

## REVERENCE

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson  
Presented November 2, 2003

*There was the method of kneeling,  
a fine method, if you lived in a country  
where stones were smooth.  
Women dreamed wistfully of  
hidden corners where knee fit rock.  
Their prayers, weathered rib bones,  
small calcium words uttered in sequence,  
as if this shedding of syllables could  
fuse them to the sky.*

The Ramadan fast, the Meccan pilgrimage, the major annual communal rites are undoubtedly what commands most outsiders' first attention to Islam. To insiders, however, what commands first attention is the *salat*, the prayer practice observed five times each day, every day of the year. This opening stanza from Naomi Shihab Nye's "Different Ways to Pray" expresses the challenge and the aspiration attached to *salat*. Every three hours of waking life it is the constant physical expression of Islam, which means in English "submission."

A Muslim is one who submits. Insiders to the faith will tell outsiders that for understanding to transcend the border between Islam and other faiths, we would have to come to some mutual understanding, indeed some mutual affirmation, of the value of "submission." For a long time to me, as perhaps to you, this has seemed an almost insurmountable challenge for those of us with a Unitarian Universalist faith. Yet just now something is afoot among us that I'm beginning to see as a small node from which a branch might grow - and that branch, as I imagine it extended, seems like it could offer a bridge, however slender, across which Muslim hearts and our hearts might meet. From our starting place, "submission" is hardly an ideal we can imagine pursuing - but all around us now U.U.s have begun talking about "reverence" and how we express it. As we join their conversation, I invite you to imagine with me where it might lead.

First let us name our starting place. Our identity statement, on the back of your bulletin, on the wall on my left, says that we "affirm ... the worth and dignity of every person", that we "promote ... the free ... search for truth and meaning", that we "affirm ... the rights of conscience." Our trust ultimately is placed in each of us to guide our own spirits as will best serve life itself. For many years we would acknowledge only reason as our shared compass. When we in this church agreed just two years ago to imagine ourselves, at our best, as "a caring community uniting reason with spiritual exploration" I think we intimated an openness to guidance beyond reason. As a shared investment, though, it was, and is, quite tentative.

Yet introspective and honest souls among us, I think, have long had questions about our apparent self-possession and self-sufficiency. From sometime back in the 1960s I've saved a midwestern U.U.'s account of his visit to another faith's monastery and the hole it revealed, for him, in our practices.

*"The monks knelt and rose and bowed, the bodies bent forward from the waist, torsoes almost horizontal. But I could not move. I was brought up in this church where no one kneels and no one bows. And when has it ever been suggested that I might kneel, even figuratively kneel, before or to Something? I wanted to kneel, that's the important thing. But I could not. To kneel and to mean it would be frightening because there is a darkness in the kneeling and a darkness in us that we cannot reason about. You teach the fear of the form without meaning, and that is right; but having avoided*

*the forms, you have sometimes avoided the darkness, and it is from the darkness that real questions rise."* (reported by Carl Scovel. U.U.A. Now 150, April 1969, p.20)

These desires are healthy responses to the human condition, as I know it:

- to be able to kneel, at least figuratively, before or to Something;
- to embrace a meaningful form through which to plumb the questions which arise from the darkness, (and even the light), beyond reason.

But the form of our faith still, almost four decades later, has few physical dimensions. It still is expressed and experienced almost entirely verbally. So, unavoidably, these desires are now finding their expression in a re-examination of the language we use to describe ourselves in our identity statement.

Last January, as guest worship leader in our Fort Worth Texas church, our Association's President Bill Sinkford offered this analysis:

Our identity statement, he said, *"serves us well as a covenant, holding our a vision of a more just world to which we all aspire despite our differences, and articulating our promise to walk together toward toward making that vision a reality, whatever our theology. They frame a broad ethic, but not a theology. They contain no hint of the holy ... I fear that 'they describe a process for approaching the religious depths but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves. ... For this I think we need to cultivate ... 'a vocabulary of reverence.'"*

Can I ask if any of you think you've heard or read something about this sermon? It resulted in articles in many newspapers, the *New York Times* and *Boston Globe* among them I know, and of course there have been references to it the *U.U. World* and other association publications. If I tell you that the way it was covered focused on whether Bill advocated putting God into the identity statement, are there more of you who remembered it crossing your path?

On a personal level, "God-talk" has become central to Bill's own "vocabulary of reverence," though it was not so in his younger adult years in our membership. He did use it as an example of the vocabulary he sought, in the sermon, but he quickly added that, *"'religious language' doesn't have to mean 'God Talk.' And I'm not suggesting that Unitarian Universalism return to traditional Christian language. I do feel that we need some language that would allow us to capture the possibility of reverence, to name the holy, to talk about ... the ability of humans to shape and frame our world guided by what we find to be of ultimate importance."*

From my viewpoint, while Bill's call has successfully catalyzed a lively conversation across our Association, that conversation has had difficulty moving beyond the question of whether the absence of traditional theological language in our identity statement helps or hinders our quest for depth. And as I've begun to participate in the conversation, the feeling has grown in me that there are prior questions we'd all do well to explore before that one. Before we even try to express a "vocabulary of reverence," hadn't we better get a firmer grasp on what's involved in the experience of reverence? Hadn't we better first ask ourselves whether we even really value reverence as an experience?

Be honest now, as we habitually use the terms these days, would you rather be thought "reverent" or "irreverent." Iconoclasts and heretics that we are, "irreverence" feels more comfortable doesn't it? At the end of her "Different Ways to Pray" Naomi Nye's last stanza tells us that, even among the Muslims,

*... occasionally there would be one  
who did none of this,  
the old man Fowzi, for example,  
who beat everyone at dominoes,*

*insisted he spoke with God as he spoke with goats,  
and was famous for his laugh.*

Isn't Fowzi's way much like many of ours? I think so. And I think that before this week, I would have called this way irreverence, before I read University of Texas philosophy professor Paul Woodruff's recent book *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, that is.

Nowadays, says Woodruff, when people praise something for "irreverence ... they mean to give praise for boldness, independence, honesty, and a boisterous contempt for anything pretentious or arrogant." What they don't understand, he says, is that all this is in fact compatible with reverence. (78). Reverence is not blind adoration of established power or long-standing tradition, he explains. Rather, in fact, reverence requires that it have an object that is not a slave to human interests or a mere product of human culture (68). In the presence of presumptuous tyranny or calcified tradition, mockery turns out to be a most reverent response (72), because at its core "Reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods." (4)

When we ask whether we value reverence as an experience, what we need to be asking is how essential to our quest for depth is acknowledging human limitation? It's a serious question. The growing edge of our faith has always been an affirmation of human development, of human capacity, personal and cultural. "We are the earth upright and proud," our favorite hymns have proclaimed; "These things shall be, a loftier race." Reverence, on the other hand, begins in awe for value which lies beyond us, beyond our full grasp or control. It expresses itself in the capacity for shame at our human failures to embody this transcendent value, as well as in the capacity to respect other humans with all our flaws. These are the affects of "knowing our place" as humans, Professor Woodruff says, and that knowledge is most deeply incorporated through ceremony or ritual. (63)

Most helpful to me in Woodruff's work is his separation of reverence from aspects of dominant religion. "Some religions place a high value on reverence, and some do not," he says (66). "Reverence is not worship," he says (125). "Most modern religions attribute moral perfection to the Being they worship, but this is not necessary for reverence." (127) "Reverence is not faith," he says, because "the faithful may hold their faith with arrogance and self-satisfaction, and because the reverent may not know what to believe." (46-7)

Woodruff is most insistent that "gods," however imaged, are but some of the possible objects for reverence. Equally possible are nature, and such ideals as justice and truth, he says. In fact whatever reminds of us human limitation is a possible object of reverence. Reverence in seeking truth, for example, is "what makes a scientist cautious; it prevents her from saying that she know exactly what the truth is and keeps her mind open to evidence that should make her adjust her theory." (66)

When I bring these lenses back to focus on our identity statement, I don't quite see there the gaping hole that Bill Sinkford sees. In our affirmations I see "justice" and "truth" offered near the top and nature implied in "the interdependent web of all existence", at the end. What gnaws at Bill I think is that we acknowledge "God" only as a source in the second part of the statement, rather than as an affirmation in the first. Knowing that some churches, and even some of our association publications, have ignored the source statements, or treated them as secondary, (an unwitting act tantamount to spiritual suicide, I believe) I can share his sense that we've not yet offered God with appropriate affirmation. Despite all our protestations to the contrary, I think our language does not yet express our supposed confidence that truth, justice, and the interdependent web can stand on equal footing with God, in our reverence. I would far rather we affirmed God, along with our other affirmations, so our those other affirmations could help clarify which God we revere (and which we do not revere). I think that we magnify rather than mock a false God's claim to reverence, when we treat "him" as the big bogeyman against whom we've barred our door. However, I also think that when we bring "God" into our affirmations, we would do well also bring in something of the language of another source we acknowledge, indeed the first source we acknowledge. To be truly reverent, I think, we must affirm

the mystery, the ungraspable, in what we revere. A claim of reverence for X, says Professor Woodruff "insists that I recognize that X is not entirely under my control, that I think X is what it is no matter what I do or believe, and that I accept a degree of mystery about X which I am trying to penetrate." (66). Reverence to nature, or to justice, or to truth, or to God, "yields primarily what I have called awe and it is usually inarticulate. ... When we experience awe, we usually do not know how to say what we are in awe of." (65). In fact, Woodruff concludes, "Reverence cannot be expressed in a creed; its most apt expression is in music, which is the most remote of art forms from the precise representation of content." (123)

Our Unitarian Universalist approach toward reverence, how to experience it, how to express it, is in its very infancy, I think. I don't know where it will lead us, but I'm not worried about our leader. When the ninth circuit U.S. Court of Appeals last spring struck "under God" from the pledge of allegiance," Bill Sinkford's public endorsement said *"We applaud the court's efforts to restore the original Pledge. ... The language of God ... does not resonate with all Americans. ... (T)he question is not what metaphor we use for the holy, the question is what commitment we make to justice."* Bill's God "knows its place." With Bill, I see our need to make this approach toward reverence as a community. "It is virtually impossible to act alone in the exercise of reverence," Paul Woodruff writes. "That is because reverence uses ceremony as a kind of language of behavior, and you cannot use a language all by yourself. That is why people who seek reverence don't merely try to improve themselves -- they try to involve family or church or community in the language of reverence -- in shared events, in ceremony." (77). In fact, I feel that ceremony is but the beginning of expressing reverence. As I contemplate the Islamic model of reverence, I can't help but wonder if we will have to learn to at least serve, rather than just affirm, what we revere. And that leads me to wonder whether when we learn how to serve what is beyond our control and comprehension, we might in fact find ourselves on a bridge which allows us to touch their understanding and affirmation of submission.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, perhaps, was growing our end of the bridge, when he wrote in the poem "In Memoriam:"

*Our little systems have their day;  
They have their day and cease to be;  
They are but broken lights of thee,  
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.*

*We have but faith: we cannot know;*

*For knowledge is of things we see;  
And yet we trust it comes from thee,  
A beam in darkness: let it grow.*

*Let knowledge grow from more to more,  
But more of reverence in us dwell;  
That mind and soul, according well,  
May make one music as before,*

*But vaster.*

And perhaps Rabi'a al Adawiyya, the ninth century Sufi saint from Basra, now in Iraq, a woman, long ago grew out her faith's beckoning bridgehead, when she wrote:

*"O Lord, if I worship you out of fear of hell, burn me in hell.  
If I worship you in hope of paradise, forbid it to me.  
But if I worship you for your own sake,*

*do not deprive me of your eternal beauty."*

"If you desire peace in the world," says Paul Woodruff, "do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent." (15)