

## ON BEING A RELIGIOUS LIBERAL

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### READING

Let religion be to us life and joy.

*Let it be a voice of renewing challenge to the best we have and may be; let it be a call to generous action.*

Let religion be to us a dissatisfaction with things that are, which bids us serve more eagerly the true and the right.

*Let it be the sorrow that open for us the way of sympathy, understanding, and service to suffering humanity.*

Let religion be to us the wonder and lure of that which is only partly known and understood.

*An eye that glories in nature's majesty and beauty, and a heart that rejoices in deeds of kindness and courage.*

Let religion be to us security and serenity because of its truth and beauty, and because of the enduring worth and power of the loyalties which it engenders.

*Let it be to us hope and purpose, and a discovering of opportunities to express our best through daily tasks.*

Religion, uniting us with all that is admirable in human beings everywhere;

*Holding before our eyes a prospect of the better life for humankind, which each may help to make actual.*

– Vincent B. Silliman

### SERMON

Perhaps the first book I could ever call my own was the World of Christopher Robin, the poems of AA Milne with the lovely "decorations" by E.H. Shepard that look all the more charming and old-fashioned since Disney bought the rights to Winnie the Pooh and Christopher Robin. It is stamped by Griffiths Book Store, Geelong, which tells me I got it when I was three or four, because that's when we lived in Australia. Until I learned to read, the illustrations were most vivid. Long about first or second grade, I claimed it officially as mine by scrawling my full name in brown crayon on the inside cover. Another time I seem to have scribbled in pencil in a fit of pique. I know many of the poems by heart, and they have become part of the internal landscape of my mind and heart. I loved sharing my first book with my third graders.

One poem, really the illustration, has always haunted me. The poem itself is sweet enough.

Brownie

In a corner of the bedroom is a great big curtain,

Someone lives behind it, but I don't know who;

I think it is a brownie, but I'm not quite certain.

(Nanny isn't certain, too).

I looked behind the curtain, but he went so quickly –

Brownies never wait to say, "How do you do?"

They wriggle off at once because they're all so tickly.

(Nanny says they're tickly, too).

And even the illustration, a child peeking behind a curtain just as a sprite-like creature – certainly the Brownie – darts out the other side. Hardly threatening. But I suppose I have been peeking behind curtains and around corners all my life, in search of something that darts away at the last minute, just as I was convinced I would grab hold at last. This picture of that elusive, ungraspable thing, has always intrigued and frustrated me – a symbol of the very thing I most wanted and seemed incapable of having.

I don't know if we find a religious home in this tradition because of a natural bent of mind always open to inquiry, refusing to be limited by dogma or doctrine. Always somehow knowing that the truth is never settled and certain, that we'll never fully grasp it. Even as we keep peeking behind curtains and around corners.

Many come to this faith in reaction against another. Others arrive with little religious background or even outright rejecting religion until they find ours. Were we always independent and questioning in a family or wider culture that tried to convince us of certainty? Or did we grow into it? I just know that I have always been seeking the brownie behind the curtain one way or another.

But here's the rub, if I ever do manage somehow to capture the brownie, I am immediately suspicious. It must be a defective brownie or I would never have caught it. This must not be the truth after all. At its best, it is just limping along as only partial truth. I could be frustrated by this tendency to be suspicious of anything I have in hand. Or I simply embrace it as an inextricable part of my quest for truth.

I long to grasp and be grasped by something larger and more magnificent than what my human mind can fully comprehend. Sometimes I even have been so grasped, but such things by their nature cannot be held onto, nailed down. We damage them by every attempt to do so. I find this truth fascinating and frustrating.

Yet this very conundrum lies at the core of our liberal theology. There are inherent tensions, apparent contradictions and paradoxes at the center of our theology. It's what makes it terrifically hard for us to define ourselves. We often think of this as a weakness, yet it is also inherent in what it means to be a religious liberal. It's not that we lack conviction or that we want to pick and choose or believe anything we want.

We are not just making all this up. We stand in a serious religious tradition if not an ancient one. By some measures, liberal theology goes back to the Renaissance and Reformation. By other measures, it is a child of the Enlightenment and modernism.

"This is not very long in the Christian tradition," admits liberal theologian and Unitarian Universalist Paul Rasor, "and it is the blink of an eye in the larger context of human religiousness." Nevertheless, knowing that I stand in a serious tradition that serious people have considered and reflected upon for centuries, gives me a comforting religious grounding.

Rasor is an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister and director of the Centre for the Study of Religious Freedom and professor at Virginia Wesleyan College. In his book, *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, he writes, "Liberal theology is characterized by the belief that human religiousness should be understood from the perspective of modern knowledge and experience."

Rasor notes the inherent tensions in liberal theology. Indeed the very things we often bewail and bemoan about ourselves are simply a part of who we are as religious beings. They are our strengths because they make us who we are.

And anyway, Rasor tells us, "These tensions cannot be resolved: they are simply inherent in the liberal religious world view," Rasor writes. Sometimes these tensions emerge as people become aware of competing liberal values, which if not exactly contradictory, often pull us in more than one direction at the same time. A recurring example is the deep commitment to individual freedom, which can easily run up against a longing for a greater sense of community, perhaps even a desire for more guidance from or even accountability to a larger group."

One of the first fundamental tensions has to do with faith, certainty and doubt. "Religious liberalism often involves a willingness to affirm faith without certainty," Rasor continues. "This is not the same thing as faith without conviction. It does mean that religious liberals tend to hold faith claims with a certain tentativeness. This is partly a result of a liberal mind-set that is always testing and second-guessing itself. It also reflects the liberal commitment to open-ended inquiry and the realization that truth is not given once for all time."

In some ways, we are as ticklish as brownies, for we realize “that experience can always be re-interpreted, that ideas and actions that seem good today may turn out to be misguided, and that particular religious doctrines are likely to change over time.”

It is why we can sit side by side with people who believe very differently than we do and all be part of the same community. It is only when we want to put a stamp on what we believe personally as the more right way that we run into trouble.

Jill went downstairs with the junior youth today to be a mentor in our Coming of Age Program. She will help them consider what they believe and write a credo statement. By this program, we acknowledge that our children are indeed coming of age and can truly think more clearly for themselves. We do not have a catechism with set answers. Each youth must develop their own internal catechism, one we fully expect to adapt and change over time. It's a tall order, which is why each youth gets a mentor. Jill has always wanted to be a mentor because such questions have always fascinated her and because the mentors get to write their own credo statement. As a good religious liberal, she is committed to such open-ended inquiry for herself and she wants to pass it on to our youth.

For the Coming of Age program introduces our youth to a primary religious value that is quintessential to who and how we are as religious liberals.

Yet our understanding that religious ideas are likely to change over time, points to another inherent tension. One reason I can stay in this religious tradition is that it acknowledges that it exists in a changing culture, and adapts and responds to changes. It is no coincidence that Charles Darwin was a Unitarian, and that our faith tradition had little trouble absorbing and growing with his radical theory of evolution. A new truth had been revealed, one so powerful that we had to find a way to absorb it in our spiritual lives. Indeed, evolution is so awe-inspiring that it has become a cornerstone of our spiritual lives.

Razor says that our difficulty in defining who we are religiously or theologically is “primarily a consequence of liberal theology’s long practice of absorbing and adapting to the culture in which it is located. This mediating posture – turning to natural sciences, social analysis, the arts, and other cultural sources – has enriched liberal theology in many ways, and liberals have long insisted that this is precisely what makes liberal theology credible and relevant.”

Yet, and here comes the downside, “One of the bi-products of this approach has been a tendency to blur the distinction between religion and culture. Critics of liberalism often charge that this stance amounts to an accommodation or even a capitulation of theology to culture. As a result, liberals are in constant danger of losing their religious identity. Liberal religion can become indistinguishable from liberal politics or liberal social analysis, and spirituality tends to dissolve in to pop psychology or New Age feel-good self-centeredness.”

There is a real tension here. Sometimes it seems we are more comfortable sitting side by side with people who believe differently from us theologically than those who differ from us politically. If we are to live our faith, we must dance with this ambiguity as well. Chango, who the choir sang about, is the god of change in Candomble, a religion in South America which blends African Yoruba traditions with Catholicism. Chango is an exacting god.

Another tension Razor notes in liberal religion is that often people come newly to our tradition and feel powerfully moved. They are changed and they want to go deeper, explore what it means to be a religious being in a faith without certainty, but they don't know where to go.

Razor says this is because we are “reluctant to engage in the kinds of sustained spiritual practices that could provide it.” We have often rejected prayer or meditation on scripture from childhood religions, he says, or we hold them “narrowly ... in super-naturalistic terms or [as] pietistic and emotion-laden traditions that [we are uncomfortable with]. Of course, spiritual depth may be found in many places,” he goes on, “from nature to music to long-distance running, and many liberals ... find fulfillment along these spiritual paths. But if these practices are to become deep spiritual resources, they require discipline and regular practice. Liberals can fall too easily into the trap of thinking that the rational and the spiritual are opposing poles rather than mutually reinforcing parts of our human condition.”

Because we have existed beyond the framework of doctrine and dogma, we must invent for ourselves a vessel to hold our spiritual paths. It can be daunting. This is one of the reasons I lead Living by Heart retreats every year or so, to give people ideas for finding their own Unitarian Universalist spiritual practice. I do provide a framework, but only you can find the discipline of regular practice.

Ours is clearly not an easy spiritual path. The real ones never are. Yet, as frustrating and elusive as some of the demands of our faith can be, they are also precisely what make us religious liberals. So, I invite you to accept even embrace these tensions, paradoxes and ambiguities and live with them creatively.

Fight for an identity. Keep wrestling with it and discovering it. Resist becoming “indistinguishable from liberal politic or liberal social analysis,” or letting your spirituality “dissolve in to pop psychology or New Age feel-good self-centeredness.” Where are the lines demarking all of this? There are none. Do the dance creatively.

Know that depth of spiritual connection will require some discipline and regular practice. Avoid the trap of thinking “that the rational and the spiritual are opposing poles rather than mutually reinforcing parts of our human condition.” Find a way to blend the two in your life.

Maintain your “deep commitment to individual freedom,” yet answer, too, your “longing for a greater sense of community, perhaps even a desire for more guidance from or even accountability to a larger group.” You can’t really do this alone. None of us can.

Ask this of your faith; ask this of yourself.

Embrace the truth that you’ll never be able to grab hold of the brownie and hold it close – not for very long anyway.

It’s too ticklish and so are we all.

Amen.

Blessed be.