

The Language of Reverence
April 27, 2008
Vanessa R. Southern, preaching

Reading: “We Astronomers” from A Responsibility to Awe by Rebecca Elson (Manchester: Carcanet/OxfordPoets, 2001)

We astronomers are nomads,
Merchants, circus people,
All the earth our tent.

We are industrious.
We breed enthusiasms,
Honour our responsibility to awe.

But the universe has moved a long way off.
Sometimes, I confess,
Starlight seems too sharp,

And like the moon
I bend my face to the ground,
To the small patch where each foot falls,

Before it falls,
And I forget to ask questions,
And only count things.

Sermon

A few years ago in a lecture our own David Bumbaugh, minister emeritus of this congregation, raised the issue of our need, as a movement for what he called, “a language of reverence.” It was a call that our president, Bill Sinkford, took up and echoed by others and now there have been workshops and even a collection of essays on the subject. The guiding motivation for the call issued was that so much traditional religious language that once served those purposes for so many is often unusable in our communities – either because it is worn out and fossilized, no longer poetic and evocative in ways it once was, but also because it so often didn’t speak to the breadth of theological perspectives present in our communities. Words like “Lord,” for instance, become useless either because they evoke the presence of a God whose distance or authoritative presence doesn’t speak to our sense of God anymore, or because many came to believe in no formal god at all.

There is more history to this conversation than just that, however. This quest is one that is longstanding in the humanist world. In his book Reason and Reverence, the Reverend Bill Murray of our Unitarian Universalist movement wrote of the Humanist Manifesto that, “[its] signers were attempting to introduce to the world a new kind of religion, one that left the myths, symbols, and rituals of traditional religion behind while providing a foundation for morality and meaning grounded in human reason.” Over time, however, humanists of that era would discover

that language of simple reason was too dry to hold the rich juices that myths and symbols and rituals of traditional religion, at their best, had held and offered their believers.

In the face of all of this, language was lost, but there remained the need to capture something of what religious language had always captured. And myth and its power through story got lost too. “What I want is a mythology so huge,” writes Rebecca Elson,

That settling on its grassy bank
(which may at first seem ordinary)
You catch sight of the frog, the stone,
The dead minnow jeweled with flies,
And remember all at once
The things you had forgotten to imagine.

There was a need to capture and recall us to all the things we had forgotten to imagine.

David Bumbaugh, at a talk at our annual gathering of Unitarian Universalists in 2004 in Long Beach, said that what we needed was, “a vocabulary [that talks about] our place in this wonderful, awesome, dangerous, beautiful world”; A language that captures the, “profound feeling of respect mixed with wonder, fear, and luck.” What we needed is language that helps us name the fleeting sense we sometimes have of our place in the order of things, that “reminds us that we are a vulnerable and precious part of a vulnerable and precious world.”

This is language that would capture things like the experiences of wonder, awe, gratitude and humility, that momentary sense we sometimes have of all that what we ourselves were part of and that is larger than we are; perhaps even trenchant fear at the precariousness of life and a renewed commitment to appreciate and protect all that we hold dear. To find language that taps into and reminds us of all of this is vital to our shared religious lives. How could we find a new, vital and alive and shared language of reverence?

A chorus of religious humanists, scientists, poets and philosophers are already engaged in the work of looking to the natural world and in the stories science for such a language and the new, larger mythology. Look, for example, at Rebecca Elson’s poem “Evolution.” In it, Elson, an astronomer (PhD from Cambridge) and poet, writes about our birth into the world. She writes:

We are survivors of immeasurable events,
Flung upon some reach of land,
Small, wet miracles without instructions,
Only the imperative of change.

Here is the wonder and the miracle of our birth. Our species the survivors of immeasurable events, unforeseen mutations, cataclysmic planetary events – we, water-based creatures who finally came to walk upon land, “small, wet miracles without instructions,” as she says, born without guidance, finding our way through billions of years to walk and think and feel and make homes and create tools and gather in tribes and -- driven only by the imperative to change – adapting and surviving to create works of beauty, means to facilitate great healing, find the gift of language, and even the miracle of poetic self-consciousness. It is astounding that we are here at all. And it doesn’t require a God who holds us, dust in his hand, and breathes into us the breath of life to make the story astounding. Just the story of science alone is astounding.

Indeed, *this* language of reverence is about reveling in the things we hold in our hands, in what we see under a microscope or in the vast night sky and even in the human life cycle. Think

how often the birth of a child instills reverence and bring a mother or father or grandparent to his or her knees. How common it is for every person in the room where the child breathes his or her first breath and cries and moves and enters the world to have the overwhelming sense that they stand in witness to the sacred, to something sacred. "I bore you one morning just before spring," Audrey Lorde wrote in her poem "Now That I Am Forever with Child." "My head rang like a fiery piston/my legs were towers between which /A new world was passing."

"An invitation to reverence," David Bumbaugh said, "is all around us." Whenever we stand in the presence of what lies just beyond our control, just beyond our ability to comprehend it. "A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science," Carl Sagan believed, "might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths." Sagan, once wrote, "The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant." (*Pale Blue Dot.*) Nature, science – they have the power to bring us to our knees or wakes us up. When the world itself, in all its wonder, is allowed to work its magic on us, like Rebecca Elson we are reminded, not to bend too much to the grinding details of life and forget to question and simply count things.

This search for language of reverence looks to places, as Richard Dawkins says, where it can "touch the nerve-endings of transcendent wonder that religion monopolized in past centuries" (p.33, God Delusion).

I find much of this quest to expand and renew our religious vocabulary thrilling. The idea of weaving in the story of science and the poetic insights and wonderings it calls us to is exhilarating. Elson has a gorgeous poem about yearning, another on the fear of death. Nothing of human experience needs to be lost in the transfer. Mary Oliver, through the prism of nature sees the pain and the beauty of human life without necessarily a Godly presence there to hold to account for what she and we suffer and the heartbreaking beauty we rend from life. I love Mary Oliver's poem "In Blackwater Woods" so often read at UU funerals. It is a naturalists account of death, but bounds it in wonder too. It ends:

Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able

to do three things:
to love what is mortal,
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

In this new quest for a language of reverence everything created is a book waiting to be read, every field of science a canvass in a museum of wonder and revelation ready to challenge and inspire and even confound those who stand before it. And those who are looking to nature and science for language of reverence are calling others to stand with them.

These writers and seekers are right: language does often grow old and used, dated or threadbare. And it has always been the work of the poet or visionary or someone who cannot stand to have life spoken about in such paltry terms to breathe life into language again, to make it relevant, and to take it back to the places where generation after generation has believed humanity is best anchored if we are to feel fully alive and oriented for a life that feels powerful and meaningful and dear.

I am excited about what this quest for new language, rooted in science, but poetic is offering us. Certainly a language and set of stories rooted in science will more easily tie us back to the interconnected web of life, to reverence for all life, to an environmental ethic that may save all our lives. And it makes room in our faith for another part of the truth we have come to know to find its rightful place.

If I have a reservation with regard to this effort it is that I am not willing, as so many of the folks in this conversation seem willing to, to leave the old language and the stories and myths of traditional religion behind entirely. For me, the stories of many of the world's great religious traditions, even if complicated, often have value for me. I can read them metaphorically. I can interpret them at face value or in historic context in ways that are still life giving. I *love* the layers of history behind them, the way the stories thread through our own history, the songs we have sung inspired by the stories, the art we have created. So, yes, the Exodus story we read last week does include a passage that says the Jews can kill whoever gets in the way to the Promised Land and that isn't in keeping with my sense of what that journey needs to look like. However, the Exodus story, the story of liberation from bondage is still a powerful one.

I wouldn't want to lose the poetic value of all those stories and myths because we wouldn't do the work to call it out. And the same, for me, goes for some traditional religious language. I'm not willing to leave it behind because it doesn't fit. I love words like grace and sin and what they offer us a chance to name – on the one hand that sense of an unearned gift from the universe; on the other radical brokenness and all that it rends apart. Sure we have some work to do to reinterpret these words, but they bring with them some history and heft too. And I want to keep them.

In her poem "Morning in a New Land" Mary Oliver describes the day handed up to us so generously each morning to us all each time the sun rises. She does it in imagery and inspiration

from nature, calling up an ancient story in new light, and leading us toward awe and gratitude for each day. This is my idea of how this work of renewal of the old begins to work new magic:

In trees still dripping night some nameless birds
Woke, shook out their arrowy wings, and sang,
Slowly, like finches sifting through a dream.
The pink sun fell, like glass, into the fields.
Two chestnuts, and a dapple gray,
Their shoulders wet with light, their dark hair streaming,
Climbed the hill. The last mist fell away,

And under the trees, beyond time's brittle drift,
I stood like Adam in his lonely garden
On that first morning, shaken out of sleep,
Rubbing his eyes, listening, parting the leaves,
Like tissue on some vast, incredible gift.

I see no reason why this quest for language of reverence can't allow for all of this – for the story of science with its grandeur, its cruelty, its inspiration and stark warnings AND the use and reinterpretation of traditional stories and language that still have power and draw for us. Moreover, I see no reason why it cannot also include as it always has for us here, the stories of history told in evocative ways, the insight drawn from the grist of one another's life stories, and also poetry and prose that points toward mystery, the great we-know-no-what in our experience of life and the universe and ourselves, the great know-not-what in our struggle to answer some of life's most important questions. There has to be a place for all that calls to stand in awe, humble unknowing, insane joy, moments of transformation and liberating clarity, even fear -- all that captures what we, in fact, feel in relationship to our lives and this world; those feelings that so often either bring us to our knees or raise us up above our station to serve in the right spirit, the so-called Spirit of Life. This is what religious language, at its best, has always done and what it always must indeed be challenged and re-challenged to do.

May we help one another find and create such language so our lives may be ennobled and our journey inspired by the truths we have come to know, and struggled to put into the fragile vessels of words.