

Draft

**REVERENCE FOR MIND**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson**  
**November 7, 2010**

Good morning again, everyone. Thank you to everyone who led this service today and also there's someone else to thank, too. Some of you may have been to Founders House lately in the evening and seen the new solar powered lamps outside the front door. Those lamps were purchased by Joe Mullens and I believe that he and Carl Ulbricht installed them. If you see Joe, please thank him if you think of it.

Ok, are there any librarians here?

I ask this question because I want to introduce us to a man who lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We know almost nothing of him. There's nothing about him on Google or other search engines. We don't know what vocation he had or whether there was a spouse, children or other family. We can say he was one of our religious ancestors of fierce inquiry and conviction.

His name was George W. Julian and he wrote an article on December 6, 1887. It was called "The Search for Truth" and appeared in this book of periodical issues called 'The Unitarian Record.'

I should add here (in deepest respect to librarians here) that the book belonged to the Cleveland, Ohio Public Library and was last out or due on July 28, 1888. This book may be very seriously overdue. However, in my defense, it was purchased for me on E-bay as a Christmas gift some years ago by a congregant in Washington State. I have no other information.

Now, I expect most of us here would be attracted to any article entitled "A Search for Truth". Let's face it, we love that search because we love to use our minds. Many here are faculty and students at Clemson. Others have worked professionally in education and other professional fields. There's a rich spectrum of minds in this room covering much of human knowledge.

As some of you know, this is the third of five sermons on reverence. In December I'll speak about reverence of heart and then in January the reverence of irreverence.

I have shared several definitions of reverence from writer and philosopher Paul Woodruff. He writes this, "**Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control--God, truth, justice, nature, even death.**"

I read this definition of reverence to mean that we can be in awe of anything outside of our control. Put another way, we can wonder at the emotional or mental landscape just beyond the horizon of our knowledge. We might ponder the question of life's meaning and continue to expand our understanding from ignorance to insight and refuse to stop. The religious faith we had as children has evolved and transformed into something quite remarkable and perhaps baffling.

It was because we revered our limitations but were not bound to them.

My question to pose this morning is this: **are we Unitarian Universalists truly reverent toward the mind as evolving, growing transforming entity and is that reverence toward our own minds or those of others as well?**

Mr. Julian wrote in his article that his search for truth began at an early age in Indiana. He was dissatisfied with the Methodist religion of his youth because he felt that "religion was not so much a struggle for heaven as a scuffle to escape hell," He called the religion of his childhood volcanic and fiery and with little interest in the mind and its evolution.

As he grew up, Mr. Julian read the "infidel" books available to him and he decided he had a thorough dislike of Orthodoxy. So he became a Unitarian.

Unitarianism of the day was Christian and still believed in the authenticity of Scripture and the divinity of Christ. This was weak milk for Mr. Julian so he continued to expand his mind with other heretics.

Then he discovered the works of William Ellery Channing. He said that Channing treated the doctrines of the Trinity, Total Depravity, Vicarious Atonement and other dogmas as the **"revolting corruptions and deformities of the pure and simple Gospel..."**

Mr. Julian says that this encounter with the Unitarian radical Channing and his works was a breath of fresh air. It expanded his mind into areas where he'd not imagined he could go. Unitarianism was still Christian but it had expanded from narrow creed to a broader understanding of what it was not - bound to the doctrines of Orthodox Christianity - toward what it might become.

It's no surprise that Channing was such an influence. We read the reading a few minutes ago called "The Free Mind" from an essay called Spiritual Freedom published in 1930. Channing wrote **"We are in the midst of influences, which menace the intellect and heart; and to be free, is to withstand and conquer these."** This was part of his rebellion against the religious orthodoxy in America of those days.

If we examine the passages we read, I propose that Channing was applauding reverence for mind. Each initial phrase starting with “I call that mind free” continues with expressions of openness and spaciousness. His final statement is almost Buddhist in its language **“Which is calm in the midst of tumults, and possesses itself, though all else be lost.”**

Another way of saying Channing’s words would be “the mind cannot be contained or bound into slavery to orthodoxy of any kind.” The mind is free but it also has a responsibility to not rest easy or become complacent. A reverent mind is one that has awe for what lies beyond the next thought but also wonders how to get there.

So back to my question for us this morning: do we here have reverence and awe for our minds as individuals or do we need to go further?

In recent times I have become far more aware of the care and nurturing of relationships. Whether it’s two people or a family or this group of fine folks on a Sunday morning, we are far more than individuals who happen to bump into one another, spend time together as separate beings, and then part. It is the sum being far greater than the parts.

Consider Mr. Julian’s story again. He wrote the essay in Santa Fe after many years of correspondence and conversations with religious people. He says nothing about a congregation or community to nurture and challenge him. If he was married and had children, there was no apparent place for them to have a similar experience of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

When he died, there is no indication that anyone was there to say Unitarian prayers or to do a memorial service for him.

For all we know, George W. Julian died alone and bereft as he moved into the Great Mystery. He learned what he could in his search for truth but knew that still more remained. He was not discouraged. He wrote at the end of his essay that **“I do not...believe in the gospel of human despair and that the work of creation is an abortion...”**

I have wondered what it would have been like had Mr. Julian had a community like this to join? I’ll bet he would have been eager and ready because he was desperate to find a truth that made sense.

Are you?

Do you think there are people in Anderson and Clemson and Esley who are like Mr. Julian? True, they might Google “The Search for Truth” and come up with 9,740,000 possible results as I found yesterday. They might continue searching on their own and not realize there’s a book group that meets here on Sunday mornings or covenant groups that meet and discuss the Great Questions of life.

They might never know that there's a place where there's no gospel of human despair but one of human and spiritual evolution joined at the hip.

I wonder if there's a child or youth out there in Seneca or Six Mile who is teased at school because they ask too many questions or don't accept the traditional churches around here.

Do you ever wonder?

Reverence for mind is a wonderful thing. We probably all feel that special awe when we read a new book or article or are inspired by a lecture we have heard.

It is a pale flame compared to the dialogues and discerning collusion of thoughts and ideas when we are pushed out of our individual comfort zones. Only other people can do this with us. This is one of the most precious gifts of this community of religious liberals.

We are not prepared to shut up and simply go with the orthodox program of religion here in South Carolina, the South or America itself.

We are not prepared to put a sign out in front of the door here that says **"sorry, no more room for awesome minds like yours"**.

What I have come to believe in recent years is that the greatest danger to Unitarian Universalism is not being a religious minority in conservative communities. I don't believe the greatest danger is lack of knowledge or the tools in order to make 'church' work well.

What I do believe is that what hurts us most is our belief that we are isolated and cut off from our kindred in Greenville or Columbia or Atlanta or Boston. Our belief that we can survive, prosper and do it on our own is a worthy one. It worked for George W. Julian but in a very limited way.

His article undoubtedly was read by thousands of people. Some might have responded or written him back. Others might have been encouraged to begin their own search for truth.

What he did not have was a way to reach out in times of joy or sorrow to share with others around him.

He did not have a place where on a Sunday he could push his mind or someone other's into new places of wisdom or discomfort.

It's a pity, I think, that he didn't live to that day.

We have a very precious gift here. Our reverence for our own minds and how we might expand them brought us here to think and study.

Our reverence for the mind now needs to open wide as possible to include the George W. Julian's of this day and the children and youth of the generations to come. That means rethinking our mission and our welcoming to all people who enter our doors.

Let me close by returning to Mr. Julian's essay for a moment. He speaks of a Mrs. Child with whom he corresponded. Mrs. Child is also unknown to us but her words might provide a fitting ending to this sermon and a beginning to a deeper appreciation of the minds outside our doors:

**“The idea that Christianity is a special revelation, made up all at once, and entirely by itself, is as irrational as to suppose the world was made in six days...there is a perpetual process of evolution in things of the mind...”**

What reverence might we place on the minds of all those who desperately need a community that is both safe haven and pioneering port?

I wonder. Do you?