

READING FOR FEBRUARY 27, 2012

Rev. Victoria Weinstein, minister of The First Parish Unitarian Church of Norwell, MASS

“I treasure irreverent humor, which I consider a fine art. Mean humor is just ugly. Disrespectful humor is also just ugly, and often ignorant. Irreverence is, for me, delicious because it originates from love, from genuine appreciation for the absurdity of human attempts to tolerate and even make meaning of our mortal condition. Irreverence isn't a "nyah nah nah nah nah," it's a deep gut laugh because you just can't help it. We are ridiculous creatures.

And glorious.

But also ridiculous.

Before I met you, I led a worship service for a pretty nearby UU congregation that your Search Committee attended so they could essentially spy on me and see if I was a good match to be this church's minister. I led the service and it went well and the congregation smiled kindly at me during some moments I thought were pretty funny. The weekend interview went really well and the Search Committee invited me to be the candidate for the pulpit here, and I led the same service here, and during those same moments when the other congregation had cracked these nice, controlled New England smiles, this congregation let loose these huge roars of laughter. I thought, "Oh, thank God. I have found my people."

Humor is a huge part of what makes a people a people. When we think about the elements of cultural diversity, we often fail to include humor, and we shouldn't.

The first line in our congregational covenant says that we unite to cultivate reverence. While we do so, we should also remember to cultivate a healthy irreverence, too – to laugh at ourselves when we get overly earnest, when we become pettier or more trivial than we should, and when we, god forbid, see any aspect of our lives together as being so holy that it can't stand a good-natured wink. We're dealing with life and death here, folks. We suffer together, worry together, face crises together, and every day walk closer to the grave together. This is all too serious to be endured without the healing balm of humor.

Draft

THE SPIRITUALITY OF LAUGHTER: REVERENCE AND IRREVERENCE

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson

February 27, 2011

Good morning again, everyone, and thank you for being here. Let me add special thanks to Linda for filling in to do welcome and announcements and to Monica for her marvelous music.

What seems like an age ago in early August, I began a series of services on reverence: reverence for body, mind, and heart were first and now I end this series with the reverence of irreverence. In that very first service I did here, we included Sophia Lyon Fah's words as in the opening words 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...”

Now we have come to a different time of this two year interim period. We have explored the concept of reverence in several ways: reverence for this body called UUFC, and the reverence we can have for our minds that are seeking, exploring and with curiosity; reverence for heart in that koan “point to that place where your tender heart begins and ends,”

So why would I presume to speak about reverence for irreverence here? Is it possible that what we call irreverence is really reverence in disguise? How might this paradox be true?

Irreverence, after all, is seen as the polar opposite of reverence, awe and deep respect. The Congressman a couple of years ago who interrupted President Obama during his speech yelling “you lie” was being irreverent to the office and majesty of the occasion and role of the President.

However, that being noted, is it reasonable to argue that other forms of irreverence might be good spiritual growth and even healthy for us? Might the simple joy of laughter in church service mean that we are having a moment of shared delight? After all, laughter is said to be one of the primal language forms to create community.

This is I believe a central meaning of Rev. Victoria Weinstein's remarks from her sermon in Massachusetts that I read this morning.

I propose to you that humor is essential in congregational life whether it be a Zen monastery or a Unitarian Universalist Church or the Islamic community down the street on Old Stone Church Road. It is reverence

turned on its head and looked at from a whole other perspective. I suggest three ways from examples of seemingly irreverent humor.

The first way humor is essential is how we might take ourselves too seriously and lose sight of the inherent absurdity of life. Here's an example that Cynthia might have shared with you or else you've heard it before:

How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb?
Answer: **We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that a light bulb works for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship to your light bulb and present it next month at our annual light bulb Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life, and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.**

At one level, this joke is clearly making fun of us. We are laughing at our Principles and our efforts to be inclusive. However, just as my colleague in Massachusetts pointed out in her sermon, **"Irreverent humor gives us a light-hearted way to test the integrity of supposedly sacred institutions or doctrines without tearing them down altogether. Because we're laughing as we do it, we can point out inherent flaws in false idols without needing to violently demolish them."**

So at another, deeper level that joke about light-bulbs speaks to our gentle ability to realize that we are religious pioneers rather than followers.

We are, after all, a rarity in American religion.

We question the assumption that God is judging and even question whether God exists.

We insist that everyone without exception is inherently worthy and can awaken to wholeness.

We relish the opportunity to question and to debate without fear.

The second attribute of irreverence as true reverence is the clear benefit of laughter and joy as healthy for body, mind and spirit. After all, if church is supposed to help us create healthy spirit, shouldn't it also help us leave here on Sundays with more healthy body and mind?

This is the point that Carla Ulbrich raises in the reading this morning. A robust sense of humor and laughter can help us at the worst of times and to help restore us to health and a greater measure of happiness.

Other churches know this as well. Here's a joke that originated in a liberal Lutheran church some years ago.

Pastor Lundquist was taking a walk in the woods. "What majestic trees! What powerful rivers! What beautiful animals!" he said to

himself. As he was walking alongside the river he heard a rustling in the bushes behind him. He turned to look and saw a 7-foot grizzly bear charge towards him. He ran as fast as he could up the path. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the bear was closing in. He looked over his shoulder again, and the bear was even closer. His heart was pumping frantically and he tried to run even faster. He tripped and fell on the ground. He rolled over to pick himself up but saw the bear; right on top of him reaching for him with his left paw and raising his right paw to strike him.

At that instant Pastor Lindquist cried out "Dear God, I know I'm a sinner and have failed in many ways, but please, please, hear my prayer and make this bear a Christian!"

And then a miracle happened. The bear dropped his right paw, brought both paws together, bowed his head and spoke: "Lord, for this food which I am about to receive, I am truly thankful."

I'll grant you that in some circles of Christianity that joke would be seen as sacrilegious and irreverent. It would be seen as putting down the doctrines and truth of Christian belief.

All that said, it's still funny and gentle to turn the tables on orthodoxy.

I have spoken about irreverence as reverence in disguise from two perspectives: first that we can take ourselves a little less seriously, and second that it promotes healthy mind and body as we prepare to leave today.

The third is even more important. It is a form of irreverence in Mark Twain's assertion that "**Irreverence is the champion of liberty and its only sure defense.**" Its Paul Woodruff's assertion in his book "Reverence" that when people praise a song or a story for its 'irreverence', it's the wrong term because people are praising boldness, honesty and a boisterous contempt for anything pretentious or arrogant. That praise, he tells us, is reverence for honesty and independence.

So this third attribute of irreverence as joy, laughter, humor is satire and being able to poke holes in pompous thoughts, words and deeds. In this way, irreverence is really a disguised form of reverence for **integrity and truth-telling with compassion.**

We Unitarian Universalists have a nearly unique opportunity to be outside the comfortable zones of religious faith in America. We are post Protestant but not abandoning our roots.

We have the ability if we so choose to experience the teachings of Jesus as radical subversive sage and ignore the post Easter Christ. What other church around here can claim that role?

We can take an ancient story like the Bible story of Job and hear it with new ears for our generation and a reverence for the mystery of life. It can sound like irreverence but we at some level feel it's true.

I'd like to end my comments before we have conversation response with one more story. If we want to question fate, God, the Force, or whatever messes with our lives, here is a plausible answer revealed in The Onion. I would invite us to hear it and be attentive to our emotional, body and mind responses. If we laugh, how does it feel? If we don't laugh or feel offended in some way, why so?

"Following decades of allegations from the 44-year-old data processor, the vast sum of all matter and energy called the universe admitted Tuesday that it was directly responsible for every single hardship in the life of Dave Schwartz, and apologized for continually foiling him at every turn.

"Dave has good reason to say the universe is conspiring against him, because, well, it is," said the cosmos, acknowledging that it has thwarted Schwartz's hopes and dreams from the moment of his conception. "He may sound melodramatic when he goes on and on about the whole world having turned against him, but he's actually not that far off. The forces of time and nature genuinely want him to fail at life, and fail hard."

"So, yes, his anger and frustration are totally understandable," the universe added. "Pointless and futile, but totally understandable."

Sources close to Schwartz have long speculated that his failure to find success in work, love, and life stemmed from his own poor decisions and lack of resolve, but the very source of all causality verified Tuesday that, just as Schwartz has always claimed, the blame for each misstep and unfortunate circumstance rests squarely on the cosmos's shoulders.

Using the metaphysical concepts of blind chance and cosmic predetermination, as well as other powers beyond human comprehension, the universe claimed to have "done its best" to increase the earthly burden on Schwartz, carefully engineering everything from his difficulty concentrating for more than five minutes, to his receding hairline, to the time he threw up on the playground after eating a whole bag of candy.

In addition, numerous ethereal essences and karmic forces stepped forward this week to come clean about "really piling it on" during periods of Schwartz's life when he already had enough on his plate and couldn't be expected to take much more cosmic punishment without snapping.

"Back in '02, we purposefully made enough things go right for Dave that he actually managed to convince himself that fate didn't exist and that the universe was a hopeful place full of limitless possibilities, all of which could be his as long as he believed in himself and maintained a positive outlook,"

the universe said. "Two days later—boom—we slam him with an IRS audit and some back pain."

"Totally threw him for a loop," added the whole of all existence. "He literally looked up and asked us, 'Why? Why are you doing this to me?'" When questioned Tuesday as to the motive for its actions against Schwartz, the universe told reporters that it had no good answer except to speculate that perhaps its essential nature was simply "cruel and meaningless or something."

At press time, Dave Schwartz was stuck in a traffic jam with severe indigestion."