

An Inclusive Language of Reverence: Is It Even Possible?
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On New Year's day, my sister and I decided to start the year off right by going to an inspirational movie. Here in southern California, there are always plenty of choices in movies, though Mary was taken aback by the prices. After discussing the pros and cons of the alternatives, we went to see an animated movie: "The Tale of Despereaux."

Despereaux is a mouse. Mice are tiny as a rule, but Despereaux is tiny even for a mouse. Actually, his body is tiny, but his ears are enormous. Mice cower in fear and run away if they sense danger. That is what class rooms of young mice are taught in Mouseland. Despereaux is a failure in school. Despite the teacher's best efforts, he cannot learn to cower. Despereaux seems oblivious to danger.

What he does have is a commitment to being good and gallant and chivalrous. His commitment is not just to *being* good but also to *doing* good. As he moves through Mouseworld and Ratworld and the world of humans, Despereaux embodies goodness. Some of us move through life always looking for opportunities to be good and to celebrate goodness. In order to be good and to do good, we need exquisite sensitivity in detecting what is bad.

However, neither mice nor humans live by goodness alone. Wise ones in India several millennia ago were the first to leave a written record of the importance of not only goodness but beauty and truth, as well. Visual beauty, beauty in music, beauty in language, and beauty in movement are all necessary aspects of a life worth living. "If I cannot dance, I do not want to be part of your revolution," wrote Emma Goldman. Some of us move through life always looking for opportunities to be beautiful and to celebrate beauty. In order to be beautiful (inside and out) and to create beauty around us, we need exquisite sensitivity in detecting what it ugly.

A life worth living requires not only goodness and beauty, but also truth. While in cynical, discouraged moments, we may wonder whether reality is overrated, few of us would volunteer to live in close contact with the chaos of delusion or psychosis. Truth matters. Some of us move

through life always looking for opportunities to be truthful and to celebrate truth. In order to be truthful and to celebrate truth, we need an exquisite sensitivity in detecting what is false.

The Unitarian Universalist “language of reverence” controversy began a couple of years ago when Unitarian Universalist Association president Bill Sinkford preached a sermon in Texas which was misinterpreted by a newspaper reporter. The controversy continues to have “legs” because it touches on the stark philosophical and theological diversity among Unitarian Universalists. In my experience here and elsewhere, it seems to me that the Unitarian Universalists who are most upset about encroaching “God talk” and “language of reverence” matters tend to move through life looking for opportunities to be truthful and to celebrate truth.

Spoiler alert: I am about to use a washing machine metaphor. Truth matters; the pursuit of truth is very important. The ability to reason about truth is vital in human development in general and in liberal religion, in particular.

However, if the pursuit of truth is not balanced by a pursuit of beauty and a pursuit of goodness, the pursuit of truth is an unbalanced washing machine. The rocking and rolling and noise can cause us to underestimate the worthwhile cleaning under way. I am a proud mobile home owner, and I know whereof I speak. When my washing machine is unbalanced and lurching, the entire house shakes. Our impulse toward truth must be balanced by our impulses toward goodness and toward beauty.

Moving on to the question of the day: Is an “inclusive” language of reverence even possible? I say no. I say that our lack of an inclusive language of reverence is wonderful, terrific, the cat’s meow, “da bomb,” the best of all worlds!

Some of us believe in God, and some of us do not. If we believe in God, we do not agree on the nature, power, and qualities of God. Some of us who believe in God acknowledge the “supernatural,” and some of us do not. Some of us who do *not* believe in God acknowledge the “supernatural,” if by that you mean unusual experiences (anomalies that cannot be explained by

current science). Some of us who believe in God believe that we are part of God, and some of us do not. If we believe that we are part of God, we do not agree on what that means.

We could debate until the cows come home about what is “natural” in contrast to “supernatural.” We could debate until the cows come home about whether “God” exists or whether “God” does not and, if “God” exists, whether “God” might have started a few processes in motion and then absconded from the scene of the crime. That is, more or less, the Deist point of view -- “Deus Absconditus.”

We could debate until the cows come home about whether “belief” is even relevant. As the philosopher Ken Wilber puts it, “You can believe in God, you can have faith in God, or you can be God.” Belief is the least of it.

I believe that there can be no inclusive language of reverence without resorting to the blandness of the least common denominator. I love wisdom, compassion, and love as much as the next person, but any language of reverence that is reduced to the least common denominator is not robust enough.

What is the alternative to an inclusive language of reverence? Unitarian Universalists draw from a living tradition, which means that *your* presence makes a difference. Here are some of the sources of our tradition:

- Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men
- Wisdom from the world's religions
- Jewish and Christian teachings, in particular
- Humanist teachings
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions

Each and every source of the living tradition of Unitarian Universalism has its *own* language of reverence. We can speak our truth, and we can listen generously to others as they hear truth in

themselves.¹ We can show our own beauty, and we can attend generously to others as they show their beauty. We can share our goodness, and we can receive graciously the goodness of others.

I love Unitarian Universalism for the broad collection of its sources. No other religious tradition draws from this collection: mysticism, history, all the religions of the world, Judaism and Christianity in particular, humanism, and Paganism. Each of our sources has its own language of reverence.

As Unitarian Universalists, it is our privilege and our responsibility to give voice to the languages of reverence of every one of our sources, in turn. This cannot be done in one fell swoop. It cannot be done in a single Sunday service or a single prayer or a single talk or a single “talk back” or a single Seder or Christmas service or Solstice service or Easter service or Equinox service.

The language of reverence of mysticism is *not* the language of reverence of history is *not* the language of reverence of the world’s religions is *not* the language of reverence of Judaism and Christianity, in particular, is *not* the language of reverence of humanism is *not* the language of reverence of Paganism. Reverence is about respect, not agreement. If Unitarian Universalists cannot make space in their hearts and in their Sunday services to hear words, phrases, idioms, and stories belonging to a Unitarian Universalist source other than their own favorite source, I have to wonder about the depth of their commitment to Unitarian Universalism.

The vocation of being a solitary practitioner is always available to us. We can be mystics, social justice activists, partisans of any of the world’s religions, Jews, Christians, humanists, or Pagans without being part of any religious congregation, let alone part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. However, we mystics, social justice activists, partisans of any of the world’s religions, Jews, Christians, humanists, or Pagans who find our way to Unitarian Universalism and embrace it are called to something else, to something different.

¹ This is a reference to a quote by Rachel Naomi Remen that appeared as a “centering thought” in the Order of Service: “When you listen generously to people they can hear the truth in themselves, often for the first time.”

Regarding a language of reverence, we “speak in tongues.” Speaking in tongues does not require much effort. In contrast, it takes effort to “listen in tongues.”² With whom does the burden of translation lie? If, when we speak in our particular language of reverence, the burden of translation lies with others, then we are speaking in tongues. If, when we listen to others speak their particular language of reverence, the burden of translation lies with us, then we are “listening in tongues.”

May we “listen in tongues.” May we refuse to be silenced. May it be so!

² See this blog entry for a description of the occasion on which a Quaker used the phrase “listening in tongues.”
<http://friend-in-need.blogspot.com/2007/05/listening-in-tongues.html>