

A Religion of Open Hearts and Willing Hands

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The Growing Season Sara Moores Campbell

"I am not religious," says my neighbor, as he hoes the rows between his beans and corn.

"Oh yes you are," I say to myself.

To plant a seed is an act of faith. To collect compost is a response of gratitude to the creator.

To water, fertilize and mulch the ground is an expression of religious responsibility.

To kneel down and pull weeds is a prayer.

To harvest is to participate in the fullness and grace of the spirit.

To protect and replenish creation is to love God.

"I am not religious, says my neighbor.

Yes, you are, say I.

Back in August, when I was asked to speak at our partner congregation in Transylvania I admit that I was rather intimidated by the task. I didn't even know that I'd have to mount a high pulpit and wear a great black robe – otherwise I would have really been nervous. Instead my fears revolved around what could I say to build a bridge from their land to ours? What about our share Unitarian faith would supports such a bridge? Then I remembered when our son, Thomas, who is now a teenager, was a little boy he and a friend were going to dig a tunnel. He asked me where they should make the entrance to their tunnel – I quickly suggested the sand box in the back yard. As he headed to the shed for a shovel I asked where they were planning to dig to? Australia came the reply.

As happens with young boys, their ideas were bigger than their muscles and they soon abandoned the shovels for other pursuits. As odd as the idea of digging to Australia sounds, it is probably true that if we dug straight through from Iowa we'd end up in Australia. It gave me pause to remember that the soil that so nurtures my soul here in Iowa is really part of a great garden that stretches from here to Australia and is beneath to Transylvania as well.

This earthly home of ours is a precious place. Yes, there are scars upon the earth, created by wars and drought and the careless destructive greed. Yet my faith tells me that those scars can be healed; that we human beings have the responsibility and possibility of joining together and stop the wars, aiding those in need and challenging the greed of our race to allow all to experience the beauty of creation. These two constants of our faith responsibility and possibility became the trusses for my bridge.

These ideas can be expressed through two strains of thought that have developed through our faith's story. The first Unitarian belief in unity. This could be understood to embrace the oneness of God or unity of this world which we share, an interdependent web of which we are all part. This understanding of unity and humanity's place in this natural order gives us a special responsibility. The Ancient Greeks had a maxim that is often

misunderstood. On the oracle of Delphi is inscribed “Know thyself”. This inscription was not meant to be some kind of pop psychology statement of being self-aware or in touch with whom you are. It meant understand your place in the universe. We are human beings – not gods. As the Greek myths tell us, when we forget our place in the natural world and think we’re gods, disaster ensues. “Know thyself” was a warning; know your place in the natural order of things.

Native American cultures often expressed this sentiment by the name various tribes and nations gave to themselves. For instance the Navajo refer to themselves as the Dini – the people. This did not mean they are the people and everyone else is something less – but that for the place they lived the Navajo’s role is to be the people in that ecosystem. Whether it’s the formulas of science, the fancy of fairies, we find metaphors and stories to help us understand the foundational unity of creation; this unity is expressed in our understanding of an interdependent web of life.

So our expression of interdependence is a reinterpretation of ancient wisdom. This has often been a counter voice to one that seeks to extol us over nature, over history itself, as anointed ones for whom the natural world is but an oyster for our consumption. In the United States our credo of Manifest Destiny led us to commit atrocities against the native peoples and the native lands. We committed the Greek sin of Hubris – we forgot that we were not gods and acted as those we were. This misunderstanding of our proper role in the world – the whole world not just the human world – continues.

Instead, we seek to understand our unity with creation. Like the character in our readings, many times we have trouble expressing this value as ‘religious’ – almost as though we’re religious in spite of ourselves. The creative act is one so filled with hope, with a fulfilling of a sense of responsibility. Being creative is the ultimate religious ritual for we are reenacting the quest of every human being who’s come before us. It is with our own hearts and hands that we shape this world in which we live. We face difficulties brought about by events out of our control. Yet there is still the laughter in a child’s voice, the love in a friend’s glance, the beauty in the sun’s rise and peace of a moon’s glow that remind us of the wondrous world in which we live. Much is not in our power to control or change, yet much of how we are in this world is in our own hands. Using these hands to help rather than harm, to create music or shake the hand of a friend rather than to form a fist and strike. These are choices we make that will affect our lives as well as those of all we meet. These choices are an expression of our responsibility, to ourselves and our world.

Powerful responsibility we hold in our hands, yet it’s rooted in the great possibility we share. This optimistic faith in our own power to better our world rises from the Unitarian belief in the significance of Jesus’ humanity. Reggie’s song touched on the different approaches to what mattered in the example of Jesus, was it a divine sacrifice on the cross or a loving example of his life? In the creed that I recited growing up Jesus was born by Immaculate Conception in the first line and suffering crucifixion in the next – as though he’d never lived at all! Within Jesus’ life we see the potential of that spark of hope enflamed by the belief we can create the Kingdom of God for every person here on

earth. That divine spark is not to be relegated to the pages of the past, but available to each one of us, here and now. Even with all of our faults and imperfections, we have that divine spark within us.

William Ellery Channing, one of the founders of Unitarianism in the United States, believed we have the power to develop this divine spark within, but we too often don't begin to realize our possibilities. As Channing wrote, "Of all the discoveries that people need to make, the most important is that of the self-forming power treasured up in ourselves. There is more of the divinity in it than in the force, which impels the outward universe." Here is our faith in possibilities. When we recognize the divine spark in ourselves we realize the possibilities before us. We also recognize that spark in others and begin to understand what it means to see every man as our brother, every woman as our sister, and every child as our own. In such moments of recognition we begin to realize we are all part of the great human family. Then the doors of our heart are opened, opened in compassion for those around us, opened with love for all of creation. With our hearts so exposed we can take the risk to care. It means we risk trusting others when that can be so difficult to do. Yet through such risks we grow that divine spark within into a flame. Our hearts guides our hands and that little light becomes a beacon to tell the world of the strength of our faith, our confidence that with our open hearts and willing hands we make a difference in this world.

Our faith offers us many ways to make that difference. For instance we may pray unceasingly, some with hands folded, some using those hands to write letters, others to hold signs of protest, all pray for an end to war. And a hope that some day soon all people will understand the unity of our human family and in that understanding seeks justice for everyone and study war no more. We pray that the hopelessness that drives the terrorist and the fear that drives our response will end. But that day is not today. Where in our faith do we find hope?

Unitarian minister Rev. A. Powell Davies wrote: "When someone asks where now is thy God, we can answer that the sacred is where it always was: in the struggle. In the pain of our hearts, in the growing clearness of our minds, in the sharpening edge of our conscience, in the welling of courage, in the purpose we cannot forsake and never shall." A leading advocate for civil rights in the United States, Davies knew what it meant to struggle. He saw the effects of injustice and what a lack of mercy could do to people. Humbly, he brought his community together to change all that. Knowing deep down that black or white, the color of ones skin had no bearing on the right to have a job, a home, or simply justice. Davies' Unitarian faith in possibilities of humanity created a Church that was force for change, the courage to look injustice in the eye and say no more. That power resides in each of our hands. I know what you're thinking in my hands? What power do they have? Join hands; Feel the touch of another human being, the pulse of their heart, the sweat of their work, the tension of their hopes and fears.

Release your hands. Close your eyes and think of your weaknesses –short comings that worry you when hear the challenge of changing the world. Take a look in your left hand – there, in your palm are those weaknesses. Now, close your eyes again, think of your

strengths, we all have them, what are the gifts you bring to this world, those qualities about you that shine through. Look at your right hand, three they are in your palm. Now hold hands again. Notice that your weaknesses fit right into your neighbor's strengths? In this circle of hands we form a community of support, a community strengthened by the hands joined. This lesson for our group is central to the gospel of Unitarian Universalism, everyone person has strengths, very person has weaknesses. When we join our hands together we are made stronger and when we realize this interdependence we have the power to change the world. This is where I find hope. Those hands have the power to make a meal to feed someone whose hungry, to lift a sign in protest or support, to mark a ballot on Election Day. Each of these acts expresses hope, especially when joined with all the other hands in this room.

I thought about this power last Thursday when I led the noon devotions at the Habitat blitz build over in Nevada. And I told the young people there this American folk tale that I'd like to share with you. It's the story of a farmer named Joe who had lived on the same farm his whole life, right next to a farmer named Jack. They'd been neighbors their entire lives, married, raised their children together, and buried their wives side by side. Yet one day a calf waded through the creek that separated their lands and ended up in Joe's pasture. Joe was angry that Jack hadn't kept a better eye on his stock and when Jack came to get it Joe said, "What calf? It looks like one of mine." Jack stomped away and the two didn't speak for more than a month.

Then one day a stranger happened along carrying a carpenter's tool box. He knocked on Joe's door and explained that he was traveling from place to place doing any odd jobs that people might have. "I've got a job for you," said Joe. "I want you to build a fence all along the creek there so I won't have to look at my neighbor's house." He pointed to a pile of boards and said, "There should be plenty of boards there to build it nice and tall." As the stranger began to move the boards down by the creek Joe told him that he had to go to town for some supplies and would be back by night fall. As Joe rode away in his wagon he could hear the sound of the hammer falling in the distance and smiled a rather angry smile. Later that day Joe returned from town looking forward to seeing that fence blocking out the view of Jack's farm. Imagine his surprise when he crested the last hill and instead of a fence saw a beautiful bridge stretching across the creek.

Joe angrily jumped off his wagon and began to stomp over toward the stranger who was putting away his tools. But before he could begin to say how mad he was, here came Jack walking across that bridge, with his hand extended saying, "Joe, I don't know how we ever let that calf ruin our friendship. I should have kept it penned in, you keep it." Surprised, Joe met Jack at the edge of the creek saying, "No, I was being petty, it's your calf." The two shook hands and clasped each other's shoulders the anger of the past month melting away. They both looked over at the stranger, who was just picking up his tool box and Joe said, "Thank you young man, I've got a couple other projects if you could stay around for a while." To which the stranger replied, "I'd like to Joe, but I've got a lot of bridges yet to build."

With our hearts and hands we're building such bridges. They may not bring angry farmers together, but might help people understand the importance of our relationships to each other. By helping us understand our responsibilities to the world and our possibilities to make a difference in it, Unitarian Universalism provides us the tools to be such bridge builders, crossing oceans, crossing the boundaries of different beliefs and finding a common ground in the divine spark that resides in every person, on the holy ground which is where ever we stand.

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