

“EXPERIENCING THE RELIGIOUS”

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October 15, 2006

READING

The reading for this morning is an adaptation of Rabbi Max Shapiro’s essay “One’s Journey Through Life.”

“I need not tell you that there are many ways to travel through Life. You can go as a tourist. You can go as someone who has paid his fee and expects everything to be right, as if it has been promised in a brochure. You know how it is: if a hotel room is inadequate, transportation uncomfortable, the food inedible – the tourist complains. She believes she has the right to be demanding of everyone and everything, but not of herself. If something goes wrong, if there is an inconvenience, she will see to it that others suffer as well.

You could also go through Life as a hitchhiker. Many of us do. The hitchhiker stands by the side of the road and waits for something to happen. If someone helps you alone, fine. If there is no help today, you will wait for tomorrow. You may have an idea where you are going, or you may not even care. And you do not really mind a diversion as long as it is heading somewhere nearby. Whatever happens, happens. There is little you see or do. You just want to keep moving. And you take your chances. There are not attachments, no responsibilities. And you are totally dependent on someone else for whatever takes place.

And I think to myself as I hear the hitchhiker talk: in this life of ours, we can dodge our responsibilities, but we can never dodge the result of our dodging. Should it not be that whatever we do in a day, be worth in some way, one day of our lives?

There is a third way to take that trip through Life and that is to make it a pilgrimage – a sacred pilgrimage. The pilgrim starts out knowing where he or she is going and there is usually anticipation and joy in the prospect. The pilgrim is aware that there may be hazards on the way, events can neither be planned nor foreseen, but that does not stop the journey. The pilgrim understands that the journey may be uncertain, but how he or she faces uncertainty is not. How we live is not. No one has promised us a rose garden. The pilgrim is aware of that. Tears and pain are on the road. What

kind they will be we do not know, but how we will respond to them – of that we are sure.”

SERMON

. . . For my purposes this morning I would invite each of you to sit back in your seat and relax . . .

Settle back . . . get comfortable . . . put down your Order of Service and your hymnal . . . find a comfortable sitting position. Try to let your thoughts clear . . . take a deep breath . . . a cleansing breathe, if you will . . . become aware of your own breathing . . . of the silence and the sound of my voice.

. . . Relax . . . look at the flowers or the walls, or the carpet, or, perhaps, even better, close your eyes . . .

I would like each of you to try to forget that anyone else is in this room worshipping with you . . .

I want you to imagine, and to believe, that you ARE NOT sitting next to anyone else.

YOU ARE ALONE.

You ARE NOT a member of a larger group. . . . You are alone.

You ARE NOT sitting next to another person. . . . You are quite alone.

Now, in your aloneness, I want each of you to think about religion. I want you to think about the ultimate questions of human experience and existence.

. . . What is the origin of the universe? . . . Why were YOU created?

. . . How do you respond to the fact of death? Is it fearful?

. . . Does your life have any significance or worth? What is that “worth” for you?

. . . Can you envision a power beyond yourself? . . . Can you feel that power?

What great joys have you known in your life?

. . . Remain in the silence, and remember that religion is an attempt to explain what cannot otherwise be explained. Understand that religion is an attempt to establish poise and serenity in the face of confusion and malevolence. Recognize that religion is an attempt to build a citadel of hope on the cutting edges of despair.

. . . You are alone . . . in solitude . . . in a private and personal world . . . thinking . . . reflecting . . . on the ultimate questions . . . forming answers and solutions that make sense to you . . . developing, in a real sense, your own personal faith . . .

There is only YOU YOURSELF . . . and the silence.

. . . And now, gently . . . very gently . . . I would invite you to return from the quietude . . . from the silence. If you closed your eyes, I would want you to slowly open your eyes, and look around you. Look around you in this room . . . feel the presence of the other individuals sitting next to you and around you, in front of you and behind you.

I would like you to move from the private to the public – from the intimately personal to the shared social – from the individual to the sense of community.

You are back, once again, in this particular religious gathering, in this worshipping community.

What is religion?

Is religion an individual experience – a private journey into the realm of value and belief? Or, is religion a shared experience – a common commitment to ideals and actions?

. . . The experts do not seem to agree.

William James claimed that religion is basically an individual rather than a social phenomenon.

But Emile Durkheim claimed that religion has its origins in the attempt to conserve social values. George Stratton held that religion has its source in the conflict which rages in the individual. Yet Talcott Parsons maintained that religion is a set of beliefs and customs which evolve from society.

In general, the psychologists tend to emphasize the individuality of religious experience as something which occurs within a particular personality, while the sociologists tend to emphasize the social aspects of religion as something which arises from the contact of a community.

Now, when the experts disagree, it is best to rely on common sense.

Clearly, all religion is private, personal, individual in some of its aspects; and, just as clearly, all religion is public, social, shared in other of its aspects.

In truth, I cannot imagine anything in human experience which is totally individualistic or totally societal. I do not think that an individual can exist fully without social environment, nor do I think that a society can fully exist without individual members.

Perhaps, it is useful to view this issue in terms of a vast spectrum: on the right, the most individualistic forms of religion; on the left, the most social forms of religion. And, in the middle, those forms of religion which have a lively mixture of the personal and the shared.

. . . By way of illustration, consider, on the far right, the likes of Simeon Stylites, a Christian monk of the fifth century. Stylites spent the first ten years of his monastic life in a cave, chained to a wall. After gaining fame as a saint unequalled in the fifth century Christian world, Stylites decided to mount a column that reached sixty feet in the air, there to live in a cage at the top. Simeon Stylites remained in that cage, sixty feet above ground, for the last thirty-seven years of his life, speaking to no one, not even his mother who came to visit him on his high perch. Stylites spent his life in constant personal prayer and self-directed silence.

Simeon Stylites was hardly a rewarding companion.

Or, on the far left, we might consider the example of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. For here was an organization which allowed little individualism. The Jesuits functioned as a watchdog for the Papacy, rather like a C.I.A. of the Roman Catholic Church. The Society of Jesus was careful in its recruitment, ruthless in its discipline, and authoritarian in its structure with the emphasis on the perpetuation and survival of the organization!

The Jesuits also were never much fun at a party!

However, even these extreme illustrations demonstrate the inevitable mixture. If Stylites yearned only for a deep, individual, and abiding relationship with his God, he was still the product of a society and a culture which honored and encouraged the monastic life. If the Jesuits required unequivocal obedience and loyalty to the rules of the Order, there were still individual Jesuit priests who gained renown for their own personal devotion and achievement. Simeon Stylites could no more escape the environment than the Jesuits could destroy the individual personality.

. . . If you find yourself wondering at the direction, or point, of my remarks thus far this morning, then I need to pause for a moment and say that I suppose one could call it a warning, a warning for each one of us.

As Unitarian Universalists, free thinkers, religious liberals, we are always mindful of the imperatives of religious individualism. We celebrate the individual's relation and kinship with, and to, life. We celebrate the individual personality's dignity and beauty and worth. We celebrate the individual's freedom and choice. We celebrate the individual's birth and death.

It becomes almost a phobia in our tradition as we decry all dogmas and creeds, as we renounce all claims of loyalty and obedience, as we sever all bonds of association, as we attack all forms of community, as we contribute less than one-tenth of one percent of our household incomes to the sustenance and the support of the gathered religious community. It may be chic to strike the pose of rugged individualism – shades of Whitman and Thoreau – but it is dangerously bordering on pride and arrogance . . . and it is wrong!

It is wrong because our religion is also a shared experience – a stew of loyalties, associations, communities, and institutions – fellowships of people which cannot be denied.

. . . If you will, return once again into your thoughts and feelings.

Think about your birth. . . .

- Were you born into the Lutheranism of Hannibal, Missouri?
- Were you born into the Catholicism of Back Bay Boston?
- Or, did you emerge in the Bible Belt of Macon, Georgia?
- Or issue forth in the Congregationalism of New England?
- Did you see the light of day as a Presbyterian in Baltimore?

- A Jew in Brooklyn?
- Or, were you a wide-eyed Unitarian Universalist in Rockford, Illinois?

In reality, your birth is an influence which one never entirely escapes.

Think about your family

- What about your father? Was he a member of the local congregation? Perhaps he slept in on Sunday mornings. Or did he pray at the dinner table?
- Or, your mother – did she grab you by the hair and drag you off to Sunday School each Sunday? Or, did she radiate a holiness that cannot be described?
- Did your parents talk about religion? Did they celebrate the religious holidays?
- How did they explain the death of good, kind cousin George?
- Or, perhaps, they ran away right after you were born.

In reality, our family is an influence which we never entirely escape.

Think about your education

- Who was your favorite teacher? Did she turn you in a new direction? Was he sensitive to your growing dreams and yearning?
- Maybe it was a minister who lit your soul . . . or, did a minister burn it out?
- Was it a book that quelled your fears? A poet? A philosopher? A comedian?
- Or, did you attend a Summer Music camp?
- Grinnell College? University of Illinois? Rockford Community College? Or, was it the school of hard toil and struggles?

In reality, our education is an influence which we never entirely escape.

Your social status. Think about it

- Are you a high-brow, a low-brow, or middle-brow?
- Are you a nurse, an engineer, a social worker, IBM exec, or a homemaker par excellent?
- When you have a few extra dollars in your pocket, do you walk up to the Salvation Army lady and put something in her tambourine? Does money buy salvation? Does poverty earn merit in Heaven? How is your theology affected by your income?

- What are the results of your biases and prejudices?
- Does the world owe you something?
- Do you play bridge at the Country Club or do you do crossword puzzles at the neighborhood diner?

In reality, our social status is an influence which we never entirely escape.

And your language, your race, your employment, your nationality, your sexuality, your age . . . these are other forms of shared experience.

The rugged individualist is fiction, a creation of the literary world. It is the religious community – the spiritual fellowship of gathered individuals – which is the primary mode of sharing religious experience. Like all institutions, it accomplishes a variety of tasks which the solitary individual cannot perform.

It enables us to articulate our deepest convictions . . . with people who are sensitive, accepting, and understanding.

It enables us to check and confirm our experiences . . . with folks who are open, caring, and honest.

It enables us to preserve our religious heritage and tradition . . . with others of a similar commitment.

It enables us to implement our ideals . . . with people who also dream of a better world of peace and justice for all of Life.

It enables us to raise our morality with folks who are wise and faithful, courageous and inspired.

In all of these ways, the collective religious experience is superior to the individual religious life, though the individual continues to inform and influence the collective.

As a minister I have often been confronted by the person who declares: “I do not need the church. My religion is walking in the woods, strolling along the ocean’s beaches, or, I can get my spiritual high out in the open, on the golf course.” Or, still another who says: “I sit down with a good book of poetry or the New York Times on Sunday mornings!”

I find such statements mostly nonsense. For there is no depth of meaning, no testing of ideals, no comparison of experiences, no context of tradition, and very little implementation. It is a very egocentric position which tends to feed upon itself. It is a secular pietism. It is a private Disneyland World! It has all the force of a New Year's resolution!

In truth, the primary institution for religion as a shared experience is the Church, the gathered community of faith, and it is here, in the beloved congregation of hope and purpose, of commitment, that religion becomes public, social, and communal.

Quite simply, if this afternoon all of the churches were immediately abolished, tomorrow, the religious community would be immediately restored. It existed among the primitive tribes of prehistory and it exists in the modern technological cities of this twenty-first century.

Finally, I would have you think back upon your experience this morning.

Earlier, when I asked you to pretend and imagine yourself to be alone in this room, I had created a kind of artificial environment.

In point of fact and truth:

- YOU HAVE BEEN born into a culture and a civilization.
- YOU HAVE BEEN nurtured in a family and a society.
- YOU HAVE BEEN living in a neighborhood and a city.
- YOU HAVE BEEN sitting in a congregation and a religious gathering.

It is the nature of the human animal to speak – to smell – to touch – to share – to belong – to help – to learn – to fight – to love.

And to constantly seek the words – the ears – the fragrance – the hands – the courage – the bodies – the wisdom – the comfort – and the love and acceptance of other human beings.

How could you gaze around this room, how could you close your eyes in this place and yet not be aware of other individuals sitting next to you, around you, and not be curious about THEIR thoughts and THEIR feelings?

How could you NOT BE AWARE and sensitive to their joys and their anguish? And NOT be wanting to share your own discovery of joys?

. . . If religion were only a vertical relation with a Larger Life Force, we could just as well be a rock or a plant! But we are human beings with the social instinct: things that cry on understanding shoulders, things that laugh in a friendly mirth.

I would like to suggest the following:

If we want our religion to be private, personal, individual, then we should use the tools of silence, solitude, meditation, independence, concentration, and self-discipline. These are powerful tools for the development of a personal religion.

And, if we want our religion to be public, social, shared, then we should utilize the tools of the gathered religious community: tradition, worship, singing, caring, sacrifice, commitment, and social concern and action. These are powerful tools for the development of a shared religion.

Yet, if we want the depth and the height, the meaning and the mystery, the insight and the action, the fullness and the roundness, then we should utilize every tool in the workshop of religion.

For religion is an affair of the heart, the heart which reaches out to redeem and transform society; and religion is also a social experience which cleanses the inner parts of the individual personality.

The stoics say: "Retire within yourself and there you will find rest." Which is not true.

Others say: "Go out of yourself, seek your happiness and meaning in diversion." Also, which is not true.

. . . Life's happiness, significance and meaning is neither within us nor without us. It is BOTH within . . . AND without.

So May It Be. Amen.