

**The Legacy**  
(or Barbara's Last Prairie Group Paper?)

a paper for Prairie Group  
November 12, 2008  
The Rev. Barbara Merritt

Introduction

After 32 years in Prairie Group I have finally found out how the Program Committee decides who gets assigned a paper. If, during the previous year's business meeting, you voted against, passionately against a particular topic, then you get to do a paper. I begin by confessing that my opposition last year to this topic was wholly mistaken. This was a superb subject for UU ministers to wrestle with. Our imagination and our vision is nourished and shaped by the generations who came before us. As Ed Friedman, the systems analyst writes, the past replicates itself within a tradition or an institution, almost like DNA. "*Because of the persistence of form, the nature of connections in the present can have more to do with what has been transmitted successively for many generations, than with the logic of their contemporary relationship.*"<sup>1</sup>

This week we have been discussing those who championed religious liberty in the Radical Protestant Reformation. What we have historically chosen to remember, and what we emphasize about their stories today is significant. How we transmit that heritage makes a difference. The Program Committee has asked me to consider how our history has cast both light and shadow on the contemporary practice of Unitarian Universalism. But for me the critical issue is whether we can lay claim to the transformative power, and the moral clarity of that original vision to enrich and deepen and revitalize our faith.

Earl Morse Wilbur described the central contribution of the Radical Reformation as being the rational principals of *reason, tolerance and freedom of religion*. It is

my intention to examine some of the deep shadows cast by this way of categorizing our movement. But the greater purpose of this paper is to bring attention to what I believe are some of the great light bearing aspects of our legacy. They include the beneficial aspects of reason, tolerance and freedom of religion, and can be understood as complimentary. But I am convinced that this heritage of ours embraces a much larger expanse of the human experience. There are neglected parts of our Radical Protestant Reformation inheritance. I will be using some of philosopher Susan Neiman's language from her book, Moral Clarity in naming what brings light to our religious tradition: **Reverence, Courage and Curiosity**. They are largely hidden treasures within our liberal legacy. I await the moment when they might be more apparent and celebrated.

## Rational Unitarian Universalists

“Lover’s feel a truth inside themselves  
that rational people keep denying.  
It is reasonable to say, ‘Surrender’  
is just an idea that keeps people from  
living their lives.” Love responds, “No”.

Rumi<sup>2</sup>

Psychologist Sidney Jourard went to cafés around the world to see how often couples engaged in casual touching. In Catholic countries, largely unaffected by the Reformation, the rate was extremely high. In countries and cultures that had followed the Protestant Reformation, the rate was extremely low. In Puerto Rico: 180 times per hour. In Florida: 2 times per hour.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Tiffany Field found in her research contrasting French parents with American ones, that the French touched their children 3 times as often as Americans.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, French adolescents at McDonald’s had far more appropriate casual touching between peers than in the equivalent group in the U.S., with the French kids being notably less aggressive and delinquent.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Robert Dingman, Clinical Director at the Wetzel Center, (a hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts for severely impaired adolescents) has found that aggression and behavior problems were dramatically reduced when an “appropriate” touch policy was implemented. A hand on the shoulder, a high-five, a pat on the back was encouraged between clients, therapists and physicians. Touch had a power to heal, and a capacity to communicate acceptance and affirmation.

What causes our culture to shy away from touch? Dr. Dingman’s hypothesis is that one contributing element comes from our religious inheritance. In European Catholic culture (France, Italy, Spain) there is a greater openness to the body, and to interpersonal touch, than in countries which underwent the Reformation.

Some of our legacy is unspoken. Some of our legacy is wielding power we don't acknowledge.

I begin with references to the life of the body, partly in response to the Radical Protestant Reformation's emphasis on the life of the mind. Earl Morse Wilbur's articulation of the intellectual principals of modern Unitarian Universalism, *reason, tolerance and freedom*, has too often narrowed our understanding of our heritage. At the very least this heavy emphasis on rationality leaves out vast areas of the human experience and consciousness. Looking at our history through a lens that ignores, or minimizes, social and economic realities, that stresses only the distinctions between theologians, that encourages a naïve and stubborn idealization of human intelligence, these can limit our capacity to understand ourselves, and to communicate with the larger world. These qualities may appeal to the lovely myth that many Unitarian Universalists enjoy: that we are smarter, more open-minded and more socially conscious than other religious people. We take quiet pride in our education, our sophistication, and our worldly success. (We are not so comfortable contemplating the extent of our isolation, our self-delusion, or our arrogance.) It must be asked, "How accessible is Unitarian Universalism to the vast majority of our fellow citizens?"

How did we come to see ourselves within a mostly intellectual framework? We actually know very little about those who bestowed on us the Radical Reformation heritage. We don't know what kept them awake at night, or what gave their hearts delight, or what their dreams were for the future of humanity. All that survives are their writings, and often very little of that. Their passion, their devotional life, their response to plagues, and oppression and massacres are rarely recorded. What we have inherited are some of their thoughts about religion, and a few brief biographies of some creative, imaginative and brave pioneers. From those limited stories, we have constructed a self image which announces to the world that we are a rational religion, based in tolerance and freedom of belief.

What we can observe a little more clearly in our present era is how those outside of our tradition perceive the liberal religious tradition as they see it practiced. The philosopher George Santayana, in his brilliant, best selling and only novel, "The Last Puritan" was more than willing to describe our shadows, examine our assumptions about the world, and interpret our behavior. Published in 1938, he shared some of what he learned about Unitarians while teaching at Harvard. What follows is Santayana's description of that bastion of Boston Unitarianism, King's Chapel.

"King's Chapel, in its granite simplicity...seemed to him a symbol of that invisible goodness of heart and integrity of purpose which would always stand unassailable amid the ruin of creeds. There was inspiration for him in the Georgian elegance of the interior, all white plaster, shining mahogany, and crimson damask. In those high-walled pews, with their locked doors, every worshipper might pray in secret, as if in his own closet...it was a relief to be safe within the high enclosure of the family pew, huddled in his cushioned corner (the very one where his father had sat) out of sight of everyone, even of the minister still hidden behind his lofty pulpit, while the organ softly played a few quavering arpeggios. The music was classical and soothing, the service High Church Unitarian, with nothing in it either to discourage a believer or to annoy an unbeliever. What did doctrines matter? The lessons were chosen for their magical archaic English and were mouthed in a tone of emotional mystery and unction. With the superior knowledge and finer feelings of today might we not find in such words far deeper meanings than the original speakers intended? The sermon was sure to be pleasantly congratulatory and pleasantly short: even if it began by describing graphically the landscape of Sinai or of Galilee—for the Rev. Mr. Hart had traveled—it would soon return to matters of living interest, would praise the virtues and flatter the vanity of the congregation, only slightly heightening the picture by contrast with the sad vices and errors of former times or of other nations. He was confirmed in all his previous ways of thinking. Of course he couldn't deny that he was intellectually more than the equal of his minister. People wouldn't become ministers unless they had rather second-hand minds. Yet a mediocre professional moralist might repeat things which you had never stopped to put into words before...An Easter sermon on the Resurrection might prudently avoid all mention of Christ...Instead the preacher might blandly describe the resurrection of nature in the spring, the resurrection of science in the modern world, and the resurrection of heroic freedom in the American character."<sup>6</sup>

(You will be greatly reassured to remember that this was written more than 70 years ago..."pleasantly congratulatory sermons", parishioners who feel

intellectually superior to their clergy, and sanctuaries that speak of wealth and taste, are surely relics of the past...)

Santayana made no distinctions between Unitarians and Puritans. What he noticed was that we all seemed to have a very high opinion of ourselves. The novel describes one woman character: *"Her moral ideal was democracy, but a democracy of the elite."*<sup>7</sup> Oliver, the hero of the novel, lives with an existential dread:

"A vague apprehension remained in Oliver's mind that he was destined to be a pastor, and to be locked into a pulpit with a big book open in front of him. A pastor would always look like that and would always feel like that: because the persons he ought to love best, like his mother and God, would always be impossible to hug and it would always be wrong to hug the others."<sup>8</sup>

Thank God, Oliver is spared this terrible fate! In 1938 Oliver is described as the "Last Puritan". Were that it was so! Puritanism, according to Santayana, was a *"natural reaction against nature."*<sup>9</sup> *"..a deep and speculative thing, hatred of all shams, scorn for all mummeries, a bitter merciless pleasure in the hard facts."*<sup>10</sup> Oliver was described as *"riding the monorail of self -will",*<sup>11</sup> a man who couldn't *"admit chaos",*<sup>12</sup> with *"an integrity of purpose, and scorn of all compromises, practical and theoretical."*<sup>13</sup> Santayana believed that Calvinists and Unitarians suffered from the *"tragedy of spirit when it is not content to understand, but wishes to govern."*<sup>14</sup> Our prayer? *" Let us endeavor to preserve our genteel traditions for one generation more."*<sup>15</sup>

But his most scorching critique is of Unitarians at our self righteous worst; as social reformers. Santayana uses unflinching terms to expose the limits of the Unitarian do-gooder.

"Your hardboiled moralists were idolaters, worshipping their own fancies, and hypnotized by their own words. They had perched at a certain height on the tree of knowledge, had stuck fast at a certain point up the greased pole of virtue. They would climb no farther; and from there they had turned and pecked ferociously at everybody below them and screeched ferociously at everybody above, invoking their hard, dry reason to discredit all that was beyond their own meager and cruel morality. But this reason of theirs was just *their* reason, their

effort to entrench themselves in their limitations. Not only was such a thing *useless* and in the end *impossible*, but perhaps in the moral world there was no single pole, no single tree on which heights and depths could be measured, like different languages or different arts, one way of knowledge mathematical, another historical, another psychological, another poetical; and perhaps the kinds of virtue were divergent too, and incomparable. The lion and the eagle were ideal in their way: so were the gazelle and the lark in theirs. Who should say which was better?"<sup>16</sup>

Unitarian Universalism has evolved since 1938. Today, Unitarian Universalists could hardly be accused of being ethical moralists. Too often we refrain from even entering discussions of *right* and *wrong*, nor are we known for speaking candidly about the personal and societal implications of adultery, drug abuse, or excessively violent entertainment. Value decisions are often viewed as too judgmental, too unsophisticated, too deficient in a post-modern sensibility where all actions are "relative." Our moral passion seems to be confined to political and social causes. There we continue the tradition of *perching on the greased pole of virtue*, and looking down upon those who disagree with us.

Have we escaped the genteel traditions of generations ago? Modern philosopher Susan Neiman, in her latest book, Moral Clarity, doesn't appear to notice any remarkable changes. She writes that the liberal religious tradition in 2008 resembles what the new left used to call "*wishy washy liberals. .. They believed in God, a little, tolerance, a little, equality, a little, but took care to rock no boats. Their faith in religion was genuine, but tepid, like their faith in everything else.*"<sup>17</sup>

I might argue that tepid might do quite nicely for a church in a comfortable, prosperous suburban world, where attendance at church on Sunday was a pleasant option, but not as important as a child's soccer game, or reading the Sunday New York Times, or going to a nice brunch with friends.

But as Santayana knew, "*There was really no telling which way the universe would drift.*"<sup>18</sup> You might live in the most secure and wealthy gated community;

chaos will always find a way to get through, whether from illness, death, or a thousand other contingencies. Santayana's own life took him to several continents, and finally to a rejection of his father's Protestantism, and a conversion to his Mother's Catholicism. He wrote, "*Life for the spirit was no walk in a paved city, with policeman at every crossing; it was an ocean voyage, a first and only voyage of discovery.*"<sup>19</sup> "*We are as much in the open sea, conscious of vast distances around and above, and of inhuman forces, that we need to huddle and curl ourselves up in a private corner to knit our poor humanity back together.*"<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, one of our favorite Unitarian Universalist ways to knit our humanity back together is with the life of the mind. Our liberal religious tradition so highly prizes reason, and rationality, and intellectual arguments, that we sometimes fail to see the mind's dark and troubling shadows. The obvious problem is that human beings are not reasonable, are not rational and are certainly not grounded intellectually. This is not debatable. This is hard, provable, repeatable science. The research is conclusive and indisputable whether from neurologists or from experimental psychology. In the modern era we finally have the data to confirm what should have been obvious all along: the human mind is largely a mask for emotion and self interest. It is not a trustworthy instrument.

In Cordelia Fine's extraordinary book, *A Mind of It's Own: How your Brain Distorts and Deceives*, she demonstrates, citing experiment after experiment, that our brains are, "*vain, emotional, immoral, deluded, pig headed, secretive, weak-willed, and bigoted.*"<sup>21</sup> She demonstrates how just about everybody believes that they are "above average", in either common sense, intellectual abilities, and or survival skills. (Certainly the members of Prairie Group are above average!) We use whatever we've got. When a person with limited mental gifts or social influence wants something, they tend to say, rather straightforwardly, "Give it to me!" When an exceptionally smart person wants something, they pride themselves on coming up with sophisticated, well reasoned and logically rational justifications for deserving and being entitled to get what they want.

Our brains are apparently hard wired with what Dr. Fine calls “*the pleasant, though misguided sense of being holier than thou.*”<sup>22</sup> She writes, “*The masterful hypocrisy of the immoral brain demands a certain grudging respect. It lazily applies nothing but the most superficial and disapproving analysis of others misdemeanors, while bending over backwards to reassure you, that you can do no wrong.*”<sup>23</sup>

Here are a few of Dr. Fine’s observations, proven in the laboratories, and confirmed over and over again in countless scientific studies. “*Effusive flattery dulls the sword of an intellectual opponent.*”<sup>24</sup> (I am so honored to have Suzanne Meyer, and all of you, as my respondents today.) “*We have a remarkable capacity to make up explanations to back up anything we happen to believe.*”<sup>25</sup> (If people don’t vote the way I want them to vote, it’s because they are idiots!) “*Benevolent sexism eulogizes the warm, caring, nurturing virtues of wonderful women, without whom men could not be complete. This honey stereotype serves to psychologically offset the fact that men have most of the political and economic power.*”<sup>26</sup> (Some women of the Prairie Group will be meeting in the hot tub later, and you can be certain that we’ll be just as gracious and cheerful and nurturing as we can possibly be!) “*We are strangely drawn towards the things that unconsciously remind us of the person we love above all others, ourselves.*”<sup>27</sup> (So nice to meet you. You are clearly a brilliant Unitarian Universalist, if you liked one of my sermons!)

Like others, we believe that any problems we might have are so natural that they hardly deserve to be mentioned.

“...we believe that our weaknesses are so common that they are really just part and parcel of normal human fallibility, while our strengths are rare and special...When we explain to ourselves and to others why things have gone well or badly, we prefer explanations that cast ourselves in the best possible light. Thus we are quick to assume that our successes are due to our own sterling

qualities, while responsibility for failures can often be conveniently laid at the door of bad luck or damn fool others.”<sup>28</sup>

And what of our clearly stated and oft celebrated practice of Unitarian Universalist, as lovers of truth? Dr. Fine writes. “*Tussling against our desire to know the truth about the world are powerful drives to protect our self esteem, sense of security, and pre-existing points of view. Set against our individually impressive powers of cognition are a multitude of irrationalities, biases and quirks that surreptitiously undermine the accuracy of our beliefs.*”<sup>29</sup> If Emerson was right, “*nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own minds*”, then nothing is sacred.

Dr. Fine has some modestly good news as well. The brain can be somewhat tamed with “*conscious effort and rehearsal*”.<sup>30</sup> We can train our minds to be less blind, less reactive and less narcissistic. But such corrections cannot begin until we have an accurate understanding of human reason. To worship reason, and to assume that human are rational beings, is to limit our capacity to work with people as they are, and to effectively guide them in constructive directions.

This shadow, cast by a reliance on and a blind faith in reason and argument has been with us from the beginning. The description of the terrible falling out in the close relationship between Francis David and Biandrata in 1579 in Transylvania is a classic example where fierce theological debate cloaked the far more emotional issues of power, safety and self-interest. The old Unitarian joke that we might prefer a discussion of heaven to the actual experience of heaven, may reveal a disturbing truth. People who are articulate and well spoken are likely to be drawn to a place where they can display their rational powers in a debate. These same folks might not swim so easily in a “heavenly” place of perfect love, mutuality and awe.

If we cannot rely on reason, then perhaps we can at least incarnate the practice of tolerance? What could possibly go wrong if we try to be charitable and broadminded, forbearing and accepting? Some of the shadows of intolerance can be found in your own experience. Have you ever been thrilled to hear a member of your board announce that he or she can “tolerate you”? If a stranger knocks at your door, or you find someone injured in the street, is tolerance the virtue we hope to bring forward? There is something about the word “tolerance” that doesn’t evoke images of healing, embrace or risk taking. Tolerance comes from the root word, “*to endure, to bear.*” The Thesaurus gives us a hint about the shadows hidden in this virtue. It can mean “*to suffer, to bear the brunt of, to put up with, to be resigned, to stomach, to go through stoically and uncomplainingly, to give carte blanche, free rein, to permit anything, to let someone get away with murder.*”<sup>31</sup> Welcome, to our tolerant, free church! Tolerance fails in more than being an inadequate, or vague description as to how we are to meet our brothers and sisters. Susan Neiman writes on the inherent limitations of tolerance.

“Tolerance, confronted by intolerance, doesn’t know how to behave. Good manners require that it question its own standpoint, and that it refuse to impose on others who do not share it. Tolerance is so well brought up, that it can’t respond to those who are not....tolerance is the virtue of disappointed old men; it can never serve as a rallying cry.”<sup>32</sup>

Which leaves us with freedom. One of the most ancient and important of rallying cries. The human quest for freedom is the oldest story we know. From slavery in Egypt, to liberation in Exodus, from oppression to liberty in the political order, and from the iron shackles of creed and dogma and ecclesiastical pronouncements, to the free search for truth in every soul. Freedom of conscience sounds like what we want, and ought to want! But even the concept of freedom can cast a shadow.

The shadows grow dark when freedom is not understood as an action; as something worth fighting for, as the oxygen which empowers our struggles. Then freedom becomes an inheritance that one is simply entitled to, or is an object that

one possess. You can sit back and demand freedom...expect freedom, or worse, take it completely for granted. And believing that you are *already* a free agent, can take the human spirit in some troubling directions.

Are any of us free to think anything we want, to do anything we feel like, or to be anyone we want to be? Are we free of our limitations and shortcomings and flaws? How can any of us practice genuine personal freedom in a context of a community or a world where freedom is rare? Three shadows grow powerful under the rubric of freedom: 1) the rejection of authority 2) the demands of the victim and 3) the disinclination to practice discipline, devotion, or surrender.

**The Rejection of Authority** Most religious liberals feel lucky to escape the external authority of despots, Bishops, creeds and external rituals. But what are the authoritative sources that we reject at our own peril? Reality has an authority that we eventually must acknowledge. What is real and true doesn't tend to go away when opposed by our delusional minds. (While I may be free to walk off a cliff, the consequences will be dramatic, no matter how cleverly I may convince myself that matter and gravity are just an illusion.) Likewise there are serious consequences if we exercise our freedom in a fashion that allows us to reject living in right relationship, acknowledging our dependency, or respecting the laws of action and reaction.

What are the consequences when Unitarian Universalist ministers are not allowed to exercise the authority of their office? What happens in an emergency room when a patient with a concussion and two broken legs refuses to accept the authority of the attending physician? What happens to employees, when they are unwilling to follow the instructions of their boss?

In the free church we are, of course free to think for ourselves, to explore all kinds of spiritual terrain and to reach our own conclusions. Only sometimes that gets interpreted as the right to remain silent and alone. Some define freedom as

the right to walk away from those who love and need them. Some define freedom as the license to do whatever they feel like doing at the moment. I suspect this is not the religious freedom that our forbearers in the Radical Reformation would recognize. It is not the freedom they gave their lives for. Our visionary founders all acknowledged the authority of God, scripture and life of the spirit. If we do not, what have we replaced it with?

**The Demands of Victims** Susan Neiman insightfully describes a cult of victimhood, that strangles our culture at large, and Unitarian Universalism in particular. Freedom, when seen through the lens of the victim, is no longer understood as the struggle of a lifetime, but as something that is owed, something that can be demanded, a power that ultimately someone else must bestow. She writes that too often in modern American culture we compete over who is to be understood as the greater victim. "*Claiming a more miserable childhood or illness or prejudice guarantees us a new form of status....undergoing suffering isn't a virtue.*"<sup>33</sup> "As an Auschwitz survivor noted, "*The victim is nailed to the cross of his or her destroyed past.*"<sup>34</sup> Neiman's conclusion, "*Legitimacy arises from what you've done to the world, not what the world did to you.*"<sup>35</sup> Victims, lost in their past, focused on their suffering and clinging to their injuries, are not free to be responsible for their own lives, to take leadership, or to respond powerfully to the challenges and threats of the present day. To use your religious freedom to claim victim status as your primary identity, is to sacrifice your autonomy, and your freedom to be an agent of change. Victims have to wait until someone else changes. Victims have to bully, or manipulate, or petition: they cannot show their own strength.

**The Avoidance of Discipline, Devotion, and Surrender** These theological terms are not often used among religious liberals. After all, we are "free" and therefore do not need to submit our will to anything greater than our own understanding. Except that our lives, like everyone else's on this earth, require us to sometimes sacrifice our own preferences. We occasionally need to

acknowledge that we have no idea what to do, and that we need to pay attention to a wisdom greater than our own. When faced with our own neurologically hard wired desire to govern, to call the shots, to be in control, how are Unitarian Universalists going to learn humility? How are we to develop our emotional, as well as spiritual capacities to trust? How do we obey the truly great commandments? How can we possibly depend on a power greater than ourselves? If you can't control your own mind, in which sense do you believe that you are free? It is an empty freedom that doesn't move us in the direction of spiritual liberation. The Anabaptist Hans Dench in the 1600s asked “ *What does it profit you if you reject all external ceremonies? What does it profit if you want to keep all of them? Teach each other to know God.*”<sup>36</sup>

For people with a passion to improve this world of ours, for people who are afraid and hurting, for people who are aware that their own mind and their own egos are not trustworthy, *reason* is not enough, *tolerance* is not enough, *religious freedom* is not enough. They are worthy of respect and appreciation. But we also need to be able to admit to their troubling shadows. Their limitations must be acknowledged. They do not answer some of our deepest hungers. We'll need a “thicker soup” if Unitarian Universalists are to offer nourishment, inspiration and religious leadership to an increasingly bewildering world.

## REVERENCE, COURAGE AND CURIOSITY

I believe that some essential brilliance of the Radical Reformation has been hidden, overlooked, and under-utilized. The names I choose to describe three liberal religious virtues are somewhat arbitrary: but the landscape they are meant to cover goes past the boundaries of reason, tolerance, and religious freedom. **Reverence, courage** and **curiosity** have always been a part of our spiritual legacy, but they have not always been celebrated or championed. I believe they

carry the kind of light that might broaden our appeal, deepen our conversations and ground us more firmly in our history.

**Reverence** comes first. Reverence is a word that Neiman identifies as one of the shining beacons of the western enlightenment. Reverence locates the holy in this world. Reverence is embodied in people and things. Reverence is the kind of relationship you take to the planet, to the chair you sit on, and to the living beings you encounter. It is the foundation to the “inherent worth and dignity” of your fellow human beings. Reverence is also a variety of mysticism, expressed eloquently in the words of our first Unitarian martyr, Michael Servetus. According to Servetus, God was to be found within and everywhere in the creation. He wrote about Christ (and the holy and the true): *“He descends to the lowest depths and ascends to the highest and fills all things. He walks upon the wings of the wind, rides upon the air and inhabits the place of angels. His place is not any particular part of heaven...he dwells within us.”*<sup>37</sup> *“Our soul is a certain light of God, a spark of the spirit of God, having an innate light of divinity.”*<sup>38</sup> For Servetus, human beings were meant to find union with God. Human beings were meant to participate in the divine nature. Contrast Servetus’ mysticism with John Calvin’s understanding of the Almighty. For Calvin, God was distant, unapproachable, absolute sovereign and wholly other. The idea that God was close, loving and accessible drove Calvin “round the bend.” At the trial that would send Servetus to his death, Calvin described himself screaming at Servetus. (These are Calvin’s own words):

“When Servetus asserted that all creatures are of the proper essence of God and so all things are full of gods (for he did not blush to speak and write his mind in this way) I, wounded with the indignity, objected: ‘What, wretch! If one stamps the floor would one say that one stamped on your God? Does not such an absurdity shame you?’ But he answered, ‘I have no doubt that this bench or anything you point to is God’s substance. This is my fundamental principle that all things are a part and portion of God and the nature of things is the substantial spirit of God.’”<sup>39</sup>

This enlightenment understanding, that God was to be found in this world, that what was holy was all around us, went forth from Servetus. Voltaire, the philosopher wrote, “ *A miracle, according to the real meaning of the word is something admirable. Then everything is a miracle. The marvelous order of nature, the rotation of a hundred million globes around a million suns, the activity of light, the life of animals—these are perpetual miracles.*”<sup>40</sup> Centuries later, The Transcendental movement would hear Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay, *Nature*, say that “*The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.*”<sup>41</sup> The Unitarian poet Walt Whitman would echo that same understanding. “*Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.*”<sup>42</sup> And now we have the environmental movement, celebrating the sacred in every tree, and living creature, and glacial ice-field.

It was our founding visionary, Servetus, who so forcefully and eloquently declared that God could not be contained in a dogma, or be set apart from us. Divine love could not be ultimately blocked by ignorance, or sin, or pre-destination. Yet this legacy, of miracle and the embodied and incarnate presence of the sacred, has too often been translated into a tepid liturgical song. It is not enough to tell our hungry, thirsty souls that we appreciate flowers and worship nature.

The mind in a reverent mood would be open to inspiration, awed by sacred music, inclined to pray. The body, when it is in a reverent stance might bow, or kneel, or just listen. And the heart, feeling reverence, would experience both tenderness and vulnerability. Susan Neiman claims that the most prominent characteristic of reverence is “*gratitude and appreciation and admiration. Its opposite is scorn, disrespect and envy*”<sup>43</sup> The challenge she lays down to my own puritanical, radical reformation heart is when she writes, “*reverence and gratitude require you to acknowledge your dependency...real gratitude requires acceptance of your limits; you are not entirely independent, but beholden, if only to the past*”<sup>44</sup>

How are we to get Unitarian Universalists to move our minds, hearts and bodies into a reverent, receptive stance? Some maintain that surrender, trust and submission are passive, and defeatist and oppressive theological concepts, containing no strength, no truth, and no practical use for liberal religious thinkers. While it is certainly historically accurate that violent and ruthless people have used these terms to further their power and their privilege, it is also important to note that those who intend to harm, will use anything at their disposal. They will twist truth to their own purposes, whether using traditional religious language or the newest liberation theology. We cannot allow those in opposition to the tenants of the free church to define our theological language, or to claim exclusive rights to important spiritual practices.

Yet, what if you, as a Unitarian Universalist have no desire for individual spiritual development? What if you only want the free faith to work as a source of community and social justice in order to transform society into a more equitable and life affirming place? Can you afford to neglect the virtue of reverence? Neiman, quoting Adam Smith, describes how essential reverence, (and the gratitude that flows out of reverence) is to our common life. *“Gratitude is crucial to the framework of civil society.. it interests us in the happiness and misery of those beyond ourselves.”*<sup>45</sup>

Reverence includes the impressive gifts of the intellect and reason. Part of our appreciation has to admire and affirm the contributions of philosophy and science, mathematics and technology, arts and music and theater. But reverence is larger than the life of the mind. It recognizes the mystery of our being. Reverence embraces the importance of the body, as well as the mind, heart and spirit.

If we can trust that the holy is under our feet, and everywhere we go, and also in our own soul, then we will probably be ready for the leap known as **courage**.

The history of the Radical Protestant Reformation is a testament to the raw courage of our founders. Servetus would not abandon his passion for religious truth, even on the stake. Tens of thousands of Anabaptists were the “pro-choice” religionists of their time. They were willing to die, rather than to live without the choice of when to be baptized, and how to conduct their spiritual lives as adults. We UU’s come from self-differentiating, heroic and visionary stock. There was no failure of nerve at our conception! How did we evolve into a denomination known for discussion groups, resolutions by consensus, and tepid commitments to the institutional church?

What prevents the practice of courageous religious leadership in our own times? Rabbi Ed Friedman’s last book (published posthumously), *A Failure of Nerve* offers a fresh look at what personal and institutional courage means in the context of American culture. He is quite explicit about what he believes blocks the exercise of courage and leadership in churches. Briefly, summarizing his list:

- 1) Focusing on your weakest, most recalcitrant, or passive aggressive member.
- 2) Not allowing leaders to exercise their authority, to make decisions and to define themselves.
- 3) An obsession/addiction with data, techniques, reorganization plans, and long range projections.
- 4) A high faith in regulating destructive and toxic forces through reasonableness, love, insight, role modeling, inculcation of values, and consensus.<sup>46</sup>

Courage flourishes, according to Friedman, in those institutional and emotional climates where integrity, imagination, creativity and energy are encouraged and supported. The courageous individual and the most effective leaders are the ones who can “ *express themselves with the least amount of blaming, and the greatest capacity to take responsibility for his or her own emotional well being and destiny.*”<sup>47</sup> There are two particular aspects of Friedman’s courage that are especially challenging to religious liberals.

*A willingness to be exposed and vulnerable* One of the major limitations of imagination’s fruits is the fear of standing out. It is more than a fear of criticism. It

is anxiety at being alone, of being in a position where one can rely little on others, a position that puts one's own resources to the test, a position where one will have to take total responsibility for one's response to the environment. Leaders must not only not be afraid of that position; they must come to love it.

*Being headstrong and ruthless* ---at least in the eyes of others. Explorers do not allow relationships to get in the way of their vision. They do not use and manipulate others, but in binds, where they have to choose between continuing a relationship and giving up their goals, they stick to their goals over team-building, consensus, and camaraderie."<sup>48</sup>

Susan Neiman calls the modern exercise of courage, *heroic*.<sup>49</sup> Unlike one dimensional stereotypes of bravado and derring-do, modern heroes addressing today's moral challenges are fully conscious of complexity, ambiguity and humility. She describes one of her personal heroes, David Shulman, an Israeli peace activist.

"David Shulman doesn't even like heroes, and when reluctantly agreeing to my request to portray him, he asked me to record that. *Hero* is for him too macho, without nuance or complexity. Heroes, he feels, are relentlessly cheerful, never noticing the cold and the rain and the thirst and the boredom Shulman knows so well. We don't need any more heroes, he insists in his book *Dark Hope*; at best, they are a nuisance.

By trade, he's a professor of Sanskrit, heaped with honors in the West as well in India; by avocation he's a poet in several languages. Like every Israeli, he served in the army... When I first met him, however, he seemed the least politically conscious man in Jerusalem."<sup>50</sup>

And this is what David himself has to say about his work. "This conflict is not a war of the sons of light with the sons of darkness; both sides are dark, both are given to organized violence and terror, and both resort constantly to self-righteous justification and a litany of victimization, the bread-and-butter of ethnic conflict. My concern is with the darkness on my side. Where I stand is a part of a Jewish past with its dead voices whispering in my memory. '*Bind the wounds, Heal the sick. Don't forget you were slaves. To save one person is to save a world. Don't be afraid. All that lives is holy. Forgive. Wake up. Shake off the dust and stand up. Feed the hungry. Bring the poor into your home. Cover the naked. Break their chains.*' Did I invent these voices? They seem to speak from some buried, dreamlike domain, as distant and insistent as childhood. It is nothing to be right, and a true disaster to be righteous, but it is everything to do what you can."<sup>51</sup>

Would that we in the free faith could embody some of David Shulman's Universalism, his identification with all souls, even the souls of his enemies. His use of religious history, could be ours, if we would only claim it. And his refusal to

use the imperial language of the righteous, is a needed corrective to our own predilection for broadcasting ourselves as occupying the high, virtuous, superior ground of the “tolerant church”.

What would our Unitarian Universalist future look like if we started to be known as the “courageous church”? Would we be able to act, fully acknowledging our own brokenness, as we attempted to be agents of reconciliation and healing in a broken world? Keeping alive our hope in human progress, could we still recognize the complexity and the ambiguity inherent in all of our good works?

Through the practice of **reverence**, we would become conscious of the abundance of resources that surround us, and sustain us. Those resources would include reason and rationality, limited but essential parts of our culture. There would also be an honoring and celebration of the body, the heart and the soul. Through the practice of **courage** we would go much farther than tolerance could ever take us. We would know our own strength, and see the strength of others. We would offer our help, not as people who are wiser, or smarter, or more advanced in our sensitivity, but as the flawed and struggling souls that we actually are.

What would the practice of reverence and courage look like in the context of religious freedom? While my hope is that we might never compromise the primacy of our individual freedom of religion, it is a fairly low-demand practice, to ask people to affirm what they already believe. **Curiosity**, especially spiritual curiosity, the curiosity of a *beginner’s mind*, asks for us to exercise our freedom in a flexible, engaged, humble and active manner. It asks that we keep our hearts and minds and souls open to new revelations, new understandings, course corrections, and the wisdom that can only come through staying in relationship with others.

Freedom is a good and wonderful thing. Being free of dogmas and empty rituals may in fact be a requirement for the soul's continuing development. But freedom will not be sufficient if you feel that your life, or your country, or the world is adrift in a vast ocean of greed, uncertainty and/or environmental catastrophe. What does it mean to offer freedom of belief to someone who is hungry or homeless or self-destructive? What does freedom to follow your own truth mean to someone who is depressed and suicidal? How liberating is it to choose to isolate and separate from a community that cares about you? Being left to your own devices is not especially helpful to those who are sincerely seeking to understand the mysteries of God or grace or death. The shadow side of "freedom" can locate us on Santayana's "mono-rail of self-will". Our natural love for no restrictions, no limits and no obedience, can convince us that we are free to escape the demands of love. When we get caught up in our own arrogance and delusions and fantasies of self sufficiency, we conveniently forget that the practice of our *freedom of conscience* is always in the context of the constrictions of our culture, the limitations of our own brains, and the frailties of all human systems of thought.

We can begin with religious freedom, but we can't stop there. We need to encourage all Unitarian Universalists seekers (and I would hope that we all define ourselves as seekers), to venture out into the wilderness, the unknown country of an engaged and active curiosity. This curiosity is born of the conviction that we are still in formation. This curiosity would be increased every time you realized that your compass was inadequate, or more seriously, that your compass has been lost. Even while pursuing your most reasonable convictions, even when you were acting with all the virtue and compassion you could bring to bear, Unitarian Universalists would be reminded often, that we don't really know very much. ( I have thought to rename my church, The First Unitarian Church of "We don't know anything".. a kind of truth in advertising...but I have yet to marshal any popular support .)

Some have called this curiosity an “advanced ignorance”. Classical theologians have described it as a kind of humility that requires an open, attentive awareness of one’s limitations and ongoing awakening. Yet it has been with us in our tradition , at least since Servetus. He wrote, “*All seem to me to have part of the truth and a part of error, and each discerns the error of others and fails to see his own.*”<sup>52</sup>

We, the inheritors of the legacy of the Radical Reformation are especially in need of this virtue of curiosity. Because while we might continue to take great comfort in what Santayana called our “*superior knowledge and finer feelings*”, we like all of God’s children face death and chaos and defeat, as well as unexpected, and quite disorienting joy and delight. Curiosity is what may help me to break out of a prison of my own construction. My own commitment to religious freedom and a beginner’s mind may help me to befriend those on the other side of the globe, and move me to want to help stop the rape and murder in Darfur. Even as I am at liberty to reach my own conclusions about meaning and truth and whom I live with, I will always need to seek out wise companions. Reverence, courage and curiosity will hopefully bring me into a supportive religious community.

I will sink like a stone if I can only rely on my own efforts, my own insight, or my own capacities. The Sikh scriptures, *The Adi Granth* put it distinctly: “*As the ocean is brimful with water, So are my troubles without number. Have mercy on me and with Your grace. Let this sinking stone swim across.*”<sup>53</sup> A sinking stone is not likely to win an Olympic swimming event, is not especially good at staying afloat or in maintaining forward motion or speed. It doesn’t have much navigational skill. How sad it would be if the stone wasn’t the least bit curious about what actually could take it the distance!

In Unitarian Universalist worship, we need to be reminded that we are a “work in progress”. We need to be assured that we can rely on our spiritual friendships, and that our religious education is ongoing. People who practice a lively,

engaged curiosity, tend to relax more, laugh more, and are not likely to think that they have reached any final conclusions. None of us have been given all the answers. None of us have explored all there is to explore. And if Shulman is right, that *“being right is nothing, and being righteous is a true disaster”*, then we needn’t be afraid of not knowing, or of staying curious, or of experimenting with new ways of looking at the world, or of asking for help.

Let the orthodox and the fundamentalists develop the formulas for certain knowledge, eternal salvation and rituals to banish doubt and insecurity. Unitarian Universalists will always be explorers. We will always be dependant on one another, and on a mystery greater than ourselves.

When I wrote the subtitle to this paper, as *“Barbara’s Last Prairie Group Paper?”* I was giving voice to my fear that those of us who emphasize and cherish the virtues of reverence, courage and curiosity may be placing ourselves outside of the mainstream of current Unitarian Universalist thought. For those who have always swum easily in the waters of rationality and tolerance, and freedom of conscience (and self righteousness), an invitation to confront the limits and the shadows of such a worldview might be marked, “return to sender.” Systems do not change easily or quickly. If more Unitarian Universalists were asked to shift the focus from rational principles (which are relatively low demand) to those virtues which ask far more of our hearts, minds and souls, then we could justifiably expect all kinds of resistance and protest.

Yet over the years, even when there is profound disagreement and resistance around this table at Prairie Group, I must admit that I have found reverence in this circle of colleagues. There is reverence in the way we approach these conversations, and in the way we worship with one another. Here I have been asked to recall and to honor those liberal traditions that sustain our ministries. Here I have seen my colleagues incarnating courage as they attempt to live out their faith in some very puzzling and troubled congregations. Every year, you

inspire me with your strength. And those who are every bit as lost as I am, continue to seek, to explore, and to ask for help, even when we have no idea whether our prayers will be answered.

It is my real and fervent hope that I might always find myself returning to this good and blessed company, as I have been doing for 32 years. But I do not seek here a kingdom of only scholarship and rationality. I need much more from my brothers and sisters in the ministry than tolerance. And I refuse that freedom that leaves me alone, to rely only on my own resources.

So, I conclude by asking you to do something outrageous, right here, right now. I ask you to take hold of the hands of the ones who are sitting on either side of you. At Prairie Group! Appropriate touching! Seeing this assembly of God's children as an occasion to feel what is holy and close by. If the floorboards under our feet are full of God, well then so are your colleagues by your side. And our gathering here this week, is yet another miracle, worthy of our reverence and appreciation. Here may we be reminded, through our rich heritage and our current strength, that at the core of us, we have the courage and the capacity to do the work that is ours alone to do. Admitting that we know so little. But surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

If asking colleagues at an academic conference to hold hands doesn't get me thrown out of Prairie Group, probably nothing will. But if this is my last time in this circle (if it is yours, and none of us know for sure) may we find a way to express our gratitude that we were able to walk together in this great religiously liberal tradition, with all its light and shadow. "Surely God was in this place, and I knew it not."

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, ed. Margaret M. Treadwell and Edward W. Beal. Seabury Books: New York, 1999, 2007. p. 249.

<sup>2</sup> Rumi, *Bridge To The Soul: Journeys Into the Music and Silence of the Heart*, trans. Coleman Barks. Harper Collins: New York, 2007. p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> George Howe Colt, "The Healing Power of Touch". Life Magazine. Kathi's Mental Health Review, Riverside, California. ToddlerTime Network. p. 3. September 18, 2008. <http://www.toddlerstime.com/mh/terms/healing-touch.htm>

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>5</sup> Tiffany Field, "The Importance of Touch." Karger Gazette, No. 67 2004. University of Miami School of Medicine, Miami, Fla. p. 3. September 18, 2008. [http://www.karger.com/gazette/67/Field/art\\_4.htm](http://www.karger.com/gazette/67/Field/art_4.htm)

<sup>6</sup> George Santayana, *The Last Puritan: A Memoir In the Form of a Novel*. Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1936. p. 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 319.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Neiman, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists*. Harcourt, Inc.: Orlando 2008. p. 229.

<sup>18</sup> Santayana. p. 319.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 318.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>21</sup> Cordelia Fine, *A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York/London, 2006. p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 193.

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- <sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 204.
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.
- <sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 202.
- <sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 200.
- <sup>31</sup> *Roget's International Thesaurus*, (6<sup>th</sup> edition) ed. Barbara Kipfer. Harper Resource: New York, 2001. p. 698.
- <sup>32</sup> Neiman, p. 118-119.
- <sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 315.
- <sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 316.
- <sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 316.
- <sup>36</sup> William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story. Third Edition, Revised and Enlarged*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K., 1975. p. 111-112.
- <sup>37</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus 1511-1553*. The Beacon Press: Boston, 1953. p. 136.
- <sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 126.
- <sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 186.
- <sup>40</sup> Neiman. p. 225.
- <sup>41</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New American Library: New York, 1965. p. 222.
- <sup>42</sup> Richard Ellman, *The New Oxford Book of American Verse*. Oxford University Press: New York. 1976. p. 226.
- <sup>43</sup> Neiman. p., 235.
- <sup>44</sup> Neiman, p. 236.
- <sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p. 236.
- <sup>46</sup> Friedman, p. 12.
- <sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 17.
- <sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 188.
- <sup>49</sup> Neiman, p. 306.
- <sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 374.
- <sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 376.
- <sup>52</sup> Friedman, p. 62.
- <sup>53</sup> Sawan Singh, *The Philosophy of the Masters, Series Four*. Radha Soami Satsang: Beas, India, 1966. p 53.

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