

Change and the Art of Reverence

Rev. Joe Cleveland

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

April 20, 2014

Reading

Tom Schade. "Afraid to Lose Ourselves." May 15, 2013.

<http://www.tomschade.com/2013/05/afraid-to-lose-ourselves.html>

Sermon

In choosing yourself as you are, you will find yourself transformed. And the skill you will be learning is the art of reverence.

Since it's Easter, I should say something about Jesus--but not right away. Instead, I want to think about survivors of the Boston Marathon bombings.

A year ago, these people had their lives changed irrevocably. They didn't have much choice in the matter. One woman named Heather Abbott said that after her leg was so severely wounded, she didn't really have much choice but to allow her doctors to remove it. She would have been in constant pain and confined to a wheelchair. She didn't really have much of a choice about being an amputee. But she still had to commit herself to who she was. She had to choose being an amputee. Because that's who she was -- that's who she is now. And in choosing that, she transformed. She committed herself to all sorts of physical therapy and training -- and she learned to walk again. She says,

"You can't help but have moments sometimes when you say, 'Why did this have to happen?' and 'Why do things have to be so hard now?' " Abbott says. "I can't change it. So I have to try to do the best with the situation that I have now."

To that end, Abbott has filled her days with speaking engagements, talking about her recovery to students, caregivers and college graduates. She believes her story of resilience and the strategies that helped her can apply to anyone.¹

¹ Tovia Smith. "After Losing A Leg, Woman Walks On Her Own — In 4-Inch Heels." National Public Radio. April 16, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2014/04/16/303358636/after-losing-a-leg-woman-walks-on-her-own-in-4-inch-heels>

What's amazing about Ms. Abbott isn't that she can walk. It's that she chooses herself as she is right now. And that's what makes her different.

Joining in the Dances of Universal Peace that Ricky has been teaching us today requires that each of us choose ourself as we are right now. And I believe that when you chose yourself like that, you are learning the art of reverence. To a large degree you have to learn some self reverence. To dance is to move your body carefully and mindfully. And to treat your body with that kind of care means seeing your body--your self--as worthy, whatever your abilities are. Moving that carefully and mindfully means understanding your body as worthy of that mindfulness.

And doing these dances with other people helps to reinforce that art of reverence, because joining in these dances, even if you are just joining in from your seat, means seeing all of these bodies as worthy, as chosen. And, I believe it means seeing them as sacred.

Last week, I said that Moses had to choose Moses. I could say the same thing about Jesus, too, and I will since it's Easter. In fact, you could say that Jesus stepped into the fullest truth of what a person can be. Ralph Waldo Emerson, our transcendentalist forebear, said this about Jesus. For Emerson, "One man was true to what is in you and me."² And that was Jesus. He realized that the sacred was inside himself. Jesus choose himself. And he saw that everyone had the sacred inside them, too. And this way of seeing is what he tried to teach. He was teaching the art of reverence. And he showed how being able to practice the art of reverence results in a profound change. Everything is holy now.

Jesus's friends and followers often had a hard time seeing the world and themselves this way. The follower of Jesus I want to mention here is Mary Magdalene. Guy Newland preached a sermon about Easter here about seven years ago. And in it he gives this wonderful reading of Mary Magdalene. After Jesus has been killed and has been placed in the tomb, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb. She and all of Jesus's disciples and friends were having a very difficult time dealing with Jesus's death. They had a hard time coping with the fact that he was gone. They look for him in the tomb and he is not there. Mary Magdalene is crying because Jesus is gone and then in the gospel of John it says that Jesus appeared to her and she mistook him for a gardener.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson. "The Divinity School Address." 1838. <http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>

Guy asks us to turn that around. The Bible is a human document, written by humans, and we humans typically have a really hard time dealing with losing people we love, so what if the human writer of this gospel ad turned things around. What if it was, in fact, a gardener who was there and Mary Magdalene looked at that gardener and saw Jesus?

To me, this would mean that she had really learned what Jesus was trying to teach. What if she's looking at the gardener and seeing the sacred that was in him, in that gardener? That would mean that she is practicing the art of reverence. She calls the gardener, "Teacher." Jesus's disciples called him teacher. Now she sees the teacher that is in another person.

The Unitarian Universalist minister Tom Schade said in the reading today: "We have to find, and inspire and activate the people who are willing now to live into the future -- who are willing to be the change that they want to see."³

Part of the way we can do this and transform ourselves and transform our world is through the art of reverence. The message we Unitarian Universalists have to offer people is that the sacred is in them. The sacred is in everyone. I like to use the word "sacred" but I could just as well use the word "god." This is an inspiring message. It's a message of hope and it's also a call to justice. It's because we practice the art of reverence and see the sacred in people that we feel it's so important to work for justice, especially justice for people who are mistreated because they are different, mistreated because of their race or sexual orientation or gender identity. It's because we see the sacred in the world that we feel it's so important to work for environmental justice and to start living in ways that don't hurt the environment. To start living in ways that are actually in harmony with nature.

Chose yourself as you are, develop the art of reverence, and you will be the change you want to see in the world. And you will be part of the world's rebirth.

Audio: <http://soundcloud.com/joe-cleveland/change-and-the-art-of/s-tVLOs>

³ Tom Schade. "Afraid to Lose Ourselves." May 15, 2013. <http://www.tomschade.com/2013/05/afraid-to-lose-ourselves.html>