

Restless Souls and Expanding Images of God
A Sermon by the Rev. Makaanah Elizabeth Morriss
March 5, 2006

Restless souls...the road less traveled...definitely images of our liberal religious journey.

Bill Miller says it well in the music we just heard:
“(I) heard a voice calling out to me
Might have been a vision, might have been a dream
Said “some things will come and some will go”
We’re only here a moment, don’t you know.”
I don’t claim to have all the answers
But I’ve got my share of questions,
If I don’t follow blindly, doesn’t mean I’ve lost my way.
Because I’m still on the journey, headed down the road less traveled
I know we’re all going to get there, in our own time and way.”

As Unitarian Universalists, our roots go back to courageous liberal religionists who honored the questions, the big questions about Life and Humanity and Sacred Source. Our ancestors were most definitely “restless souls.”

Our Unitarian roots come from those who after the invention of the printing press, read the Christian Scriptures for themselves and began the search for the most authentic way to follow the life and teachings of Jesus. They found no clear scriptural basis for the doctrine of the Trinity and thus they expressed their belief that Jesus was a human being with exceptional courage and vision. The image of “Father, Son and Holy Ghost” seemed to them a barrier to both living in the way Jesus taught and to experiencing the fullness of the ever-changing Unknowable Mystery which many call God.

Our Universalist ancestors likewise felt that the image of God put forth especially by the Calvinists of a punishing father figure was inadequate. They expanded the image of God by focusing on the Sacred Source as being a loving parent who offered universal salvation to all souls. This has always been at odds with the mainstream Christian churches.

Our Unitarian roots were further strengthened by a commitment to religious tolerance – acknowledging that there are many perspectives possible on theological questions. Early on, Unitarians affirmed that individuals have a right to pursue their own spiritual quest in their own ways as long as they do not impinge upon the safety or freedom of others. Here we see the beginnings of an understanding of the need for ever expanding images of God or Ultimate Source.

Both Unitarianism and Universalism found nurturing soil for these roots when these theological perspectives began to develop in the new United States. Both groups were looking for freedom from religious persecution and both had the clarity and congruence to support religious freedom for all peoples not just themselves.

Thomas Jefferson, as many of you know, was a Unitarian who believed that this liberal religious faith made so much sense that within one more generation most citizens

would be Unitarian. Jefferson had a brilliant mind but in this instance he was unfortunately less than accurate.

In a recent book entitled *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, Leigh Eric Schmidt who is Professor of Religion at Princeton traces how liberal religion has fueled American spirituality up to even the present day.

This book is filled with the names of well-known and not so well known Unitarians who stretched the descriptions and definitions of religion, theology, spirituality and God.

William Ellery Channing, one of the most significant ministers of the early 1800's in Boston and the minister who helped coalesce the budding Unitarian movement into a reality, was a person for whom religion and spirituality meant the continued encouragement to questioning, visioning, articulating and debating possible understandings of God. In 1837 in an address to the Unitarian Sunday School Society, he offered words and a vision which is the cornerstone of our liberal religious education approach. He spoke these words which are familiar to many of us:

“The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own; Not to make them see with our eyes but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own; not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth; not to form an outward regularity but to touch inward springs.”

“Not to form an outward regularity but to touch inward springs.” Such are the sentiments which can nurture restless souls and affirm evolving images of God.

The Transcendentalist movement which began in the mid-1830's came out of the dissatisfaction of many Unitarian and other liberal Christian ministers and thinkers that their religion had become too stale, spiritually cold and uninspiring for the mind or heart. The Transcendentalists included such famous names as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller among many others. These were authors, poets, social activists, newspaper editors, professors.

Leigh Schmidt writes about early religious liberalism in this way:

“In the United States, liberalism ... was the volatile currency of religious innovators and critics of orthodoxy who, though spanning a wide spectrum of allegiances, remained convinced of their own essential affinities. Individualistic in their understanding of authority, religious liberals were generally contemptuous of creeds and scorned uncritical submission to scriptural texts as ignorance or even idolatry. Moving beyond mere toleration as an ideal, they led the way as eager sympathizers with other faiths. With a grand sense of human freedom and potentiality they were committed to progress in the domain of spiritual consciousness, social organization, and scientific knowledge.” (Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, p.11)

This type of liberal religious spirituality included the following principles and as I read these, listen and see if any of these principles are important to you on your religious/philosophical journey:

- Individual aspiration after mystical experience or religious feeling;
- A valuing of silence, solitude, and serene meditation;

- The immanence of the Transcendent – in each person and in nature;
- A cosmopolitan appreciation of religious variety as well as unity in diversity;
- Ethical earnestness in pursuit of justice-producing reforms or “social salvation”;
- An emphasis on creative self-expression and adventuresome seeking.

(Schmidt, p. 12)

These are our religious and spiritual roots. These principles affirm our liberal restless souls, souls in constant search for new understandings and truths, and souls which invite ever evolving images of God.

In an interesting book entitled, *God and the Evolving Universe*, James Redfield, Michael Murphy and Sylvia Timbers offer an excellent summary of the evolution of human spiritual awakening and expanding images of God.

They write: “Evolution entered a new domain with the appearance of humankind. Intelligence, communication skills, and other attributes of animal life advanced dramatically as our species formed newly creative social groups, harnessed fire, developed new tools, learned to speak, and tried to make greater sense of the world around them. As their capacities developed, our ancestors awoke to the Transcendent and began to advance toward the truth of their higher nature.” (Redfield, et al, p.22)

Let’s look for a moment at how our human evolution has continued to call forth changing and expanding images of the Ultimate Mystery.

Fifty to sixty thousand years ago, our forebears more swiftly than ever before elaborated language, tool-making, art, and their approach to the spirit world. Shamans were central in this awakening. They were at once medicine men or women, visionaries, masters of sacred ritual, artists, and guides to realms beyond the senses. (p.22) They had many skills including their ability to enter altered states of consciousness. Shamanic practices in many different and very geographically separate parts of the world have always shown a remarkable degree of similarity.

Then many thousands of years after the birth of shamanism, the human awakening to the Transcendent that had begun in the Stone Age was kept alive in the “mystery schools” and centers of religious ritual that emerged in Greece, Syria, Anatolia, Egypt and Persia.

Human consciousness made another significant advance with the emergence of Vedic culture in India during the second millennia B.C.E.. The Vedic Hymns and Upanishads include hymns and prayers to a variety of gods, formulas for healing and nutrition, mythologies of ancient India as well as spiritual philosophy.

From the 7th to 4th century B.C.E. in Asia, Greece and the Middle East, there was another extraordinary surge of intellectual and spiritual creativity. In China, Taoism arose. In India, the Buddha flourished. Among the Jews there appeared several of the world’s greatest prophets. And in Athens and other Greek City states, philosophical speculation made an evolutionary leap. Such thinkers as Pythagoras proposed that there was no difference between “science” and religion.” To understand the nature of physical things and their relation to the human soul was a spiritual activity. (Redfield, p. 34)

The journey of human awakening then continued through the development of Christianity from its foundations focusing on the life of a remarkable Jewish teacher, Jesus, to the Renaissance, and to the Enlightenment with its focus on the use of reason and its birth of the industrial and eventually scientific revolution. Answers to the questions of “how” and “what” and where did the universe come from were greatly expanding old images of God and Ultimate Mystery.

With Darwin’s theory of evolution, yet another unfolding of understanding occurred. It is an unfolding which is still continuing. Along with the findings of quantum physics, our human understandings move forward and then at times seem to kind of double back only to move forward again as new pieces of the puzzle of the origin of the Cosmos and Ultimate Being emerge.

Science and religion in dialogue – that is our liberal religious way. That is the way of our evolving intellect and opening intuition. We continue to develop as physical, intellectual and spiritual beings.

And thus our restless souls quest and reflect in silence and dialogue and debate; in word and drawing and creative expression; through art and e-mail, and late night talks about the why and wherefore of existence.

And we of the liberal religious persuasion relish this restlessness at least to a certain extent. We offer each other deep listening, profound but hopefully respectful questioning, and encouragement on the journey.

We know that we must both achieve a sense of clarity for our individual current beliefs as well as being continually open to new perspectives and understandings.

Sam Keen in a recent article in the magazine “Spirituality and Health” writes, “The more earnestly I search for a way to talk about the great mystery of being – “God” for short – the more confused I become. All the metaphors that suggest I am separated from and must search for the [Universal] Totality are farcical.”

To avoid falling into idolatry, he suggests we proceed from silence to paradoxical speech and back again to silence.

I hunch that each one of us here this morning, has experienced changing and expanding images of God, Ultimate Source, Unknowable Mystery, over our individual life journeys.

Take a moment and think about what your image of God/Goddess was when you were three or four years old...Now think of how that image had changed by the time you were a teenager.

In your order of service is an insert with some of the paradoxical names which Sam Keen suggests for the Nameless One. He and I invite you to stretch language to the breaking point. Invent names. Use once and discard. Keen says that if you add 3 names to the list and send it to three friends, who must in turn send it to three friends, within three weeks you will receive over 30,000,000 new names for God!

So let's take just a couple of minutes of silence and then I'll ask you to call out names you'd like to add to the list...

With the names you develop, both your restless soul and your sense of connection with the Mysterious Unity of All are nurtured. In this way we can stretch our minds, our hearts, our intellect, our mystical spirits to see more aspects, to understand more profoundly. An in so doing we will find ourselves more able to align our actions with our courage and our souls so that justice, equity and compassion in all our relations will become our norm.

This quest for evolving images of the Ultimate Source is built into our aliveness and into our DNA. It is good for our present and for our future.

About three weeks ago, Ed Warsaw forwarded a poem he had just written entitled "Ode to God as Ultimate Power." Ed is a longtime liberal religious seeker, a mystic, a poet, a humanist and an activist. I was deeply touched and inspired by Ed's poem and I have asked him to share it with us this morning.

"Ode to God the Ultimate Power"
The story of God is a love story
Greater than all love stories
For it is the tale of agape
Of divine love for creatures
Imbedded in their creative world
So webbed together that to say
Life is spontaneous is to miss
The point of creative regeneration!

The sign points to cosmic infinity
Are like all metaphors pointing
Two ways or several directions
Like an inverted compass or
Like a spinning gyroscope
Always moving and pointing
In a perpetual dance of life
Spinning and tumbling with energy!

God is the Universal Creative Energy
Anthropomorphic but also very much
Anti-anthropomorphic as well;
Christians and Moslems have both horns
To the great equation making them
Both right and both wrong together...
To step outside their boxes is to know
That humans are both servant and master!

To become master one must master servanthood
And to become servant of God be master
Of one's own life and destiny without

Dogma or doctrine and pride or prejudice;
The importance of creation was not the Tempter
But the introduction of maturity into
The fairy tale existence of naive unreality
Revealing a double quest between Creator and Creation!

As creatures we claim organic birthright
In the great contest of life and death
But as servants and masters we claim
Part of the flame of discovery and science
The firey chalice of truth and light
Which coupled with our organic passions
Forces us discriminate between the fragile
Cells of life and the engines of death!

The evil in this world is the evil of abundance
Having the ultimate power of life and death
Over innocents and fragile seeds of becoming
Shaping the next generation with our bad habits;
In a destiny where we can be anywhere and everywhere
Having the ultimate power of life and death
And the technology to exercise extinction with
No discrimination makes us butcher of the world!

And we also have the capacity of rectitude
The capacity for forgiveness and love
The instinct to enhance and save the web of life
And the ability to plan and improve our world;
This conflict between poet and engineer
To both savor and to dominate the current scene
To become creative and open to positive change
Underscores our progression from beast to messiah!
Edward Carl Warsaw
Cheyenne, Wyoming
Friday, February 10, 2006

We are restless souls in physical bodies traveling through the cosmos. We need
ever expanding images of God and Ultimate Source.

As the 13th century Islamic poet Rumi wrote,
“We began
as a mineral.
We emerged into plant life,
And into the animal state, and then into being human,
And always we have forgotten our former states, except in the early
spring when we slightly recall being green again.
That’s how a young person turns toward a teacher...
Humankind is being led along an evolving course,

through this migration of intelligences
and though we seem to be sleeping
there is an inner wakefulness that directs the dream,
And that will eventually startle us back to the Truth of who we are.”

May our restless souls, our evolving God images, and our connections one with
another nurture and encourage us.

Blessed be.