

First Parish Unitarian Universalist, Bridgewater, MA
“Religious Experience” Sunday, October 18, 2015, 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: We covenant to affirm and promote ... Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations ...
– 3rd Principle

Reading from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James,
Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh, Scotland, 1901-1902

Religion ... shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.

Religion, whatever it is, is a man's total reaction upon life.... Total reactions are different from casual reactions, and total attitudes are different from usual or professional attitudes....

“God has two families of children on this earth,” says Francis W. Newman, “the once-born and the twice-born,” and the once-born he describes as follows: “They see God, not as a strict Judge, not as a Glorious Potentate ; but as the animating Spirit of a beautiful harmonious world, Beneficent and Kind, Merciful as well as Pure. The same characters generally have no metaphysical tendencies: they do not look back into themselves. Hence they are not distressed by their own imperfections : yet it would be absurd to call them self-righteous ; for they hardly think of themselves at all.

[In Protestantism's] recent 'liberal' developments of Unitarianism and latitudinarianism generally, minds of this order have played and still are playing leading and constructive parts. Emerson himself is an admirable example. Theodore Parker is another.... [Here is a characteristic letter from Parker:]

”I have swum in clear sweet waters all my days; and if sometimes they were a little cold, and the stream ran adverse and something rough, it was never too strong to be breasted and swum through. From the days of earliest boyhood, when I went stumbling through the grass, ... up to the gray-bearded manhood of this time, there is none but has left me honey in the hive of memory that I now feed on for present delight. When I recall the years... I am filled with a sense of sweetness and wonder that such little things can make a mortal so exceedingly rich. But I must confess that the chiefest of all my delights is still the religious.”....

[On the other hand,]Religious melancholy must be cast in a more melting mood. Tolstoy has left us, in his book called *My Confession*, a wonderful account of the attack of melancholy which led him to his own religious conclusions. The latter in some respects are peculiar ; but the melancholy presents two characters which make it a typical document for our present purpose. First it is a well-marked case of anhedonia, of passive loss of appetite for all life’s values; and second, it shows how the altered and estranged aspect which the world assumed in consequence of this stimulated Tolstoy’s intellect to a gnawing, carking questioning and effort for philosophic relief.

Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! help! No prophet can claim to bring a final message unless he says things that will have a sound of reality in the ears of victims such as these. But the deliverance must come in as strong a form as the complaint, if it is to take effect; and that seems a reason why the coarser religions,

revivalistic, orgiastic, with blood and miracles and supernatural operations, may possibly never be displaced. Some constitutions need them too much....

The individual, so far as he suffers from his wrongness and criticizes it, is to that extent consciously beyond it, and in at least possible touch with something higher, if anything higher exist. Along with the wrong part there is thus a better part of him, even though it may be but a most helpless germ.... [In the stage of solution or salvation,] He becomes conscious that this higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself. when all his lower being has gone to pierces in the wreck.

The simplest rudiment of mystical experience would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one. “ I’ve heard that said all my life,” we exclaim, “ but I never realized its full meaning until now.”....

[Such, according to James, are some of the *Varieties of Religious Experience*.]

Sermon “Religious Experience” Rev. Paul Sprecher

Lao Tzu, 2500 years ago, spoke of the mystery to which William James refers to in his lectures this way:

There was something formless and perfect before the universe was born.

It is serene. Empty.

Solitary. Unchanging.

Infinite. Eternally present.

It is the mother of the universe.

For lack of a better name,

I call it the Tao.

“For lack of a better name....”

The problem of how to name that which is beyond the ordinary is an ancient one, and has been spoken of in many different ways in different traditions. When the sages who wrote the Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads, struggled with how to refer to THAT, they referred to Brachman, that beyond which includes everything; and to Atman, that within each of us which corresponds to and responds to THAT.

In the Jewish scriptures we read the story of Elijah, a prophet of the God of Israel, who had just fled to a cave in the mountains after personally slaying the priests of Baal, a foreign god. 500 priests. Single-handed. He was a bit of a fanatic, it seems. While in the cave, he wishes his god would come forth with a mighty hand and destroy his enemies. As the story is told in I Kings,

[I Kings 19:11b-12, NKJV] And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

“A still small voice.” Another translation offers “a sound of sheer silence.”

“Hush, Hush, Somebody’s calling my name.”

Quakers refer to listening in the silence to “that of God within us.” The Hindu greeting “Namaste” means, “I worship the God within you.”

In our own Unitarian tradition, Ralph Waldo Emerson was perhaps the most eloquent of those who wrestled with naming the unnamable; he spoke of the “over-soul”:

The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains every one to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character, and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand, and become wisdom, and virtue, and power, and beauty.¹

While William James places Emerson squarely in the camp of the once-born, and properly so, I spoke two weeks ago of Emerson’s own mystical experience; he wrote:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear....

Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am

nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.... I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.²

I myself grew up among the twice-born, in the Pentecostal tradition, so I have some particular allergies to invocations of the Holy Spirit – the Holy Ghost, for those who prefer the King James Version of the Bible. The Pentecostal tradition – which today is the fastest growing movement within Christianity across the entire world – puts a high value on the movement of the spirit, in a quite literal sense. And their theology speaks of the need for repentance, of becoming “born again.” This puts it squarely in the camp of theologies of the twice-born, in James’s terms.

The modern Pentecostal movement began just over a hundred years ago in a humble stable in Los Angeles. The founders took their inspiration from the story in the second chapter of Acts, in which the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples gathered in the Upper Room and they begin to speak in many different languages.

This Pentecostal practice of speaking in tongues was disturbing to me as I recall first hearing it from the church nursery when I was five or so; there was something strange and uncanny about it.

But there was also something of great value there in Los Angeles at the start of the Pentecostal Movement in 1906. The experience of that revival broke down the color line, and Blacks, Whites and Chicanos worshipped together in harmony. Half of the founding twelve member leadership team were Black, and women were also well

represented in their ranks. This is clearly an example of James' appreciation of religion in general, and especially of this twice-born religion; he says:

The highest flights of charity, devotion, trust, patience, bravery to which the wings of human nature have spread themselves, have been flown for religious ideals....³

We Unitarian Universalists – especially here in New England – generally feel more comfortable experiencing the Mystery in less demonstrative ways; most of us find ourselves more of the temperament of the once-born. We speak of paying attention; of listening; of mindfulness, as is spoken of in the Buddhist tradition.

“Hush, hush, somebody's calling my name”

We need to still ourselves and listen. It's one of our purposes in gathering in worship: to listen, to pay attention to the still small voice.

And then there is faith. Sharon Salzberg, a prominent Buddhist teacher, says that the “essence [of faith] lies in trusting ourselves to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely.” So when we listen, when we pay attention, we discover that we are connected in compassion to all other people. Our faith enables us to experience ourselves as part of the whole – not “self-made,” not alone and isolated, not having to do everything all by ourselves, but part of something much greater – the Unity, as Emerson put it.

William James speak of faith this way:

No fact in human nature is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance. The existence of the chance [that is, of faith] makes the difference, as

Edmund Gurney says, between a life of which the keynote is resignation and a life of which the keynote is hope.⁴

This faith, this trust, comes to us from paying attention, from mindfulness, from listening to the still small voice. Sharon Salzberg, a leading teacher of Buddhism, reminds us that:

The Buddha said, "Faith is the beginning of all good things." No matter what we encounter in life, it is faith that enables us to try again, to trust again, to love again. Even in times of immense suffering, it is faith that enables us to relate to the present moment in such a way that we can go on, we can move forward, instead of becoming lost in resignation or despair. Faith links our present-day experience, whether wonderful or terrible, to the underlying pulse of life itself.⁵

There is listening. There is finding a faith that links us to the underlying pulse of life itself. For some, like Tolstoy, there is a need to put the old self behind and become a new self, to be twice-born. For some, like Theodore Parker, there is a deepening commitment to life just as it is, swimming in "clear sweet waters all my days." For all, there is a coming to awareness of that which is greater than ourselves, what James speaks of when he says, "By being religious we establish ourselves in possession of ultimate reality at the only points at which reality is given to us to guard." And James warns religious liberals not to be too cocky in their once-born faith; he says:

[We] can see how great an antagonism may naturally arise between the healthy-minded way of viewing life and the way that takes all this experience of evil as

something essential. To this latter way, the morbid-minded way, as we might call it, healthy-mindedness pure and simple seems unspeakably blind and shallow. To the healthy-minded way, on the other hand, the way of the sick soul seems unmanly and diseased. With their grubbing in rat-holes instead of living in the light; with their manufacture of fears, and preoccupation with every unwholesome kind of misery, there is something almost obscene about these children of wrath and cravers of a second birth. If religious intolerance and hanging and burning could again become the order of the day, there is little doubt that, however it may have been in the past, the healthy-minded would at present show themselves the less indulgent party of the two.⁶ [location 2256]

Our 3rd Unitarian Universalist Principle, which is our Thought for Contemplation this morning, says that “We covenant to affirm and promote ... Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations ...”

We come here this morning from many different sets of experience, with many different stances toward the world, toward the sacred, the still small voice, “ultimate reality,” as James speaks of it. We commit ourselves to respecting and learning from each of the paths we have walked to this point in our lives, striving always to strengthen the faith that orients us to the world we live in and which we are called to serve.

This is the essence of faith. From inwardness we are called to outward action, to putting into practice that respect for all persons and for the underlying pulse of the web of life itself. In this we recognize that we are part of a greater whole, that we must act

with compassion as we ourselves are treated with compassion, that there are broken things in the world that we need to help put together again: relationships, communities, our Mother Earth. There is work to be done to heal the world, to engage in Tikkun Olam, as our Jewish brothers and sisters refer to this work.

Listen. Find faith. Act. It begins in listening. Listening to that still small voice, to the underling pulse of life itself, to the spirit of life. “Hush.” We have another hymn [#391] that speaks of this. [sung:]

Voice still and small, deep inside all,

I hear you call, singing. [you can hum or sing along if you remember]

In storm and rain, sorrow and pain,

still we’ll remain, singing.

Calming my fears,

quenching my tears,

through all the years, singing. [let’s do that again]

Mary Oliver in her poem “Mindful” reminds us – whatever our temperament – to listen, to pay attention:

Everyday

I see or hear

something

that more or less

kills me

with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle

in the haystack
of light.

It was what I was born for —
to look, to listen,

to lose myself
inside this soft world —

to instruct myself
over and over

in joy,
and acclamation.

Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant —

but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.

Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help

but grow wise
with such teachings
as these —
the untrimmable light

of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

Amen, and blessed be.

¹ <http://www.emersoncentral.com/oversoul.htm> referenced 1/5/14

² <http://www.emersoncentral.com/nature.htm>

³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Kindle Edition, loc. 3581

⁴ *Varieties*, loc. 6992

⁵ Sharon Salzberg, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2002, pp. xiv-xv

⁶ *Varieties*, loc. 2256