

The Unitarian Church of Barnstable – April 14, 2019
“Lest the Stones Cry Out” – The Rev. Tracy Johnson

There is a holy light in my back yard. Perhaps you’ve seen it too. It originates at the edge of dark, rain-filled clouds and clear blue sky. It casts a crystalline clarity across the spectrum of color that exists in grass - and leaves, blossoms on trees and sprouting shrubs, cardinals’ and starlings’ wings – colors that burst forth - so intense that you don’t even see the object, but rather see as the artist sees; pieces of color - connected -to create a scene. Not quite the phenomenon that my daughter refers to as “God-light” - where the streaming, distant rain falls from clouds toward the earth in even rays, but a cast like that of a certain brilliance which causes you to pause – to ponder questions about the sacredness of our existence.

This experience of the holy and these words came to me one afternoon as I was preparing the grill for dinner! So suddenly and intensely it occurred - and I knew immediately that I needed to write it down – capture it, so that I would always have it – so that I might someday share it. A moment of grace – a gift from the universe.

What is this thing that I experienced? Certainly we feel it, as I did from my back porch, that sense of wonder at the world around us – how marvelously put together it is. We can’t help but stand in awe sometimes. It may be the sound of the ocean for some of us and the rustle of fallen leaves beneath our feet for others. Maybe we find it in a beautifully crafted poem or in the words of our children; our grandchildren. Surely we can all recall an experience of it. A time when we witnessed some part of the natural order “crying out” as it were, rendering praise by its very existence for the gift of life; of being.

Reverence is the word for what I felt, what you have felt in the face of something so awesome that it is hard to find the words for – a sense of something larger than humanity, accompanied by awe. It is a capacity, really, to feel, to emote. And it is directed toward something that reminds us of our limitations as human beings. This awe we experience renders us mostly inarticulate; coming over us and leaving us at a loss to say what it is about; evading our vocabulary. Suddenly we are dwarfed by what we have confronted because it doesn’t fit neatly into a set of beliefs. We are called into silence; into waiting for further disclosure.

There are certainly scientific reasons for the light I saw and we can deny our emotions and chalk it all up to science and reason, but I am not possessed of a totally scientific mind or understanding. And beyond the science, when we are graced to witness something that we can’t control or change, that sometimes even experts can’t fully explain, that we didn’t create, there is a sense of transcendence. Beyond the science is the holy; a purity if you will, and it calls forth reverence.

Our reading this morning from the book of Luke recounts Jesus’ entry into the city of Jerusalem and today is the day for the Christian celebration of this event, but I didn’t choose our words because of that. It is actually the last line of the reading that spoke to me so vividly. Where the people are all excited and extolling Jesus’ entry on the scene and the Pharisee’s are upset because all this excitement with all these people is likely to evolve into a riotous affair, and they suggest that he might quiet things down a bit. But he says that even if these folks were silenced, the stones themselves would cry out. To me this is a metaphor for something that desperately needs to be expressed; that if we as human beings didn’t shout about it, something inanimate like rocks would do it for us. It simply has to happen, one way or another.

This is the way it is with reverence. There is that moment of silent witness to the grace that we receive and then we must respond. It may be found in the words we speak as we attempt to recount what we have felt, but it is in our actions as well. It comes from a place of deep respect, a place of oneness with the mystery that is our life; our world. It is present when we listen deeply to one another here and beyond these walls in our community. We are acting out of reverence in these moments and we speak volumes in these silent acts about our respect for human life. Humanities professor Paul Woodruff says that reverence is expressed whenever we have moral choices to make and that it shows up in our respect for others and our world. It is in what he calls a “language of

behavior.” Words are lovely tools to represent our thoughts, but you know the old saying, it is our actions that speak louder.

It saddens me to say that there appears to be no shortage of irreverence to which we are exposed these days. It fills the airwaves, pops up – unexpectedly - on our Facebook pages; it is shouted across playgrounds and from the bleachers at little league games. There seems a certain level of permission that has been granted by virtue of example from the highest offices in our land; permission for hatefulness; permission to behave badly. We see irreverence for the earth – our disposables tossed out of car windows, piling up on the roadside and floating on the surface of once pristine waters. Irreverence: It is the diminishing of life. I find that the irreverent word is often more easily spoken; passing through the lips just seconds before the signal comes, beckoning us to hold back. It happens to all of us. It seems we need a language of reverence simply to bring balance to what we hear and see; to lift up what has been made low. Choosing reverence takes practice; mindfulness. We are amazing creatures to be sure, but we are human, lest we forget, and the possibilities are limitless for us to fail humanity as well as to make good. Reverence requires us to be grounded in the things which we covenant to affirm; that which is inherent in all persons, the quality of our relationships, our goals for community and our connections to all that is - to carry those affirmations with us as we enter into our days.

Woodruff posits a connection to this virtue called reverence, as he puts it, to a capacity for awe, which is easy to see; to respect, which seems to follow as a response; and finally to shame, which was a little harder for me to grasp until the other day. I was at the local fish market and I asked the man behind the counter for some swordfish. I watched him as he placed the piece I had pointed to on the scale, printed out the label and wrapped it up, handing it over with a smile. Did I want anything else? No, I said, this is fine. Thanks. As I walked away I glanced down at my dinner and noticed that the label said flounder. And not only that. Flounder was, at the time, about five dollars less per pound, which meant I had gotten quite a deal! But there was this inner conversation brewing about whether I should bring it back and tell him or not. Woodruff suggests that shame occurs when we are exposed in our own minds to shortcomings in relation to the ideals toward which we stand in awe. No one would have been the wiser if I just checked out and went home – no one but me. And I couldn’t do it because I hold this ideal about honesty and respect. I share this by way of example, of course – I’ve not always been so virtuous in my actions and I am sure you have similar stories. I am quite human. We are all quite human.

Was this reverence? I may not have said so a month ago, but now I believe it was. When we privately make the moral choice out of a sense of awe and respect for the human experience, no fanfare about it, we are acting out of reverence. It arises out of a very personal space and is made public in such subtle ways. But without it, where would we be? Would we lose our humility? Without some sense of our limitations as a reminder, what would we become? There is a humanist belief going back to the ancient Greeks, in the necessity of reverence as a foundation for society; that it is required for groups of human beings to stand by one another. Without reverence for humanity it is easy to do violence; we see it every day. A case can be made for the strong correlation between a lack of reverence and the level of violence we encounter historically, in our family and community lives, and in how we treat our environment.

I recall the years I worked in the prison system and watching as the stories of those incarcerated grew increasingly more violent over time and a quick check of the local news would indicate it is not improving. My sense is that it had to do with the environments that enveloped these young lives. Systemic oppression denies reverence to the individual who is then caught up in this spiral of irreverence. The ability to act with reverence is, in some ways, a possession of the privileged. Lack of choice is a powerful inhibitor to a reverent life. And yet, what we see on the surface – whatever bravado one needs to make it through their days – is not always or even often an accurate representation of what is going on inside the heart.

It was Augustine who recounted our proclivity toward the miraculous - when he took stock of the things we wonder at: the heights of mountains, huge waves of the sea, broad flowing rivers, the courses of the stars. He proclaims his own wonder, though, at our tendency to ignore the marvel that we are as human beings. We have come a long way since the days of Augustine and as Unitarian Universalists we have developed what I would call a “healthy awe” for the life that we live in all of its manifestations: physical; spiritual; or emotional. We see it

reflected in our principles. We have something to stand on that reminds us to be self-reverent as well. It is not because we are part of some exclusive club, or that we have some advantage ours alone, or because of privilege, although these things have begun to ring true for us and we do the world a disservice when we forget that truth. It is instead about empowerment, affirmation and a sense of universal inclusivity.¹ Because when we experience these things in our humanity, we know ourselves to be acceptable; we understand our worth and that of others; our capacity for reverence is taken up a notch and we respond differently.

But how does one come by that if not through teaching or religion? The point is that it is a capacity which makes possible other ways of being. We all begin capable of it; where it goes from there does depend on culture and learning. So what are we to do?

If you are near my age or older you will recall the line from a now famous film that states, “Plastics” indicating that, “They are the way of the future.” And I am reminded of the movie, “Bag It,” which I saw some years ago about the horrible, awesome truth of that statement! Plastic is everywhere, poisoning us and our environment needlessly; it has reached epidemic proportions according to the narrator. And since that viewing I have been going to the grocery store with my canvas totes in hand, trying not to individually bag my vegetables before taking them to the register – which is really hard with things like green beans! Most of our towns have banned plastic grocery bags and some are considering plastic water bottle bans on their town warrants this spring. I have a tote bag full of tote bags in my car for when I go shopping! And I am making a conscious effort to use re-usable water bottles, travel mugs, napkins and straws. This was hard at first, but it is getting easier! It takes thought and strength to swim against the current. But we teach by example, creating a culture change, one plastic bag at a time.

We are teaching reverence and this is just one instance of it. Where else do you see it? Practice it? When do you have the feeling that if you didn’t say or do something to call attention to what you have witnessed or felt, that there would be a shout from the ground on which you stand? There is a void that is apparent when reverence is left unexpressed. We can fill it with respect; offering dignity and connection across the societal divides of class and race, bringing healing and hope to individuals and to our world.

What begins as an internalized experience, manifests itself in words and actions, becomes externalized, evident. Inherent in this language of reverence is a piece of the healing and wholeness so lacking in our world today. We can tip the scales toward a more reverential existence for all of humanity when we include a language of reverence in our day to day interactions, holding as sacred our common bond with all of creation.

Lest the stones cry out.

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¹ Robert Lee Hill, Kansas City, Missouri, 2012.