



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Saying and Unsayings,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on April 28, 2013

In the prayer/poem we just heard,¹ those people in church were moved to share their own names for the holy:

Peace, said one.
One My Mother Knew, said another.
Ancestor, said a third.
Wind.
Rain.
Breath, said one near the back.
Refuge.
That Which Holds All...

Today I invite you to think about words and their limitations, about speaking and about keeping silent, about naming and unnamings. An essay by David James Duncan called “Unsayings the Word ‘God,’” helped me think about this. He says, “It is necessary to define words. It is also at times necessary to undefine them... Out of all the words I have heard in my time, ‘God’ is the one most grievously abused by humans; the one most deserving of a careful unsaying.”²

He continues, “Our love for a person leads us to love the sound of that person’s name. I, for example, love a certain woman so much I always thrill slightly at the mere sound of her name. If I heard other people using this name as a pretentious or cruel or polluted exhalation resulting in violence or injustice, if I heard them judging, condemning, even killing each other in the name of my beloved, I would try like hell to defuse this insanity, telling the abusers that this is not what she wants of them and not what her name means.” Duncan says it’s the same with the name God.

When it comes to talking about the divine, words fail us. Duncan says, “God is Unlimited. Thought and language are limited. God is the fathomless but beautiful Mystery Who creates the universe and you and me, and sustains us and it every minute, and always shall. The instant we define this fathomless Mystery It is no longer fathomless...” He says, “I don’t point this out to insult (anyone’s) God. I point it out to honor the fathomless Mystery.”

¹ The reading today was the prayer/poem by Rev. Nancy Shaffer, “That Which Holds All,” available online at <http://uucf.org/blog/which-holds-all>

² David James Duncan, “Unsayings the Word ‘God,’” in *God Laughs and Plays* (Great Barrington, MA: Triad Books, 2006).

I love the moment in today's reading, when after people spontaneously shared their names for the holy; "then, there wasn't any need (for the preacher) to say the things she thought would be important to say, and everyone sat hushed, until someone said Amen."

Often my favorite part of our Sunday service is just after the spoken prayer, when some of you come forward and light candles silently, and Claudia plays the piano and we are present to, and bear witness to what feels like a sacrament, a sign of that which is precious and holy. No words needed.

But we've come to the sermon, which is all about words. Or is it? Rev. Roger Paine, the minister where I did my internship, begins his sermons with this invocation: "May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all of our hearts, find their place this day in the heart of God." This reflects his belief, and mine, that preaching is not a one way street; it's an encounter between speaker and hearer that, when it's working, evokes meditations in your hearts that the preacher knows nothing about. Unless you tell him or her. It's like in music, where something important happens in the spaces between the notes.

There's a Zen Buddhist saying: "to point at the moon you need a finger, but woe to those who mistake the finger for the moon." Our talk about God, our efforts at meaning-making, are like that finger pointing at the moon. They are attempts to orient ourselves toward that fathomless mystery. But we tend to forget this, and focus on our words and methods, which exist to help us to apprehend that fathomless mystery by pointing toward it. But words are the finger, not the moon.

The 20th century theologian Paul Tillich understood how religion can be unhelpful, coming between people and the holy. He wrote: "The name of the infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even the name itself."

This work of translating and discarding and reframing is what David James Duncan means by "unsaying." It's choosing to give up certain beliefs or words that no longer work for you, and I commend it to you.

Do you know that Thomas Jefferson took a razor to his Bible? Working with the four gospels, he cut out the parts he thought were inauthentic--like the virgin birth and the miracles, leaving what he saw as the true message of Jesus. In our time, some have advocated for discarding those texts which have been used to exclude and oppress. They say it's better to throw them out, so they won't do more harm. There are times when an unsaying is called for.

We have done this, to some degree, in Unitarian Universalism. Unlike most churches, we don't have appointed readings from the Bible, The preacher is free to choose the text. I love that our canon includes contemporary poets and the mystics and diverse wisdom sources. But I wonder about what we lose when we push away the words and stories we find difficult; the chance to

engage with them, and struggle with them, and even, to redeem them. Next year, on my sabbatical, I plan to work on identifying those stories from scripture that we should be telling.

Brian McLaren is a leader in what's called the "emergent church" movement, that aims to reform Christianity for this postmodern era, calling the Christian church to give up its claim of having all the answers and being the only way. Kind of like what we do here. Recently he was asked, if this approach is the wave of the future, appealing to all those "spiritual but not religious" folks, then why haven't the UU's grown--who've doing this for years? Brian McLaren said "the degree to which a religious community deconstructs without reconstructing will put it at a disadvantage."³ It's true, isn't it? We have been better at unsaying than at saying.

I was talking with Sally Liebermann, our Director of Religious education, about this. She reminded me that our RE program introduces our children to talk about God at a young age, and not all UU churches do this, but here we see this as important work; providing a door or a window through which our young people can begin to think and talk about this fathomless mystery. When our youth participate in Coming of Age, they often begin by saying what they don't believe, like, "I don't believe God is a man with a white beard in the sky." And this isn't a bad place to start, saying what you don't believe. But then we encourage them, "Now tell us what you affirm, what you give your heart and mind to."

I just came back from five days of trout fishing in Montana. When it's going well, which isn't the same as catching, my heart is full to overflowing. I feel a connection to the wonder and rightness of this world. One fisherman put it this way: "The motto of every serious angler," he said, "is 'Nearer my God to thee.'"⁴

David James Duncan knows something about this. He writes, "Intense spiritual feelings were frequent visitors during my boyhood, but they did not come from churchgoing or from bargaining with God through prayer. The connection I felt to the Creator came, unmediated, from Creation itself. The spontaneous gratitude I felt for birds and birdsong, tree-covered or snowcapped mountains, rivers and their trout, moon and starlight, summer winds on wilderness lakes, the same lakes silenced by winter snows, spring's resurrections after autumn's mass deaths--the intimacy, intricacy and interwovenness of these things--became the spiritual instructors of my boyhood. In even the smallest suburban wilds I felt linked to powers and mysteries I could sincerely imagine calling the Presence of God."

His next sentence pains me: "In fifteen years of churchgoing," he says, "I did not once feel this same presence." He says his church experience was one of "heavily agenda-ed, fear-based information being shoved at me by men on the church payroll. I take his point. Should I tell you, "Don't come to church! Go out there, under the wide sky and among the people, because that's where you'll find the presence of God"?

Words from the novel *The Colour Purple* come to mind. "Tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in

³ This conversation with Brian McLaren available online at his website: <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/q-r-what-about-unitarians.html>

⁴ Thomas McGuane, *The Longest Silence: A Life in Fishing* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. xiv.

church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God.”⁵

We need experiences of that fathomless mystery, which we are most likely to experience out there, in the world, under the wide sky, living our lives as fully as we can. And, I do believe, we need a place like this, to come and reflect on our experiences, individually and with one another, a place to share what we know of that fathomless mystery.

There are times when an unsaying is called for. So if there are words, like God, that have not much meaning for you, translate them. Tell us about the depths of your life and the source of your being. Perhaps, Paul Tillich said, you must forget everything traditional you have learned. Perhaps there are names you should just let go of. So you can say what it is that you do give your heart to, without reservation.

The thing is, there may be someone sitting right beside you who cherishes the very name that drives you up a wall. How do we manage this diversity? Do we keep our deepest experiences to ourselves, so we don't trouble or offend someone else? That doesn't sound like a church I'd want to be part of.

We're trying, aren't we, to be a house of the spirit, a home like the one John O'Donohue imagines:

“...a safe place
Full of understanding and acceptance,
Where we can be as we are,
Without the need of any mask
Or pretense or image...
a house of courage,
Where healing and growth are loved,
Where patience and dignity prevail.”⁶

May we be people, and may this be a place, like that one in our reading this morning, where we can speak the names that have power for us. And where we make room for others, and for the names that are precious to them.

*“Peace, said one.
One My Mother Knew, said another.
Ancestor, said a third.
Wind.
Rain.
Breath, said one near the back.
Refuge.
That Which Holds All.
A child said, Water.*

⁵ Alice Walker, *The Colour Purple*.

⁶ John O'Donohue, “Blessing for a New Home,” from *To Bless the Space Between Us*.

Someone said, *Kuan Yin*.

Then: *Womb*.

Witness.

Great Kindness.

Great Eagle.

Eternal Stillness.

And then, there wasn't any need to say the things
she'd thought would be important to say,
and everyone sat hushed, until someone said

Amen." ⁷

⁷ Nancy Shaffer, "That Which Holds All"