

“Our Most Persistent Human Need”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
August 3, 2008
Bruce A. Bode

Poetry from Order of Service

Hard to get into the habit of yourself;
Hard to get out of the habit of yourself.

(From "Variations," Gunnar Ekelof, tr. Robert Bly)

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

At times our own light goes out,
And is rekindled by a spark from another person.
Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude
Of those who have lighted the flame within us. (Albert Schweitzer)

Opening Words

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this lovely summer Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve integrity, 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, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth.

CONGREGATION: Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge; it is the servant of discovery.

MINISTER: A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief.

CONGREGATION: Doubt is the touchstone of truth; it is an acid which eats away the false.

MINISTER: Let no one fear for the truth, that doubt may consume it; for doubt is the testing of belief.

CONGREGATION: The truth stands boldly and unafraid; it is not shaken by the testing:

MINISTER: For truth, if it be truth, arises from each testing stronger, more secure.

CONGREGATION: Those that would silence doubt are filled with fear; their houses are built on shifting sands.

MINISTER: But those who fear not doubt, and know its use, are founded on rock.

CONGREGATION: They shall walk in the light of growing knowledge; the work of their hands shall endure.

MINISTER: Therefore let us not fear doubt, but let us rejoice in its help.

CONGREGATION: It is to the wise as a staff to the blind; doubt is the attendant of truth.

(Robert T. Weston)

Reading

A part of my sermon this morning will have to do with the difficult project of becoming an individual. And a paradoxical part of that difficulty is that you can't become an individual without others.

Coming into this world we are completely dependent on others for our very survival, and we remain at least somewhat dependent on others throughout our whole life.

But to be a person means to have your own name and your own independent point of view. It means that, if necessary, you will stand against the whole world, including those upon whom you depend, like a Martin Luther saying, "Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me God."

My reading this morning from the poet Emily Dickinson has to do with this difficult task of being a person in your own right.

And how Emily Dickinson struggled with that issue! Except for a few months she lived in the home of her parents – “her Father’s house,” as she put it, “Father” always spelled with a capital “F.” And in the later years of her life she was almost completely reclusive, rarely leaving the property.

Yet I can hardly think of anyone with a more developed and independent point of view than Emily Dickinson.

The poem I’ve chosen for our reading is, as are many poems, a bit difficult to get on a first reading or just by hearing it. Thus, it’s printed in your Order of Service so that you can follow along.

I will read the poem twice, the first time for sound and feeling, and then a second time with a few interpretive remarks.

I’m ceded – I’ve stopped being Theirs –
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now,
And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I’ve finished threading – too –

Baptized before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace –
Unto supremest name –
Called to my Full – The Crescent dropped –
Existence’s whole Arc, filled up,
With one small Diadem.

My second Rank – too small the first –
Crowned – Crowing – on my Father’s breast –
A half unconscious Queen –
But this time – Adequate – Erect,
With Will to choose, or to reject,
And I choose, just a Crown –

(#508 in Johnson edition; see also #353 in Franklin edition)

And now a second time with a little commentary:

I'm ceded – [I've seceded; I've left the union; I'm my own state now] **I've stopped being Theirs** –
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now,
And They can put it [the old name] with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading – too – [The old decorative life, the training that young ladies of that time received to take their place in society, is over and done with.]

Baptized before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace – [Becoming your own person, discovering your individual identity and true name. This second baptism is an experience of grace.]
Unto supremest name – [Not supreme in relationship or comparison to others, but...]
Called to my Full – The Crescent dropped –
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,
With one small Diadem. [In other words, not the crescent moon anymore, but the full moon. The whole arc of the sky filled with the light of that single light, which is like a crown, not a gaudy or large crown, but a small one, just fitted to the individual.]

My second Rank – [This new rank of self-identity] **too small the first** –
Crowned – Crowning – on my Father's breast –
A half unconscious Queen – [The first crowning was in relationship to outer authority, to the protective Father; she a queen to a king, but only half aware]
But this time – Adequate – Erect,
With Will to choose, or to reject,
And I choose, just a Crown – [“Adequate” and “erect” are important words for Emily Dickinson. To be adequate and erect, not inflated, not deflated; not more than an individual, but not less either. To simply be a person with the capacity to choose or to reject. And she chooses “just a crown,” that “small Diadem” fitted to the individual that yet fills up the whole world with its light.]

“OUR MOST PERSISTENT HUMAN NEED”

Introduction

A number of years ago – it was Sunday, December 16, 1990 – I was privileged to be present for a sermon by my colleague and mentor, Dr. Duncan Littlefair. The sermon had the arresting title, “Our Most Persistent Human Need.”

At the time Dr. Littlefair delivered this sermon he was 78 years old and had spent a lifetime reflecting on the human condition. This added interest to the question for me. After so many years of reflection on and consideration of the human condition, what would he say our most persistent human need might be?

Dr. Littlefair didn’t keep the congregation long in suspense; he answered with the opening words of his sermon, saying:

Our most persistent, urgent, desperate, universal human need is for self approval. To think well of our self.

(Quoted from a transcribed sermon of Dec. 16, 1990, Fountain Street Church, Grand Rapids, MI)

Simply that. Our most persistent human need is to approve our self, to think well of our self. So I’d like to put that response before you this morning for your consideration.

And, indeed, do we not keep coming back to this concern our whole life through, beginning at about age two when we begin to use the word “I” ...

... which, it seems to me, marks the beginning of the development of *self*-identity, the beginning of what you might say is the *self*-project, the time when we begin to become *self*-conscious, aware of having a self, of being a self ...

... which is what makes us distinctively human. It distinguishes us from the other creatures of our planet, though some others are close to this, and may even be at the early stages of self-consciousness. I’m thinking of chimpanzees, and the great apes, elephants, dolphins, and sometimes I think of dogs and cats, but humans clearly so.

So we're talking this morning about a *human* need – not the basic biological needs that we share with other creatures for food, water, shelter, reproduction, etc. – but a distinctively human need, a need that arises with being *human*, or a need that arises with the evolution of self-consciousness, a need related to the “self-project,” when you look into a mirror and *know* that you are looking at *yourself*, a separate being that is now alive but that you also know one day will also die.

I watched this unfolding of the human project with my children ... the point at which they started to use the word “I” ... which, as I said, was at about two years of age, the beginning of the development of a sense of personal identity ... where they begin to ask about themselves, asking, in effect, “Mommy, Daddy, do you see *me*? Do you love *me*? Do you approve *me*? Is this how you want *me* to be? Is this how you want *me* to act?”

It starts there and never ends – all the way to the end of a life – when we may ask:

What has my life meant?
Have *I* measured up?
Have *I* been what a human being ought to be?
Have *I* done what *I* should have and could have done?
Have *I* been what *I* was called to be?
Is this what *I* was called to be?”

I think in this regard of T.S. Eliot's most difficult words relating to a life-review, where he speaks of:

...the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to other's harm
Which once you took as exercise of virtue.

(From "Little Gidding," Four Quartets)

I'm thinking just now of a lovely woman I knew who had lived a long, rich, and full life into her 90's, much loved and respected by family and friends, but in her dying months reviewing her life with trembling fear, wondering,

questioning, sorrowing: had she fulfilled the human project? She could not convince herself that she had, even though others tried to say she had.

And I think of my theologically very conservative grandfather in his dying days, 96 years old but fully conscious and mentally capable, doubting whether he would make it through the heavenly gate, doubting whether he had passed the test, believing he was unworthy, and pleading on his deathbed with his God to accept him, to receive him, to approve him.

Does not the concept of Final Judgment – a feature of religions world-wide – have its psychological origin in the *self*-project?

Some aspects of self-approval

So let's look at something of what might be involved in thinking well of yourself and of what it means to approve yourself.

1. We might say, first of all, that to approve yourself and to think well of yourself means to have a sense of personal identity, individual judgment, and inner authority ... some idea of who *you* are, of what *you* think and believe, and of what attracts *you* and what repels *you*. And to be basically pleased about your being, to feel, as Emily Dickinson put it, "Adequate – Erect,/ With Will to choose, or to reject."

"Adequate" will do. Not greater than, not less than, but simply adequate. "Adequate" will meet the criterion of our most persistent human need. "Adequate" will provide a sense of human worth and dignity, the first principle of our Unitarian Universalist covenant statement.

So to approve yourself, to think well of yourself, means, in the first place, to have a sense of personal identity as a *human* being and to be basically pleased and happy and honored to be a human being.

How much do you struggle with this concern?

I just returned from the East coast and from leading a week-long workshop on the poetry of Mary Oliver, and I was struck again in re-reading her poems by her struggle to accept the human project of embracing *self*-consciousness. "Do you cherish your humble and silky life?" she asks. ("Peonies," from New and Selected Poems)

For her this is no idle question ... for over and over she writes of the burden of *self*-consciousness, the burden of having a self, of knowing you are a self. In so many of her poems she longs to have the *unselfconsciousness* of the animals or even of the plants. In a poem titled, "Roses, Late Summer," she writes:

If I had another life
I would want to spend it all on some
unstinting happiness.

I would be a fox, or a tree
full of waving branches.
I wouldn't mind being a rose
in a field of roses.

Fear has not yet occurred to them, nor ambition.
Reason they have not yet thought of.
Neither do they ask how long they must be roses, and then what.
Or any other foolish question.

(New and Selected Poems, p. 96)

And in another poem, she imagines herself as lily of the field, which as the gospels say, "neither toils nor spins." Yet she says,

But if I were a lily
I think I would wait all day
for the green face

of the hummingbird
to touch me.
What I mean is,
could I forget myself

even in those feathery fields?

(from "Lilies," New and Selected Poems)

She can't forget *herself*— though often she wishes she could. She wishes she could be free from the self-project, from worrying about the self. She says:

For years and years I struggled

just to love my life.

(from "One or Two Things," New and Selected Poems, p. 122)

The struggle to accept yourself, to accept your humanity, to accept the project that the Powers That Be have thrust upon us, and simply to be adequate, erect. It's a struggle that persists throughout a lifetime ... perhaps our most persistent human need.

2) A second aspect of thinking well of our self and of approving our self may have to do with having a sense of place – perhaps just another way of approaching the same question of feeling adequate.

To feel and believe that we have a place in the world, a place in the universe, a place in the scheme of things.

To feel and believe that we belong; that there's a place here for me; that there's room here for me; that the Powers That Be accept and affirm and approve me; that they welcome me. Or, if they don't welcome me, at least they don't reject me. Perhaps the Powers That Be are indifferent to me. I think one can still have a sense of place under those conditions.

I know what it is to be uprooted from a place where you have lived for many years, and how that is a part of thinking well of yourself. Having a place to call "home."

What a word – "home!" What a concept! What a feeling! To have a home. To be at home. To lose your home. To return home.

It brings me back many years to an experience I had in 1980. I was attending an environmental conference in Washington D. C. with a friend. Actually, at this conference I heard Al Gore give the speech that last year became the basis for his movie, An Inconvenient Truth. So I remember that.

But what I also remember was that on the last evening of the conference my friend had to leave and I was left alone in Washington D. C. by myself, a place where I knew no one. And I remember feeling so forlorn and alone in that hotel room, in that city where I knew no one. I felt so lonely and depressed. I had no sense of belonging, no sense of place. I did not think well of myself. And this was just for one night; I was going home the next day to a wife and a house and a community that I was part of.

I rarely suffer from loneliness, but I think of the many who do suffer from loneliness – day in, day out, month in, month out, year in, year out. I wonder how they make it.

So I suggest that a sense of belonging, a sense of having a home, is part of the persistent human need to think well of one's self.

3) I just alluded to having a wife to come home to. To think well of one's self may also mean having a sense of being loved.

If you have even one person in the world who loves you and who cares for you *as you*, that may be enough for you to think well of yourself. Poet Raymond Carver, near the end of his life, asked this question:

“And did you get what you wanted from this life even so?”

And he answers for himself:

“I did.”

And then he asks:

“And what did you want?”

And he answers:

“To call myself beloved,
to feel myself beloved on the earth.”

(Raymond Carver, “Late Fragment”)

To think well of yourself may mean to have a sense of being loved. Feeling loved would help meet our most persistent human need.

4) And, finally, to think well of your self might also be related to having a sense of purpose in your life. Not necessarily that you know what purpose, if any, this great cosmos holds, but that somehow within the vastness of time and space, you have found a purpose for yourself and your life, a sense of connection, a sense of how you are part of a larger process and a greater wholeness.

To find and have a purpose will go a long way toward approving yourself, toward thinking well of yourself, and toward meeting our most persistent human need.

And so these are four aspects I suggest may have to do with thinking well of yourself.

- 1) First, a sense of personal identity and feeling adequate
- 2) Secondly, a sense of belonging and of place
- 3) Thirdly, a sense of being loved
- 4) Fourthly, a sense of having a purpose

The difficulty in approving our self

But how difficult this human project is! I've suggested this, but I want to end with saying something about the difficulty of the human project so that perhaps we cut ourselves some slack with respect to it when the slogging gets hard.

One of the difficulties of this human project is the *process* by which one develops a sense of self-identity. This is what I talked about in my introduction to my reading this morning, the paradoxical fact that you can't develop an independent point of view or a sense of a self without others – others who support and shape you, others upon whom you continue to depend, and with whom you are in relationship.

It's the struggle that was expressed in the Emily Dickinson poem I read, that triumph of breaking free of the bonds that shaped you, yet without diminishing the persons who have shaped you. In another poem Emily Dickinson writes:

The Props assist the House –
Until the House is Built –
And then the Props withdraw –
And adequate – Erect –

The House support itself –
And cease to recollect
The Scaffold, and the Carpenter –

Just such a Retrospect
Hath the Perfected Life –
A Past of Plank – and Nail –
And Slowness – then the Stagings drop –
Affirming it – A Soul –

(#729 in Franklin edition; see also #1142 Johnson edition)

That's the goal: to be a soul, to grow a soul.

And perhaps the most difficult part of the process is that it's never-ending. One never finally grows a soul, but is always and forever in the *process* of growing a soul. And a part of that process of growing a soul is doubt, insecurity, and anxiety.

To have a sense of identity and to think well of yourself doesn't mean that you are without insecurities, anxieties, or doubts, as we sometimes assume.

Quite the contrary, I take insecurity, anxiety, and doubt to be necessary conditions of *human* life and the human project.

Absence of doubt is no sign to me that one has achieved self-identity or self-approval, though that may be the appearance given.

Frankly, I go on high alert when I hear that someone has no doubt, or when one is trying to talk me into a perspective from which all doubt has been extracted.

To me doubt is part and parcel of the human project.

Do you find that you easily collapse at the disapproval of others, or that you become rattled or fall apart when a given person, or maybe any person, disagrees with your opinion?

I say, "Fine, let it be so. And don't kick yourself over it." It's natural and normal for us human beings; it's part of the human condition.

And it's how we come to be a person ... by over and over stumbling and collapsing and still finding our way. It's through this process that, over time, you begin to discover a resiliency, and a sense of who you are, as well as a sense that there is some underlying support and strength that holds you

and upholds you, and to which you are related: an interior strength that is on your side and that is rooting for you to be a person, to be an individuated human being – a power that says that you, too, have a place in this vast, complex, and wild reality that has birthed you.

Let me end with a great poem of affirmation by Mary Oliver, who, as I said earlier, for years struggled mightily “just to love her life.” Out of that struggle, in the midst of insecurity, fear, doubt, and despair, there emerged this poem of affirmation. It’s titled “Wild Geese.”

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

(Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese,” from New and Selected Poems)

Benediction

There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise.

Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

(Rev. Kendyl R. Gibbons)

Extinguishing of Chalice

And now we extinguish our 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 sermon given by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode on Sunday, August 3, 2008. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)