

“The Practice of Reverence”

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All Souls Church, Unitarian

Washington, D.C.

30 September 2007

Delivered by recording to Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

August 31, 2008

A few weeks ago, a young woman came to me after the service and said she needed to talk. I hadn't seen her in over a year. She had come to All Souls while attending college in DC, but had since moved to the Gulf Coast to help rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. When we finally sat down to speak in my office she told me more of her story, a story she's given me permission to share with you this morning.

She left for Louisiana a year and a half ago, eager to lend a hand in that devastated community, but what she found when she got there was even worse than she'd imagined. She described for me the relentless emotional and psychological strain of living and working in a disaster zone. She spoke of the rage that she felt at the injustice of it all and how, day after day, she had to swallow that rage like a bitter pill because of one setback after another in the relief efforts. She told me she'd watched coworkers crack and break down under the emotional stress for, no matter how much you worked, no matter how many hours you put in, there always remained an overwhelming amount of work to be done. And when this young woman began to feel that she herself was about to break down, she got out. She took a break, just for a few months. When we spoke, she was about to return for another year.

Her question to me that morning, the reason she pulled me aside and asked for some words alone, was to ask me essentially this: What can I do to save my soul? What can I do to save my soul? She didn't mean “save” in the sense of being saved from sin and let into heaven; she meant saved in the sense of survival. What can I do to keep my soul from being torn to shreds? In the midst of so much suffering, how do I hold a peaceful center? In the midst of so much tragedy, how do I find grace? What can I do to save my soul, she asked.

I share this woman's story with you for two reasons: first because I know that many of you have been deeply affected by your own experience visiting and working in New Orleans. A large group from the church went last spring and many of you have been, I know, on your own and I thought you could relate to her story. But I have another reason for sharing it, a reason that takes me to the heart of my sermon this morning. Because this young woman's story offers in my mind a glimpse into a side of spirituality that we don't often see portrayed in our culture these days. Let me tell you what I mean.

I am concerned that spirituality has become terribly watered down in our contemporary American culture. As if a spiritual life were just another choice in a menu of life's enhancement opportunities. Let me explain. Earlier this summer I was struck by this when I walked into a pharmacy, what we used to call a drugstore, and overheard a customer ask an employee something I never thought I'd hear asked for in a drugstore, even a high-end, holistic drug store, which this was, in Berkeley, California. The gentleman asked the employee at the drugstore, “Do you have any little Buddhas?” And he asked as naturally as if he'd just said, “Do you carry Advil in the tiny gel-caps?” [Laughter] I was further surprised when the employee smiled and said, “Why yes, we have little Buddhas” [Laughter] and proceeded to show the gentleman a display of not only Buddhas, small and large, I might add, but yoga mats, candles, incense and a smattering of self-help books. And that's when it struck me that spirituality in America is in danger of becoming something that we merely consume. Grab off the shelf. Or worse, that it has become a luxury item, like getting a facial or a spa treatment, something to make the good life even better.

And so I share this woman's story to remind us that, properly understood, the nurturing and sustaining of our souls is not a luxury but a necessity, sometimes even a matter of survival, a desperate attempt to keep our lives from careening out of control, consumed by sorrow or anxiety or pain. And so the young woman's question still remains before us: “What can I do to save my soul?”

Our religious ancestors on the Unitarian side were among the first spiritual seekers in the West to shift the essential question of religion from “How do I save my soul for the afterlife?” to “How do I sustain my soul in this life?” Basically they believed that if we took care of our spiritual business in this life, the next one would take care of itself. And as their focus shifted from the by-and-by to the here and now, they sought to re-enchant the world, a world that had been denigrated by both orthodox believers who called it a veil of tears and secular materialists who saw it as nothing more than a machine. They went about searching for the holy in the mundane. They studied human life, human fulfillment and liberation, the nature of a just society, the earth and her creatures, believing that the holy could be found here, in our very midst; we didn’t have to look elsewhere. Just as the rabbi studies the Torah and lovingly immerses himself in its complex minutiae and nuance and contradiction, believing that in the midst of all that he’ll find God, our Unitarian ancestors lavished reverent attention upon this world, believing that in its minutiae, its nuance, its contradictions, could be found assurances of and guidance from the spirit. Life was their scripture.

But in order for life to reveal its meaning to us, we had to bring a certain quality to our living, said the early Unitarians. And they called that quality “reverence.” Now reverence is one of those words that, I think we all have a sense of what it means, but it’s sometimes hard to really pin down. For me, reverence is fundamentally, a deep respect. It is an attitude of awe and wonder and gratitude for something of high or ultimate value. Albert Schweitzer, the doctor and theologian, famous for his concept of reverence for life, had this to say about reverence, and I hope you’ll listen carefully. He said: “Affirmation of life is the spiritual act by which man [woman] ceases to live unreflectively and begins to devote himself to his life with reverence, in order to raise it to its true value.” I want to say that again and make sure it sinks in. He said, “Affirmation of life is the spiritual act by which [woman] ceases to live unreflectively and begins to devote [her]self to [her] life with reverence, in order to raise it to its true value.” For Schweitzer as well as our Unitarian ancestors, reverence was not merely an attitude; it was a way of life, a practice. A practice characterized by careful, reflective attention to life and its meaning.

Let me share with you a quick story about this practice of reverence, or the lack thereof. This summer I took a hike in the Marin Headlands, just north of San Francisco. The path began deep in a wooded gulch that gradually switched back up, out of the dark woods and onto a sun-drenched bank, filled with big, scratchy brush bushes that loomed over my head and that clawed at my clothes as I walked by so that I could barely see on either side of me. From time to time the brush would rustle and crack under the weight of an animal’s paw and I was certain that one of the mountain lions that still stalk the Marin Headlands was about to pounce on me. Luckily, it was just a deer. Finally the brush cleared and I emerged on the top of the hill, with views all around. In front of me was the Pacific Ocean, shimmering in the sun, stretching to the horizon, and behind me, over the next mountain, I could see the tops of the two rust-colored stanchions of the Golden Gate Bridge with San Francisco silhouetted in the distance. I paused for a moment and took in the view. But having reached the culmination of my hike and, honestly, still a little anxious about the mountain lions, I quickly headed back down. But after a few moments I stopped myself and reflected on what I’d just done, on the beauty I’d turned my back on. And I marched myself back up that hill and sat down and just savored, pausing in reverent attention before the earth’s beauty, giving thanks.

“Pursue some path,” said Thoreau, “however narrow and crooked, in which you can walk with love and reverence.” The spiritual riches that life offers us are not revealed by a cursory glance or a surface impression. Life’s meaning is revealed in its texture, in its details, and the only way we’re going to notice is if we cultivate a practice of reverent living, taking time to savor and to give thanks.

“What can I do to save my soul?” Before the young woman left my office that morning, I pressed into her hand a little sheet of instructions. They were instructions for prayer, a meditation, really. The central spiritual practice of our Unitarian ancestors is what I put into her hands. You see, aware that reverence doesn’t always come naturally, aware that there are people like me who can look at a sun-drenched ocean and turn and walk away, early Unitarians developed practices designed to cultivate reverent living, practices that developed habits of attentiveness and sensitivity to the spiritual dimensions of our lives. Now, hopefully, the ushers have pressed a similar instruction sheet into your hands this morning. This one [holding up a piece of paper] is what I’m talking about. I had these printed up yesterday and I delegated the color choice to someone else in the office. I might not have chosen fuchsia on which to print The

Meditative Self-Examination, though I was picking on fuchsia in the first service and the fuchsia twins down here, stand up fuchsia twins, down here in the choir, took exception to my fuchsia comments [Laughter]and so I'm not going to call fuchsia out in second service. But this little card lays out the meditative discipline that I'm talking about.

Each day, before going to bed, our ancestors would take themselves on a guided meditation of their day, carefully, reverently recalling its details. They paid attention to their relationships, asking if they'd treated others with respect and love. They noticed the work they'd done and asked if it was principled and righteous. They looked for glimpses of grace, signs of the spirit, little moments they might have otherwise overlooked in the rush of their day. They examined the moral and ethical situations that they'd faced during the day and judged whether they'd heeded the demands of conscience. They pored over their lives like the rabbi over his Torah, convinced that it would yield truth and meaning. And at the end of the meditation, they usually fell into prayer, prayers of gratitude for the blessings of the day, prayers of forgiveness for that which needed forgiving, and a promise to make good on the day by going into tomorrow wiser and better.

Now when you look at it on its little piece of fuchsia cardstock, it doesn't look like a very special thing. It doesn't look like it has anything to do with a mountain top experience or a struggling soul in New Orleans. But I think it has everything to do with those experiences. For only by cultivating a habit of reverence, day in and day out, can we experience it in our daily lives. That's what spiritual practices are for, exercises designed to develop our faculties. I've been practicing this now, off and on, for over ten years and, despite lapses that I shared with you earlier in this sermon, I recommend it to you highly. It has deepened my life.

When the young woman left my office that morning, I reflected on our time together and was reminded of a story that a mentor of mine once told. He had told me about a time when he was a young man and he at one time was consumed with rage and with sorrow. He was driven to prayer during that time, not by the love of God, for he didn't even believe in God back then, but out of a desperate need to quell that rage and that sorrow. Well, his crisis was averted and the rage has subsided, but 30 years later, he's still praying every morning. And now he'll tell you he wouldn't give it up for the world, because his prayer life has added immeasurable depth and richness to his life.

As she left my office that morning, my wish for the young woman was that a prayer turned to in crisis might one day, for her, become a source of not only solace, but of rich and reverent living. And that's my prayer for all of us, too. Amen