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POETS SAY IT BETTER

Since I use so much poetry in the religious services I lead and even quote it fairly regularly in casual conversation, people tend to assume that I am fond of poetry. I am not, or at least not of most of what people usually call poetry. Generally speaking, I would go five miles out of my way to avoid reading a poem. If it is real poetry, it is much too hard work and takes too much time to read it properly, and if it is not (and it usually isn't), but pretends to be, it is dreadful to read. Nevertheless, there are certain poems that I venerate, and true poetry has more of ultimate truth in it than any other form of literature or verbal communication.

It's hard to say exactly what poetry is. Rhyme and rhythm certainly are not it, although some poetry rhymes and most of it has rhythm of some sort, though not necessarily regular. I have come to the conclusion that it must be defined by the density of the words and phrases that it uses, which is why it is difficult to read. Words in poetry mean much more than their dictionary definitions. Their connotations are deep and often personal, the ramifications and impact of their meaning, infinite. The word *god*, for example, is the quintessential poetic concept. No one can define the word *God* in simple terms which will be meaningful to everyone, and yet it has an impact far beyond the three letters that it uses, or even the definitions that we decide on for ourselves. There is a little, playful poem by Robert Frost that I think is a good example of poetic density:

The Rose Family

The rose is a rose
And was always a rose,
But the theory now goes
That the apple's a rose,
And the pear is, and so's
The plum, I suppose.
The dear only knows
What will next prove a rose.
You, of course, are a rose —
But were always a rose.

That is just a little love lyric in the simplest possible, almost prosaic-seeming language. That is all it is, and all Frost meant it to be, and I'm not trying to say that it has a deeper significance than that, just that its impact is greater than its surface message because of what we know *ourselves* about roses and pears and scientific theories and love.

I should admit that I am a bit of a crank when it comes to deciding what is poetry and what is not. I have done a few workshops in one place and another on poetry. One of them was a four-day experience. On the third day of this particular one, one of my colleagues said, "I understand you're trying to insert the idea of quality into your poetry workshop." It was true, and I could not deny it. I believe that you *can* make qualitative judgments about poetry, and that is why I do not consider myself a poet or write much poetry, and why I am perceived to be, and occasionally perceive myself to be, a crank on the subject. The urge to write poetry does not make a poet. I am a much better critic than I am a poet, and that depresses the urge to write poetry faster than anything I know. When the urge is overwhelming, however, I usually still have enough control not to inflict the results on others. Real poets say it much better than I do, and I think the reason that they do, and their defining characteristic, is that significant density of language that I was talking about.

As a lover of the English language and a believer in its richness and flexibility, it has always frustrated me that none of us, including myself, have ever been able to put in straightforward prose what we wanted to say about theology. We could begin, but at some point the effort would break down, and we would become at best unclear, and at worst unacceptable. I met a mathematician some years ago (in fact, he was the father of the bride in a wedding I was officiating at) who said something very insightful about that that began to explain it for me. He said, "Consider words as being of the third order, and theology, metaphysics, ultimate reality, whatever you want to call it, as being of the fourth order. What you are doing when talking about God (or whatever you might call it) is to try to deal with a fourth order concept using a third order tool." Well, it made sense to me. And it explains how poetry can begin to approach the fourth-order concepts of metaphysic. The density of its words and phrases, going beyond the mere definitions, takes it beyond even itself.

One type of verse that does not seem to fit into this particular argument is light verse. It is not poetry in the sense that I mean poetry, and yet some of the best writers of it often begin to approach truth at least as well as great poets do. Perhaps the explanation is that a good sense of humor also is of the fourth order. A sense of humor is a sense of proportion, laughing at those matters which are a bit askew from the expected order of things. Proportion is something of a metaphysical notion along with aesthetics, of which more later, so humor would also be in the metaphysical realm the realm of ultimate reality. Perhaps it might be said that there is no salvation without a sense of humor.

John Haynes Holmes, one of my more illustrious predecessors in this profession, wrote that when he was asked if he believed in God, he was either irritated or amused, as he found it an irrelevant and unanswerable question. It was his actions toward the world and other people that were important. He tried to deal with things through reason and the power of intellect. However, he went on to say, it was when he read poetry that he felt closest to a sense of his own being in a suspension of struggle and intellectual exercise. While the books of theology gathered dust upon his shelves, those of the poets were tattered and stained by his fingers and his tears. (That last part is almost, though not precisely, a direct quote, and very poetic it is.)

I would suggest that rather than suspending his intellect in favor of his emotions as he implied, Holmes simply intuited that the poets were closer to the truth than the theologians and he met them not just on the intellectual level but through his emotions and spirit, and, I suspect, physical reactions as well, since when I read a really good poem I get chills down my back. (That's the true basis of my excellent critical sense. If it gives me chills it's good, and if it doesn't, it isn't.)

One of the things we tend to do, since we have in the past separated the intellect from our other reactions as having more value than they, is to assume that because we are reacting in other ways, our intellect is in abeyance. I do not believe that, and I think that poets not only think as well as feel, but need to be met on the thinking as well as the feeling level. That doesn't mean we should analyze a poem to death, but it does mean that we should attempt to grasp its meaning on as many levels as possible if it is really to speak to us. When Archibald MacLeish said that a poem should not mean, but be, I think (I hope, since he is one of the poets I most admire) he was using poetic license to say what I said a little while ago about a poem's meaning being more than its denotative sense, not, since his are extremely meaningful, that it should be without meaning.

Unitarian Universalists can get more hung up on words than just about any other single group of people. We can quarrel over words, fuss over words, worry over words, almost split our congregations over words. What are we going to call this place we come to on Sunday to do ...whatever it is we do? What do we name this talk the minister gives? And please do not say words like religion, faith, grace, holy, soul, redemption, salvation, sin or, worst of all, god. When I was doing my Clinical Pastoral Education years ago, my supervisor who was an Episcopalian said that Judaism, Christianity and Islam were called religions of the word, but if any group deserved the name it was we Unitarian Universalists. He was, as most CPE supervisors are, very perceptive.

A couple of years ago UUA president, Bill Sinkford created a flap by talking about the need of Unitarian Universalists for a “language of reverence.” When people asked me what I thought of that idea, they were shocked when I, a confirmed non-theist, a strong proponent of skepticism and critical thinking, said that I strongly agreed with him. We ought not to leave these words of power to the literalism of the religious right. We get hung up on these words because of their density of meaning for us. It is not just their definitions, but the experiences we bring to them, and the ways that they are often used to blame, to exclude or to frighten. Too often our experiences have been negative. Too often the words are used for ideas we find not only untrue but dangerous. Except that for many of the ideas that help us to seek to understand the purpose and meaning of our lives there just aren’t any other words, or at least none that reach that poetic fourth order of meaning.

One of the words that create a good deal of consternation in my congregation in Naples is *church*. I will admit to a certain sympathy with those who object to the word church for this building in which we gather. For those of Jewish background, or for those for whom going to church was torture and penance, its connotations are powerfully evil. Yet, somehow, for the building, congregation just doesn’t cut it. It can get a little strange. “I’m going down to the congregation while no one is there to get some work done in the kitchen.” It’s not that we don’t like the word *congregation* when we find ourselves saying church instead. It’s that we like it too much. The power of the word *congregation* is that it’s about people – people together, in community, seeking truth together, loving one another – together. Our movement is clearly post-Christian, but that’s where we came from, it is our essential culture, and most of our buildings throughout the country are called churches for those reasons. It’s not really an evil word, and it’s certainly descriptive. I love the word congregation for the name, but I’m afraid years of training won’t allow me to call the building anything but a church. It still gets me in trouble, but it too is a word of power that I refuse to relegate to the dustbin.

And what do we come here for on Sunday morning? And what am I doing up here? Well, I'm almost afraid to tell you this, but it is my contention that we come to worship and I'm preaching a sermon. The word *worship* comes from the Old English and means to shape things of worth. I understand the old connotations of idolatry and deplore them, but shaping things of worth is what we are here for. We are here to discern what is worthy, to celebrate it and to act in the light of that discernment and celebration. What better word can be found to describe that than worship seen in its true meaning? But preaching a sermon? When I was in divinity school, the then dean, Krister Stendahl in preaching classes pronounced, "A sermon is only a sermon if it is based on an authoritative text, *i.e.* the Old or New Testament. Otherwise it is only a lecture" Well, I've heard lectures based on those texts, and I've heard sermons that were not, and it's clearly a different discipline. It's not a speech or a talk, either. Its purpose is not to educate, to inform or to entertain or even to persuade; though it may do all or any of those things. Its purpose, although it usually fails, is transformation; a new insight, a deepening of understanding, a new path for your own search, a renewed commitment or dedication.

And I will use those other words sometimes, words of power and poetry, because what I will be talking about will be ideas of my mathematician acquaintance's fourth order. It can be persuasively argued that human beings are simply animals who have evolved to the point that they are able to think rationally and change their environment in order to ensure their survival as a species. If such is the case we don't need poetry or beauty or even goodness except insofar as it enhances our survivability. We don't need fourth-order thinking if that is our whole reality. Yet we have a longing and an unrest that asks for more, that requires a purpose greater than the flourishing of our species in material ways. We work for justice, we create beauty, we seek truth, we feel love and compassion, and these things are more to us than any material progress. We have, it seems to me, a spark of the divine that urges us to dedicate ourselves to something greater than we, and to become greater than we are. So, because we have no third-order words that can explain it to us, we need the poetry and the songs, the words of density and power, the humor that points toward the true and the life of the spirit as well as the body. Life on earth rose to love. Life on earth rose to our great need for understanding and purpose.