

A Religion of What Matters

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Some wag once described Unitarian Universalists as atheists with children. For some of us it's true. Many of us came looking for a religious community because we wanted it for our children. *What is it that people who do not care whether or not our children believe or do not believe in God, do not care if they receive communion, are bar or bat mitzvahed, or ever go on haj, what is it that we, who do not care if our children believe in heaven and do not want them to believe in hell, what do we want for ourselves and for them from religion?

I believe that there are but two things that matter to most of us; a mixture of awe and sympathy that Albert Schweitzer called "reverence for life," and an ethic and values based in the compassion that flows from that reverence. That is all that matters. Sure, it would be nice if we and our children knew who Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and Gautama were, but that is an extra. What matters is instilling and keeping reverence and values.

Albert Schweitzer said, "By having a reverence for life, we enter into a spiritual relation with the world. By practicing reverence for life we become good, deep, and alive." That is all there is. That is the heart of religion. That is what matters

In his book, My Name is Asher Lev, Chaim Potok tells this story, "And I drew, too, the way my father once looked at a bird lying on its side against the curb near our house. It was Shabbos and we were on our way back from synagogue.

"Is it dead, Papa?" I was six and could not bring myself to look at it.

"Yes," I heard him say in a sad and distant way.

"Why did it die?"

"Everything that lives must die."

"Everything?"

"Yes."

"You, too Papa? And Mama?"

"Yes."

"And me?"

"Yes," he said. Then he added in Yiddish, 'But may it be only after you live a long and good life, my Asher.'

"I couldn't grasp it. I forced myself to look at the bird. Everything alive would one day be as still as that bird?"

"Why?" I asked.

"That's the way the Ribbono Shel Olom made his world, Asher."

"Why?"

"So life would be precious, Asher. Something that is yours forever is never precious."

I expect many of us would not answer the whys in the same way as the father in Chaim Potok's novel, but I do want to be able myself to look at a dead bird in a way that leads the child with me to come to know that I believe life is precious.

In her book Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage Unitarian Universalist religious educator, Sophia Lyon Fahs uses as an example of a children's worship time, a time in which she asks the children to guess what the oldest thing in the room is. Some guess the furniture. Some guess Mrs. Fahs. But her answer is the water in a glass on the table. She is not using this lesson to teach the science of the water cycle; of water condensing off the ocean, being dropped as rain, flowing through the ground, into the rivers and out again to the ocean. *She uses the lesson to elicit awe. Water, a simple everyday thing, isn't simple or everyday at all. It is old and mysterious and wondrous.

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When Tom Barnett writes in the meditation we used earlier, “I miss the old temples where you could hang out with God. Still, we have pet pounds where you can feel love draped in warm fur, and sense the whole tragedy of life and death. You see the consequences of carelessness, and you feel there the yapping urgency of life that wants to be lived. The only things lacking are the frankincense and myrrh,” he is speaking of reverence for life. There is awe and there is sympathy. That is what reverence is.

Italian poet, Diego Valeri describes people with a reverence for life as “You who have an eye for miracles.” He writes, “You who have an eye for miracles regard the bud now appearing on the bare branch of the fragile young tree. It is a mere dot, a nothing. But already it’s a flower, already a fruit, already its own death and resurrection.”

One of my favorite hymns in our hymnal is Number 343, “A Firemist and a Planet.” The words are by William Herbet Carruth. “A firemist and a planet, a crystal and a cell, a starfish and a saurian, and caves where ancients dwelt; a sense of law and beauty, a face turned from the sod – some call it evolution, and others call it God. Haze on the far horizon, the infinite tender sky, the ripe, rich tints of cornfields, and wild geese sailing high; and over high and lowland, the charm of goldenrod – some people call it autumn, and others call it God. Like tides on crescent sea-beach, when moon’s so new and thin, into our heart’s high yearnings come welling, surging in, come from the mystic ocean whose rim no foot has trod – some people call it longing, and others call it God. A sentry lone and frozen, a mother starved for her brood, and Socrates’ dread hemlock, and Jesus on the rood; and millions, who, though nameless, the straight, hard pathway trod – some call it consecration and others call it God.”

However we name it we need that mixture of awe and sympathy that is reverence. It is one of the two things that matter in our religion.

The second thing that matters is to develop a set of values and an ethic for living that is based in that reverence. *A mother whose beloved son had died carried his body to the Buddha and asked if he could not tell her how she might bring back her son. He told her to gather a handful of mustard seed and bring it back to him. There was one caveat. The mustard seed must be taken from a home that had never known death. The woman searched for a long time. She found no home that had never known death. She did find sympathy for herself and in herself sympathy for others.

For those of you who know some of the history of the Christian Bible it may surprise you to know that there is a story contained in the gospel of John that doesn’t really belong there. The Interpreter’s Bible says of it, “This story is not part of the Gospel According to John, but is rather a piece of floating tradition which centuries later came to be inserted at this place...” Four gospels were chosen to be included in the Christian canon, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And, at some point, this story, which was included into the text of John. And what story is this that was deemed so important as to be stuck into a gospel. It is this one, “The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?’ Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger in the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, ‘Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.’ And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus looked up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go and do not sin again.’”

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Lovingkindness, compassion. These flow from reverence, and they are the base for the values and the life ethic I want for myself and for our children. Lovingkindness and compassion are what the stories of the women before the Buddha and the Christ are about.

In the reading I will share after this sermon, Alicia Ostriker's "Everywoman Her Own Theology," she says, "Ethically, I am looking for an absolute endorsement of lovingkindness, no loopholes, except maybe mosquitoes. Virtue and sin will henceforth be discouraged...." Virtue can lead to snobbery and condemnation of others. Sin can lead to degradation and mortification of oneself. Lovingkindness flows from the sympathy that is part of reverence. It honors all life. Albert Schweitzer again, "I can do no other than be reverent before everything that is called life. I can do no other than to have compassion for all that is called life. That is the beginning and the foundation of all ethics."

Lee Bluemel, a Unitarian Universalist minister tells this true story,* "It happened in the years preceding the Second World War. A Quaker woman came to work as a nurse in a small Catholic village in Poland. There were no other nurses or doctors there, so the Quaker nurse did just about everything. She birthed the babies, tended the sick, set broken bones, cared for the dying. There was plenty to do, and it was good work, so the Quaker nurse stayed on.

"She stayed for the year, and then a second year, and a fourth year, a tenth year and by then the villagers stopped counting. The Quaker nurse was practically one of them. The villagers loved her. The first babies she had delivered turned into fine young men and strong young women. Their aging mothers came to her with confidences and hot chicken pot pies.

"Then one day the Quaker nurse died.

"The villagers needed a place to say their good-byes and bury the body so she could rest in peace. But the village was a small one, and it had only one cemetery – A Catholic cemetery. You couldn't bury a Quaker nurse in a Catholic cemetery. It was illegal. There was nowhere for her to go ...or so it seemed.

"The villagers got together. They asked one another: What could be done? After much deliberation, they decided to bury the Quaker nurse just outside the cemetery's stone wall. It was the best they could do. The young men dug the grave, the villagers said their good-byes. They had loved her. Some cried. Then as the sun began to set, slowly they walked back to their homes. Darkness came. All was quiet.....Except for one sound – an odd sound—out be the cemetery. If you listened very carefully, you could tell it was the sound of stone scraping against stone. And, there was another sound too – the sound of labored breathing. The young men and the young women were moving the stones of the cemetery wall. They worked in silence, breathing hard, with the help of their mothers and fathers.

"When the sun came up the next day, it turned out that the Catholic cemetery in the little Polish village was just a bit larger than it ever had been before. As for how it got that way, when the villagers were asked, no one seemed to know. But the next night all of the villagers – even the Quaker nurse – rested in peace."

Albert Schweitzer said, "By having a reverence for life, we enter into a spiritual relation with the world. By practicing reverence for life we become good, deep, and alive." That is all there is; these two things. *Find a reverence within yourself and give it to your children. Base your values and ethics in that reverence and teach your children to live that way as well. That is all that matters. That is the heart of religion.