

“A Last Sermon”

A short while ago, the phone rang in my office. Kathleen said there was a young man downstairs who wanted to see a minister. I had just been clearing up loose ends so that I could get serious about writing my last Annual Report. It was already overdue. I should confess that my first thought was that the young man probably needed some material assistance. I'd have to tell him about JUMP (Joint Urban Ministry Project) to which we, along with a number of other faith communities, contribute in order to provide a safety net for cases just like his. But then again, no case is just like any other and I'd need to pray for the grace to discern and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of this young man in whatever way possible.

An unexpected caller can either make you feel like an open target or, with a little imagination or faith, open for revelation. The Greeks had a name for this kind of revelatory moment that distinguished one kind of time from ordinary, one dimensional time. They called it Kairos, as opposed to Chronos. Kairos signified time that is pregnant with meaning. Chronos is simply a way of marking time, chronological time, days on a calendar.

I wasn't prepared for what awaited me downstairs, a revelatory moment in the person of a 7th grader who resembled Harry Potter wearing an Indiana Jones hat. He had questions about religion that made me wonder if he might be a young Michael Servetus. Like Servetus, a forefather of Unitarianism, he asked if Jews, Christians and Muslims didn't all worship the same God. They simply called him by different names like Yahweh, Allah or Adonai. In the 16th century this kind of theological investigation on the part of Servetus cost him his life. He could not have been better intentioned. As a student of the Bible, when he couldn't find any scriptural grounds for the doctrine of the trinity he thought he had discovered the key to reconciling the Jews, the Muslims and the Christians. For centuries, the divinity of Jesus had been a stumbling block to the Jews and the Muslims, even though Islam did recognize Jesus as a prophet. Eventually, the authorities saw Servetus' Treatise against the Trinity as enough of a threat to orthodoxy that he was burnt at the stake.

As I brought my young inquisitive friend into our sanctuary, I felt proud of what the banners on our wall symbolize. Our faith draws from the wisdom of all the major religious traditions. I never tire of telling people about the religious pluralism to which we aspire and are committed as a denomination.

One question led to another. I remembered reading that being able to clarify the question is what learning is all about. The young man wanted to know if I would rather people practice Christianity or whatever they wanted. Of course, I said that people had to be free to practice the religion of their choice. This brought up the idea that it might be good if he visited different places of worship to experience how people of faith do practice. Here, I was reminded of T.S. Eliot's classic line from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock:" "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?' let us go, and make our visit." At which point the young man thought he might check us out on a Sunday morning.

On his first visit, we only covered two questions. He saved the topic of atheism for his second visit. I was glad to tell him that we do have some devout atheists within our congregation and that I believe atheism can be a catharsis, as in a cleansing, for inauthentic religion. For now, he's decided that on the spectrum of belief and unbelief he's probably an agnostic.

Meeting with my 7th grade friend was definitely a Kairos moment. At 13, he was on his way to becoming religiously literate. At a time when people often think of religion as the problem tearing at the fabric of our society, there are those who argue that the more we understand the common values and principles which underlie our faith traditions, the more we can repair and strengthen that fabric.

Stephen Prothero, the chair of the religion department at Boston University, would argue in favor of the latter position—the strengthening power of religion. His most recent book is entitled Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't. The author points out the irony of the United States being one of the most religious countries on earth and, at the same time, shockingly illiterate about religion. Only ten percent of American teenagers can name all five major world religions and fifteen percent cannot name any. Nearly two-thirds of Americans believe that the Bible holds the answers to all or most of life's basic questions, yet only half of American adults can name even one of the four gospels and most Americans cannot name the first book of the Bible.

According to Stephen Prothero, we have a major civic problem on our hands. Even though there is a lack of basic knowledge, still politicians and commentators continue to use religious language—the meaning of which is missed or misunderstood by the majority of Americans. His solution to this problem is one that I have strongly advocated and that educators and authors like UVM's Robert Nash and Stanford's Nel Noddings have championed for years. Religion should become the “Fourth R” of American education.

In his book, Prothero makes a provocative case for the study of religion in the public schools alongside reading, writing and arithmetic. An important distinction has to be made here—the difference between teaching about religion as opposed to teaching religion. Teaching religion raises the fear of indoctrination, whereas teaching about religion or religious studies considers religion as a socio-cultural, historical phenomenon, one that our founding fathers revered and thought to be an essential element for social cohesion. Only recently have I begun to appreciate the enlightened faith of our country's founding fathers.

Reading Gary's Revolutionary Spirits was a revelatory moment for me. Forgive me for lapsing into an occupational hazard of anyone who has ever been in the book business. You can't resist promoting a good book. But there's a story attached to this book that only I can tell.

Every May 5th, I call an old theology professor of mine, not because it's Cinco de Mayo. I call him because it's the birthday of Friedrich von Hugel, born in 1852. Von Hugel was a favorite theologian of my former Jesuit teacher at Fordham in the '60s. They were kindred spirits. In his time, Von Hugel attempted to open the mind of the Catholic Church to the currents of modern thought in philosophy, biblical criticism and historical consciousness. He was part of a movement known as Modernism which the Vatican condemned in 1907. A number of prominent Modernists were excommunicated, but Von Hugel, by nature a diplomat, tended to pull back from the controversy. He focused more on the spiritual and mystical dimension of the church's tradition rather than the institutional element.

This year, our annual phone call was a Kairos moment full of meaning and validation. We usually banter back and forth, riding the crest of our theological differences. Just as I was ready to challenge him on his narrow interpretation of Deism, he caught me off guard. Out of the blue, he started telling me about this great book he was reading by some guy, Gary Kowalski. Had I heard of him? *Revolutionary Spirits* had made it to Yonkers, New York. Here was this old professor of so many years, theologically trained abroad, wondering how our founding fathers had arrived at such enlightenment and how he could have been so oblivious to the depth of their faith. We traded favorite passages from the book, like Thomas Jefferson's response to John Adams when Adams wanted to know about his thoughts on life after death and the immortality of the soul. Jefferson wrote: " 'When I was young, I was fond of the speculations which seemed to promise some insight into that hidden country, but observing at length that they left me in the same ignorance in which they had found me, I have for very many years ceased to read or think concerning them, and have reposed my head on that pillow of ignorance which a benevolent Creator had made so soft for us, knowing how much we should be forced to use it' " (Kowalski, p.24).

For myself, I like to tuck under that soft pillow of ignorance Gary's commentary on the faith of Benjamin Franklin which was enough to bring this lifelong tinkerer and inventor comfort. "Would a Creator bother to manufacture minds like Franklin's and millions of others only to destroy them in the end? Not a very rational way to run a universe. More reasonable to suppose that as Franklin said, 'I shall, in some Shape or other, always exist' " (Ibid 48).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing a century later, shared Franklin's reasonable supposition when he wrote that the blazing evidence for a life after death is our complete dissatisfaction with any other solution.

The faith of our founding fathers could not be more relevant. It speaks to issues that we grapple with today like whether religion tears at the fabric of our society or strengthens it. In his Farewell Address, George Washington encouraged his countrymen to resolve their differences. He believed that religious institutions played an important role in the work of reconciliation. People needed the help of churches and synagogues to raise them above narrow interests and partisanship. Washington saw religion and morality as indispensable to political prosperity. His Farewell Address emphasized that " '...faith

had a crucial role to play in the newly founded republic. At its best, the religious impulse enabled people to lay aside private gain and personal advantage in favor of the common good' ” (Kowalski p. 4).

Another founding father, Thomas Paine, would have approved of the religious diversity that our banners celebrate. He held that the Creator welcomed a variety of devotion somewhat like a parent appreciates the different offerings of their children. I found it synchronistic and satisfying that a former teach of mine from another era of my life should discover the faith of liberals and deists to be so inspiring thanks to the work of my colleague, Gary.

It occurred to me that my precocious 7th grade “drop-in” would benefit from reading *Revolutionary Spirits* because of its reverent and rational approach to religion. I regretted that he was not enrolled in our Religious Education Program, that he hadn't had the opportunity to explore the sacred texts of Hebrews and Christians in the 4th and 5th grade with Jeff Trumbower, a biblical scholar and Dean at St. Michael's College, that he hadn't experienced the Neighboring Faiths Program in the 7th and 8th grades. By observing and exploring the faith of others, students in this class develop a context in which they are able to make sense of their own.

As a seventh or eighth grader, he would also have the opportunity to sign up for OWL, Our Whole Lives, a comprehensive, age-appropriate course on human sexuality. At a critical age, young people gain a broader understanding of the meaning of sex and relationships from highly qualified and trained teachers.

Thomas Moore, a psychologist, therapist and spiritual author, points out in his best-selling book, *The Soul of Sex*, that even though as a culture we are the most sexually explicit, we are at the same time inarticulate about sexuality. There's an intriguing parallel here with the irony that religious scholar Stephen Prothero writes about in his text on *Religious Literacy*. According to his study, this country is the most religious in the world and yet we are illiterate when it comes to our basic knowledge of religion.

The similarity between these two subjects, religion and sex, might have something to do with the way in which Thomas Moore understands them. He sees sex and religion as both being about power and mystery, relationship and love.

What better place then for young people to learn about sexuality than within a religious education program? What better place for young and old to learn about ourselves than within a community of faith, among people who are interested in asking questions about the purpose and meaning of life?

I learned about the purpose and meaning of my life just two Sundays ago. I was invited to be with the kindergarten and 1st grade class. They are using the colors of the rainbow to explore the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism. They're also beginning to explore UU values and ideas associated with religion, like the sacred, prayer and symbols.

On this Sunday, the class was celebrating Olympia Brown Day, the second woman ever to be officially ordained by the Universalist Church in 1863. She embodied a number of our principles in her work for justice and peace. She lived at a time when women were not allowed to vote, traveling by horse and buggy all over Kansas, giving speeches about why women deserved the right to vote. She wrote hundreds of letters, spoke to representatives and senators in Congress and marched in parades. She struggled for women's suffrage for over 50 years. Finally, after she picketed the White House day after day with hundreds of other women, in 1917 the 19th amendment was passed. Once her hard work for suffrage was over, Olympia Brown took up the cause of world peace for which she campaigned until the day she died at age 91.

As the Sunday grew closer for my visit to the kindergarten and 1st grade, I found myself getting anxious about how I was going to do justice to this inspirational woman. The phone rang the Friday night before the class. John Grimm, a parent involved in the R.E. program, said he was going to be my co-teacher. He had prepared to the hilt with indoor and outdoor activities that related to the life of Olympia Brown. My own preparation paled by comparison. I realized that all I had to be was an exhibit of a woman minister for the class as well as a witness to the commitment and creativity of one parent. There were two other parents involved covering the snack. My own involvement consisted in circulating crayons and appreciating the beauty of the scene and the story of a valiant woman.

At one point, John asked the students what a minister does. A little girl's hand shot up as she continued coloring with the other. She said, "She does joys and sorrows." As minimal as that sounded, the more meaningful it became in terms of what ministry and religion are about. Participating in each others' joys and bearing one another's sorrows remind us of who we are and are becoming, members of one human family.

Solidarity is a familiar word in the vocabulary of struggle. I like to think that the 13th century mystic Meister Eckhart is speaking about another kind of solidarity when he says that being able to enter into another's joy is what heaven is about.

When Paul wrote in his epistle to the Galatians: "When you bear one another's burdens you have fulfilled the law," I think he's referring to the law of love. Being members of a religious community makes us more able to "do joys and sorrows" and in the doing, enriches our lives, deepens our faith and strengthens the fabric of our society.