

# “I: Accepting Oneself”

A Sermon by The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, October 14, 2007

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

I begin my sermon today with a text from modern religious literature for the irreligious—the comic strip “Sherman on the Mount.” Sherman, a lovable pious monk, is enjoying a beautiful sunny day when he hears a most godly “A-a-a-achoo!” thunder from a solitary cloud in the sky above him. He automatically responds “God bless you!” Then realizing Who he must be speaking to, he looks upwards sheepishly and says “If you’ve got a minute, I’d like to talk with you.”

“What’s on your mind Sherman?” says the Voice from the cloud. “Well, as You know my father was a Methodist and my mother Presbyterian; my attire suggests Catholicism and my religious roots are deep in Jewish tradition. I’m really confused.”

The Voice booms down “It’s okay to be confused, Sherman. Just keep the faith.” Sherman sounds more like a Unitarian Universalist than a monk but that can’t be, because we know that UU’s are never confused about their religious identity. Are they?

Unitarian Universalist children sometimes are. I think back to my own confusion trying to make sense out of my world as a UU child. I remember reaching one of the stages of awareness and discovering that other people seemed to have consciousness just as I did, though they seemed to be different from me. I could neither understand them nor even get into their ways of seeing the world we shared.

Did those other people really exist? Did I exist? What is real? Is my consciousness the same as reality? If I were not here at all, would reality still be here? What is consciousness after all? Am I perhaps a figment of someone else’s imagination, perhaps a God who is imagining me thinking? If that could be so, where did all these other imaginary people around me come from? Are they figments of God’s imagination too?

I think I was about ten when I held that conversation with myself. It was all very confusing and I gave up trying to figure out how I could exist and others exist until I got to college and learned that people called philosophers made a living from thinking like that. (UU ministers too.)

“I think, therefore I am.” Big deal! I had stumbled into that morass that Descartes had explored earlier and I didn’t even know I was a philosopher. Maybe I really wasn’t one, but I knew then that as E. E. Cummings said in his i: Six Nonlectures at Harvard University, “when you come right down to it everybody’s the whole boxoftricks to himself, whether she believes it or not.” I say “Believe it. Believe it!”

You are the most wonderful and mysterious and thoroughly engrossing possibility that you will ever encounter. Even when, from time to time, life seems lousy. Do not, says Cummings, ever forget “the mystery which you have been, the mystery which you shall be, and the mystery which you are.” I say Love that mystery!

When he was a radical young Unitarian minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson once complained about listening to a preacher who was so abstract that Emerson felt he must have “lived in vain.” He said

He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it.... This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought, and sold; he had read books, he had eaten and drunken; his head aches; his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all.

You know we preachers are sometimes tempted to speak as if we drew Truth direct from the Spigot of Life, without having to live it first. But in truth, I think autobiography is the best theology, perhaps the only theology rooted in reality. I believe as Emerson did that each of us must forge an original relationship with the universe, and that the truth is always most real when it can be shared personally, when it surges through the “I” of our individual consciousnesses.

One of the great hopes of the ages (in fact the underlying assumption of all good orthodox theology and bad science) is that truth is objective, immutable, and separable from our lives. “God exists and this is what He says...” say orthodox and fundamentalist theologians, and “Science knows that...” say people who don’t know that Science (with a capital S) doesn’t really know anything at all.

This is the great fallacy. The best scientists know that even in their most precise measurements done in the most sterile of circumstances with the finest tools, nothing is exactly what it seems. The act of measuring something, anything, changes the thing being measured. The human influence cannot be removed. The Heisenberg Principle of Uncertainty, for which Werner Heisenberg received the Nobel Prize in 1932, closed the door on objectivity as a possibility, perhaps forever. (Of course we cannot say even that with certainty, thanks to Heisenberg.) Objective reality may be there, but you and I can’t get there from here. If this is so in science (which I trust more than theology) it is even truer in human life, in which the “I” of each of us is deeply involved in everything we say and do.

If we hope to approach the truth of our lives, we have to first learn to speak from the “I,” accepting ourselves with all of our limitations and all of our mystery. We have to own ourselves. We all have a bit of the confused “Sherman on the Mount” within, and each of us really is “the whole boxoftricks to himself, whether she believes it or not.”

We really only know one another when we tell one another real details from our lives. That’s often how we learn important things about ourselves. We see ourselves in one another’s experiences. That’s true even when we lie, as we often do innocently. We lie whenever we speak of insignificant matters when a painful or joyous truth is churning inside and we do not disclose it. We only mean to hide ourselves, but even in hiding we disclose truth.

I disclose to you that I am a person who is choosing to hide something. You disclose to me that you are shutting out observers from significant elements of your life. Is that okay? Of course it is. We can’t go around telling all the tawdry and sublime facts of our lives to everyone.

”Hello, how are you?”

“Well, I’m here. But I got reamed out by my boss yesterday and I’ve been festering about it ever since even though I did get some respite last night when my husband and I made love. Let me tell you about it....”

No thanks. “Well, let me tell you what my boss said and what I wish I had said back to him....”  
Again, no thanks!

Revealing the “I” significantly to others and accepting oneself does not mean revealing all. Our lives are filled with relationships with people to whom we reveal almost nothing of consequence unless we have to. You’ll tell the pharmacist you want a particular medicine that has been prescribed but you may not tell her anything about why you need this medicine. You may even feel a bit uncomfortable picking it up, guessing that the pharmacist knows something about you that you didn’t intend to tell. Self-revelation is a choicy business. We carefully choose those to whom we will reveal ourselves.

It is a sign of great trust and love to reveal to another something of consequence about oneself. To reveal personally important facts of one’s life to another person is the second greatest gift anyone can give. The greatest gift is to reveal one’s important facts to oneself, and to accept them. Only you can give that gift to yourself. Therein lies the power to accept yourself. (Some people call it the gift of “Grace”.)

Why is this difficult? Because there are many facets of ourselves that we don’t like and don’t admit to ourselves, let alone to others (consciously). But sometimes the only way to the self is through others, to be able to say to others what you are afraid to say to yourself. Then you can meet your self by experiencing others accepting you. That’s one reason people go to psychotherapists.

Others who are important to us always know things about us that we don’t want to know. So we don’t “know” these things. We cover them up. We sometimes transform them into criticisms of others, not knowing that observant people can see that we’re talking about parts of ourselves that we don’t like, and won’t accept, though we can see them clearly in others. Thank god for love. If those observant people didn’t love us, they’d call us on that game all the time. As it is they only do it sometimes.

Muhammad Ali is one of the greatest practitioners of celebration of the self that the world has known. He was the “Greatest” and he loved saying so. Once a friend asked him how he did at golf. “I’m the best,” said Ali. “I just haven’t played yet.” Behind the hype a realist lurked in Ali. Once on a plane about to fly somewhere for a fight, he was reminded by a stewardess that he had to buckle up his seat belt. “Superman don’t need no seat belt,” said Ali. “Superman don’t need no airplane neither,” said the stewardess. Ali buckled up. Even Superman has to accept himself with all his limitations to survive.

And if the limitations, the truth about one’s reality, is too painful as it may sometimes be for us, what then? Does accepting oneself mean giving up, feeling oneself to be worthless when hope fades, and even disappears? I think reality can tell one that a situation will not be survived, and one can still retain the fullest sense of self-worth, dignity and hope. Terminal patients have to acknowledge the reality of their conditions to fight them, and in refusing to give in, their dignity and love of self can survive even the harshest of fates.

Muhammad Ali was perhaps the greatest heavyweight boxer of all time. In 1967 his title to the heavyweight championship was taken from him by the New York State Athletic Commission because he refused to accept a draft call to serve in the army, claiming conscientious objection because he was a Muslim. He was sentenced to five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine, but Ali refused to accept it and fought all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court before his conviction was reversed. He returned to the boxing ring and won the championship again seven years later.

In 1982 Ali learned that he had Parkinson's Disease. Some doctors said it had been caused by damage done to him in the boxing ring, but Ali never accepted their diagnosis. When asked if he had any regrets about boxing because of the illness, Ali said he did not, that if he had not boxed he would have remained just a house painter. Though he accepted the truth about himself, he never gave up his spirit. He's still the greatest!

The dignity of the self can be honored and personal value known even in the most desperate of situations. That happens when people accept themselves for who and what they are, and act in the space that only they have for life. No one but you can act for you in your space. Accept it. Accept yourself, right where you are. Circumstances make each life unique, challenge each of us in ways never experienced in the same way by anyone else. Only we, with the loving touch of those who know us, can redeem our lives, make of them beacons of courage and hope for others.

As we, you for you and I for me, accept ourselves as we are, we can learn from one another and continue our journeys more deeply into the ways only we can go. There alone will you resolve "the mystery which you have been, the mystery which you shall be, and the mystery which you are." Until then, love your mystery! Love the "I" that is yours alone! Love yourself!

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