

Jane Rzepka's Homily, CLF Worship Service, Thursday, GA 2006

Revelation, Reason, and Moving On

So Rosemary and I—Rosemary Bray McNatt here—were sitting on the floor last year. Sitting on the floor in the convention center eating sandwiches between things at GA, and we had the best time. Talking talking talking. Not about our kids for once, not about the best-new-book-ever or anything delicious or funny or sweet. What we were talking about was theology. Unitarian Universalist theology.

Though we were about the same height sitting there on the carpet, theologically, we did not see eye-to-eye—that right there was a lot of the fun. So on the spot I asked Rosemary if she would join us here at this service in St. Louis, and she readily agreed.

Along about Thanksgiving time we got to emailing, and that was when Rosemary had her excellent sermon topic idea: We would model the conversation that addresses the problem. We would, as she put it, “talk about the problem, blasting through the tensions and the cold sweats.” As I say, I recognized this suggestion as an excellent plan, in spite of the dawning awareness that I had no idea what “the problem” in fact *was*. What problem were we going to address?

Helping me along, Rosemary informed me that the problem was the theist/humanist controversy.

Oh that. I reviewed. I have heard sermons from younger ministers that place the problem between humanists and theists in the 1980's. Some UUs put the controversy in the present tense. Historians of our movement date the theist/humanist controversy round about 1916 through 1933, where it ends. Me? I visualize this discussion between people who believe in God and people who don't, as having happened, in, oh, 1959.

We are sitting at the dinner table, my mom and dad and the five children ranging in age from zero to nine. It's me who is nine. Over the din of the kids, over the instant mashed potatoes and the meatloaf, and canned peas, I can hear my dad saying to my mom, “But Helen, there just has to be something—some god—that started it all, that designed all this complexity. The universe couldn't have just happened. The people and the buffalo and tadpoles and everything couldn't have just evolved on their own. It doesn't stand to reason.”

And there's Mom, dishing out the red Jello with the fruit cocktail inside and the Cool Whip on top, allowing how there's simply no evidence to support god. None. That this marvelous world and beyond came about naturally, and we need to be good to it and to each other.

My parents embodied a version of the humanist/theist controversy. As they talked, we five little UUs-in-the-making picked up the sense that talking about this religious stuff was fun—not tense or disagreeable. Everybody chimed in with age-appropriate comments that, coming as they did from younger brothers and sisters, I secretly thought were...well, maybe I could have been more charitable. But the point is that nobody felt they didn't belong at the table, nobody was going to *leave* the table sulking or exasperated, and only the very “immaturist” among us were going to fling the Jello across the table for whatever reason.

Let me be clear. My folks did not invent this discussion topic, and it's not a product only of the 1950's, or the eighties, or the immediately pre-Humanist Manifesto

era of the thirties, or however it might be manifesting in Unitarian Universalism last Sunday or next.

How about we take St. Louis and its larger neighborhood for example? Let's plunk ourselves down right here in the latter part of the 1800's. Around these parts they really *did* have a theist/humanist problem. Out here in the "West," a lot of Unitarian ministers favored a religion of ethical principles, rational thought, and inclusivity. The Rev. John Learned, the minister of the Church of the Unity here in St. Louis was that sort of minister. Others, personified by the Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot, minister of the older Unitarian church in town, the Church of the Messiah, insisted that Unitarians believe in God and call themselves Christians. The two factions were fed up with each other.

One liberal leader [William Channing Gannett] noted that we need to keep moving on, theologically. He said that at one time we stood for revelation, but the times forced us to move on. Then the denomination stood for miracles and the supernatural, but Emerson and Parker came along, and we moved on. Then we took another stand, this time for the divinity of Jesus, but again our religion moved itself on. Finally, after the Civil War, the liberal wing of our religious movement was ready to move on again here in "the West"; it was time to move away from Christian theism. Understandably, this pushed the conservative ministers over the edge. "Now," lamented one of them in 1886, "the stand is made at Christian theism," and once more, we are asked to move on. "Move on where?" "We are told we must move on from our Christian theism to freedom, fellowship and character in religion, that is, to non-theism. ... There is nothing about which there is more mental confusion than about this whole moving on idea." [<http://www.americanunitarian.org/sunderlandissue.htm>] Another colleague concluded, "Truth, Righteousness and Love is a humbug basis!" [Douthit p. 185, *Freedom Moves West*]

At their wits end, the conservatives wanted to establish a creed. They wanted to draw the line: If you don't believe in God, you're out. At a conference in here in St. Louis [1885] it got pretty rough, what with some Christian theists insisting that the non-Christians and non-theists should be excommunicated, and some of the radicals in fact threatening to excommunicate themselves and split the denomination.

I wish I could tell you that here in St. Louis, they figured it out for all time. They did not. But a statement [Gannett's Statement] arose [1887] that did calm the waters and it said in part, "Whoever loves Truth and lives the Good is, in a broad sense, of our religious fellowship...."

That statement included everyone who was in the fray at the time: the theists and the Christians, the ethical humanists, the Universalists, the Unitarians, and the non-Christians. That statement in 1887 opened its arms to the theological diversity among us. That statement, its sentiment handed down through the generations, welcomed and included both my mother-the-humanist and my father-the-theist in Unitarian Universalism well over a hundred years later.

It was as if, as our reading suggested, those ministers looked around the room and suddenly realized that most of the people they saw are very probably theological relatives. ... It was as though, had it been possible back then, they had compared their genetic make-up and determined it to be about 99.9 percent the same. It was as if on some level they understood that religious liberals are uncannily alike, and in the most

fundamental sense, all family. They knew then what Rosemary-the-theist and I-the humanist know today: We are family to one another within Unitarian Universalism—Rosemary and I—we are close relations.

And we are part of a religion that in the 21st Century knows how to embrace us all.

- From my parents, the theist and the humanist, I learned about our religion of gratitude and awe for life itself and all its crazy manifestations, for love and for wisdom, for the miracles and mysteries. As Unitarian Universalist children, we learned to talk about how grateful we felt, so lucky, so stunned by the wonder of it all. Language of reverence for all of us.
- From my parents, the theist and the humanist, I learned about our religion of compassion and care and kindness that's founded on respect and easy embrace. As Unitarian Universalists, we wanted get to know the human family, all kinds of people, one-to-one, and do right by each other. Language of reverence for all of us.
- And from my parents, the humanist and the theist, I learned about our religion of justice, and how the energy needs to be nimble and fierce. We learned that Unitarian Universalists do our best to act with integrity for fairness and for dignity and for peace. Language of reverence for all of us.

As Bill Bryson suggests, when we look around, yes—just look around this room—when we look around we suddenly realize that most of the people you see are very probably theological relatives. When we compare our religious make-up, we can determine it to be about 99.9 percent the same. Unitarian Universalists are uncannily alike, and, Bill Bryson is right: We are in the most fundamental sense, all family.