

Draft

WE GATHER IN REVERENCE
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
August 8, 2010

Good morning again and what a delightful day today. I have looked forward so much to see us together on this Sunday morning and I am honored to be here. I do want to again thank all those who have helped me move, find a new home, help unpack, show me some great places to eat, all the goodies you brought for today and so much more of your kindness and generosity.

There's something special about you. I've seen it elsewhere in my 20 years ministerial journey but in recent years it's become more priceless when I find it. Some churches and fellowships seem to have lost it; others, like you, have this special quality in many places ready to emerge.

I saw it when I read your information on the website and in the packet you sent me. It was powerful and it spoke volumes about you – the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson. It's so much part of you that I had to speak of it on this first morning we are together.

Here's a story that speaks to what I see here already.

In January of 1986 I was dealing with some personal crisis. I expect it was probably a failed relationship. I was living in the San Francisco Bay Area and I was working as a manager at Bank of America. I don't remember the details of the failed relationship but I was in a gloomy emotional place. There are few things in the world more depressing than a gloomy New Englander. That wasn't for me. I decided to take a book of poetry and go to a beach near Santa Cruz. I hoped that having some quiet time in the sun at a deserted beach would give me the opportunity to heal.

I drove about 70 miles down the coast and parked my car by a deserted beach. I found a rock near the waves and settled in for a good poetry reading. About a half-hour later I suddenly felt a sense of presence – one of those odd feelings we get sometimes of not being alone. I remember looking around me. The beach was still deserted – no one around. I then looked out at the ocean. There it was. There seemingly so close that I could touch it was a full grown whale with its huge length slipping out of the water. I was so close that I could see barnacles on its back. Apparently, as I learned later, it was feeding in the shallows. Again and again it came to the surface and entered my world while I sat in astonishment.

At that moment I had an experience of total awe, and knowing my place in the universe. Just a few scores of feet away, a huge living being fed

calmly and perfectly in its place in the world. My worries simply dissolved as that vast presence moved through the waves by the shore.

For me, that was a moment of reverence. All these years later, I can see the sight of that whale so close that I think I could reach out and touch it. For me that moment is another way of expressing Sophia Lyon Fah's words in the reading this morning:

“We gather in reverence before the wonder of life/the wonder of this moment/the wonder of being together, so close yet so apart/each hidden in our own secret chamber...”

From my place of solitude and loneliness, from my secret chamber of isolation, I was suddenly moved by wonder back into the world of connection and community by another living creature – a being unaware of my presence – it and I so close, seemingly of different worlds, but for that moment connected by astonishment.

This morning I'd like to talk for a few minutes about this matter of “reverence”. Some of you may remember that about seven years ago Unitarian Universalist Association President Bill Sinkford preached a sermon in Texas on religious language. A reporter interviewed him late and the headline in the paper the next day read, **“Unitarians Want God Back.”** As you might imagine, this led to very exciting email exchanges among Unitarian Universalists. Rev. Sinkford sent out a letter clarifying what he'd said. He said he'd expressed the hope that Unitarian Universalism wouldn't leave religious language to religious conservatives.

Conversation about reverence has continued in UU circles. The UU World – our regular magazine that is published by the UUA – had a cover article in the summer of 2006 “Understanding Reverence” written by humanist UU minister Kendyl Gibbons.

She asks us in the article to consider how reverence might be claimed as a core, authentic and necessary religious value in our faith. She tells us that we ought not to flee from such a religious word like we would a revival meeting next door. Instead, she warns us that **“a religious tradition that does not help its members discover satisfying ways of expressing and responding to experiences of [awe] reverence is missing a central piece of its function.”**

She goes on to tell us that reverence does not require we be in agreement with traditional religious words or beliefs. No one can stand before you on a Sunday and wag their fingers demanding that you be filled with awe or reverence.

She informs us that reverence arises in new words and feelings with every generation. One generation might be filled with admiration at new

freeways running across the horizons. Another would be awe-struck at the natural world unmarred by human constructions.

In coming months I want to talk about our relationship with reverence as a religious concept and shared spirituality. There will be four types of reverence I will discuss in coming months: the reverence with body, the reverence with mind, the reverence of irreverence, and finally the reverence with heart or spirit.

Each of these is a form of reverence that I have seen here in the last two months. Each speaks to our power as a liberal religious community.

The first is reverence for body.

Body here means not only taking care of our individual body but the physical world around us. When I first looked at your website in May, I was thrilled to see the work you have already done with Green Sanctuary and its efforts to create an eco-balanced way of life here at the Fellowship and in your own lives. You now have discussions on sustainable eating and diets based more on regional and local healthy foods. Most liberal religious communities have only barely begun to talk about practical application of the Seventh Principle. Few have put them into practice such as your great parking lot outside this building. Your reverence for body is a reminder that a healthy body is created by healthy living conditions around us.

The second is reverence for mind. This form of reverence is lovely to behold in Unitarian Universalist communities. Many of you are associated with Clemson University. Thoughtful discourses and study groups pose the great questions. Reverence for mind is also reverence for mindfulness – that wonderful Buddhist teaching on being aware of the world around us. Your newsletter speaks of social justice projects such as habitat for humanity. There have been other stories on how our eating, consuming and materialism affects the world beyond our community.

The third form of reverence is irreverence. You might argue this is a contradiction. How can one be irreverent and have reverence? In some ways I think this is an essential form of reverence and awe. I mentioned in June that humor and fun are keys for a successful religious community. I have heard an amazing amount of happy laughter here since I visited. I hear laughter at meetings and Julie laughs in the church office. Whatever you are doing, laughter seems contagious here and its very irreverence calls us to be filled with the great sound of joy and rediscover what it means to be filled with delight.

Finally, and I suggest most importantly, there's the reverence for heart or spirit. If you don't like "spirit" then consider something in its place – It might be a beautiful piece of music or a stunning sunset. It is beyond words

and intellectual discourse. It arises when we least expect it. All we need do is to be cleansed in its presence.

I've heard and seen you express this form of reverence many times just in a few weeks. Several people have shared their summer travel experiences and how nature's glory brought them to tears. Someone else told me of the incredible awe they felt when they held their first child after she was born. The child looked up with wide open eyes and this person said they felt they had seen the presence of God.

I felt the spirit of reverence among you on that evening when a large group of us gathered in the social hall for an informal gathering. Do you remember that evening? I do and Vanessa does. There was a feeling of amazement in that room – not an amazement of me visiting you but a beginning awareness of an invisible presence. That presence was the hope and passion every one of you carried with you. It showed in your faces and it spoke with your questions. It was a reverence that said **“the sum of our parts is far greater than our individual concerns, conflicts, worries, or weariness.”** It was the birth of an ‘us’ that was like that baby opening its eyes for the first time.

The reverence for heart can happen when we least expect it. It can begin to dissolve the pain we carry. It can transform us with its power from nature or a feeding whale or an extraordinary landscape. It can begin to heal us if we are ready.

I'd like to end with one more example on how reverence that can transform us. It's a poem from the early 1960's. The poem expresses reverence but I will leave it up to you as to whether it is of body, mind, or spirit.

James Wright was an American poet who suffered a great deal in life but was acclaimed as this country's greatest writers in his lifetime. In his biography he comments that during an especially difficult period, he and a friend drove aimlessly through the Upper Midwest as he complained about what seemed like a dead end to life. It all felt empty, he said. Then, a simple incident on their travels helped to renew his energy and enthusiasm for life and his work. The event wasn't the only turning point, of course, but it did lead him into the greatest years of his vocation. It was a simple encounter one evening with two Indian ponies in a fenced meadow.

Perhaps the message of “A Blessing” will bring a smile; perhaps the words will remind us of life's possible moments of unbounded and unexpected joy if we have eyes to see and ears to hear

**Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.**

**And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear...
...Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.**

May we begin a new morning and together break into blossom.