

## Merging Solitude, Dialogue

A condensed sermon from our minister, published in the Sun-Sentinel, May 20, 2005

I grew up in the Brooklyn Unitarian Universalist Church, a place with stained glass windows, an organ, a raised pulpit and fixed pews. But the adults of my childhood church in Brooklyn were proud to be members of a church like no other. Theirs was a faith of action, a spirituality in and of the world. Petitions and marches and consciousness raising were their practice. (I think they liked not looking like religious folk.) But they were people of faith, in their words and in their lives teaching courage and honesty. They weren't afraid to see that the world was often a miserable mean place. They taught hope. Yes, so much was in need of saving, but that was work we could do and do well. They taught joy. Despite the turbulence in society, despite their eloquent and sometimes loud differences of opinion, they knew how to hang together and found reasons to laugh.

Many of the elders in my childhood church worked hard to peel away the calcified religious language they had been taught, to dislodge the old God images, and free themselves from a constricting piety. In that struggle they found themselves holding something precious; the power of creativity and the strength of a community gathered around respect, reason and tolerance. This was so brilliant a light that no other words were needed. How surprised they would be to hear that now congregations like our Boca Raton UU set aside time on a weeknight for prayer and meditation.

In his Divinity School Address, Ralph Waldo Emerson said that our faith was life passed through the fire of thought. He told those newly minted Unitarian ministers "to go alone... to refuse the good models...but live with the privilege of the immeasurable mind." That was July 1838.

Ours is a faith that gives primacy to individual experience. We begin - always and only - with unfettered, immediate life as it is lived, with what is in front of our eyes, all that is over our heads. This then is reflected upon, questioned, refined by reason, shaped into words, raised up into concepts and principles. In a century and a half, all that the heirs of Emerson have been able to add, is the importance of community. For it is in community, in the conversation among a circle of peers, that the fruits of the search are tested. How broad are our truths, how close to universal? How honorable are they? Can they bend the world toward justice? Are they life affirming? Do they lead to hope and strength and a resilient joy?

Regardless of where we stand on the theological spectrum, this way of being faithful is open enough to include us all. Experience, refined in the fire of Reason, and tested in community, makes a space for the scientist and the seer, the lover of God, the lover of the Goddess and lovers of the interdependent web of which we are all a part.

And so we come to church, to worship, for an hour to consider things of worth. This may be the only hour in a busy week when we can let the world take care of itself and just be whoever we are. It is a time of solitude. It is an opportunity to relieve the loneliness of our individuality, to remember, or discover, that even in the complete privacy of silence, we are not alone. This is the time we have, to answer what calls us, to do something about our longing for the numinous, to find an antidote for our

despair, to live more meaningfully, with trust in joy. And even though we know that this is probably not the time or place that the heavens will open and angels will sing (for epiphanies don't meet deadlines, but come as a surprise, usually at an inconvenient time) this is our time and place to be religious, each in our own way.

The mystics of every tradition will tell you that to follow teachings without question is not the spiritual path. To search for wholeness, for the holy, is a way to encounter life, not a road map for getting from here to there. It is to be in a relationship which ever draws us deeper. Like every other relationship which shapes our lives, it cannot be forced - either on us or on the other. But, in an open, diverse community of faith it can be nurtured and celebrated. Put down your hymn books, stand up, and make a joyful noise!