

Freedom, Reason, and Love

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, Aug. 15, 2004
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

It is fitting, as we come to the beginning of a new and exciting church year - it is fitting, before embarking on a new time together, with so many new people having joined our ranks - that we take some time to reflect, this morning, on those things that hold us together, we Unitarian Universalists, we of differing religious beliefs and many spiritual paths.

You have heard it said many times: "one church, many paths." But perhaps you have not considered just what it is that allows us to be one church. And I'll bet good money you've never thought that the glue that holds us together might be something called a "trinity"!

Yet Pat Murray - who spoke to us two weeks ago about her experiences in a Unitarian Universalist leadership program sponsored by The Mountain - alluded to that trinity, and this morning I asked Cindy Berryman-Fink to read you the passage, from historian Earl Morse Wilbur, which first articulated what has come to be called, only partly tongue-in-cheek, "The Unitarian Universalist Trinity." Every UU minister, somewhere in his or her seminary training, learns this Wilbur text, because it is one of the most common explanations of what has, historically, bound us together as a religious movement - the three values that undergird our church communities: freedom, reason, and tolerance.

This, of course, a different kind of trinity. It is not the kind that James Luther Adams, in this morning's first reading, meant when he spoke of "the idolatry of human claims to absolute truth." It's not the kind of trinity that Saint Paul affirms in his letter to the Corinthians - though you will notice that I have

changed the ultimate part of Wilbur's formulation from "tolerance" to the much more challenging "love."

But more on that later. Let me begin with a story.

Several years ago, in one of those unexpected, heart-stopping, "teachable moments" each and every parent occasionally faces, I was whiling away the summer hours at the zoo with my son Patrick, when he suddenly asked a perfectly innocent - yet supremely difficult - question.

As background, you need to understand that my entire family is vegetarian, and - since that lifestyle choice is based, for us, primarily on an ethical stance - Jennifer and I have always been somewhat conflicted about zoos. We seek to avoid any participation in what we see as unnecessary or inhumane treatment of animals - and the idea of removing creatures from their natural habitat in order to put them on display in cages is one that certainly disturbs us. Yet the educational opportunities for people (and in particular, for our child) that are afforded by zoos and aquariums - as well as the protection they can provide for certain endangered species - leaves us, paradoxically, as what you might call "zoo supporters." In short, we can see both sides of the coin, and at the time in question, we had already discussed this ambiguity at length with Patrick, who, I suppose, understood it as well as a four-year-old could.

In any case, at one point during this particular zoo trip, Patrick commented to me that one of the monkeys looked "sad." I responded that, indeed, it probably was sad, perhaps longing to be free.

"Daddy, what is free?" Patrick asked.

Well...

A very good question, I had to admit. What does it mean to be free? What is freedom?

I tried to think of a simple answer to his simple question, and finally blurted out something to the effect of: "When you're free, you can go wherever you want and do whatever you want, without somebody else stopping you, or telling you what to do."

As soon as the words left my mouth, of course, I knew I was in trouble - for, based on my definition, a four-year-old child is most decidedly not free. Instantly, the discussion had shifted from animal rights to human rights.

The fact is, "freedom" is a tough concept to grasp - even for adults - because, in reality, "freedom" is an ideal - one of those concepts that human beings can imagine, but may never truly experience. Much as a four-year-old - much as a forty-year-old - would like it to be so, true freedom is ultimately elusive. What we often mistake for freedom (what we sometimes refer to in theological discussions as "free will") is actually nothing more than the ability to choose between or among alternatives. Freedom, though I could not have explained it this way to Patrick, is choice.

In the context of organized religion, the idea of choice is almost unheard of. In fact, the word "heresy" comes from the Greek verb "to choose." Notice I said that in a religious context, choice is almost unheard of - because there is one religious tradition that upholds the individual's right to choose his or her own religious path, to formulate a personal set of beliefs - and that tradition is Unitarian Universalism. We are, and always have been, the strand within the Judeo-Christian heritage that insists on individual freedom of religious belief, on the right of the individual to choose his or her own religious practices and professions.

This is such an important, such a defining, aspect of who we are that Earl Morse Wilbur chose to list "freedom" first among his three fundamental characteristics of our faith. As I said earlier, every UU seminarian has learned the Wilbur "trinity" - freedom, reason, and tolerance - and at least two generations of our ministers kept the faith with that formulation. But in recent years, influenced by my mentor in Columbus, Rev. Mark Belletini, among others, I, and some of my colleagues, have begun to shift our language a bit. Nowadays, I prefer to say that "freedom, reason and love" are the three pillars of Unitarian Universalism - a nod to St. Paul's own "trinity" of "faith, hope and love" - as well as an admission that, in today's postmodern world, "love," more than just "tolerance," is what we are called to practice.

Thus it is that today's sermon title is "Freedom, Reason and Love" - because contemporary UU's, while maintaining their historic tradition of insisting, in Wilbur's words, "on freedom in religion rather than bondage to creeds," and "reason in religion, rather than reliance upon external authority," also - these

days - we aspire to live the kind of love articulated, in each century, by humanity's great religious and social prophets.

So let us, for a moment, consider the first "pillar" - the idea of religious freedom. Each week at the congregation I used to serve in North Olmsted, the worship leader proclaimed that ours was "a free church, founded in 1834, as a beacon of hope and progressive religion in northern Ohio."

I can almost hear four-year-old Patrick now: "But Daddy, what is a 'free church'?" Luckily, the answer here is a bit easier. Free churches are those, like the Unitarian Universalists, like the United Church of Christ, like the Baptists and the Quakers, who developed from the liberal wing of the Protestant Reformation, and whose system of governance, or polity, is congregational. That's a mouthful, but simply put, it means that each congregation is free, and independent of external ecclesiastical authority. No outside person or body - not the Unitarian Universalist Association, not the federal or state government, no one - is allowed to make decisions for this, or any other, UU church. We, the members of this church, alone decide what our name is, who our minister is, how we spend our money, what we teach in Sunday School, and, ultimately, what we, ourselves - each individual - believes religiously.

And, lest we not forget, religious education is not just for kids. I am eternally grateful for the grounding in free religion I received through adult education classes at the All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma - a remarkably successful congregation that is deeply committed to the spiritual growth of its members - a congregation that is, not coincidentally, the largest UU church in America. Its former minister, Rev. Brent Smith, puts it this way:

"I believe that our Unitarian Universalist congregations ought not to be in a constant quandary, asking themselves over and over again what their mission is. Our mission is clear. It is to institutionalize religious freedom. That is to say, it is to provide the literal, physical place where religious freedom is preserved, protected, and secured. What governments are supposed to do for civil liberty, we are meant to do for religious liberty."

Thus, here, in a Unitarian Universalist church, you will find gathered, people on a common quest for truth, a mutual journey of spiritual exploration - not rallying around some pre-determined set of religious beliefs, but rather sharing with one another their own personal beliefs (all of which, after all,

are works in progress). Here, you will find people - young and old alike - celebrating life's mysteries, honoring its ambiguities, all the while seeking, together, a deeper understanding of what it means to be human, to be most fully alive.

But that search has certain parameters. Certain boundaries. We discover at some point that religious freedom, like civil freedom, has its limits. We need a reference point along our path. And we have it - in the second pillar of Unitarian Universalism: reason. As our Unitarian Universalist Principles say, ours is a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Freedom must be balanced with responsibility. And we in the free-church tradition - since at least the time of the sixteenth century Anabaptists and Socinians and Transylvanian Unitarians - have been characterized by the responsible use of human reason in the consideration of religious questions.

Just as religious freedom flies in the face of creedal orthodoxy, so too, our reasoned approach to religion is in direct contrast to what is commonly thought of as "faith." In one branch of Christendom, believers are supposed to accept certain religious and cosmological assertions, on faith alone. Yet in our tradition, one's beliefs - if they are not put to the test of reason, science, and conscience; if not, in Emerson's glorious words, "passed through the fire of thought" - are nothing short of irresponsible.

To believe, without question, assertions that were made when it was commonly thought that the earth was flat, or to take as religious truth, doctrines that were developed under ecclesiastical and political coercion, without first considering them with a modern mind, weighing them against personal experience, responsibly considering their alternatives and implications - short-changes the seeker. While I do not, as one hymn in our hymnal contends, agree that simply "to question is the answer," I do believe that questioning is a pre-requisite to true faith, to being confident and well-grounded in our personal convictions.

And those convictions, simply by virtue of the fact that we Unitarian Universalists gather in free and open religious association, using our God-given human reason to think, to explore, to ask questions - those convictions, necessarily, will differ from one to another. In a Unitarian Universalist church, there is not uniformity of belief. Thus, we need a third pillar - for as any engineer, or any rock-climber, will tell you, if something is to stand firm, it needs three points of contact with the ground.

For us, that third point of contact, though it begins with what Earl Morse Wilbur once called "a generous tolerance of differing religious views," must really go one step further, toward engagement with the spirit of love for our fellow human beings. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., when I say love, "I'm not speaking of some sentimental feeling. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme, unifying principle in life."

Unitarian Universalism has a long and, I would argue, admirable history of tolerance in our tradition. Unitarian King John Sigismund declared his land to be one where "no one shall be reviled for their religion." Unitarian President Thomas Jefferson once declared that, in America, "no one should be made to suffer in any way on account of his religious opinions or beliefs." It must be pointed out that both these men, as well as countless other Unitarians and Universalists, held their opinions in times when the prevailing sentiment was quite the opposite.

Today, however, we live in a society that is, slowly, becoming more accustomed to, if not more comfortable with, the idea of religious tolerance. In just our lifetimes, mainstream opinion has been bending in the direction long advocated by Unitarian Universalism, and summed up so well by Rev. Carolyn Owen-Towle as the religious, faith-filled acknowledgement "that no two people think, believe, taste, feel, hear, or encounter life in [exactly] the same way."

But let us remember that even we progressive UU's still struggle with the true depth of the challenge set before us by early Unitarian thinker Francis David: "We need not think alike to love alike." In our Unitarian Universalist churches (and in our culture at large), we must learn to move beyond simply "tolerating" those views - religious or otherwise - with which we do not agree. We must go further, learning to "love alike" both the person with whom we agree, and the person with whom we disagree.

Every Sunday, every day of the week, Unitarian Universalist congregations such as ours are the place to put into action this type of healing love - the place to practice what we preach. Here we are free from the constraints of stifling creed and doctrine, free to develop our own beliefs, guided by our own rational approach to religion, heeding the dictates of personal experience, conscience, and reason.

Let us use this freedom wisely, and - in community - covenant with one another, to share our hard-earned beliefs ... in compassion, in hope, in love. To adapt a bit the language of Paul, in this place, let "three things abide - freedom, reason and love - and of these, the greatest of all is love."

May it always be so.

Blessed be, and amen.