

SECULAR SOCIETY AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

A Sermon Delivered for
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister
Sunday, October 14, 2007

First Reading

from *A Secular Age*

Charles Taylor

We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity, or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving or inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, [for example], of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, where we feel ourselves there. . .

These experiences, and others which can't all be enumerated here, help us to situate a place of fullness, to which we orient ourselves morally or spiritually. They can orient us because they offer some sense of what they are of: the presence of God, or the voice of nature, or the forces which flows through everything, or the alignment in us of desire and the drive to form. But they are also unsettling and enigmatic. Our sense of where they come from many also be unclear, confused. . . We are deeply moved, but also puzzled and shaken. We struggle to articulate what we have been through.

[T]he sense of orientation [we may find] also has its negative slope; where we experience about all a distance, an absence, an exile, a confusion or . . . melancholy. What is terrible in the latter condition is that we lose a sense of where the place of fullness is, even of what [it] could consist in; we feel we've forgotten what it would look like, or cannot believe in it any more. But the misery of absence, of loss, is still there.

Then thirdly, there is a kind of stabilized middle condition, to which we often aspire. This is one where we have found a way to escape the forms of negation, exile, emptiness, without having reached fullness. We come to terms with the middle position, often through some stable, even routine order in life, in which we are doing things which . . . contribute to our ordinary happiness, or which are fulfilling in various ways, or which contribute to what we conceive of as the good. . .

But it is essential to this middle condition. . . that we have some continuing contact with the place of fullness. But [in our secular age] there are surely many . . . for whom this life in what I've described as "the middle condition" is all there is. This is the goal. Living well and fully is . . . all that human life offers, but on this view this is a) no small thing, and b) to believe that there is something more -- after death, or in some impossible condition of sanctity, is to run away and undermine the search for human excellence.

In order to place the discussion between belief and unbelief in our day and age, we have to put it in the context of this lived experience. . .

Second Reading

from *Ethics after Babel:*
The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents

Jeffrey Stout

One need not be religious, in any standard sense of that term, to recognize that we are finite, limited, and conditioned beings who owe our existence to forces beyond our control and who exercise whatever freedom we have only under circumstances we have not authored ourselves. Any of us can testify to this. . . This recognition can give rise to a sense of awe in the face of the powers that bear down upon us; a sense of gratitude and obligation to that on which we depend for our existence, our identity, and the satisfaction of our desires; a sense of remorse and a need to repent when our gratitude ebbs or we fail to meet our obligations; a sense of the real possibilities that are left open by our circumstances, which despite the extent of our dependence, leave ample scope for the exercise of human agency and ground for the cultivation of realistic hope; and a sense of how, given the ordered relationships in which we find ourselves, one's life might have meaningful direction. . .

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Have you ever had a religious experience? If you did, how would you even know that you'd had one? That your experience was religious, that is?

Some people like to define "the religious" rather narrowly. In a novel written by a friend of mine, for example, a young Tennessean back in the 19th century is asked if he's had a "religious experience." But back then, on the Oregon Trail, where that story is set, that was defined as meaning one thing only: an experience of salvation, of giving your heart to Jesus. The young man replies, "Nope, I ain't had no experience." But given all the things he's been through by that point in the novel, my friend clearly meant his reply to be read as ironic. All of us have had many experiences. Some of which fill us with awe, or fear, or gratitude, or hope, or move us to self-transcendence and transformation.

Many of us in First Parish have recently been reading Michelle Huneven's novel, *Jamesland*. It is set in the context of a Unitarian Universalist congregation in California. The new minister is a woman named Helen Hartland. While at seminary, she was wowed, as many have been, by reading *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, by William James. But her first congregation is a small Unitarian Universalist group made up largely of

older people who define themselves as secular humanists and rationalists. Helen knows that many people these days, like herself and younger, are actually yearning for a non-dogmatic spirituality deeper than the materialism and consumerism of our secular age.

So she begins a mid-week service, on Wednesday nights, which she begins to call, “my little religious variety show” --because one week features a Buddhist monk, the next a feisty nun, the third a progressive rabbi. Most of her older congregation doesn’t attend. In fact, the Ministerial Relations Committee lets her know that many members actually resent the attempt to bring new dimensions to their comfortable club, in which their retired minister congratulated them for being beyond all nonsense of religion.

I was reminded of the New England UU I once asked about *her* new minister. And she replied, “Our new minister seems very interested in mythologies. And I am not.”

Helen, when asked by an old seminary friend about her new congregation replies, “I feel as though I have suddenly acquired about one hundred disapproving parents.”

(Watch out, Lucas! Most new ministers go through feeling that way!)

But her Wednesday nights gatherings attract some spiritual seekers who don’t even realize that that’s what they are. One is the 33 year-old great granddaughter of William James himself. And here’s the incident that opens the novel and brings her there:

Alice awakens in the middle of the night having heard a noise. Earlier, she’d had a fight with her latest boyfriend. He’d left drunk. Perhaps it’s him, she thought. Or her elderly great-aunt, Kate, who’s writing a novel based on the life of her grandfather James. It’s her big house, near Griffith Park and the Santa Monica mountains near Los Angeles, where Alice has come to stay, both because her life seems directionless, and because dear Aunt Kate seems intermittently a little dotty, addressing her as if she were her namesake, Alice James, sister of the great psychologist/philosopher, and of the novelist, Henry, Jr.

Downstairs, she smells the outdoors. Maybe the boyfriend left the door open. There’s another thump. And there, in the middle of the living room, a deer rises up. Without her glasses, she sees in the kitchen doorway what seems to be Aunt Kate, standing in her white nightdress. The doe is startled; she pees on the floor. Alice shoos her out the door, then cleans up, looks for Kate, has a drink, and goes back to bed.

The next morning, Alice wonders if it was all just a dream. Her aunt has no recollection of getting out of bed and is sure the house was locked. Is she going crazy? She picks up what seem like tufts of deer hair from the carpet.

When Alice finally gets up the courage to talk to Helen about her uncanny experience, the minister recalls that in the Bible, the deer is a symbol of spiritual longing: “Like as a deer thirsts for the water brooks, so my soul thirsts for You, God.” Psalm 42. How could this experience be tied to Alice’s continuing, self-frustrating pattern of looking for love in all the wrong places, largely with men who are already married?

Meanwhile, nearby, a 46 year-old man named Pete Ross knows that he is considered “crazy.” A talented chef, a perfectionist, he got suckered into starting a celebrity-sponsored restaurant and, as it failed, managed to wreck his marriage and slash his wrists, ending up in a psychiatric institution. Now he’s out, being cared for by his mother. Who has left her convent, and the comfort of “her second husband,” as Pete calls him, “Jesus,” to provide a stable re-entry for Pete – centering around a food bank for the homeless, where he too encounters Helen.

I won’t go into all the intricacies of the rollicking, complex plot that brings Pete to realize that cooking for others can be a spiritual activity, and a catalyst to real friendship, not just a path to profit; nor how the friendship that he and Alice develop turns to love; and why Helen finally gives up her ministry. Except to say this: Michelle Huneven’s earlier novel, *Round Rock*, was set at a California drunk farm. One review said, “Imagine a Magic Mountain for alkie.” She knows that when the founders of AA were trying to find a way to help people start new lives of spiritual recovery in a pluralistic, secular society, they found inspiration in reading William James. Why?

Well, as Charles Taylor points out in the book from which I took our first reading, “secular” can be defined almost as variously as “religious.” If you or I lived in Europe, or in Israel today, we might we consider it part of our identity: to be secular, as opposed to people who practice the established religion. Here in America, a secular society tends to mean a pluralistic one, in which religious affiliation, belief, or practice may be a personal matter, but, please, never a public one. Don’t get me going how that’s working! Taylor reminds us that even the most adamant secularists can have strong beliefs – often rooted in personal experience.

If you were raised in another tradition, for example, what experience caused you to go looking for a new path? I know when it happened for me. At 16, when I was an Catholic exchange student in Italy, I went on a pilgrimage with my host family to Rome. Somewhere in the midst of climbing, on my knees, saying the rosary, a staircase that I knew was not brought there from Herod's Palace, but was a pious fraud, I asked myself, "Why am I doing this? Is this in any way pleasing to God?" A Luther-like experience.

I also know that I have had experiences in life that reminded me of how important it is to find a true spiritual path. Like the one on the morning our first child was born. Driving home from the hospital, exhausted, stunned by the wonder of a new human life – so beautiful, so fragile – I found myself shaking so hard I had to pull over on the road. First came the thought, "She depends on you. Do you even have enough life insurance?" And then the thought, "And you'd better set her a good example. Get your act together!"

When I've talked to parishioners over the years about their own experiences, especially those they have been willing to characterize as "religious" I've often felt like William James, collecting, like a good empirical scientist, religious case reports. Many are about feeling awestruck and overwhelmed by a night sky, or a sunset, or an encounter with the beauty of Nature.

Even atheist philosophers like Daniel Dennett talk about how "the Tree of Life is neither perfect nor infinite in space in time, but it is actual, and if it is not Anselm's 'Being greater than which nothing can be conceived,' it is surely a being that is greater than anything any of us will conceive . . . Is it something sacred? Yes," Dennett says he would say with Nietzsche. "I would not pray to it, but I stand in affirmation of its magnificence. The world is sacred."

I'm reminded of Emerson. Who was a close friend of Henry James, Sr. – father of William, Alice, and Henry, Jr. Who visited the family shortly after William was born. And reportedly blessed the child. Who grew up knowing many staunch New Englanders and transcendentalists whom he characterized as religious, but of the "once born" variety. People who believed that the task in life was simply to grow steadily in ethical, spiritual wisdom; to leave behind a child-like faith and become wiser, more humble, awed, and committed to passing on a better world to their children.

But William James had a trouble relationship with his father, Henry James, Sr. Who was an idealist who made it impossible for his children, especially his oldest son, ever to meet his expectations. For much of his life, he followed of Swedenborgianism, which emphasized human free will, but also saw in natural occasions the marks of angels, and mystical hints of the New Jerusalem. Enough to make William a staunch empiricist, and a young adult who struggled repeatedly with bouts of clinical depression. So much so that he too had be convinced that he was not fated to stay that way, but some form of genetic predisposition, punishment, or predestination.

Read, some time, his great essay, “The Will to Believe,” in which he argues that often great transformations in human lives can only occur if we set about to behave “as if” we are free, and are loved, are capable, have a future, can effect change within. Even if that means opening ourselves up to sources of transformation not of our own making, sources of grace, as they are sometimes called.

This is how the first great empirical student of religious experience came to feel that the religious experience of the “twice-born,” whether conventionally religious or not, may be more profound than that of the “once-born.” And I can’t help but agree. On the basis of experience: not only my own, but with people I have known, not all of them conventionally religious. Not at all. Here’s a literary example:

When the writer D.H. Lawrence³ was a young man, he exchanged letters with the minister of the Congregational Church in England where he had worshipped as a boy. Evidently his mother, worried about the state of her son’s soul, had asked the pastor to send Lawrence some of his sermons. The writer’s response to one, a sermon evidently on the necessity of conversion for salvation, contains these memorable lines, which are included in the little book *Forrest Church and I* wrote called *A Chosen Faith*:

“I believe that one is converted when first one hears the low, vast murmur of life, of human life, troubling one’s hitherto unconscious self. I believe one is born first unto oneself – for the happy developing of oneself, while the world is a nursery, and the pretty things are to be snatched for, and the pleasant things tasted; some people seem to exist thus right to the end. But most are born again on entering maturity; then they are born to humanity, to a consciousness of all the laughing, and the never-ceasing murmur of pain and sorrow that comes from the terrible multitude of brothers [and sisters].”

“Then, it appears to me, one gradually formulates one’s religion, be it what it may. A person has no religion who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it; and one’s religion is never complete and final it seems, but must always be undergoing modification.”

D. H. Lawrence was not a Unitarian Universalist. But like him, I believe that religious experience in a secular age does not need to be confined to being “converted” in some conventional sense. I believe that if we are open to recognizing the transforming possibility and sacred dimensions of our ordinary, daily human experience, whether other people would call those experiences “religious” or not, there is every possibility that we may grow spiritually by being born again, and again, and yet again.

My friend and colleague, Barbara Merritt, says that for her, spirituality has been like a zig-zag path, with lots of switchbacks. She quotes the great spiritual master, Rumi: “I shoot an arrow right; it lands left. I ride after a deer, and find myself chased by a hog.”

“You know how it is. Sometimes/ we plan a trip to one place, but something takes us to another.// God fixes a passionate desire in you,/ and then disappoints you./ God does that a hundred times!// God breaks the wings of one intention, & then gives you another.”

Alice set out to find Mr. Goodbar. She found Pete. Pete set out to be a celebrity chef. He found Alice in a pantry for the homeless. You and I have each set out to find this or that. Yet here we are. We have found each other. In a place of mutual acceptance, where no one need have their own religious experience conform to anyone else’s. Because our secular world need not be devoid of deep, meaningful, spiritual experience, but everyone of us is free, in a pluralistic world, to interpret our experience as either banal or as having a sacred depth.

And when we find the latter dimension, perhaps with one another’s guidance, perhaps we’ll understand what it would mean to be “born again Unitarian Universalists.” As even Daniel Dennett says, spirituality is ultimately this:

“Let your Self go. Approach the world’s complexities, both its glories and horrors, with an attitude of humility, acknowledging that however deeply you have seen, you have only just scratched the surface, and you will find worlds within worlds, beauties you could not heretofore imagine, and your own mundane preoccupations will shrink to proper size, not all that important in the greater scheme of things.”

“Keeping [and renewing] that awestruck vision of the world. . . while dealing with the demands of living is no easy exercise, but it is definite worth the effort, for if you stay centered and engaged, you will find hard choices easier, the right words will come to you when you need them, and you will indeed be a better person.”

Amazing, the grace that is continually open to us. May we find it, in many forms. Transforming us, again and again, even in this secular age of ours. Amen, and amen.

*Hymn 205

Amazing Grace

John Newton

Benediction

In the words of Paul Robeson:

“Sorrow will one day turn to joy.

All that breaks the heart and oppresses the soul
will one day give place to peace and understanding
and everyone will be free.”

So may it be. Amen.

