

Reverence is a term I don't often hear in a Unitarian Universalist context. It's almost like touching a hot stove, we tend to stay away from such terms—often in knee jerk fashion. At least that's the way it seems to me. I suspect it has something to do with the fact that most UUs are “come-outers”; many of us have come out of a religious faith community we could no longer fit ourselves into. They had words and concepts we no longer believed. We no longer felt comfortable living our lives in reference to beliefs we could no longer accept as truth.

Historically, and up to this day, many UUs have turned to science, logic and rational thought as a primary reference point, as a source of grounding and as a way of making sense of this universe of ours. We've come up with various names to categorize ourselves; Humanists, atheist, non-theist, agnostics.

Unfortunately, some of us have taken pride in our perspective and consider it superior to those who continue to accept religious concepts, and dogma that we have rejected. While much less so now than in years gone by, some Unitarian Universalists have been disdainful of those who believe in God...God with a Capital “G”.

In too many of our congregations, we don't talk about God, and mention Jesus only in our children's religious education classes and at Christmas time. (For those of you longing to hear about Jesus, hang on, Christmas is coming). I know, I myself, feel pressure to not choose hymns that praise God or are God centered, for fear of alienating those among us who reject the concept of a personal God.

My hope in choosing Reverence as our theme for the month is to encourage us to embrace the experience of reverence, to move beyond a knee jerk reaction to reverence as a religious term. My hope is to help us claim reverence as foundational to a faith community, our faith community. Even more importantly, I want us to recognize reverence as central to living a full and robust life.

For most of my life, I could comfortably put myself into one of the categories I mentioned earlier: humanist, non-theist, agnostic. For most of my life, I did not think of myself as being religious.

And the term “reverence”, to my mind, certainly fit within the context of religion. Not only was it a “religious” term, it was a term associated with God. And I gave up believing in God when I was about 10 years old---as I was rather precocious.

As I’ve been thinking about it, for the longest time I put the word, the concept of reverence in the same camp as the term “admire”. I suspect I was in my late 30’s or 40’s before I could allow myself to think that I admired someone. I was perfectly comfortable respecting people, thinking highly of them, valuing their contributions to the workplace or the world.

I knew people who were very knowledgeable, talented, highly skilled but I was not comfortable thinking in terms of admiration. It seemed to me it put someone on a pedestal. People are just people after all.

That changed as I worked with a colleague and friend over a number of years. At some point it became clear that I admired Bill Friedman. No other term worked as well. He belonged in a special category.

He and I did a fair amount of diversity training together. We did a lot of work centered around issues of race. He’s a Jewish, white guy. I came to call him a “silver-tongue”. I would speak my truth, say exactly what I meant, what I thought, what I saw. More than once, my words hit with a thud.

He, on the other hand, always seemed to be able to say things... cloaked in velvet. He didn’t upset people. No matter what he had to say, somehow his words just went in, he got very little resistance. I always valued his perspective and insight, I grew to admire his style. Later came to admire him as a father and as a religious man.

In a similar vane, I was late to come to reverence. Reverence crept up on me. I didn't decide to be reverential. One day, I simply recognized I felt reverence, and it was not the same as appreciation. That awareness came as a by-product of the energy work I was studying and practicing. I came to recognize in myself a reverence for nature (which is more than enjoyment), a reverence for beauty, reverence for the mystery of the universe.

From an awareness of the *feeling* of reverence, it was a small step to accept religious concepts. More importantly, my awareness of reverence, my experience of reverence, allowed me to let go of my childhood, outdated definition of God. It allowed me to re-imagine the concept of God.

Joseph Campbell, in the *Power of Myth*, speaks directly to this point. He says, "The idea of Buddha consciousness is of an immanent, luminous consciousness that informs all things and all lives. We unthinkingly live by fragments of that consciousness, fragments of that energy. But the religious way of life is to live not in terms of the self-interested intentions of this particular body at this particular time but in terms of the insight of that larger consciousness." (p213)

He tells a story of a Catholic priest asking him a series of questions. "Are you a priest?" No. "Are you Catholic?" I was. "Do you believe in a personal God?" No. The priest then says, "I suppose there is no way to prove by logic the existence of a personal god". Campbell, in a very Campbell-like way, responds with, "If there were Father, what then would be the value of faith?" (p.213).

Campbell was focused on the particular wording of the priest. Asking about a belief in a personal god implied the possibility of an "impersonal" god, which Campbell calls a "transcendent ground or energy in itself". Some might call it a Buddha consciousness.

I think Campbell would have been comfortable finding himself within the broad definition of liberal religion. Meaning, a broad interpretation of religious dogma, of theological concepts, a liberal interpretation of scripture and a non-literalist interpretation of a Biblical God.

Joseph Campbell, among others, has done us a great service in offering a translation or reconfiguration of important ideas, concepts and experiences of what's included in a meaningful life. Many of his translations, if you will, are of religious ideas and experiences.

He so often points out that we put ourselves in a box, we limit ourselves when we constrain ourselves to a literalist interpretation, when we use only that part of the brain that is guided by logic and rational thought. When we limit ourselves to what we can touch, see, smell and hear. He lived in the world of myth and mined wisdom contained in various orientations to life, to what drives us, to what feeds our deepest yearnings.

He taught us much about what connects us... human to human, human to nature, present existence to what came before. He guided us on a journey within, so we could connect to not only what we thought and believed but to what we value, need and have experienced.

He tells us that the concept of God is a unifying concept, connecting all to the all. He lets us know we do not need to be constrained by a singular interpretation of God. We don't need to have a personified image of God in order to experience the divine. He even suggests that God may not need to be seen as the source of creation, but may rather, be the vehicle of the energies and wonders of the universe.

Campbell says that "the source" of all existence is and always has been a mystery. It's the mystery that we need to accept, to experience. And when we do, we experience awe and know that we are a part of something much greater than ourselves, much greater than what we know as the human dimension. Our experience of, our connection with that "greater than" is what elicits a sense of reverence.

I'll end with another Campbell quote. "Anyone who has had an experience of mystery knows there is a dimension of the universe that is not that which is available to [the] senses. There is a pertinent saying in one of the Upanishads: 'When before the beauty of a sunset or of a mountain you pause and exclaim, AH, you are participating in divinity'. Such a moment of participation involves a realization of the wonder and sheer beauty of existence... [it's the] recognition of something there that is much greater than the human dimension" [p 207]

For me, reverence comes as a result of an awareness and the embracing of wonder. It's an act of receiving. It comes from within. Reverence is the experience of connection with, participation in, the divine. We can experience reverence and wonder when we truly honor the god within and the god within each other.

The Hindus have a word and jester that does just that: Namaste.