

Sunday Reflections as told by Steve Ernst & Laura Kaspro

October 11, 2015

In Translation by William Sinkford

Today's reflection comes from a sermon presented by William Sinkford who is the senior minister at the First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon. He is a former UUA president.

Reverent Sinkford says, We are people of the word. Or, better said, people of words, many words. Words are one of the most important ways that we "know" things.

But, he continues, words, to quote Henry Adams, are "slippery things," and words mean different things to different people. Take the word "freedom." To the privileged early Unitarians, freedom meant freedom of thought. To the African American community, however, it meant freedom from slavery and freedom from oppression. The two groups had a hard time talking.

For a recent church auction Reverent Sinkford offered to preach on the topic of the highest bidder's choice, and the winning couple considered themselves to be on the humanist/atheist side of the big theological tent that we pitch. Here is what they asked him to speak about:

It's difficult for us to translate religious language into something that makes sense to us. We end up tripping over words like God and prayer. Why are we always the ones who have to translate? Strip down that language to its core.

In response, he shared with them this short description for their sermon: "The words we use to talk about the holy can close more doors than they open." One of them responded: "I tripped over the word 'holy' a bit. 'Holy' can be one of my cringe words in the sanctuary, [especially] when it is followed by the word 'one,' rather than the word 'cow.'"

Holy Cow!

After all, Rev. Sinkford explains, he was the one, as UUA President, who had called for a Language of Reverence and asked if our avoidance of traditional religious language was making it harder for us to connect with our deepest yearnings and most profound connections. In our association, Sinkford claims to be the poster child for reclaiming the use of those words that require some of us to translate.

“Why are we always the ones who have to translate?” What Sinkford heard in that inquiry, more than anything else, he explains, was weariness. Because translation is work and having to translate can be a barrier to belonging.

He tells the story of when he was elected President of the UUA in 2001 and gave the benediction at that year’s General Assembly closing celebration. He tried to call our faith community to witness for justice and ended with a paraphrase of the prophet Isaiah (6:8): *Here we are, Lord; send us.* He received several letters from women leaders, irate that he had used the term *Lord*. “I hope I never hear you use that word again. I thought we had put that patriarchal language behind us.” That was some of the gentler language.

Sinkford suggests that one approach to dealing with language that no longer reflects our common assumptions or values is simply to discard it. Another approach is to search for and use only a kind of “least common denominator” language that the fewest of us will have to translate.

The sermon winners said: “For people like us who are atheists/humanists, we can still be excited about the wonder of the world, the flowers, the babies—without calling it ‘holy.’ Wouldn’t it be great if the religious people could translate ‘wonder’ into ‘miracle’—rather than our always having to translate religious language into what works for us?”

So what would that language sound like? Well, using *congregation*, perhaps, rather than *church*; meditation rather than *prayer*; message rather than

sermon; spiritual rather than *religious*; yes rather than *amen*. (That is the original translation of “amen” after all. Just “yes.”)

And what about that biggest of words, the word that more folks react to, both positively and negatively, than any other—that word *God*? Perhaps the least worst way to talk about God is as Mystery. The mystery at the heart of things. Sinkford, however, acknowledges, even that may sound like creeping theism: the mystery at the heart of things. He says he hopes it doesn’t, but then asks don’t we need some language that acknowledges that there is something beyond our own intellects and egos?

Each week when he prays, or invites the congregation into meditation together, he usually begins: “Spirit of Life. Spirit of Love. Dear God.” Three names—he knows that are not very Unitarian.

His hope is that however we name the mystery at the heart of things, or even if you choose not to name it, we will be able to find a handhold. By using many names he’s trying to convey that no one name holds absolute truth.

Spirit of Life, known by many names and no name. Allah. Buddha-nature. Power of Human Possibility. Yahweh. Brahma. Nature and its Cycles. God of Love.

But that becomes quite a mouthful. And he’s sure that some of us would trip over one or more of the names on that list.

Stripping away, leaving behind words that carry with them histories of being used to exclude, histories of being used to limit our spirits or even punish us, is one approach to this dilemma. But Sinkford shares that he would hate for us to move toward a list of forbidden words. The auction winners were not asking for that. They just don’t want to have to work so hard and translate so much. It tires them out.

So, he asks how do we deal, in practical terms, with the religious diversity in this house of Unitarian Universalism?

We come hoping for, yearning for, so much. We come looking for affirmation of who we are, seeking more depth and meaning than we find walking in the ways of the world. We come hoping to be reminded of how we want to live. We come to celebrate the passages of our lives and to find support and consolation through life's troubles. We come wanting so much and with such diverse histories.

What do we share?

Sinkford says that what he knows is this: we are all humanists in the broadest and (for him) most important understanding of that term. We know that if the Beloved Community is to be built, we will be the builders. Atheists and theists, humanists and pagans, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, those who resist any label—all of us, regardless of our particular theological beliefs, cultural heritage or current practices, agree on that core theological point of view.

If we are going to thrive as a vibrant pluralistic religious movement, the question of translation becomes critical. Because if we are going to use language that is evocative, language that leads us to depth, drawn from many traditions and sources, then we need to be mindful that each and every one who hears our words will be translating. All of us are hearing those words through our own life lenses, bringing our own meanings to the experience of being together.

Traditional religious words do have resonance. They remind us that across the centuries people have been gathering in churches and synagogues, in temples and mosques, around Seder tables and around solstice bonfires. They remind us that people have been gathering to seek affirmation, to find their place in the order of things, to search for meaning and direction in their lives that is deeper, more centered and grounded than the meaning we find today on concrete sidewalks that lead to the mall.

The resonance Sinkford hopes we can find in the words we use is that history of longing and of hope, not the way those words have been used to

justify violence and limit the human spirit. Those abuses are true, without a doubt, but so are the need and the hope that have been present at each of those gatherings.

So much can be lost in translation. Words are imperfect tools we use to tell our story, to know our truth. If we remember their limits, perhaps we can use them to greater benefit. If we remember that we are all and always translating, listening for the words beneath the words, then perhaps we will make more time and more space to listen and even to hear. Perhaps we can come to remember and understand not just the challenge, but also the gift of our being together, and the possibility for wholeness that gift can open for us.

There is also a role for silence in our being together. Silence with no words to trip over, no words to struggle with, just silence and the honesty it invites.

Sinkford ends his reflection by extending this invitation, and I quote: "Wherever you are, whatever surrounds you at the moment, will you enter with me that space of silence and honesty, known by many names?"

Spirit of Life and of Love. Mystery at the heart of things. May we find what we yearn for: Meaning, Direction, Acceptance and Love.

May we create a community where love guides us, helping us hear words under the words, helping us speak from our hearts in language that opens us to life, rather than closing us down. And may what we share be strong enough so that the community we create can sustain us all.

Alone, our vision is too limited to see all that must be seen and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, there is more hope, and more help for us all on this small blue planet.

Yes." End quote

Saved by Tandi Rogers

This is a story called "Saved" by Tandi Rogers, a Growth Strategies Specialist for the UUA. It illustrates what happens when we become too tangled up in words and preconceptions of the "other" and perhaps as a result might miss an important opportunity for deep communication and connection.

Tandi Rogers is paid to evangelize, to grow current congregations and plant new congregations. She's been lurking on internet sites of fundamentalist evangelists, because, quite frankly, they have systems for planting new congregations. They have trainings and boot camps and coaches and conferences just for planting. She has a hot case of holy envy. So she thought about attending such a conference as an add-on activity in a city where she was already working on behalf of our Association. Well, attending it didn't work out, but on the plane back home guess who her seatmates were? That's right, two fundamentalist, evangelical men who had been to the church planting conference.

Rogers strained her ears to hear what they were saying. The older man seemed to be in charge, and the younger one deferred to him. The elder quoted scripture and talked a lot about saving people. Their whole mission is converting people to Christianity so they may be saved and get into heaven.

Rogers says she wanted to jump in, interrupt with all of the questions she had for them. For a split second a voice in her head warned her: *Stop... foreign land... don't go there... possibilities for hostility... what are you going to do once they find out you're Unitarian Universalist?* But the words burst out of her mouth: "I couldn't help but overhearing. Do you plant congregations? Did you just go to the church planting conference? I wanted to go so badly, but had other work to do. I plant congregations for my denomination. I'd love to hear more about what you learned."

The younger man asked, "Which denomination are you?" Rogers replied: "Unitarian Universalist." The younger man looked blank. The older man grinned like he had something on her. She confesses that her heart fluttered a bit.

"Jason, you've never heard of Unitarian Universalists? They're the ones with all the ethics and none of the doctrine. They do good without believing in hell."

Jason looked at her as if he'd just discovered she was a unicorn. "You don't believe in hell?!" Jason asked. The older man smiled to himself as he put his headphones over his ears and settled in. Rogers shook her head, and before she could get a word out the young man asked if she believed in Jesus.

She replied, "Jesus the Christ or Jesus the radical, fierce, loving rabbi? I love Jesus the Rabbi and consider him one of my greatest teachers. But I don't have any belief or use for the Christ part. No offense. I'm glad it works for you, but I just want everyone to find his or her or zer own way that amplifies love and brings out his, her or zer authentic self."

He still looked at her like she was a unicorn. "But how do you reconcile John 14:6?" he asked. "*Jesus said to him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man comes to the Father but by me.*"

She lit up. She knows this chapter and loves it. At the Jesuit seminary she attended she spent a lot of time meditating on it with her Christian cousins in faith. She said, "I can reconcile it by the four verses prior to that. *In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you.* There are many mansions for so many expressions of the Spirit of Life and Yahweh and Allah and Ultimate Source and Most Awesome Goodness and Fierce Love and Holy Yes!"

They stared into each other's eyes for a long time. Rogers had a melting experience. She broke the silence by asking him about his conversion story. (Everyone has a story of some epiphany or conversion of some sort. Rogers confesses that these fascinate her.) Over the course of

about an hour Jason told her his tale of parents who weren't enough, his own drug abuse and domestic violence and giving up, and how someone invited him to church. The church's very clear doctrine held his despair and gave him direction and hope. It was a moving and beautiful story. They both had tears in their eyes throughout his telling.

He asked if Unitarian Universalists believe in conversion. "Some do," she replied. She said that she was one. She was converted. As a queer she felt early on that her sexuality was very tied to God, but that's not what her church of origin was teaching. And the Unitarian Universalists took all of her, and saw her as whole (even in her brokenness), as holy (even at her base self) and precious (even when she felt unlovable). Jason nodded. Teary eyes again. Mutual understanding of the possibilities and blessing of religious communities!

He asked Rogers if she was a minister, and she nodded. She also noticed he was now staring at her *Star* magazine. Yes, an obvious incongruence by most standards. She blushed and explained that she likes to keep up on pop culture and that she also prays down the magazine, like she regularly prays down the newspaper and prays down the congregations in her Association.

Jason wanted to pray with her right there on the spot. Yes, at 30,000 feet above the earth she led a prayer for Miley Cyrus, a pop culture character with a tongue that needs an exorcism, holding hands with someone Rogers would usually think hates her and what she stands for. Except for that day.

As they were leaving the plane, she overheard the older man ask Jason if he had saved her. "Nah," Jason said. "She was already saved."

Thus ends Rogers' story. What we may learn from it is that understanding and connection can occur in the least likely of places and at the strangest times. May we, like her, be open to all possibility.

