

## Baby with the Bathwater: The Case for Traditional Religious Language

A person will worship something—have no doubt about that.  
We may think our tribute is paid in secret  
in the dark recesses of our hearts—but it will out.  
That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts  
will determine our lives and character.  
Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship,  
for what we are worshipping, we are becoming.  
– Ralph Waldo Emerson (#563)

The title comes from an old German proverb: “Don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater.” It’s a comfort to know that the human dilemma addressed by the proverb is not new. “Don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater” has been found in print as early as 1610, and I’m sure the dilemma is much older.

The internet in various posts and blogs offers a number of contemporary interpretations: “Don’t take a drastic step to solve a small problem. Don’t kill a fly with a sledgehammer. If your son has a messy room, but is otherwise a good kid, don’t harp and carp on the subject until he totally breaks off communication. You can’t close the airport when one airline has problems. Don’t lose the good parts when you get rid of the bad parts.” (Google)

This sermon takes the position in favor of using traditional religious language here at the fellowship. I'm saying, don't avoid or censor or forbid the use of traditional religious expression in your effort to remain safe and comfortable or to be more true to Unitarian Universalism as you understand it. Don't throw out the baby with the bath water.

Let's start with the feelings. We are talking about words that have the power to evoke that frisson of adrenaline or to bring down the wall that seals us off from what we don't want to hear.

I had an experience like that last week in yoga class. My teacher was talking about chakras, those points in the body said to correspond in various Eastern traditions to physical or spiritual energies. I don't get the whole chakra thing. I was tired and just wanted to stretch and relax and not think. But she kept talking about the chakras, the points, the energies, the colors associated with each area...and I lay there on my mat getting more and more annoyed.

Now I understand that part of my yoga practice is to recognize and try to work through the resistance I discover in my body and in my mind, but I wasn't interested in that worthy project. I was feeling bratty. I didn't want to work on it. I wanted it to go away.

The words matter. Many of us have strong feelings about the language we hear and use, especially in religious community. We become reactive to words we don't like or don't understand. In today's political and cultural climate, where conflict is so often tied to religious expression, we may sometimes feel we just want this whole vocabulary to go away.

Unitarian Universalists are especially vulnerable to these feelings and for good reason: most of us are converts who have left some other religious tradition. Many of us are still uncertain about our relationship to that previous tradition. Some of us identify as nonbelievers, atheists, agnostics, humanists—and the current popularizations of these views cast nothing but contempt on traditional religion and its language. *God Is Not Great.*

But this reactivity does not serve us well. Rosemary Bray McNatt, the minister of the 4<sup>th</sup> Universalist Society in the City of New York, has said, “Some of us are so afraid of being thrown back into the irrational religious past that we have succumbed to a curious fundamentalism of our own. Some of us have...made our congregations into bunkers to protect us from contamination by believers in anything different than our own postures of faith. Instead of living as communities resistant to the current culture of disrespect, we have embraced one of our broader culture’s most destructive qualities—we have stopped listening to one another, in an effort to protect our own hearts, and the fragility of our own spiritual journeys” (CLF, *Quest*, November 2006, p.4).

During our sharing time today, you will have a chance to say what you are thinking and feeling about traditional religious language. Right now I invite you to sit with me while I think out loud about this tender and complicated question.

I’m not trying to change your feelings. I won’t say to you, oh, just let it go. Let’s sit with it together. Jon Kabat- Zinn, who has popularized Buddhist practice for Western audiences,

writes, “When people say ‘Let it go,’ what they really mean is ‘Get over it,’ and that’s not a helpful thing to say. Instead of ‘Let it go,’ we should probably say, ‘Let it be’; this recognizes that the mind won’t let go and the problem may not go away, and it allows you to form a healthier relationship with what’s bothering you. That’s what mindfulness is all about: Paying attention—without judgment—to whatever is happening in the present moment” (in *O* , August 2007, p. 194).

The Rev. Gary Kowalski, A Unitarian Universalist minister whose work with animal rights has been appreciated in this congregation, has written a wonderful autumn meditation about letting go. It’s called “Harvest”:

The last tomatoes in the garden are clinging to the vine, doing their best to ignore the change in season...

It occurs to me that the basic strategy of these vegetables is a mistaken one. The biological winners are those that accepted their fall from grace weeks ago, when the ground was still warm and welcoming. Next year, they will be the one to produce new seedlings.

What is it, I wonder that keeps these fruits hanging on? Is it hope? Fortitude? Perseverance? Or just a bad sense of timing?

Timing is essential to the art of living: knowing when to hang in there and when to let go, when to struggle and when to surrender, knowing how to recognize the seasonable changes of our lives.

May we be blessed with the wisdom of good gardens.

And speaking of not letting go, you might ask why I am taking a *position* about our fellowship's language. Isn't the minister's job to somehow accommodate to all of the differences in the room so that we can be here together in harmony? Why don't I just figure out what language is acceptable to everyone and use that?

Because it's not my job to make nice or to smooth things over. All Unitarian Universalists, including UU ministers, are free people. We come together in religious community, not to find the lowest common denominator or to learn how to avoid rattling each other's cages, but to speak our truth with as much depth and authenticity as we can. We strive to create a faith community where everyone will feel safe enough to speak their truth.

The Code of Professional Practice of the UU Ministers Association includes this clause: “The minister, in keeping with our tradition of the free pulpit and the free pew, is to preach and teach the truth as she sees it without fear of any person and with respect for all persons.” So our work here is not to keep each other happy and comfortable.

My job is to tell you the truth as I see it. *Your* job is to speak *your* truth. And *our* job is to listen to each other, to hear each other out, to carefully and respectfully “seek the truth in love” together with open hearts. And so may it be.

One more distinction: we may be just fine with individuals who use the religious language of their own traditions in their own religious communities or in their private lives—Ysaye Barnwell can sing about prayer without offending most of us. It’s her tradition, her story, her business. It’s hard to square our UU claim to respect for the worth and dignity of every human being with intolerance or disrespect for all religious discourse. Lots and lots of people—most people—use religious language. Unless we think we’re better and

smarter than they are, we pretty much have to be willing for them to do that. So.

That's the easy part.

What's at issue for more of us is the kind of language we use here among ourselves and in our Sunday morning gatherings. Our UU heritage is Christian, so the old hymns and all the historical writings are full of Christian language, Jesus, reference to scripture, stained glass windows, the Lord's Prayers, communion. All of this traditional imagery and language was still a part of Unitarian Universalism a hundred years ago.

But fifty years ago, when this congregation was founded, the Fellowship Movement was in full swing. Many of the congregations that were planted in those times were distinctly intellectual, humanist in orientation, usually lay led, often anti-clerical, and unfamiliar with or hostile to traditional religious language. A whole group of congregations developed outside of the Unitarian Universalist religious tradition of the past.

Each congregation developed its own Sunday morning practices over time. Some eventually engaged ministers and became more overtly religious. Some remained lay led and less friendly to traditional religious discourse.

Traditional religious language includes the vocabulary that is used in other faith communities: words such as *God*, *Jesus*, *faith*, *church*, *worship*, *sacred*, *prayer*, *scripture*, and the like. Many of us associate these words with orthodox religions (orthodox, from the Greek, meaning “right belief”), the correct or proper belief as defined by official ecclesiastical bodies. Different ecclesiastical bodies have come up with different correct beliefs, but what makes them orthodox is that they are believed to be correct.

Liberal religion, in contrast, does not make the claim that there is one correct belief. It allows for different interpretations and understandings and for individual variation in belief. So in the liberal tradition, for example, the word *God* can and does have many different meanings. And in the liberal tradition, the authority to decide lies not with some ecclesiastical body but with the individual soul.

So, an orthodox understanding of *worship*, to take another traditional religious word, would involve “reverence paid to a divine being” (*Merriam- Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11<sup>th</sup> Ed.*)

In contrast, the Rev. Philip Hewett, a Canadian Unitarian minister, has written, “Worship (worth- ship) is an act of reverence for what is regarded as of great, or supreme, worth. In the ultimate analysis this is but another way of capturing the meaning of love...Love is reverence for life...and reverence is a mode of worship. Worship in a Unitarian setting becomes a shared act of celebration expressing our love for things of worth—those values by which and for which we live...The bond of unity in a church is not a shared belief but a shared worship” (in *A Chosen Faith*, Buehrens and Church, p. 134).

Well that’s all well and good, you may say, but *worship* really means reverence for a divine being. To insist that orthodox religions have the power to define these terms is to surrender a whole legacy that we have inherited from our religious forebears. I refuse to do that. I will not allow any one of the orthodox Christian churches, for example, to dictate to

me what a Christian is. No authority that I recognize has the power to do that.

Which is to say, I'm not a literalist or a fundamentalist about the words I use in religious practice. The meaning of *Christian* can change as I have new experiences and new understandings.

The thing about words, all words and especially these words, is that they are “slippery little devils. They don't stay put.” The Rev. Dr. Laurel Hallman, in her Berry Street essay in 2003, writes about her discovery that the meaning of words can change:

I remember my shock, as a Jr. High Student, when I used the word “queer” thinking it meant “odd” and discovering to my dismay that it was a pejorative label used to mean a homosexual.

I was horrified. Partly because I was in Jr. High. Partly because I didn't mean what people thought I meant. But I was most horrified that the word didn't mean what I thought it did.

Until that point I had assumed that words meant what they meant. That words stood still. They stood firm against all the vicissitudes of life. And in that moment, my faith in language was shaken. (I should also add that at that time in my life I was a Religious Fundamentalist, as well. It may have been more than my faith in words that was shaken that day.)

And then I was to discover—then I was to discover that the word, for example, “God,” could become the victim of what [Alfred North] Whitehead called “Misplaced Concreteness.” Words, over time could lose their rich, metaphorical, living depth, and become concretized—rigidified and lifeless. The imaginative vitality could ebb away. The word “God” could die.

So if words don’t stand still, if they are subject, over time to misplaced concreteness. If they don’t necessarily represent one theology or another. If they are inadequate, even when they serve political and psychological purposes, even when they give us some meaning and purpose. If words need to point to the depths of lived experience...If we are currently in a crisis of language (which I believe we are). If we are truly to minister in the fields of human need, what will save us from ourselves?...

I heard a simple explanation about a Russian Orthodox Icon. The Priest explained that the value given the icon was in its ability to teach the people who sat with it. “They didn’t analyze it. It taught them,” he said. (“Not very American,” he added.) Being from a more plain tradition, I never pursued iconography, and have always worried about idolatry, but that simple explanation changed how I thought about the traditional words of Western religion. I couldn’t drop them. They had evoked too much for too many people, over too long a period of time, and I needed to stay connected to the human struggles, the human understandings they represented, if only to inform my own. The word “God” might have become concretized. The “word” God might even have died. But I could not ignore all that it represented before it was rigidified into a state of rigor mortis...

Who was I, to drop these words that had meant so much to our very own spiritual ancestors, as well as generations of human seekers, even if the associations might be

complex. And perhaps the word “God” wasn’t as dead as I had thought [*UU Selected Essays 2003*, p. 31].

So what’s the case for using traditional religious language in our worship here at the Fourth Unitarian Society? The first reason is practical: it’s hard to talk about things of ultimate value without using religious language. Unless you intentionally censor it, this is the language you will find in such discussions. You keep running into it because it is the language most people have used for most of history to talk about ultimate meaning and value.

Second, we enrich our discourse and widen our invitation to others when we include this language. Rev. Barbara Pescan, a UU minister who has served now for many years in Evanston, Illinois, writes: “I am forming a unified field theory of our [UU] faith...Before the six sources and the seven principles, I posit this one rule: When you enter the doors of our faith, you may not lock them after you. You may not close them against others who may come, nor against what new promptings may knock at the door of your own heart” (UUMA News, September 2007, p.8).

Third, we include ourselves in the wider faith community when we use this language. We recognize our affiliation with other religions and other religious communities: the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, the Catholics, the Jews, the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists. We acknowledge that there are people of competence and good will in these other faith communities, people with whom we have much in common and with whom we can make common cause. We open ourselves to them and their contributions instead of shutting them out or closing ourselves off from them.

Fourth, when we use traditional religious language, we keep faith with our own liberal beliefs in inclusivity, diversity, and respect for all. Rosemary Bray McNatt evokes a vision of the Unitarian Universalist community she hopes for where “there are atheists sitting next to followers of Jesus, and they are in real conversation. Theists are learning ritual from their pagan sisters and brothers. Ministers are preaching about the Hebrew Scriptures and quantum mechanics. There are prayer groups and healing circles and sanghas too, and best of all,

best of all, no one is apologizing to anyone else for being fully who they are” (op cit, p.4).

And in the end, words fail us. We are like Moses before the burning bush, barefoot and tongue- tied. You remember the story: he was tending his father- in- law’s sheep, the bush was burning, he was told to take off his shoes, he was told to go to Egypt, and when he found his tongue, he asked the question we are still asking: What is your name? And the God in this story said, “I am who I am.” (Exodus 3: 1 –14)

It’s a mystery. Words fail us. I bow before the mystery and the limits of language, any language, to fully contain or fully explain the ultimate. And I claim the language of my fathers, who are also your fathers, to speak these mysteries, however haltingly, however incompletely. It’s a good place to begin the conversation.

Amen

Copyright 2007

By the Rev. Dawn Sangrey  
For the 4<sup>th</sup> Unitarian Society  
In Mohegan Lake, NY  
October 21, 2007