I certainly don't want to answer that question about life with the certainties of Dr. Martin, who assures us that this world is only a jumping off place to heaven for people who believe like him, and hell, for everyone else. Such doctrines are not alive to begin with. They are like plastic flowers, and poorly made ones at that. How can things that are dead and lifeless give life and nourishment? How can death bring growth?

So what kind of world is this? I'll answer with Voltaire's famous character, *Candide*. “Cela est bien dit, mais il faut cultiver notre jardin.” Or in expanded English: “Your philosophies all sound very clever, yes, but in the end, we'd best get back to what we were supposed to do in the first place back in paradise lost...cultivating our garden. The garden of the spirit. The garden of the world.

Offertory

Let us cultivate our institution with the hoe
of generosity, the spade of vision, and the strength of commitment.

Prayer

O Earth, our mother, our substance, our garden,
our only home, our holy home, mystery
and wonder, beauty and adventure, great
planet and small grain of sand on the shore
of the cosmic sea, may we cultivate our
relationship to you as we might cultivate a local garden that brings us delight and
nourishment...

with vigor, enjoyment, perseverance and
skill. May we labor gladly until the ripening,
that we might harvest peace and good will. Amen