

“Dimensions of Religion: The Experiential Dimension”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
October 15, 2006
Bruce A. Bode

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather together on this special Sunday morning.

Here we are come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history; blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

Blessed is the fire that burns deep in the soul.

It is the flame of the human spirit touched into being by the mystery of life.

It is the fire of reason, the fire of compassion, the fire of community, the fire of justice, the fire of faith.

It is the fire of love burning deep in the human heart, the divine glow in every life.

(Eric Heller-Wagner)

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: That day I see a leaf is a marvel of a day. Many days I see millions of leaves without seeing one leaf.

CONGREGATION: I am a small marvel, a penny mystery. Generations of people have lived, bearing the same mystery as I, yet all are reduced to me, one person.

MINISTER: I am as much a mystery as the whole race. One gnat is as much a quandary as all of life.

CONGREGATION: To look at the sprouting eyebrow of a house cat is to be stupefied before the unquestionable.

MINISTER: Stay away from the microscope; it is a tunnel down which you can fall into unnamed worlds.

CONGREGATION: In the smallness of the small, beyond the eye's coping, is enough majesty to strike a horde of angels dumb, and make Almighty God speechless.

MINISTER: What need have I of horticultural halls and botanical gardens, who have found a yellow dandelion flower, and the purple fire of the thistle?

CONGREGATION: I will ride up to heaven on a fragile sail of milkweed.

MINISTER: Pardon me; I must attend to the universe. There is an ant on my hand.
(Ken Patton, "Small Majesties," adapted)

Meditation

Let us enter into our time of silent meditation and prayer with this poem from the Islamic Sufi poet, Rumi, titled "Begin":

This is now. Now is,
all there is. Don't wait for Then;
strike the spark, light the fire.

Sit at the Beloved's table,
feast with gusto, drink your fill

then dance
the way branches
of jasmine and cypress
dance in a spring wind.

The green earth
is your cloth;
tailor your robe
with dignity and grace.

Reading

My reading this morning, as I speak about the experiential dimension of religion, is from poet Walt Whitman, a great champion of "experience."

It seems that Whitman, who lived from 1819-1892, underwent some kind of immense experience of mystical union when he was in his early- to mid-thirties. Out of that deeply personal, unitive experience there emerged a whole new kind of poetry, in both form and content, in which he tried with all his might for the rest of his life to convey a sense of the value and unity of all life and of the importance of discovering this value and unity for oneself.

My reading consists of a series of short excerpts from a much longer poem titled, "A Song for Occupations."

There is something that comes to one now and perpetually,
It is not what is printed, preach'd, discussed, it eludes discussions and print,

It is not to be put in a book, it is not in this book,
It is for you whoever you are, it is no farther from you than your hearing and sight
are from you,
It is hinted by nearest, commonest, readiest, it is ever provoked by them.

The sun and stars that float in the open air,
The apple-shaped earth and we upon it, surely the drift of them is something grand,
I do not know what it is except that it is grand, and that it is happiness,...

The light and shade, the curious sense of body and identity, ...
The endless pride and outstretching of man[kind], unspeakable joys and sorrows,
The wonder everyone sees in everyone else [that one] sees..., and the wonders that
fill each minute of time forever,...

We consider bibles and religions divine – I do not say they are not divine,
I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still,
It is not they who give the life, it is you who give the life,...

The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are,
The President is there in the White House for you, it is not you who are here for him,
The Secretaries act in their bureaus for you, not you here for them,
The Congress convenes every Twelfth-month for you,...

All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it,...

All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments,...

Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at last,
In things best known to you finding the best, or as good as the best,
In folks nearest to you finding the sweetest, strongest, lovingest,
Happiness, knowledge, not in another place but this place, not for another hour but
this hour,...

(Excerpts from “A Song for Occupations,” Leaves of Grass)

“DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION: THE EXPERIENTIAL DIMENSION”

Introduction

What is religion, and what does it mean to be “religious”?

In these first six weeks of our new church year, as we are looking to the future of this religious organization, I have been exploring these questions through an outline suggested by English scholar of world religions, Ninian Smart, who defines religion as a “six-dimensional organism.”

So what is religion as you look at it world-wide and throughout human history? In Ninian Smart's model, it is a six-dimensional organism consisting of the ritual, mythological, doctrinal, ethical, social, and experiential dimensions.

Each of the last five weeks I have explored another of these dimensions, looking at it first in general terms, then how it relates to liberal religion and our Unitarian Universalist congregations, then to this congregation, and finally to us individually and personally. Today, in this final week, I will be exploring what to me is to the most fundamental and interesting of these six dimensions, the experiential dimension.

Also, each week in this series I have begun these sermons by addressing the question of what it means to be a religious being. I have argued that we are not made religious by being associated with one of these six-dimensional organisms, but rather that we are religious beings in our very nature, just as we are social beings in our very nature, and it is because of this religious nature that these six-dimensional organisms or religions emerge. That is, they emerge as a means of addressing and dealing with our religious nature.

What it means to be religious

And what is our religious nature? A clue is found in the very word "religion" itself, something that delights me.

The word "religion" derives from the Latin "*religio*," which in turn has the little root word "*lig*" in it. "*Lig*" means "to tie" or "to bind" or "to link." Then you add the Latin prefix, "*re*," and you have "to re-tie," "to re-bind," "to re-link."

But what has been separated or disconnected so that it needs to be "re-tied," or "re-bound," or "re-linked?"

The answer is that we humans have separated or been split off from our source, from our wholeness, from nature, from God – pick your term.

Because of the evolutionary development of the neo-cortex of the brain, we humans have the capacity to stand apart from that which has birthed us. We are consciously aware of standing out or standing apart from the creativity that has produced us.

We *appear* upon this earth. We are not self-created or self-produced; we have emerged from something that pre-existed us and is larger than us. And we have the capacity to know and reflect upon this.

In the language of psychology, we have evolved an "ego," a sense of a separate identity that experiences a degree of freedom from its source and must now determine how it shall act, what it shall value, and to what it shall give its allegiance.

We are creatures who have the capacity to choose. It is our “fate to be free.” We cannot not be free. Freedom is our destiny; it is our delight; it is also our discomfort and disquiet ... for it is freedom and our capacity to choose that brought about our “fall” from the mythical Garden of Eden, that land of “dreaming innocence”.

Unable to resist the “temptation” to choose our own way, our species separated from the animals and stood out from nature. We lost our psychological wholeness, a wholeness that we envy in young children. And we experienced the anxiety that comes with having to choose.

Most disquieting of all, we learned of our mortality. We learned that this remarkable creature, who had awoken from sleepy unconsciousness and who had experienced its own separate identity and point of view – we learned that this sense of personal identity was temporary, not everlasting. We learned that this creature, whose awareness could stretch to the farthest ends of the universe and beyond, would all too soon fall back to sleep and return to the dust of the earth and the organic elements from which it had arisen.

All of this relates to the “burden of consciousness,” the burden that comes with a sense of personal identity and a sense of separation and standing apart from the source of our being.

But this separation from nature and from the “dreaming innocence” of the Garden of Paradise has also been called the “fall upward” ... for our split with nature and our development of a separate sense of identity and point of view allows us to see and feel and relate in new ways to the source of our being.

And this is the wonderful potential of religion then – though how often it achieves this potential is another matter – but it is the potential to assist in re-relating or re-linking us to our source, and this time *consciously*, not simply to sink us back unconsciously into nature, but to relate us consciously to that larger reality from which we have emerged and evolved.

Using the traditional symbols of Western religion, it is the journey from the Garden of Paradise to the New Jerusalem. Both are symbols of wholeness, but it is not the same kind of wholeness, for the wholeness at the end of the journey is a conscious wholeness.

This is what is implied in the word “religion” itself. It is a re-binding, a re-linking, a re-relating to the source of your being, and being aware that this is what is happening.

The experiential dimension of religion

This brings me, then, to the experiential dimension of religion. And even though I am speaking about this experiential dimension last in this series, it is really first in importance. It is the essence of the religious quest: how to be related to the ultimate source of your being. How are you part of the whole, and how is the whole part of you?

Joseph Campbell, who has a different model for approaching religion, speaks of four functions of mythology or religion. They are: the mystical or metaphysical, the cosmological, the sociological, and the pedagogical or psychological. It's a different model than what I have been following in this series and worthy of its own series sometime.

But in his scheme he puts the mystical or metaphysical function first. And this function, he says, has to do with awakening the individual to the wonder and miracle of their life and to the underlying mystery from which life emerges. That's the first function of religion, which corresponds to Ninian Smart's experiential dimension of religion.

The experiential dimension of religion is the most inward and personal part of religion in which you experience your relation and connection to the depth of your being. You stand apart from it and are aware of standing apart from it, but you are also connected to it and can be aware of that connection.

The experiential dimension of religion, then, is the delicious experience of that connection or re-connection. And being aware of that connection is what makes it most delicious of all.

Joseph Campbell describes a custom in India of drawing a red circle around an object. It can be any object: a tree, stone, a coin, an animal. (All cows in India are as if they have red circles drawn around them.)

When you draw a red circle around an object, that object now becomes the occasion for a meditation, a meditation on the mystery and wonder of that object's being.

That object becomes a holy object. That is to say, you are not considering it in terms of its practicality and usefulness to you, you are thinking of it as it is in itself, a fragment of being that has arisen, as e. e. cummings says, from the "no of all nothing," a fragment of being which now stands nakedly before you beckoning you to come hither and lose yourself in its embrace – "Stay away from the microscope; it is a tunnel down which you can fall into unnamed worlds." (Ken Patton)

Any object in time and space can draw you into itself. Goethe said, "All things are metaphors." (Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p. 230) That is, any fragment of being in time and space speaks of and is a symbol of the whole of reality. Each and every fragment of being points beyond itself to the indescribable power of being that is, was, and always will be.

And perhaps the greatest wonder of all is that you, also a fragment of being, have the capacity to behold the mysterious presence of these other fragments of being. You are the power of being come to consciousness and beholding itself – being contemplating being.

So this is how I like to speak of the experiential dimension of religion. But, of course, there are many ways of speaking of this, and many methods for seeking connection, and many names by which to address the source of our being, this field of wild energy from which we have come.

As an example, last Sunday immediately after our services I went to the East Shore Unitarian Church in Seattle for the ordination of a colleague. Arriving early, I and a fellow minister heard chanting coming from the sanctuary of the church, which proved, upon investigation, to be a gathering of Hindu worshippers, mostly East Indian.

Invited in, we took seats near the back of the sanctuary and sat for a straight hour of chanting and singing in a language we did not speak – men and boys on one side, women and girls on the other. But though I could not understand the language, I could feel the rhythm and I could sense what they were after: a sense of connection to a larger self and to the infinite and unimaginable power that rolls through all things.

This, I would say, is the primary religious experience, the experience of the connection of your small being with larger being, and the wonder and miracle of it all.

The experiential dimension in liberal religion and Unitarian Universalists congregations

Turning now to liberal religion and to our Unitarian Universalist congregations with respect to this experiential dimension of religion:

The chief features of religious liberals in relation to religious experience is the understanding that:

- 1) We are all offspring of the same creative power and, as such, all capable of experiencing our connection to this creativity. No one is or ultimately can be shut out from it.
- 2) That there can be different methods for realizing this connection.
- 3) That these methods are self-chosen so that one's experience is direct and does not need to be mediated by another.

The religious liberals in a given religion are the ones who look to the teaching and teachers of their religion for clues, hints, and assistance, but not as substitutes for their own direct, individual and personal experience.

For religious liberals, the teachers in a religion are just that: teachers, guides, helpers; but not saviors, mediators, or intermediaries. One is ultimately on the same playing field with the teacher – a brother, a sister, a fellow traveler, a fellow seeker.

Thus: “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him” – a harsh statement meant to jolt you into the realization that you can’t look to another figure, not even the most revered or accomplished soul, to make a connection for you. That’s your work.

The religious experience – the experience of a connection with the cosmos and the powers that play out in it, the experience of participation in the life that is larger than your own – must be your experience. You find and choose the methods that work for you.

Our Unitarian Universalist congregations are congregations of religious liberals in this regard. There are no savior figures, no final authoritative scriptures, nor is there any one prescribed method or ritual practice through which one might seek religious experience.

This is both a blessing and a challenge. A blessing in that one is free. A challenge in that it is helpful to have a spiritual practice or discipline by which and through which one may be opened to the wonder of life and being – but what will that be for you?

I spoke when I first came to this congregation, and again recently, of four faiths within our Unitarian Universalist congregations: Humanism, Naturalism, Mysticism, and Theism. Each of these are different windows opening to the larger reality that transcends our individual being, different avenues and approaches for making a connection to that larger, embracing reality.

And how does a given congregation create possibilities so that persons of each of these different orientations may have the experience of connection and participation?

The experiential dimension of religion at QUUF

Let me turn, then, to this congregation as it relates to this experiential dimension of religion, and let me ask of you:

Does this religious organization help you in relating to and connecting to the larger life of the universe and its creative power? Does being in this sanctuary – which was created as a special space for such contemplation and connection – does being in this sanctuary, and being with these people, and participating in these services help to awaken you to the wonder and miracle of your life and being?

Sometimes you will catch it more than at other times, but to my mind this experience is fundamental to religion and to this religious organization.

It is, of course, a great challenge as a minister to prepare and lead services in which persons of somewhat differing perspectives are present. A minister will obviously have his or her own methods, slants, and biases. Nevertheless, that is my aim.

What I am ultimately after in a service is that each person might be helped to experience their connection to the larger reality of which he or she is a part, whether one understands

that reality in strictly materialistic and naturalistic terms or whether one sees the material, manifest world as the flowering of an unmanifest reality.

So that is my aim, particularly in these services – to help us to reach toward the experience of the connection of our individual selves to a larger self, a larger life.

This, of course, is not something that can be done for you. It is finally the task of each individual person.

Thus, I want to encourage you as individual members of this congregation to find ways that work for you – through small groups, classes of study, music, art, meditation, excursions into nature.

If you feel a need, if you have an idea, don't be shy. Come forward. See if there are others who might like to join you as you seek to become more awake to this one wild and precious life that is yours.

The experiential dimension of religion in individual life

This leads then, in conclusion, to the experiential dimension of religion at the individual and personal level ... which has, first of all, to do with becoming aware of the deep need to consciously connect with the larger reality of which you are a part; and then, being aware of that need, to attend to it in whatever way is most natural and vitalizing for you.

In other words: Don't miss the miracle!

We are here on this earth and in our present incarnations such a short time. Let us not waste this time of our life on greed, envy, pettiness, anger, or defense of our ego.

And with all that might be improved in the world, and with all that might be saved in the world, let us not forget to notice what is already here.

Let us therefore be grateful for what already is – not for what might be, could be, or should be – but for the marvels that the power of being has already produced.

We are, as poet Robinson Jeffers says, “eyes and ears of the universe.” In us the universe has come to consciousness of itself. If we don't see it, who will? If we don't tell the world of its loveliness and complexity, who will?

This is the point that poet Mary Oliver makes in the opening poem of a newly published book titled, Thirst. The opening poem is titled, “Messenger.” The poet sees herself as a messenger.

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird –
equal seekers of sweetness.

Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.

Benediction

In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time
There shall be no ugliness or death
For yourself or for any life that your life touches.

Seek goodness everywhere; when it is found
Bring it out of its hiding-place
And let it be free and unashamed.

Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption.

Encourage virtue into whatever heart
It may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow
By the shame and terror of the world.

In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time
You shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world,
But shall smile instead to its infinite delight and mystery.

(Preface to “The Time Of Your Life” by William Saroyan)

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on October 15, 2006. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)