

Edges

May 23, 2010
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Opening Words

We are here
after a week of storm and rain and a bit of sun
to worship, to once again claim for ourselves
both deeper challenges and redemptive blessings
which strengthen us, and renew our call
to lives of service and deeper community.

So, Mindful that we share a common world, but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.

Sequence (based on a prayer I wrote for my friend Doug)

It's morning. Grey or sunny, no matter. It's morning.
Wet or dry, no matter. It's today.
The only today that is *this* very day. The only one that I will have in my whole life.
Events will happen. Conversations will happen.
Aggravations will transpire. Joys will knock me over. Stresses will ignite my vulnerability.
Uncertainties will knock at my door.
It's the way the world is. Expecting something else
is to cultivate vain fantasies & spiritual entitlements.
I want neither.
Instead, I will respond to each event today
with my best me.
Or if I am not feeling my best,
then I will respond with whatever me who is there,
because that is the reality that is real,
and there is no shame in that.
I am loved, and I love.
In the midst of it all, I love and am loved.
Nothing is really more important than that for me.
It's the center, the sun, around which everything else whirls.
It's my center. My inner light and brightness.
A gift I both receive and give at the same moment.
So now I bow to the day. I bow to who I am and to who you are for we are real, just as is. I bow
to the world which is just on the other side of my skin, but lives inside that skin in another, but
equally real way. I bow to the day. I bow to the day. I bow to the day.

silence

I bow to the day, to all the people with whom you and I share the day. All those who inhabit my heart and your hearts because we love them, remember them, or struggle with them. They too are part of me, and part of this celebration...because we are here. So may we bring them to the fore now, by seeing them in the quiet of our hearts, or naming the sound that is their names aloud softly, that our worship may be honest and full.

naming

I bow to the music. I bow to the presence of such a miracle: note and rest and word and vibration and tone and rhythm and harmony woven together into a moment of wonder. I bow to the wonder.

Readings

The First Reading is from Carolyn Karcher's editorial comments on an article by Unitarian Lydia Maria Child's astonishing essay called "The Intermingling of Religions," in *Atlantic Monthly*, 1871. Maybe you don't know this Unitarian genius, but you have sung her famous song: *Over the river and through the woods...*

Child's emphasis on the commonalities that link Buddhism to Christianity, and particularly to Catholicism, also serves an ulterior purpose. In 1871, some Irish Catholics were leading a campaign to ban Chinese immigration, that would culminate in the Chinese exclusion bill of 1882. Child counters their stereotypes of the Chinese as unassimilatable aliens both by underscoring the similarities between the two people's religions, and by describing Christianity itself as a religion that has assimilated Asian elements. Symbolically, the Ecclectic Church of the Future, which she offers as a model of religious and political unity, takes the form of a Catholic cathedral, but preserves the beauties of "all ages and nations."

In our secular age, the religious tolerance Child advocated may no longer sound radical. Nevertheless, the developments of (our) century: the worldwide resurgence of fundamentalism and religious warfare, the rise of the Christian right, the revival of calls to define the United States as a Christian country...suggest that the counter-vision Child holds out in the "Intermingling of Religions" remains timely and relevant.

The Second Reading comes from the Pali Canon, the oldest of the vast Buddhist Scriptures; it was written down, we think, sometime in the second century before our era. It's from the Digha Nikaya, the Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta. I've removed all of the fancy titles and baroque language which makes the Buddhist scriptures so often difficult to folks used to more condensed Western styles of literature.

A certain fellow came up to the newly-consecrated Royal Sovereign and said, "You need to know, your majesty, that the sacred treasure of our nation, the Golden Wheel, has disappeared. We don't know where it is." The Royal Sovereign was grieved, and felt forlorn. He decided to

seek out the council of the local sage. The sage said to the Sovereign: “Your highness, the Golden Wheel’s loss is terrible. But all it was really was just an heirloom from your forbears. So from now on, it’s time for you to turn a much better wheel, the Wheel of What We Hold Dear. Honor that wheel now instead. Cherish it.” “What does that mean for me as Sovereign?” The sage answered, “Let the Wheel of What We Hold Dear turn for everyone: your own household, including the children; your guard, your citizens, people in the cities, people in the country, ascetics and clerics, even beast and bird. To those in need, give. Ask questions of those who have given up infatuation for things, and are now devoted to forbearance and kindness. Ask them, ‘What can I do that will lead to happiness?’ And they will then join you in spinning the Wheel of What We Hold Dear by saying: “Do not take life. Do not take what is not given. Do not lie. Do not intoxicate yourself. Do not harm others sexually.”

Sermon

Friday night I enjoyed a lovely meal with my friend Fred. We ate at *Indochine*, over on Hamilton Rd. It’s a Laotian and Vietnamese restaurant with authentic food, and the friendliest staff imaginable. I asked the server if she attended the *wat*, that is, the Buddhist temple, not too far away on Bexvie Ave. If you haven’t seen it, it’s a surprising South East Asian style building covered with golden dragons and lions. It looks as if it was wafted by some magician directly from Laos, and plopped down gently on Columbus’ East Side. The server answered, “No, we belong to the Vietnamese *wat* over on Cleveland, near Morse. Hey, you should come on Sunday for our Vesak celebration. I know today is Vesak, but *we* celebrate it on Sunday from 2 PM on. Invite your members to come if they want. Everyone is welcome at a Buddhist *wat*.” (Vesak, by the way, is the Southeast Asian Buddhist festival celebrating Buddha’s birth, death and enlightenment, sort of like Christmas and Easter all rolled into one.) I said, “I’ll let the congregation know. But, I’m confused. The Laotian *wat* had a big Vesak festival back in April.” “Oh,” she said, “the Laotians use a lunar calendar, and we use a modern calendar. You know, its like you celebrating Christmas in December, but in Moscow it’s in January. But, no matter. It’s the same holiday. In fact,” she added, “I think *all* religions are the same at their core. They’re just different because of culture, that’s all. It’s culture people are really fighting about when they talk about religious wars.”

Well, Fred and I truly enjoyed our dinner. And we had fun talking with this wonderful woman. But I told Fred later, “You know, I hear that all the time. *All religions are basically alike*. And I understand what’s being said, I think, because everyone usually hastens to add ‘at their core.’ But that *core* is a tough thing to grapple with. On the surface, the Buddhist concept of the Dharma, the Islamic concept of God’s Judgement Day, and the diverse Christian and Jewish concepts of Atonement, are all *wildly* distinct, at least to me. A religious Humanist reading Carl Sagan and a Pentacostal falling into a faint after being seized by the Spirit makes those fabled apples and oranges look almost identical by comparison.

And yet, the great Canadian Universalist Angus Maclean, whom I quoted in your Order of Celebration, really speaks to me. He grew up in a remarkably strict Presbyterian family in Nova Scotia. When he grew into his mature Universalist faith as an adult, he admits that though “Time” had changed his ideas about God, the Devil, the Bible and the Sabbath,” *nothing* had

changed his “ethical core.” He calls that core “honesty.” The culture of Scotch Presbyterianism gave way to the culture of Universalism, but his core remained solid. That’s exactly what I felt when I shifted from my childhood faith to my present one. I gave up a lot of culture, but I kept the ethical core given to me as a child. I’d like to think that perhaps my Buddhist server at the Indochine restaurant was talking about that when she offered me her opinion about religion. Maybe she was thinking of the root meaning of the Buddhist word Dharma, or Dhamma, which I rendered in the Buddhist scripture you heard this morning as “What we hold dear.” The Sanskrit-rooted word which Buddha used means, after all, “that which we hold” or “that which we carry.” The core is what we carry with us, no matter when we celebrate Vesak, or whether we celebrate it at all. In the scripture you heard, the Dharma, the core of Buddhism a Buddhist carries around, was expressed ethically: “Do not take life. Do not take what’s not given. Do not lie. Do not intoxicate yourself. Do not harm others sexually.”

But if there is a core, is there not also an edge, an outer boundary? The seed-filled core of a McIntosh apple is not the same as its bright red exterior. The skin and pith of an orange are not the same as the juicy segments at its center. Does it make any sense to say that this is not true? So are there core beliefs among Unitarian Universalists, beliefs surrounded by edges and boundaries? Are some beliefs closer to the center, some closer to the edge? Is this the conversation we are having when we skirmish about the “real” meanings of the words *affirmation, covenant, creed, belief, faith, and authentic*?

Let me try to unpack this idea by telling you about a time when I really wrestled with these ideas in a surprising way. Long ago, at my former congregation, a young woman who’d grown up in the church came to my office. She was unhappy. She told me that when she had recently outlined her own theological views to another member of the congregation, she had been told that she wasn’t *really* a Unitarian Universalist anymore if she believed something like THAT.

I was immediately *appalled* that anyone in MY church had said such a thing. I asked the young woman to tell me more. She said to me that when she was a child in the Sunday school, she had always been told she could eventually make her own decisions about her religious views. She was told she could study other religious traditions as well as her own. She was to take up the responsibility for deciding for herself what to believe and when to be skeptical, knowing she might change her mind several times on the journey. No one was supposed to make choices for her.

“That sounds right,” I confirmed. “So what did you tell this guy about your theology?” She said, “Well, I told him that I believed the things that Jane Roberts received from Seth.”

“Seth?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, “the personality that Jane Roberts channels while in a trance state. Seth told her that people create their own reality. That’s my belief.”

“Is Seth her name for God?” I asked, not sure at the time whether I had heard of this before. I was also in a bit of shock at the phrase “creating your own reality.” I was wondering what my

friend Stefan, who was dying of AIDS inch by painful inch, might think if someone told him he was “creating” that horrendous suffering himself.

She wanted to know what I thought of her theology. I told her that I wasn’t sure I understood what it means when people say they go into trances and write things, since the people I know who have claimed to do such things...ranging from prophets to shamans to reformers...have all come up with totally different revelations. But I told her that I would actually like to preach a sermon about her story, and that I would read the Seth books myself beforehand.

I read the Seth materials. It wasn’t easy. They affirmed things which in all honesty I could not make sense of. It seemed to promote a view of reality that didn’t overlap with my own at all. But then I read Jane Robert’s self-critique of her own work. She clearly owned that she thought that her imagination, and even her unconscious, had a lot to do with her trances. She was not really affirming, necessarily, that there was a being someplace outside of her named Seth. The passages I read affirming her rational self-critique were VERY clear. And, no-where in her writings could I find any instructions to those who trusted her revelations which countered my own understanding of a core ethical life. She never says that some people are not really people, some groups do not belong, some people need to be treated with violence, sarcasm, or dismissal.

The metaphysical understanding of the Seth world is certainly not my cup of tea. But as far as I can tell, it’s not a religion founded on banning some people, or being cruel to others, or declaring war.

So I preached a sermon to that effect to my former congregation. I told them that our chief historians had noted that Unitarian Universalist history is very complex, and there have been men and women who had come down on all sorts of theological sides within our living history. But what they shared in common, what drew them to our historical tradition, was our clear, constant defense of personal freedom in religious expression, our reliable tolerance of divergent points of view on matters like what kind of God a person believes in or doesn’t believe in, and our tendency to reason things through by conversing with each other instead of trying to convert each other to the once and for all “right” position. Oh, yeah, and that love is a more important lens through which to view the world than either fear or certainty.

This, after you have surveyed our history name-by- name for the last thousand years, is what you will discover to be our living core. No metaphysical assertion...i.e. there is God, there isn’t a God, who knows what that word means anyway? etc is at the center, the core, of our history. No decision about the precise words of Jesus, the meaning of Buddha, the feminism of Susan B. Anthony is at the core of our living tradition. My former parishioner who loved the Seth books knew she was further from our historic affirmations than most. Out at the edges, if you will. But she had not given up on our core any more than Angus Maclean gave up on his core. So, I concluded: “Please don’t go telling anyone in this congregation that they are not REALLY part of our faith tradition. They may be closer to the edge than you, but all parts of the apple and all parts of the orange are still apple, and still orange.

But why did I read that passage about Lydia Maria Child? How does that connect to this business of core and edges, boundaries and center?

The immigration issues we are hearing about in the news these days, the Arizona debacle, are hardly newfangled inventions. Immigration craziness has been a big part of the history of this nation, including at the very beginning when a bunch of European immigrants, speaking English on one coast and Spanish on the other, landed on these shores, crossed into these territories, and claimed everything for themselves without much regard for the folks who had been living here for 17 thousand years. But look, Lydia Maria Child was focusing on something much more specific and local than that. The upheaval of some Irish Catholics in Boston trying to get ALL Chinese immigrants banned. The Irish-American citizens of Boston, who themselves had been treated harshly when they immigrated, and largely because of their religion. Unfortunately, they succeeded in getting some anti-Chinese immigration bill passed. Lydia Maria Child, a Unitarian, with core values of freedom of expression, reasonable conversational approaches, and a broad welcoming inclusiveness (which she called by the old fashioned word “tolerance”) responded. She moved out of these core values to look for a solution to this immigration conundrum. She tried to show the similarities between Christian, but more specifically Roman Catholic, practice and Buddhist practice. She tried to break down the boundaries between the cultures and tried to show that at the core, and at their best, *both* religious traditions were celebrating the overlapping values of *compassion* and *community*. Their great saints each lived equally ethical lives. Remember, anti-Catholic prejudice was high amongst Protestants, and even among some Unitarians in those days, so her boundary-breaking solution in addressing the issues was a radical one.

Carolyn Karcher suggests in her commentary that maybe Child’s work doesn’t seem radical anymore. She writes: *In our secular age, the religious tolerance Child advocated may no longer sound radical.*

I would disagree. I actually think her approach is *still* radical. To actually find similarities between two distinct groups, to find ways to build bridges across the cultural boundaries that separate them, and then to actually cross those bridges...that still seems radical to me. Downright revolutionary.

Whether we are talking about the legal/illegal immigrant issue, or theological and metaphysical issues, or even political issues...to entrench ourselves into final and fenced in positions without ANY hope of building bridges, or entering into conversation, or finding connection core-to-core, means, as far as I am concerned, that hope is dead, self-serving Cruelty is the only real God worshipped in the world (and I mean by everyone), and the old “going to hell in a hand-basket” phrase is just sober hard-edged and plainly descriptive truth.

But I, for one, don’t accept that. My core values as a Unitarian Universalist keep me faithful toward a hope for and a vision of a world that is wiser and freer than our present age. This does not mean I foresee, or hope for an age, when everyone is united in belief and culture, we have all abandoned our local cultures for some mythical humanistic commonality and utopian common civilization. To me, that is just a fairy tale. I think there will always be core values, *and* also

divergent images at the edge. I think there will always be diversity at deep levels...emotionally, intellectually, culturally. But our call as Unitarian Universalists, as I see it, is to make that diversity work. To make that diversity just and fair. To make that diversity a strength that frees, instead of divides, the world.

Now look. I understand. It's not easy. Eleven years ago I told a story in this pulpit about a very tall and powerfully-built man in San Francisco who called himself Jesus Christ Satan, which is all you probably need to know about his mental health. He entered our San Francisco Church at the late service on Christmas Eve with a can of gasoline and a bull whip. The candles were all lit. The minister almost died of fright on the spot. But she knew that it was neither the time for conversation, or inclusive welcome...or fear. She knew it was wise to find a way, non-violently, to get him out of the building before he blew everyone up. She did that. I'm glad. There are times when you have to set boundaries, and set people outside the edge of your community, for safety's sake. I agree with that principle. But all I am saying is that it is not the final principle; and that mental health issues like his may be addressable. Just not at midnight... with candles and gasoline.

Festivals like Vesak, or Christmas, or New Year's will continue over the centuries. They may take different forms, just as Buddhists and Christians and even atheists, have all expressed themselves diversely and with variant metaphors, rituals and calendars. But I remain thankful that you and I, my friend Fred and the restaurant server, the Pentecostal trembling on the floor, and even Jesus Christ Satan in his purple cape, are all each and every one human, part of the great mysterious wonder called *the human race*.

Offering

What gifts do we bring this morning? Our presence. Our humility. Our teachable-ness. Our self-questioning. Our risking. Our hope. Our ideals. Our conversations. And yes, our financial support, either given in more electronic ways behind the scenes, or offered in this more ancient way as an integral part of our celebration. The ushers are invited forward.

Vision

Spirit of Liberty, greater, deeper and wiser than what I now imagine, kindle a vision of what each of us might do. Help us to so live our lives that we strive to make a freer world, not as our ancestors did, "monarch and creed defying," but as is right for this age. Whereas our ancestors challenged those who forced their own religious views on their citizens, may we instead challenge the newer religion of unconscious consumption and entitlement, which forces itself on the citizenry of the present age. Whereas our ancestors challenged long argued creeds, may I instead challenge un-argued creeds, signed by the thought "Everyone truly wise must think just like me." Spirit of Freedom, help me to question the ways of the world so that I might see it with compassion and challenge its harsher ways with courage. But also, help me to question my own self, and my own motives no less, for I too am part of the world. Amen.