

Vocabularies of Reverence

by Jerome A. Stone

I have never met most of you, and yet I think that I know something about each one of you. I believe that each one of you has felt joy and sadness, has had hopes and hopes denied. I believe that each one of us holds some things to be very, very important. And for all of our differences, I believe that we have things like this in common.

I would like to talk about “vocabularies of reverence.” I say “vocabularies” in the plural because I do not think it is possible or wise to agree on a single vocabulary. On the other hand, these different vocabularies are not isolated linguistic islands. With our different words pointing to the sacred we can indeed understand one another.

The President of the UUA, William Sinkford, has challenged us to develop and share a vocabulary of reverence. Although some are afraid that he is trying to turn us back to an outmoded tradition, I take this to be an exciting and necessary challenge. We need to be able to speak of what burns within us, even though words cannot capture it. He is not trying to impose a vocabulary upon us. Rather he is urging us to develop our own vocabularies and to share them.

Our UU President has also challenged us to create elevator speeches. Again, he is correct in issuing this challenge. And it is important to note that while a good elevator speech is brief, it is the result of a long time spent in reflection.

Today diversity often means separation. There is a great deal of talk in this so-called “post-modern” age about separate identities, separate ethnic groups, separate religious traditions, diversity of all sorts. And that is important. We are drawing back from the old idea of “one size fits all.” We realize that one single notion of good music, one single set of ideals, and one single religion, can be stifling and oppressive. It’s good that we have abandoned this ideal of uniformity. But let us not forget that with all of our diversity, we do need to work together. We need to plan together. We even need to play together, cry together, and love together. And sometimes we need to be reverent together.

Today there are UU theists, UU Christians, UU process people, UU humanists, UU Jews, UU Buddhists, and UU pagans. We are forming separate organizations and keep in touch with like-minded people by electronic communication. On the whole this state of diversity is a good thing. But it can lead to fragmentation, as it can in a family. It’s healthy to have different interests, friends, music, and sports. But if we don’t spend some time being with one another, being available to one another, working, laughing, and sorrowing together, we might go our separate ways and not realize the depth of our fragmentation until the bonds that unite us weaken and become atrophied through neglect and lack of attention.

What we need is not a single vocabulary of reverence, but various vocabularies that are close enough that we can understand each other. My wife and I have been married for fifty years. We cannot always describe how we feel about each other, but we can give each other hints and glimpses. That is all we need. When you suffer a loss, I don’t feel your pain. But I can get a sense of how you feel because I have been to a similar place. Likewise, when we speak about what is most important to us, the things that we are most passionate about, all we can give are hints and glimpses. But that is enough, because we have all been to a similar place.

Sometimes it seems as if the UUA is like the Tower of Babel, with all the hyphenated UUs talking past each other. But I suggest a different image. You remember the story of the blind men and the elephant. Now in my version, just suppose the blind people all gather together for dinner and share their stories. At first they are amazed at the differences between them. But then the next day, they go back to the elephant and explore some more. They never do agree on what the elephant is. But they do agree on going back to the elephant. They share a common quest. Now when I enter the story, the elephant doesn't feel like God to me. But my comrades urge me back to hunt for the grace and the challenge. And the grace and the challenge I can feel.

In my vocabulary of reverence some things in the world are sacred. "Sacred" is a word I use to talk about things of overriding importance. Let me give some examples. When I see a newborn, I know that I am in the presence of something sacred. My marriage is sacred. When I once saw migrating sand hill cranes at dawn practice their courtship dances, I knew that I was on hallowed ground. When I try to give supportive challenge to my students, it is because their intellectual and spiritual flourishing is sacred. When I took my family on open housing marches in Evanston with the FBI taking pictures, it was because the right of people to live where they can afford is a sacred right. These are some of the things that I hold sacred. What do you hold sacred?

When something is sacred, it doesn't mean that you block out scientific inquiry and critical questioning. This is important to remember. The health of a child, the durability of a marriage, the flourishing of a species, social change, all call for rational, critical, scientific inquiry. But a recognition of their sacredness also takes us beyond reason and science, without rejecting such careful thinking.

I do not think there is a God. But I think I understand something of what my friends mean when they talk about the presence of God in their lives. And I have felt sacred things. Haven't you?

You and I already have words to talk about what is of overriding importance to us. The challenge that has been given to us is to continue to refine and clarify this language.

Of course, we all stutter when we talk reverently. We should hesitate. For we see in a glass darkly. We are blind people, talking about our deepest surmises. But these glimpses are about our aspirations and strivings, about what makes life important.

Friends, I speak with conviction. The universe has a growing edge, and humans are on that growing edge. We may not be the most important of these, but we are on one of these leading edges. And the movement for liberal religion is like the yeast in this growth. Our liberal religion is a key catalyst for both change and preservation. Let us rededicate ourselves anew to this important task.

May we be dedicated to the proposition that beneath all our differences, there is a unity, which makes us one and binds us forever together.

In the name of all that we hold sacred.

So be it.