

Rev. Frank Hall, Westport, CT Sunday, July 10, 2011 “The Religious Impulse”

Opening Words from UU minister Ralph Helverson:

Deep in ourselves resides the religious impulse.
Out of the passions of our clay it rises.

We have religion when we stop deluding ourselves that we are self-sufficient, self-sustaining or self-derived.

We have religion when we hold some hope beyond the present, some self-respect beyond our failures.

We have religion when our hearts are capable of leaping up at beauty, when our nerves are edged by some dream in our heart.

We have religion when we have an abiding gratitude for all that we have received.

We have religion when we look upon people with all their failings and still find in them good; when we look beyond people to the grandeur in nature and to the purpose in our own heart.

We have religion when we have done all that we can,
and then in confidence entrust ourselves to the life that is larger than ourselves.

Sermon:

E. E. Cummings demonstrates the ‘religious impulse’ in his prayerful poem:

i thank You God for most this amazing day:
for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

There's something in us, biologically, that makes us religious, which is to say, that has caused us to invent ways to help us survive, individually and collectively, and that causes us to feel thankful for Life, in spite of all the struggles it delivers to everyone's doorstep.

The religious impulse is an instinctive drive – a tendency to find ways to overcome the existential reality of our existence. We are alone – each of us is a single, separate person. We have a deep-seated need to overcome our sense of separateness, and religion or 'the religions' have helped do that, providing a feeling of belonging, acceptance, or a sense of feeling '*connected*.'

The root of the word religion, *legare*, is the Latin verb, 'to bind, or to connect.' My personal definition of religion is '*the life-long process of reconnecting with other persons, with an ever-changing, aging and failing self, and with Nature.*'

Over the long course of the evolution of life on our planet our forebears invented what we refer to as 'the religions of the world.'

The heart of all the religions – the best in every religion – is a sense of compassion. Compassion is what distinguishes us as human; and compassion is all about feeling connected to other persons and other forms of life.

The poet Miller Williams says it this way:

Have compassion for everyone you meet
even if they don't want it. What seems conceit,
bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign
of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen.
You do not know what wars are going on
down there where the spirit meets the bone.

That's from his collection he titled, *The Ways We Touch*. He might have called it 'the ways we connect.'

The religions of the world were invented to provide comfort in times of trouble, and moral guidance for day-to-day living... a set of guidelines on how to be a good person, how to live a good life, and it offers rituals to remind us of our aspirations. That's why I include Miller William's poem in *my* collection of religious poetry, or spiritual writings.

For some, the motivation to be a good person, to live a good life, is the promise of a comfortable afterlife – the promise of heaven, and the avoidance of hell.

A friend sent me a story about a couple from Massachusetts who planned a trip to Florida to thaw out after this past winter's snow and cold. They thought it would be nice to stay at the same hotel where they spent their honeymoon 25 years earlier, to celebrate their silver anniversary.

Because of hectic schedules, it was difficult to coordinate their travel schedules. So, the husband left Massachusetts first and flew to Florida on Thursday – his wife was to arrive the following day.

The husband arrived and checked into the hotel on schedule. There was a computer in his room, so he

decided to send an email to his wife. However, he accidentally left out one letter in her email address, and without realizing his error, sent the email.

Meanwhile, somewhere in Houston, a woman had just returned home from the hospital where her husband, a minister of many years, had passed away after being in the hospital for several days. She had been by his bedside day every day.

When she got home from the hospital the widow decided to check her email expecting messages from relatives and friends. After reading the first message, she screamed and fainted.

The widow's son rushed into the room, found his mother on the floor, and noticed that her computer was on. He looked at the computer screen:

The subject line read: To My Loving Wife -- I've Arrived

His message read: I know you're surprised to hear from me so soon. They have computers here now so you can send emails to your loved ones. I've just arrived and have been checked in.

I've seen that everything has been prepared for your arrival tomorrow. Looking forward to seeing you then!!!! Hope your journey is as uneventful as mine was.

P. S. It sure is hot down here!!!!

For some, religion is all about belief in God, or the gods; it's about heaven and hell; it's about who has the right answers to the unanswerable questions; it's about putting your faith, or your trust in the answers that are given to you by those in authority.

Religions, like people, evolve. Religions, like people, mature and grow, if there's a climate of freedom.

Chautauqua is that kind of religious community. It was founded in 1874 by Lewis Miller, a Methodist minister, and John Heyl Vincent, a business man who financed the gathering. They called it the Chautauqua Lake Sunday School Assembly, to provide training and support for Sunday school teachers.

From the very beginning the seeds of an ecumenical spirit were planted: ecumenism is the acceptance of all forms of Christianity with the hope of Christian unity after the long separation based on religious doctrines, dividing it into hundreds of denominations.

The ultimate hope of ecumenical Christians is that there would be a single Christian Church.

The word is from the Greek (oikoumene) which means, 'the whole inhabited world.

In recent times the ecumenical Christian spirit that was planted in Chautauqua from day one has broadened (or evolved) into an *interfaith* spirit to include Jewish and Muslim participation -- the so-called Abrahamic faiths since they each trace their roots to Abraham.

The interfaith spirit affirms appreciation for Eastern religions – Hinduism with its many gods, and Buddhism, which is non-theistic, as is Confucianism and Taoism, and so forth. That interfaith spirit is wide enough to include Unitarian Universalism as well!

Chautauqua's original Christian education purpose evolved rather quickly to include a wide-range of academic subjects as well as the arts, with emphasis on music. Those early seeds are still growing, still satisfying the religious impulse, but on an ever-changing, evolving way.

Recent advances in the understanding of the human brain suggest that the religious impulse is located in the same area of the brain as music and the arts – in the right hemisphere.

The left hemisphere is the analytical area, for math and economics, for buying and selling...for building sky scrapers and bridges.

We need both sides. One of the purposes of religion, including our own UU brand, is to nurture the right hemisphere – to get beyond the limits imposed by the analytical left hemisphere and to integrate all aspects of what it means to be human.

Many people today say, "I'm spiritual but not religious."

They say that because their idea of religion has to do with a set of beliefs to which they cannot give their assent, and we live in a culture that no longer burns heretics at the stake, no longer hangs witches, no longer condones the kind of religious persecution that has given religion such a bad name – the kind of fanaticism that turns more and more thoughtful people away from religion altogether.

This group – those who turn away from organized religions – is reportedly the fastest growing segment of the world's population, estimated world wide at more than a billion – those who are not believers in a traditional sense.

But something else is happening to serve the human need for connection...it has to do with a sense of humility in the face of this amazing universe, about which we continue to learn, to understand, including the inner workings of the human mind, within which there is this thing we call 'the religious impulse.'

Today there is a renewed appreciation for poetry and the realization that religious language at its best is the language of poetry, of metaphor...the use of language in a way that breaks the barrier between the left and right hemispheres.

We turn to the poets for an expression of the right-brained spirituality. John Ciardi captured it well in his spiritually eloquent little poem, White Heron.

What lifts the heron leaning on the air
I praise without a name. A crouch, a flare,
a long stroke through the cumulus of trees,
a shaped thought at the sky — then gone. O rare!
Saint Francis, being happiest on his knees,
would have cried Father! Cry anything you please

But praise. By any name or none. But praise
the white original burst that lights
the heron on his two soft kissing kites.
When saints praise heaven lit by doves and rays,
I sit by pond scums till the air recites
It's heron back. And doubt all else. But praise.

Those who use traditional religious language would say that the poet is praising God. For some of us the words God and Nature are synonyms -- God is the personification of the whole of the universe...the Natural Order.

Those of us who don't find the traditional language useful, say that the poet is expressing a deep sense of admiration or a sense of awe – spiritual, not religious in the traditional sense.

'What lifts the heron leaning on the air I praise, without a name.' This is an expression of non-theistic spirituality.

Ciardi's hymn of praise is also an expression of humility. Without that sense of humility we run the risk of hubris; of too much pride in ourselves and our achievements. Hubris is the father of idolatry – thinking we know all the answers. Hubris is behind religious fanaticism and fundamentalism; hubris divides us into camps of the saved and damned, of the true believers and the infidels.

When it comes to the deepest religious questions, the answer is that we do not know. But we *feel* something like a connection to Nature, just as we feel a connection with other persons; shall we call it sacred? This sense of connection? Is that what is meant by 'God is Love?'

Religion, or spirituality, if you will, does not require a belief in God in the traditional sense. Our concept of God changes as we grow, as we evolve collectively, and as we mature individually. All of our beliefs are temporary.

As we move through the days and years of our lives we accumulate experiences that change us and mold us. That process continues as long as we have freedom and as long as we have our minds.

Stanley Kunitz says it best in his poem *The Layers*:

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.
When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon

and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.
Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?
In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.
Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.
In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
"Live in the layers,
not on the litter."
Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

‘Some principle of being abides from which I struggle not to stray.’

As I understand it, the ‘principle of being’ that abides is the authentic self, the self we were at birth, the essential and unique self which in religious poetry is ‘the soul.’

The layers we’re directed to live in are the changes for the better, both as individuals and as a collective.

The litter is the accumulated pile of our faults and failures, including the long list of what we used to call ‘man’s inhumanity to man,’ otherwise known as evil, personified in Christianity as the devil and in Islam as Satan.

The age of religious dogmatism is clearly coming to an end – not the end of faith as Sam Harris predicts, but the end of the primitive thinking that divides humanity into the saved and the damned; the end of religious wars and family strife. He might as well write a book on ‘the end of poetry, or the end of

music...the end of art. Poetry, music and art are the heart of religion and religion in some form is here to stay.

God isn't always and only 'a delusion,' as Richard Dawkins suggests, but it can be an evolving concept, a metaphor to be sung with the poets as opposed to an anthropomorphic grandfather in the sky.

Christopher Hitchens (God is Not Great) calls for a 'new enlightenment.' It won't happen in a flash, like a revolution, but it is happening gradually, like evolution happens.

We are not done with our changes.

We humans have a built-in religious impulse that will not be driven out by the left-brain's insistence on analytic rationality.

The question is not 'religion or no religion, faith or no faith, God or no god' but what kind of religion, what kind of faith, what kind of God.

Donald Babcock expresses the religious impulse in a poem with which we'll close:

The Duck by Donald Babcock

Now we're ready to look at something pretty special. It's a duck, riding the ocean a hundred feet beyond the surf. No it isn't a gull. A gull always has a raucous touch about him. This is some sort of duck, and he cuddles in the swells.

He isn't cold, and he is thinking things over. There is a big heaving in the Atlantic, and he is a part of it.

He looks a bit like a mandarin, or the Lord Buddha meditating under the Bo tree.

But he has hardly enough above the eyes to be a philosopher. He has poise, however, which is what philosophers must have.

He can rest while the Atlantic heaves, because he rests in the Atlantic.

Probably he doesn't know how large the ocean is. And neither do you. But he realizes it.

And what does he do, I ask you? He sits down in it! He reposes in the immediate as if it were infinity — which it is. He has made himself a part of the boundless by easing himself into just where it touches him.

I like the duck. He doesn't know much, but he's got religion.