

*Breadcrumbs, Crash Helmets and Life Preservers*  
**Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka**  
**Sunday September 16, 2007**

READINGS

Introduction to *Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence*

By Rev. David Bumbaugh

As an observer of and participant in contemporary Unitarian Universalism, I have found myself of late wondering what has happened to the Humanist witness among us. How has it happened that we, who once seemed to set the agenda for religious discourse, now find ourselves increasingly on the defensive, if not engaged in monologue? I would submit that to some degree at least we are talking to ourselves because we have allowed ourselves to be defined by the opposition. We have dismissed traditional religion as an atavistic aberration. We have given up the hope of a constructive dialogue. We have manned the ramparts of reason and are prepared to defend the citadel of the mind against a renewal of superstition until the very end. But in the process of defending, we have lost the vocabulary of reverence, the ability to speak of that which is sacred, holy, of ultimate importance to us, the language that would allow us to enter once more into critical dialogue with others. If this be so, then the recovery of a vital vocabulary of reverence is a task of great urgency for those of us who cherish the Humanism tradition.

**From “The Tracker”**

By Tom Brown, Jr.

The mystery reveals itself slowly, track by track, giving its genealogy early to coax you in. Further on, it will tell you the intimate details of its life and work, until you know the maker of the track like a lifelong friend...The mystery leaves itself like a trail of breadcrumbs, and by the time your mind has eaten its way to the maker of the tracks, the mystery is inside you, part of you forever. The tracks of every mystery you have ever swallowed move inside your own tracks, shading them slightly or skewing them with nuances that show how much more you have become that what you were.

**Reading from “Teaching a Stone to Talk”**

By Annie Dillard

A high school stage play is more polished than this service we have been rehearsing since the year one. In two thousand years, we have not worked out the kinks. We positively glorify them. Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God is so mighty he can stifle his own laughter. Week after week, we witness the same miracle: that God, for reasons unfathomable, refrains from blowing our dancing bear act to smithereens...On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday Morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats...to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

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The word “God” does not come to my lips easily. Of course I am an atheist when it comes to believing in that Old Guy In The Sky with a long white beard. Yet my attitude toward the words “God” and “prayer” has evolved, especially in recent years during seminary and as a hospital chaplain.

When I was a child, my family lived a half a block from a naturally flowing creek flowing through our post-World War II residential neighborhood of urban Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The creek was similar to Minnehaha Creek in Minneapolis, where the creek flows between its own earthen banks, large trees overhang the slow moving water, and grass and flowers and tall bushes abound. As a child I loved to climb those big trees and look out over the neighborhood rooftops. I also loved to crawl under those huge bushes, set down branches at an angle and call it my “fort.” I would lie down and gaze at the sky for hours between the high arching branches overhead. I often felt a great sense of peace then, and a deep sense of connection to those trees and bushes, and to that water and sky. As an adult, I see that time as my first conscious encounters with the Great Mystery.

When I was thirteen, I discovered a book called *The Tracker*. The book is an autobiography of Tom Brown’s life as a teenager. When he was eight he met another eight year old boy who was an Apache Indian, and whose grandfather was an Apache holy man. For eight years the holy man, Stalking Wolf, taught the two boys how to track animals and live in nature, respecting and honoring the flow of natural life. At age 13, I was absolutely captivated by this book. It was one of those books that stays with you your whole life, and I even quoted from it for a term paper I wrote for my Film and Theology class my first semester in seminary.

The importance of the book for me is captivated in the reading we heard earlier. For the first time I read something that articulated the way I felt connected to the whole world all around me, especially the world of nature: “The mystery leaves itself like a trail of breadcrumbs, and by the time your mind has eaten its way to the maker of the tracks, the mystery is inside you, part of you forever.”

I have followed the breadcrumbs of nature in ever more intricate spirals between being alone and being in community. It is one thing to feel connected to the universe while being in nature, but it is quite another to feel connected to the universe while living in a concrete city or after joining a large group of people with many different perspectives and beliefs.

If we are one person alone, it is easier to believe and behave the way we alone choose. But when we chose to join with something larger than our selves, be it a loving partnership or a spiritual community, our beliefs and actions are subject to challenge, negotiation and compromise. Unlike more conservative religions, our Unitarian Universalist congregations are groups of voluntary association. We do not have a creed, we do not require baptism or confirmation, and our members may be theists, atheists, Humanists, agnostics, Pagans, or a wide variety of other theologies. We do not ask people to check their reason or skepticism at the door, but this is also not a place where you can believe what you want. We do have common values and we do covenant with other Unitarian Universalist congregations to affirm and promote a set

of Principles and Purposes. One of our tasks then, as a spiritual community of voluntary association, is to explore and articulate why it is we join together, and to figure out just what it is we are doing here together on a Sunday morning.

During my candidating week here last spring as you were sizing me up to decide whether or not you would call me as your next minister, I was asked the question: “What do you think about clapping during the service on Sunday mornings?” For me, this is not so much a difficult question to answer, as it is an invitation to spiritual growth, to explore with more intention and depth what it means to be in this spiritual community together. I cannot answer this question without first examining why are we here on a Sunday morning; that examination is interwoven with questions about worship; when we talk about worship, we need to ask what, or whom, or whether we worship...which then forces us to examine the larger forces of the Universe that called us into existence.

If you have been around Unitarian Universalism a while, you may remember the hullabaloo in 2003 when a newspaper in Fort Worth, Texas, reported that our president, the Reverend Bill Sinkford, gave a sermon in which he called for UUs to add the word “God” to the UUA statement of Principles and Purposes. Sinkford immediately issued a statement declaring that he had been misinterpreted; he had expressed “wonderment” that the Principles and Purposes lacked “traditionally religious” language. He had not called for their revision, but more broadly, for UUs to reclaim a “vocabulary of reverence,” including the word “God.”

What people may not know is that President Sinkford was inspired to write his sermon after reading a 2001 sermon by Reverend David Bumbaugh called, “Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence.” David Bumbaugh began his ministry as a Universalist in 1959, two years before the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists in 1961. He has always been a keen observer of UU history, structure, and activism in the world, and continues to eloquently articulate a religious worldview closely aligned with religious Humanism. He also taught the preaching classes I took at Meadville/Lombard UU seminary in Chicago, and I am deeply honored to announce that he accepted my invitation to preach the sermon at my ordination service here in this congregation next spring.

In his sermon, “Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence,” and in subsequent talks, David Bumbaugh believes we UUs have handed over religious language to fundamentalist traditions, and have allowed them to define religious words for us. In the process of defending our position against traditional Christianity, Bumbaugh says, “we have lost the vocabulary of reverence, the ability to speak of that which is sacred, holy, of ultimate importance to us, the language that would allow us to enter once more into critical dialogue with others.”

I cannot do justice to David Bumbaugh’s entire sermon in this sermon, but he takes as his starting point the original Humanist Manifesto from 1933 that, among other things, honors religion as a constant in its quest for abiding human values, as an inseparable feature of human life, rejects the dualism of mind and body, and believes that we humans are part of nature and have emerged as a result of a continuous process.

In his invitation to rediscover and use a Humanist language of reverence, David Bumbaugh eloquently describes great scientific discoveries of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. We have discovered subatomic particles that “emerge from and return to an undifferentiated void, a world in which particles oscillate in time, between past a future [and are] changed and altered by the very act of observing [them].” At the other end, we have discovered an evolving universe that is many billions of years old and is larger and more varied than we can imagine. “Curiously enough,” Bumbaugh writes, “much of our insight into the early history of the universe emerges

from and resonates with our insights into the interaction of subatomic particles which suggests a strongly recursive Universe in which patterns repeat and recur over many scales. The more we understand about the macrocosm, the more reason we have to stand in awe and reverence at the process that shaped and structured its evolution and *our* evolution.”

Awe and reverence. This is where we begin, in this state of awe and reverence for the universe that, stage after stage, spiral after spiral, eon after eon, evolution after evolution, called us into being. We are not an end product, and we are not insignificant in the universe, but from our human perspective as midpoints between the microcosm of subatomic particles and the macrocosm of a universe beyond our imagining, we may begin to understand that we are not creatures who live in this universe or on this planet. We carry in our very bodies the elements that originated from exploding stars from the beginning of the universe many billions of years ago. We beings of earth, we creatures of Gaia, do not live *in* this Universe, we are expressions *of* the universe.

It is in this context that I must address the question of clapping during the Sunday morning service. According to David Bumbaugh, we are called by the magnitude of the universe to discover a vocabulary of reverence as we approach our time together as a spiritual community in an attitude of awe and reverence. According to Annie Dillard, what most churches do on Sunday morning is a “dancing bear act” and we are nothing but “children playing on the floor with...chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday Morning.” So which one will it be for us?

I do not feel it is my role to stand up here and demand specific behaviors. But I do feel it is part of my role to hold up our beliefs in one hand and to lift up our behaviors in the other hand and ask if they are in alignment.

Though I have heard, here and elsewhere, that a desire to clap comes from a desire to express appreciation, my observation, here and elsewhere, is that the congregation claps only after a musical performance. I have never seen a congregation clap after a chalice lighting, or after a prayer, or after the completion of singing a hymn together. I am not suggesting we become a Puritanical New England congregation of crusty white people who obediently fold our hands for an hour every Sunday. On the contrary, I would be fine with people clapping in joy and enthusiasm or shouting “Amens” throughout the *entire* service at anything they found to be startling or delightful.

As a professional holy man, I approach worship as an artistic endeavor, a crafted, living piece of imagination intended to provide beauty and meaning in the hearts and minds of the people who are participants in it. When clapping occurs only after a piece of music, it feels to me as though we see ourselves only as audience and performers, the entertainers and the entertained, and not as a spiritual community gathered in a common endeavor. I understand worship not as a concert or a play – I have never seen one actor applaud another in the middle of a performance – but rather as a communal act of awe and reverence before that which called us into existence.

By using the words “awe” and “reverence” I do not necessarily mean “solemn.” In fact, I hope that what we do here on a Sunday morning is vibrant, engaging, participatory, and that we are nothing like those church children Annie Dillard describes who are “playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday Morning.” What I want to do with our worship together is to provide crash helmets and life preservers: “It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats...we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers

and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

We have in our very bodies and communal resources the ancient power of exploded stars. According to David Bumbaugh, the Humanist Manifesto “gave us a doctrine of incarnation that suggests not that the holy became human in one place at one time to convey a special message to a single chosen people, but that the universe itself is continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, hummingbirds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms, and in every living thing.” This religious story is our story, and is a “vision of reality that contains the sources of moral, ethical, transcendent self-understanding.”

When we see worship as a communal act of awe and reverence before that which calls us into being, we then allow ourselves to be drawn out beyond ourselves by the waking god to a place where we can never return. We are called to the world beyond these thin walls. This is the power of communal religious work, of communal spiritual identity, of communal worship, the power we have in our very blood and bones: it is the power to save and transform lives.