

Oh God! Language of Reverence in Unitarian Universalism

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First Reading: Unitarian Universalism's Eight Principles

Second Reading: *That Which Holds All* by Nancy Schaffer

Plowshare Prayer by Spencer LaJoye, part 1

Sermon:

The 8 Principles. That Which Holds All. The Plowshare Prayer. All very different; and all very Unitarian Universalist. This faith is big enough to hold both literal ethical guidance and as much evocative metaphor and music as you like.

The 8 principles and the values they lift up are central to Unitarian Universalism. Even though we now have a different expression of our values, the principles are still with us. They were created by years of wordsmithing – striving for the clearest, simplest, most inclusive and unambiguous language to describe Unitarian Universalism 40 years ago. We often disagreed about the details of practicing the principles. But there was some clarity - no squishy religious language. No hope, love, grace, mercy, or faith. No evil or sin. No Spirit, no Holy One, no God. No prayer of any kind.

This was on purpose. The original 1961 Principles did include the words “faith” and “God”.¹ But the 7 principles (as adopted in 1985) reflected both a much-needed updating and the humanist thought that became prevalent. The result was very ethical and literal. No poetry or metaphors to interpret, no imagery, no mystery, no explicit beliefs, no overtly religious language at all.

I appreciated this grounding in the rational. I firmly believe that anyone who practices any religion should constantly evaluate the real world impact of what they're doing. Our principles offered a guide – am I bringing more compassion and justice into the world? How am I accountably dismantling racism? Whose inherent worth am I overlooking right now?

And, I appreciated the striving for clarity. I like precision in words. Back when I was a patent attorney, I worked a lot with small biotech companies – in their patents, the difference between a precise definition and a sloppy one could affect the future of the company. Literal clarity was my job, and my comfort zone.

And, early on in my relationship with Unitarian Universalism, I carried this commitment to precise meanings for words into my church. I remember arguing (eloquently, in my own mind) that we should not use the word “spiritual” because it means different things to different people and some of us don't have any idea what it means, and how can we possibly use a word when we don't agree on what it means?

There's just one problem. Not everything that matters can be precisely defined. If we limit ourselves to words with clear, unambiguous meanings, there are important things we will never

¹ uuworld.org/articles/uuas-original-principles-1961

talk about. We need the rational. But we also live in a world of great Mystery, where we understand little and yet seek meaning and comfort, connection and inspiration. The words we have for that world are all wrong – they’re too small and vague – and many have been used to abuse and oppress. It’s tempting to build our life without any of them. But when we do, we can find ourselves boxed into the rational, unable to explore – even imperfectly - what is beyond those walls, and unable to connect with others who are exploring that same territory along different paths.

The way we think about our lives and this world is shaped, and limited, by the words available to us. In her TED talk, cognitive scientist Lera Boroditsky shares this example² – there’s an Aboriginal community in Australia whose language does not have words for left and right – instead, relative position is always defined using compass directions – your northeast hand, the cup to your west-south-west. Try that sometime. Most of us can’t do it – we would have a hard time correctly naming the direction of that cup even with time to think about it – it’s not gonna happen mid-sentence. Our sense of direction is mostly not that good - because the words we use, or don’t use, guide what we pay attention to, how we perceive our world, and how we think.

The words we use also shape our experiences. I think this is what the Presbyterian theologian Frederick Buchner³ was getting at when he said “It is not that you feel love and then say ‘I love you,’ but that until you say ‘I love you,’ you have not fully loved ...” he goes on, “In some important sense the thing you are ... feeling doesn’t fully exist until you have given a word to it.”

If we are to explore the world that exists beyond the rational ethical framework, we need language to speak of it. Flawed, ambiguous, misused, and distressingly squishy though it may be.

That language can also be helpful when we try to explain Unitarian Universalism. Way back in the day when the word “spiritual” was more than I could handle, it seemed so clear to me that I could just give someone one of those little cards that had the Principles on it, and the veils would lift and they would understand, and demand to be one of us. It rarely worked that way. I still remember one Jewish man who was so politely confused when I shared the Principles with him. He didn’t disagree with them – he said “of course” because these commitments are central to Judaism, too. But he was puzzled that that seemed to be all there was. He immediately saw what took me over a decade. The principles, important and central though they were, did not fully explain this faith, who we are deep down, what we trust in this world, what gives us hope.

Our new statement of who we are – the six values with love at the center, may come closer, but it doesn’t get us all the way there either.

So, then, how do we articulate who we are?

Often, not all that well. Most of us find it hard to explain Unitarian Universalism.

And ... we make it harder than it needs to be. Because so often we shy away from words that might help us to articulate the aspects of this faith that are beyond the rational and ethical. The

² “How language shapes the way we think” cognitive scientist Lera Boroditsky
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKK7wGAYP6k>

³ A Room Called Remember, quoted in *Fluent in Faith*, page xiv.

love, the mystery, the hope, the spirit; the redemption and salvation, even; the grace, the mercy, the blessing, the prayer.

Words that might have been used as a sword against us. But that might also help us open, might help us grow.

Plowshare Prayer, part 2

Our religious heritage gives us some words that carry the history and the insights of our ancestors. These words have power - for good and for evil. We could decide they're too corrupted from misuse to be redeemed, and set them aside. That happens sometimes - for noble reasons - a desire to distance ourselves from the misuse, and to be inclusive and welcoming - a refuge for those wounded by those words, used as swords against them.

But, without those words, we limit ourselves and our children because ... we only pay attention to what we have words for.

Take that word evil. Or sin. Without question, historically and currently, sometimes used in ways that cause harm. But without these words, we risk becoming people who can only see inherent goodness, because we lack words for the inherent propensity for awfulness that is also part of being human. Without these words, we abandon the most emotionally-laden language we have for speaking of systems of oppression. Environmental devastation. Cruelty. Torture. Genocide. Sometimes, the word I need is "evil." Maybe even "sin." And I need words that offer hope in the presence of such things. Without them, we limit our ability to speak truth about our full experience of the world we actually live in, and who we are in that world.

There are many progressive Christians - and Unitarian Universalists - who are not willing to abandon the rich words of our heritage to those who would use them to cause harm. We want their depth, and their emotion, and the way they can open us to greater experience and understanding. And we want to use them to help connect beyond these walls. These words are being reclaimed.

All that said, there are also people who come to Unitarian Universalism and to this very church with some form of religious trauma. Particular words can be triggering. If this is your experience, please honor what your body tells you. At some point, on your timetable, nobody else's, you might explore your experience, perhaps with a minister or therapist, and see what you can ultimately reclaim from your religious past. We don't have to agree, we don't have to use the same words - today or ever.

At this point in my life, I sometimes use language of reverence. I haven't done it a lot around here, where it can be a barrier to communication for some; and there are some words - like sin and salvation - that I rarely use without saying something about how I use them. But if I don't use these words at all, it limits me, and it becomes a barrier to communication with those who need to hear such words. I will speak of grace, mercy, love, evil, blessing, faith, prayer and God. Going forward, I may do it a little more often. I do so knowing that what I mean may not be what you mean, and knowing that you may make different choices about some or all of those words.

I'm not interested in uniformity. I'm interested in the conversations we can have.

My ... prayer ... is that each of us might develop our language of reverence, and explore what these words mean to us, and how we might perhaps use another word or two, in the service of

learning and growing and connecting. My prayer is that each of us might respect the language of reverence of those around us – knowing that we’re all trying to use limited words to illuminate something so much bigger. My prayer is that this will not be a place of refuge from religious language, so much as a place where words are used expansively and voluntarily; to heal, rather than harm; to invite depth, not platitudes. And my prayer is that we will equip our children, not with our baggage, but with as many of these powerful tools as possible so they can grow and live to their fullest. //

Sermons are very heady things. Lots of words, trying to put the Mystery into a tidy intellectual box. So let’s end with the final part of Spencer LaJoye’s Plowshare Prayer. Perhaps allow it to invite you into an experience of some language of reverence.

Plowshare Prayer, part 3

May it be so.

Amen.