

THE DISCOVERY OF AIR
Sermon by Reverend Kathleen Hepler
First Parish in Framingham Unitarian Universalist
October 3, 2009

READING

There is a Deeper Than the Depth of Things
-Richard S Gilbert

There is a deeper than the depth of things,
A something that is impossible to conceive,
Impossible not to conceive,
Both a presence and an absence.

I cannot name it,
It has no voice,
Is without personality,
Yet as real as ground under feet,
As warmth of human bodies.

There was a time I could name it,
A time it spoke to me clearly as ear could hear.
I was confident of its presence, its personality.

No longer is the world so clear.
Personality has been transformed into vague presence.
Confidence into doubt, wonder, sometimes despair.

Yet there is a deeper than the depth of things
That will not let me go.
I cannot quite escape that conclusion.

It is as real as air that floats the bird.
As water that sustains the great whale.
It is as real as food that nourishes my body,
As solid as ground that supports my step.
It is as real as those who people my world
And have made my world.
It is as real as I myself.
What I was, am and will be.

I would penetrate this reality,
Open it to my view,
Understand its every working,
Probe its every depth,
Explore its every dimension.
I would devour it whole,
But I cannot.

I am content to rest in its strength and insecurity.
There is a deeper than the depth of things.

SERMON

The following says a lot about this liberal faith: A visitor attends a UU worship service for the first time, unaware of the nature of liberal religion...that each person is free to believe what they find to be true. At the end of the sermon, the usher asks the visitor what he thought about it. The visitor replies, “I didn’t agree with half of what that pastor said!” The usher replied, “Oh, good...you will fit in quite well here”!

Recently, someone who is new to Unitarian Universalism, spoke of the fear that can arise in her when she realizes the spaciousness, the freedom, inherent in the liberal religious way. Coming from a very structured religion where following the rules promises salvation, she finds the freedom in Unitarian Universalism at once exhilarating and frightening. Having left the clear proscriptions of another religion, she wonders, in her freedom, “What do I hold onto here?” “What is at the core of liberal religion?” It could be that liberal religion is more about letting go and entering the dance than it is about holding on. It could be so...this is what she might discover.

I speak today on four aspects of religious liberalism.

First: it is a path that requires us to learn to trust ourselves, to love ourselves...to begin to know the sacred through our own experience as human beings. In our liberal religion we are asked to come to know that we are inherently worthy...not inherently sinful, but worthy, good. This way of understanding human nature is not a new one. Hebrew scripture says that we are “made in the image of God”; at the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth.”

You are the salt of the earth, a blessing...in you is the promise. When I hold a baby to be dedicated in our faith, I am affirming that she is originally blessed, that he is not born originally sinful.

On the liberal path one learns that the heart of the sacred is a loving heart, and that it beats inside every one of us. The liberal journey begins with the growing recognition of our individual power to know

the holy and to increasingly live from that place. This can be hard work especially if we have come from a shame-based family or religion. But, this is the beginning of becoming a religious liberal.

Some shamanic traditions in parts of Africa and the Oceanic societies attend to health and well-being through what is called cradling work, a four part practice in staying connected to the good, true, and beautiful aspects of one's nature. In cradling work we lie on our back and place both hands over our heart. Silently, we acknowledge the character qualities that we appreciate about ourselves, we acknowledge our strengths, we acknowledge the contributions we have made and continue to make, and, finally we acknowledge the love we have given and received.

In our tradition we each are called to trust our own wisdom and cradle ourselves into renewed wholeness. Persian poet Rumi says it this way:

THE SILK WORM

Rumi

I stood before a silk worm one day
And that night my heart said to me,

“I can do things like that, I can spin skies,
I can be woven into love that can bring warmth to people;
I can be soft against a crying face,
I can be wings that lift, and I can travel on my thousand feet
throughout the earth,
my sacks filled with the sacred”
And I replied to my heart,

“Dear, can you really do all those things?”
And it just nodded “Yes”
In silence.
So we began and will never cease.

The second thing to say about religious liberalism is that as far as beliefs go, it is spacious and welcoming of change... in individuals and in the tradition itself. That is to say, we do not have a creed...we admit that an open mind is more able to move toward an increasing understanding...and that the purpose of the spiritual path is an increasing understanding.

We can thank our ancestor Unitarian Minister, Joseph Priestly, for being on the cutting edge of this world view. Priestly rose at the right moment in history to bring about a new thinking paradigm to chemistry, electricity, politics and faith. This one man resided at the apex of a complete shift in how Western culture views life. “The contemporary view of intellectual progress is dominated by one book: Thomas Luhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* published in 1962, but describing the kind of thinking

that Priestly originated. In the book, “Kuhn set out to dismantle the idea that scientific progress happens in a linear fashion, as a series of indisputable facts unearthed one after another “ within a certain set of rules that put boundaries on the inquiry. “But over time, anomalies appear inside the paradigm: data that can’t be explained, questions that can’t be answered using the tools of the existing model....and revolutionary science begins to happen.” (from *The Invention of Air* by Steven Johnson)

Joseph Priestly went even further and allowed that this worldview could be applied across disciplines....scientific paradigm shifts coincide with comparable revolutions in the structures of human society toward more democratic governance... or toward less authoritarian religions. This way of being in the world was the beginning of our understanding of life as a web on interconnections. Priestly trusted himself to go outside of the existing paradigms across all disciplines beginning to reveal the connections between them. And by so doing, this one person profoundly changed the way we understand the world.

It’s not always easy leading change. In his book “Corruptions of Christianity” Priestley reasoned an argument for a return to the profound teachings of Jesus instead of focus on a triune God or miracles or church ritual or creed. It was this book that greatly influenced Jefferson into being able to say that he was still a Christian. This kind of ethical life based on the life of Jesus was what the early Unitarians professed. As a minister in Leeds and Birmingham Priestley was considered to be a “Dissenter”, one who disagreed with the Church of England.

It was also this book and the Unitarian sermons of Priestly that caused violent protests in England. A mob burned his church, then his home along with most of his library and his scientific tools. It was this stance in religion...the liberal way... that caused Priestly to get on a boat and come to America in 1791. He founded a Unitarian Church in Philadelphia and greatly influenced the thinking of those who were creating a new republic like Adams and Jefferson. (In their correspondence Adams and Jefferson mentioned Priestley more than anyone else.)

In our liberal tradition of Unitarian Universalism we are invited to bring an open mind to the process of spiritual growth and to accept that understanding of the deepest dimensions of life move because that is the very nature of life. Spiritually it is less a creedal resting place and more a making of one’s self as a vessel for the co-creation of love and justice. For myself, my understanding of the nature of the Divine has detached from a concrete entity that is attached to a particular story or creed...and become much more an experience of a process that wants to open us to more loving....”a deeper than the depth of things that will not let me go...as real as air that floats the bird”.

Another poem says it so well: (by John Squadra in the ‘Compass and the Rose’)

When you die to what
you thought was true
everything in your life catches fire.

You are the instrument
for the music,
you will go on playing
no matter where you are

or who's conducting,
the gig is never over.

The heart is always singing
Yes.
The mind is always singing
No.

Between the two,
we come and go
safe on the solid shore of maybe.

A third thing to say about being a religious liberal is that it is a way of relationship. We are not bound together necessarily by the same theological beliefs...but we are asked to listen to others and to respect differences and to shape our own ideas in the fire of community. Priestley's life exemplified the belief that the evolution of individual belief was strengthened by the sharing with others. While in England he met regularly with a group of men called the 'Honest Whigs' with the likes of Ben Franklin and others meeting late into the night. They would share ideas and eagerly listen to how others would recast them. They would shape the next conversation out of the communal learning of the previous one. Once in America Priestley belonged to the Lunar Society. It was the same concept...trust in the better truth emerging within the context of a fellowship of tolerance and eager reception.

Thomas Jefferson wrote this about this kind of evolutionary being.

"That ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition, seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature, when she made them, like fire, expansible over all space, without lessening their density at any point, and like the air in which we breathe, move, and have our physical being, incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation". Thomas Jefferson

Here at First Parish and in the work of the wider Unitarian Universalist Association we seek to share our beliefs in a spacious container of acceptance and eagerness, so that the spirit of truth can move us to new understanding. This is the brilliance of liberal religion. It calls us to openness and tolerance and faith that this larger liberty gives birth to larger truths. It is, at its core a practice that lends itself to diversity. And, the desire to move us toward being more diverse in our own congregations, in our wider movement and in the world is the goal of the money that you have so generously given on this Association Sunday.

And fourth, liberal religion will put us in the way of the work of bringing more equality and love into the world. It is a natural evolution...this spacious container that increases truth has put us on the edge of many social issues. Because we are not asked to accept any scripture as the final truth, we are not asked to maintain prejudice as a way to salvation. This freedom made it so that our religion was the first to ordain

a woman into the ministry in 1863, Olympia Brown. This air of tolerance and inclusivity moved us to be the first religion in America to provide union services for gay and lesbian people and to seek more just laws. Not being tied to biblical literalism, we have been free to understand that all are loved by God...we have been free to fill our hearts with compassion beyond the rut of scriptures that codify injustice. Now when I hear someone pointing to the Bible as proof for homophobia or sexism, I say a prayer that they will be released from the narrow, that their heart will be released from the fear their religion promulgates and come to know the exhilarating life of the free mind and the open heart where the Spirit freely moves.

We have been called over and over to the edge of change to witness to the spirit of equality trying to be born...and we have been free to choose to go there.

Faith in each as “the salt of the earth”, inherently worthy and deserving of dignity.

Faith in our own ability to become wisely humble and more joyous and more attuned to the evolution of love.

Faith in communities where tolerance is practiced, and authentic sharing is the communal agreement, and openness a sacred rite...and the experience over and over again that truth is always partial, and in love, coaxed more fully in to the mind of life through us.

And, faith that life lived in this way, through us, bends toward justice.

This is the faith that saves my life every day. This is the faith that has me less afraid of differences. This is the faith that cradles my own spiritual growth and in whose communities I learn that I am not alone. It is the holding place where for me the face of god has changed many times even as my own being has become faithful to the mystery and its ability to heal and transform the world.

Faith of the larger liberty source of the light expanding. The religion that has discovered air.