“IS ANYTHING/EVERYTHING SACRED?”

A sermon delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister of The Community Church of NY Unitarian Universalist, Sunday, December 11, 2011

When love is felt, or fear is known,
When holidays and holy days and such times come,
When anniversaries arrive by calendar or consciousness,
When seasons come, as seasons do, old and known, but somehow new,
When lives are born or people die,
When something sacred’s sensed in soil or sky,
Mark the time.
Respond with thought or prayer, or smile, or grief.
Let nothing living, life or leaf, slip between the fingers of the mind,
Mark the time well; rejoice; sing Alleluia.

Max Coots

Readings

(1) The first readings are words of Pete Seeger who joined our congregation about 20 years ago. In a wonderful book titled REFUSE TO STAND SILENTLY BY, Pete Seeger is among those interviewed as part of An Oral History of Grass Roots Social Activism in America, 1921-1964. Along the way, Seeger speaks about his own religious journey:

I used to think I was irreligious until I found out I was having a lot of fun meeting and talking with a lot of religious people. I had sung with Catholics and Protestants and Jews and Moslems and Buddhists all around the world, and I found out we had a lot in common, so I can’t call myself irreligious anymore…

I confess if somebody asked me what’s my religion, I’d say, I don’t’ know. But I do put a last verse on [my version of “Gimme That Old-time Religion”]: [singing]: “I will arise at early morning, when my Lord gives me the warning, that the solar age is dawning, and that’s good enough for me. Give me that old time religion.”

Then Pete Seeger adds, “I guess that’s my religion. I walk out of here and I feel like yodeling when I see the sun come up.” [278]

(2) Spiritual living, religious living is a matter of being present; we know that. To be present to and with one another is a sacred thing. If I were to
compile a loose-leaf Bible, I would in the wisdom literature include these words of Sam Keen, who writes,

The task of authentic religion is to keep this world a sacred place, to remind us to wonder, to tread reverentially on the humus and be compassionate to all sentient beings. I believe we do this best by remembering in the beginning there was Silence.

The Word is still spoken in sparrow’s song, windsigh, and leaffall. An Electron is a single letter, an atom a complex word, a molecule a sentence, and an indigo bunting an entire epistle of the sacred. The ocean whispers its mystery within the chambered seashell. Listen quietly to the longing in your heart for love and justice and you may hear an echo of the holy word that addresses you. Hush for a while. Be still and know.

(3) Barbara Brown Taylor, former church pastor, and now seminary professor has pondered Chaos Theory, quantum physics and the origins of the universe:

She asks core faith questions. “Am I alone?” How could I ever be alone? I am part of the web that is pure relationship, with energy available to me that has been around since the universe was born.”

“IS ANYTHING/EVERYTHING SACRED?”

What do you do with discarded human body parts… random remains of sometimes unknown human beings, who have died? Are they “waste” material, as an Air Force officer referred to them earlier this week when speaking to the press? The issue arose when the Air Force disclosed that it had incinerated partial remains of 274 soldiers and then dumped them into a landfill in Virginia.

What do you do? I learned the answer growing up as a Unitarian Universalist. I grew up in a Unitarian Universalist congregation that seemed to me in retrospect to have been largely humanist, where I found the worship services to be soul satisfying and meeting the needs of my spirit – a time of centering, of nurture, of provocation, witnessing to transcendence, or at least to transcendent values, a sense of community, and connection, as well as social witness and action.

God and words like sacred and holy were not active parts of my vocabulary …. Except… except I think I did sense, know, feel, believe that each one of us, each person is sacred and Life is a gift, and somehow sacred, inherently precious.
Highly rational, analytic and fully committed to understanding the world through empirical, scientific method, I also had a vague nature mysticism… the intuition that I was a part of this natural realm in some deep sense. No supernatural hocus-pocus… a curious naturalism… at-homeness in this mysterious world, blessed by a “holy curiosity” (as Einstein has described our natures) and blessed by a measure of wonder. Theologically, my experiences reflect overlapping identities: pantheism, transcendentalism, naturalism, mysticism.

During seminary, one summer I did my chaplaincy training at Bellevue Hospital. One of our duties was to bless – offer prayers for those who had died whose bodies were in wooden boxes going to Potter’s Field on Hart Island at the tip of Long Island Sound, the mass gravesite for the poor, or the unknown. Utterly clueless about such a ritual, I quickly found help in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, and I then began to find my own voice, my own prayers, role and being.

The first time I received this assignment, I was advised that the smaller boxes, in addition to infants and stillborn, contained body parts… amputated limbs and the like. At first thought, it was a surprise, but then immediately, I was touched by the respect being shown, the thoughtfulness, the sense of worth and dignity, the sense that something sacred was in play….

How appropriate to include these precious limbs and parts in a blessing/funeral/memorial in the loading dock of the hospital where the boxes were stacked ready to be transported by truck from mid-town to Hart island.

What to do with body parts… other than treat them as “waste” products? Offer a sacred reckoning, acknowledgement of life, and a life’s passing, and even a limb. Like so many, most of us I hope, I was startled – I was shocked – to see the military spokesman speak of human remains as “waste”… and then he paused…. A long pause, as perhaps he too for the first time felt the overtones of his words….

Growing up Unitarian Universalist, or from my parents, or from culture, or all of these, even in a humanistic congregation, I learned that humans are precious, sacred, and so it makes sense to offer some heart-felt response to loss…., even partial loss.

As Max Coots advises, “When lives are born or people die … When something sacred’s sensed in soil or sky … Mark the time.”

Herman Melville, a Unitarian, in 1860 was on a clipper ship the Meteor, which was captained by his brother Thomas. He records in his diary a storm that lasted for “three brutal days…’snow, rain, hail, sleet, mist, fog, squalls … smoky
Ah, but something else had happened; they had paused... held a funeral... taken a sacred moment in this loss of a sacred life. They had marked the time.

And if for you, the word sacred is empty, or filled with supernatural baggage, and not useful, then maybe substitute some thing like moment of reverence, for sacred moment.

Also just a word about Jerry Sandusky, the former assistant football coach at Penn State, with 40 allegations against him of having been a sexual predator on young boys: In an interview, he was asked if he were sexually attracted to young boys, and he paused perhaps ten seconds before saying “no.”

Most of us, I think, have an instinctive revulsion, and why are we repelled? Something sacred is being violated, isn’t it? The innocence of youth, the potential damage to a child’s sense of self-worth and inherent dignity, the abuse of trust, the misuse of power by an adult for personal gratification...

This morning I am looking at the faith, belief, conclusion, hunch, speculation, conviction... premise that creation, the Life Process, the Cosmos is Sacred, and we humans are sacred. That does not mean at all that the universe is made to please us, nor does it mean that everything we do is sacred, for we humans surely can and do violate what is good and beautiful and act badly, horribly, even cruelly at times. Tragic choices mark our species.

In considering the world as sacred, some of us, and I know I do, may feel at times like Max Kapp, who was dean for so many years at the St. Lawrence Theological School in Canton, New York. St. Lawrence was founded by the Universalists, and Max Kapp was a Universalist minister. He writes,

> Often I have felt that I must praise my world  
> For what my eyes have seen these many years,  
> And what my heart has loved.  
> And often I have tried to start my lines:

> "Dear earth," I say,  
> And then I pause  
> To look once more.
Soon I am bemused
And far away in wonder.

So I never get beyond, “Dear Earth.”

Kurt Vonnegut, also Unitarian, was once talking to his son Mark and said, "We are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever this thing is." And we get through this thing, I believe, if we live with a measure of reverence, a sense that Creation is sacred, and everything in this Cosmos is part of an extraordinary, profligate, Life-giving Creativity.

When was it? About 40,000 years ago, after about 15 billion years or so, consciousness arose on this planet in this small corner of the universe… We are the bearers of something extraordinary that is emergent…. The universe itself is becoming aware of itself, which gives us a “special place” which is not to be “confused with special status.” (Rev. Fred Muir, *Heretic’s Faith*, p. 92)

As U. U. Mary Feagan puts it, “I am just, bottom line, a millions-of-years-old wonder. You are too.”

“When lives are born or people die, … When something sacred's sensed in soil or sky … Mark the time.”

Marilynn Robinson offers this sense of transcendent grace of creation in her novel *Gilead*.

Pastor Ames ponders friendship, a close friend, the secrets we carry, and the sense as he says, “there are inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us” – between all of us on this planet… (197)

Yet… Marilynn Robinson adds, in case we are sleepy, or distracted… Pastor Ames, affirms, “Existence is the essential thing and the holy thing.” (189)

Why do we miss it, some of the time, much of the time… the sacred in our midst? Hinduism says one of our primary problems as humans is that too often we are asleep, not awake.

Islam describes the equivalent of this original sin as forgetfulness. We forget we are part of an interdependent web of existence, part of this sacred thing, sacred like each one of our companions on this planet.

Too much of Christianity insults the beauty with which we are born and speaks of depravity, even though Jesus invites us to open our ears and our eyes, so that we may understand the grace of creation incarnate in each child, which is the deeper meaning of Advent isn’t it?
Taoism diagnoses our challenges in terms that Benjamin Hoff describes in his interpretations of the *Winnie the Pooh* characters: Eeyore, Tigger, Pooh, Owl, and Rabbit, and especially Piglet, in his *The Te of Piglet*.

Most of our unhappiness, according to Taoism, is that we are too often guided by illusions – illusions for example that we are Separate from the Natural World. Or the illusion that some of us are better than others. Sometimes we have unpleasant feelings or fear because of the illusion of What Might Be, an illusion because it has not yet happened. Or there is sadness from

- What Might Have Been, or
- What if, or
- If Only I Had…. (Owl and Rabbit)

Big egos (Tigger) – distracted egos (Eeyore, the worrier and complainer) – can throw us off balance, keep us from finding balance, harmony… flow… connection with all of Life… keep us from life’s meaning, which is to find “virtue in action”.

In our society, we see also so many things that distress, that are not in balance, as I spoke about last week regarding the transforming vision of the Occupy movement.

Taoism… religion… spirituality without God…. And what is religion? From the Latin, *religare*… to bind ourselves – to fasten ourselves securely to Life, purpose meaning, compassion, connection – call it God or not. In practice, it is how we respond to the wonder of this world, the miracle and mystery of our lives.

Our religion is what we do, how we act, and its rituals, contemplative practices and theologies will take many forms, e.g., in ways we might not always associate with religion.

Piglet, in the Winnie the Pooh stories, expresses virtue in action and the value of small things, for Piglet is frequently identified as a Very Small Animal. The significance of Piglet is that only Piglet, among all the Pooh characters, undergoes transformation, growth, and change. And Taoism is a way of transformation, as well as harmony.

“When fear is known…. Mark the time. Respond with thought or prayer, or smile, or grief. Let nothing living, life or leaf, slip between the fingers of the mind, Mark the time well; rejoice; sing Alleluia.” (Coots)

Matters of life and death speak of sacred Creation, and moments of connection speak of graciousness of which we are capable.
Another poem from Karen Ethelsdattar, who is a long-time friend of ours here:

Who will it be
who connects with me
Me, a woman reluctant
to admit she’s in need
of a cane
& in this instance, a seat on the bus.
Who am I to ask
& who are they to proffer it?
As I open my mouth
to make my request,
someone with imagination
sees my need
rises from their seat
looks at me & gestures
I should take it.
Their grace to offer
& mine to accept,
thankfully.

She titles it, “This Act of Grace.”

It reminds me of two Minnesotans with Jewish roots, one with thoughts on God; the other on prayer.

Senator Al Franken a couple of years ago spoke at our denominational Annual Meeting when it was being held in Minneapolis. He said his father saw God not as a person, but “behind everything, including nature. It wasn’t very different from what our founding fathers believed.” He included a story about a friend who had praised his son for being so nice, who reflected simple virtues, virtue in action, doing the right thing. Choking up a bit, he added, “To me that’s what God is. God is my dad in my son,”

So, the sacred gets passed along, from generation to generation, a bonus of value-added by our deeds.

Bob Dylan, regarding mindfulness, marking time, right action, in his autobiography titled, Chronicles, offers a vivid description of a particular shop owner with slightly odd views. The shop owner at one point asks him,

“You a prayin’ man, huh? What do you pray for? You pray for the world?”

Bob Dylan responded, “I never thought about praying for the world. I said, ‘I pray that I can be a kinder person.’”
The sacred is all about us, in us, in the cosmos, in our consciousness, in our abilities to connect and create creatively... and to be sure in matters of Beauty.

I commend to you the art show in our gallery next door, just as I commend serving in our Shelter for Homeless Men, and embracing our social action efforts in their various arenas, each pathways of sacred service.

This universe – our home – is now contemplating itself through us, thinking about the infinite mysteries and the daily perplexities, and again, and again... and again... with our seeking to follow the wisdom of compassion, of the heart, despite our failures, and to follow the love of the mind to explore, to question, to change and to create... sometimes with a thin line between creativity and destruction, as we know.

To be sure, people are not perfect; we can be vane, egocentric, power-hungry, cruel, and those are choices too often made. We are also, blessedly, an evolving species, with strange inventions, wonderful inventions, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or the International Criminal Court... steps forward in our cosmic evolution... steps... not final remedies...

Having turned sixty, a few weeks ago (and thank you for the luscious cake during Fellowship Hour), I cannot help sharing some lines of poetry from Archibald MacLeish in his "With Age Wisdom". He speaks of how in his youth, he saw

Little beauty, less grace.

[But] Now at sixty what I see,
Although the world is worse by far,
Stops my heart in ecstasy.
God, the wonders that there are!

MacLeish is also the author of that enduring play JB, a retelling of the story of Job in Jewish and Christian scripture, the tale of a righteous man suffering without just cause, and with God’s permission to Satan. At first glance, there seems little of comfort in the book, yet there is what has been called Companion Theodicy... theodicy a theological word about why a good God would allow evil, pain, suffering to befall us, which in my mind has no good answer in traditional notions of a supernatural God.

This view affirms Job’s friends’ first reaction. When they see him “from a distance” in his suffering, they “weep and mourn for him.” Rather than seeking a theological explanation, “They sit with him seven days and seven nights, and no
one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.” (Job 2:13)

What helps is silence and solidarity… a caring presence…. A sacred connection. When in sorrow, what we want is “aid, companionship, and yes, answers, but not scholarly sleight-of-hand.” A word of caring, but not glib assurances. (“Companion Theodicy,” Mark Scott, Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Summer/Autumn 2010.)

All of which reminds me of Alice Walker’s comment about church going in The Color Purple:

... tell the truth, have you ever found God in Church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping … (God) to show. Any God I ever felt in Church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They came to church to share God, not find God.

To share a spark of the sacred within us with each other… a sacred thing.

And whether or not you begin as Alice Walker does when she says “Dear God,” as she begins the last chapter of that brilliant novel, … with or without God or the sacred, as part of language and symbols for making sense of this world, I invite you to consider humility, thanksgiving, and reverence each day. I invite you to consider marking each day and say at least “Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear people. Dear everything.”

Mark the time.
Respond with thought or prayer, or smile, or grief.
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