2007-10-7 Indigenous Liberals

Opening Words

We are here
under this high and golden ceiling,
embraced by windows proclaiming morning,
our feet on a carpet as colorful as October,
to worship, to look both into the world
and into our own gathered and open hearts
with the wonder and the fearless fidelity
which might strengthen our lives. So we say:

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence

A walk down Le Boulevard Des Capuchines in Paris, France, past that trendy pastry shop.
A walk down a muddy path next to the Alima River in the Congo near Okoyo, past that spectacular Ana Tree.
A meal of salted cabbage and beef in that little Korean Restaurant right near La Plaza des Armas in Santiago de Chile.
A meal of fermented mare's milk in the settlement of yurts near the beautiful Lake Uvs in Northwest Mongolia.
The sighting of a hawk above the red sands at the edge of the Tanami Desert in Australia's Northern Territory.
The sighting of a hawk above the dark chimneys of St. Philippe de Neri in Quebec, nestled above the St. Lawrence River.
The sound of a recorded call to prayer from a Minaret towering above the Arab Quarter in Al Quds, or Jerusalem.
The sound of a favorite recorded song

by Fred Astaire which later today will be played at the Memorial Service of man who was a beloved member of the Third Unitarian Church in Chicago, Illinois.
The deliberate and tender silence in the house of a napping baby in Farafagana, Madagascar.
The deliberate and tender silence in the Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus Ohio, US of A, as one of the ministers strikes a bowl-like gong often used in Buddhist ceremonies shaped by Japanese culture.

silence

Whether we take a walk, eat a meal, see a hawk, notice a song, or fall silent, in one part of the world or another, we engage in what is commonly human, no matter what language, no matter what culture, no matter what meaning might be found there.

And so now we set aside a moment at the heart of our together-time to name aloud, or to remember quietly, or to see with our mind's eye those we love, and those who love us.

naming

The world's cultures, all of them, each of them, are as much borne along by music as they are by the call of love and the stirrings of beauty. But then again, what's the difference?

The First Reading *is from the Book of Devarim in the Torah, known often by its Greek name of Deuteronomy. Like the rest of the Torah, it was put in final edited form about 2500 years ago, although most scholars are convinced that many of its passages date back to Josiah/Yosyah's Reform Movement, one hundred twenty years before that.*

You are the children of the Eternal your God.
Therefore you shall not ritually cut yourselves,
nor shave away the forelocks of your hair when
it comes time to grieve the dead.
You shall not eat anything which is abhorrent.
You may eat lamb, beef, goat, antelope, venison
and the meat of any other animal which has true
hooves which are cleft in two, and which chews its food twice. But you may not eat rabbit, or camel, or pork, for although the pig has true hooves, it does not chew its food twice, and therefore is unclean for you.
You may eat the meat of clean birds. You may not eat eagles, or vultures, or falcons, or ravens, or ostriches, or owls or nighthawks or sea gulls, or storks or pelicans or herons or cormorants. You may not eat any flying insects which swarm. You shall not boil a baby goat in its mother's milk.

The Second Reading *comes from Ruth Benedict's classic Patterns of Culture, written in the tough years before WW II. When she speaks of the Northwest Coast, she is speaking of what we now call the Pacific Northwest. She was an expert in the culture of one of the native nations there, the Kwakiutl people.*

Most people are plastic to the molding force of society into which they are born. It does not matter whether, with the Northwest Coast, it requires self-reference, or with our own civilization, the amassing of possessions. In any case, the great mass of individuals take quite readily to the form that is presented them.

Sermon

About 700 Unitarian Universalist ministers gathered last June on the day before our annual all-congregation General Assembly in Portland, Oregon. I always treasure these collegial forums where I'm challenged and can deepen my calling.

Dr. Jeremiah Wright led our program this past June. Before that day, I only knew of Dr. Wright mostly by his connection to a man running for president of the United States, namely Barack Obama. Dr. Wright has been the senior parish minister at the church attended by Senator Obama for many years. This church, as you may know, consists of some 4000 members. It's the largest

congregation among the churches of that other great liberal denomination in the US of A, the United Church of Christ.

No matter what you personally think of Mr. Obama, I assure you that, after hearing Dr. Wright hold forth, I now spend my time wondering why we don't go around saying "Senator Obama is Dr. Wright's parishioner," instead of the other way around. Wright's presentation was the best I have ever heard at one of these Continuing Education sessions. And I have been going for 30 years! Many of my colleagues felt that way too. Dr. Wright held our rapt attention for over three hours. My mind never once wandered. He was nothing short of brilliant.

The subject of his presentation? Language. Language and cultural assumptions. He himself demonstrated fluency in several major European languages. But then he started to talk with us about the two American languages. He spoke to us of Black English and White English. As a trained linguistic scholar, he offered us the standard definitions of an accent, a dialect and a full-blown language. He convinced us quite handily that we are talking about two languages here, not two dialects of the same language. He also said that most African Americans are bilingual, and most Euro-Americans are not. That in itself rocked our boat.

He listed the languages once spoken by the men and women brought over to this country as chattel slaves. Ashante. Ebo. Yoruba. Twee. And about fifteen others. He explained how these languages are related, you know, like Italian and Spanish are related, or Dutch and German.

Then he offered us examples of Black English. He noted that, in general, the word *asks*, as in the sentence "The teacher often asks them that," is often pronounced by African-Americans this way, "The teacher often axe them that." But then he said, "Do any of you find it interesting when I tell you that in Ashante, Ebo, Yoruba etc., there are no consonantal clusters like s-k-s? Black English pronunciation is clearly based on the culture of the original African languages." Then he spoke to us about the verb "to be." In many African-American sentences it is not conjugated, that is, put into a different form. So where an American with European roots might say "He's over at Easton, shopping," an American with African roots might say, "He be over at Easton, shopping." Again, he said to us, "Do any of you find it interesting that in Ashante, Ebo, Yoruba etc. the verb "to be" is never conjugated, and is always kept in its infinitive simple form, like the English 'be'?" He went on for hours like this, unpacking the ancient roots of every African American pronunciation, grammatical distinction, and vocabulary difference. And you have to know that ministers of every color, ethnicity, age and gender found almost everything he said to be news.

In all honesty, most of us, both Euro-Americans and even some ministers of color, admitted that we had fallen for the blather that Black English must be the result of poor schooling, or cultural isolation. No one imagined it might be because of African cultural realities surviving centuries of European intellectual colonization. So most of us discovered that day that WE were the ones poorly schooled. About language. About history. And most tellingly, about the very nature of culture.

Yet European history itself is clearly marked by the same dynamic. For example, the pre-Christian cultures of Northern Europe completely resisted the making of images, of representational art. Their stance was similar, in fact, to the prohibitions found amongst both Jews and Muslims to this very day. Abstract designs were OK. Drawings were not. Sculpture was not. Paintings were not.

When Southern European Catholic Christians imposed their theology onto the Northern Europeans in the 5th and 6th centuries, they were not, in fact, also able to impose their artistic culture on the North. For example, there was a deep difference between North and South in their attitude toward illustrating the Scriptures that the monks were copying by hand. The South produced elaborate drawings of men in robes and halos with gilt edges, depicting the gospel writers with splendid human detail. The Northern Europeans refused to do that, and simply made complex designs. Geometric. No faces. No hands. No feet. No bodies. Their theology may have bent, but their culture did not bend.

And of course you know that the Protestant Reformation largely broke out in Northern Europe, not the South. In their most furious stage, the rebel Protestants entered Catholic churches, and broke the stained glass windows there, over-turned and burned statues they found, and slashed or removed paintings. You see, just as with African culture surviving into English, so the anti-image culture of North Europe remained strong 1000 years after their theology changed.

Does this congregation have a culture? Sure. Everyone is part of some culture. What is culture? "It's the way we dress," says Aime Cesaire. "It's the way we walk, the way we carry our heads." And Ruth Benedict confirms that "the great mass of individuals take quite readily to the form"--- the cultural form she means --- "that is presented them."

What kind of culture was presented to you when you came to this congregation? Quiet or loud? Was it respectful of authority or suspicious of it? Did you find an expectation of intellectual prowess or an expectation of emotional depth? Was the culture here conflict-avoidant or conflict-welcoming? Whatever your answers, I affirm we are, each of us, new or long-term members, children of a real culture, woven, unconsciously perhaps, in 1940 by our founders. We may not always know the structure and form of this culture, and we surely blend it with our own individual family cultures. But believe me, culture is the water in which we all swim like so many fish. We may not see it, but without it, we're often gasping for life.

How are cultures formed?

The Hebrew scriptures provide one excellent example. There are, as some of you know, many rules in the first five books of those scriptures, commonly called The Torah. They are usually more cultural than strictly religious rules. These rules always seem to separate out and define one culture against another. The original reasons for these laws were forgotten after a while, but the culture stayed the same in any case.

Originally, the Hebrews defined their culture over and against their enemies, the Philistines. You don't eat pork because they sacrifice wild boars to their god Dagon. Don't be like them. You don't eat shellfish because they own the sea coast. So eat lake fish instead. When they grieve at their funerals, they shave the front of their heads. Don't do that. Grieve some other way. You don't boil a kid in its mother's milk because that is a form of sacrificial ritual they use to their pestiferous gods. Don't follow their religious rites either. In fact, the authors of the book of Deuteronomy insist, *anything* that smacks of their culture upsets us. We detest their cultural ways. We want our culture to be the exact opposite of theirs. We have come up with a shorthand code to separate ourselves entirely from their culture. We call anything they do, by our word, *to'evah,* which means, "We really hate his." So we really hate it when they use same-sex eroticism as a form of worship in their temples, so we forbid that. We detest it when their priests dress up in certain colors of clothes, so we won't do that either." The foolish King James translators came up with the word "abomination" to translate the Hebrew shorthand word

"to'evah." But the modern preachers who toss this word around are so removed from the cultural meaning of this term that their rhetoric is more than wrong, it's embarrassing, and remarkably hurtful. Even the authors of the Torah forgot the original cultural reasons for these laws, and invented this business about the shape of hooves and the number of times an animal chews its food.

But is culture always established by reaction against some other culture? Not always. Some cultures are born in near isolation. Others are subtly influenced and changed by other cultures, either neighboring ones or immigrant cultures within the borders. Or sometimes cultures are created by the systemic violence of colonization.

Perhaps many folks here in Columbus Ohio do not know this, but you may find Unitarian Universalist movements and communities all around the world. From here to the Philippines. From the Philippines to India. From India to Africa.

Their religious affirmations are similar. Liberal, we might say, in our shorthand word. But, their cultures are different. For example, there is a Unitarian movement in Burundi, in Africa. Like us, they meet on Sundays. But they do not come out of a sermon-centered liberal congregational Protestant culture like we do, but rather, out of a largely Catholic and Anglican missionary culture. They questioned the Anglican theology, but not the culture…they still enact some of the central practices of their colonial religion. They partake of bread and wine each Sunday in a ceremony of communion. Do they think of it as an image of the body and blood of Christ? Not at all. They are Unitarian, after all. But they do see it as a profound expression of their community. The communion prayers have a great deal of silence woven into them too. Still, I think you have to admit their culture is quite distinct from ours.

On the same continent, in Lagos Nigeria, you will find the Brotherhood Unitarian Church and some newer congregations. They come out of the social impossibility that is Lagos Nigeria, a city which only a scant 25 years ago was about the size of Columbus, but which is now an insane urban sprawl with almost 21 million people, and without the electrical and water structures necessary to make something like that work. Lagos has over 200 ethnic groups and languages within its confines, and many Muslims and Christians as well as traditional religious groups.

This Unitarian congregation comes out the indigenous Yoruba religious traditions, a noble and complex spiritual way of life. By our lights, it's a polytheistic religion, that is, it presents a theology which urges folks to call on many divine spirits, both close and remote. It's known for its tradition of spirit possession, something expressed in some of our Western Christian traditions as "charismatic" or "Pentecostal."

Their service is in Yoruba, with drums and other local instruments. Their music is all Yoruba music, an example of which you will hear at the end of the service. Their service however, like ours, is sermon-centered, with readings. This clearly reflects a blending of cultures, Christian and Yoruba, since the Yoruba religion per se uses no scriptures, offers no sermons. And they do not use the Flaming Chalice as a uniting symbol, like we do. Instead, author Melinda Sayavedra proposes that African Unitarianism might be best symbolized by the Ana Tree, a drought-resistant, erosion-preventive, hearty tree that survives all odds. Like African Unitarians.

Up in the Hungarian-speaking areas of Eastern Europe there have been Unitarians since the 1560s. These Unitarians clearly come out of, and are a reaction to, the Calvinist tradition that had spread to Eastern Europe in those years. For about two centuries, they were vaguely known

to the Unitarians in England and North America with the stress on the *vaguely*. In the last century, our cousins were, as it were, rediscovered. Persecuted by the maniac Communist leader Ceaucescu, their plight moved the hearts of many here in the States.

Since then, the idea of Partner Churches came to life. Individual congregations, here in the States and in Canada, partner with congregations in Transylvania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, or the Philippines. There are exchanges of culture, mutual visits, learning and, sometimes, burgeoning friendships. This relationship has proved beneficial to both sets of congregations.

But the Hungarian speaking Unitarian churches are not like ours in many ways. We may share Unitarian religious sensibility, but our cultures are different by far. One, they have bishops. We don't, preferring the congregational system of government. Two, women and men sit in separate areas of the church. Three, their hymnody is much, much slower than ours, and consists of utterly different melodies, based on the local culture. Four, they take communion four times a year, at a round table, and this is very important to them. Like the Unitarians in Burundi, it's more of a communal symbol than a commemoration of the death of Jesus, but it's quite central. And fifth, the Unitarians in the Hungarian areas of Europe are rarely college educated, upper middle class folks like Unitarian Universalists tend to be here…at least according to our self-congratulatory mythology, which in my experience is often just that. They, however, are clearly mostly farmers. They take care of orchards. They pick plums. They make pork sausages. They dry red peppers. They drink *palinka*, a potent clear brandy that could remove the paint from these walls in a trice. They have country fairs, country dances. But they have a very hard life economically, compared to most Unitarian Universalists here in the States.

So do the Philippine Unitarian Universalists. A very hard life. Even tougher than the Hungarian speaking Unitarians. They are poor, largely uneducated, and barely have enough to eat. These people come out of Catholic culture too, with some Muslim roots as well. They evolved on the island of Negros, where Visayan is spoken instead of Tagalog. Their services resemble ours a great deal, including the ceremonial use of the chalice, and the frequent singing of songs like Spirit of Life, although they do have some songs of their own tradition. Still, the Philippines were colonized by the Spanish for centuries, and we have been their de facto colonizers ever since, so naturally they look to us for their worship patterns and sources,
since colonizing groups largely supplant the local cultures.

In this country of *E Pluribus Unum*, "one out of many," Unitarianism has a very American slant. We too, you see, are indigenous liberals. Yes, we are far more well-to-do than Unitarians or Universalists any place else in the world. But we are also creatures of American culture, which sometimes we mistake for our religious life.

Jeremiah Wright, you see, was correct. Culture survives even the worst possible attacks and attempts to destroy it. It survives in languages, in concepts and in practices that may no longer be identified by their original purposes. But culture and religion are NOT the same thing, though I understand they may sometimes overlap. So I ask you to consider at least a few of these questions during the week. Does your understanding of Unitarian Universalism as a spiritual way of life have an educational component to it? Do you think folks need to be school-educated to walk in the door? Is there an economic component to your understanding of our religious path? You can't be a struggling farmer? You don't think a struggling single mom working two jobs could find anything here? Really? Does our religious path mean that music has a certain form for you, a certain style? Or is that a cultural stance you take? What *are* your cultural stances? Can you distinguish them from your spiritual life? If you were invited to sit at the welcome table with

Unitarians in Lagos, would you think their reverence for Ifa, or God, was cultural or theological? Or even experiential in their lives? If you were visiting one of our congregations in Transylvania and were offered communion, would you accept it? If so, why? If not, why not? Is your answer culture-based or religion-based?

Yes, I am well aware that this business of religion and culture, spirit and tradition, is a very complex issue. It demands a lot of both heart and head. But as this congregation begins to imagine what it would mean to us if we too might partner with a Unitarian Universalist congregation in another nation with a totally different culture and language, these are very important considerations to hold close to our center, to face honestly, and yes, to embrace with joy. For remember, we, like every other culture in the world, are just one small part of the world. Hardly, hardly, hardly its main culture, its final culture, its best culture, or its most significant culture. And such humility marks the beginning for me of any spiritual life…or cultural life… that grounds my soul and restores my sense of hope and health.

Offering

And now some of our members and friends bring a portion of the pledges they have promised to the church, for the church is the congregation of the people who agree to make it. If you are a guest this morning, or just visiting, it's ok to let the basket pass you by in peace this morning. Should you one day choose to share in the work of this good community, we will welcome your generous gift with gratitude, for generosity of spirit is the power that sustains any community of justice, learning and love.

Prayer

Soon, Love, we're gonna sing a song about sitting at the welcome table.
It says we're gonna sit at the table, not set it.
And we're not gonna build the welcome table… either, it's already there.
Been there for a long time.
We're not issuing all the invitations, seems…we're on the guest list ourselves.
We've been invited. I think I might go.
But who is gonna welcome us?
Do you know, O Love?
Don't tell me if you do.
I for one, don't want to know.
I just want to sit down at that table, join hands for a moment, and begin to eat in thanksgivng with everyone who comes.

Offering

Closing Prayer