

There has been much discussion among Unitarian Universalists lately regarding the use of a “language of reverence.”

I would like to suggest that a language of reverence is, in part, a way in which we come to name the sacred – our experience of awe and wonder at the Holy in life, or Ultimate Reality. I would like to further suggest that part of what is difficult for some folks about a language of reverence is that it is associated with problematic notions of the Divine.

Today I will be looking at the way in which three texts name and envision the Sacred. Our primary text is from the womanist tradition, a movement of whom Alice Walker is the seminal thinker and responsible for giving womanism its name. It was developed by women of color in response to western feminism’s totalizing of Anglo-European women’s experience. This tradition is represented by Shug in *The Color Purple*. The Goddess tradition is found in our responsive reading “The Charge of the Goddess,” (written by Doreen Valiente, but mistakenly attributed to Starhawk in *Singing the Living Tradition*, our UU hymnal), and engaged Buddhism in our meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh.

I offer these as openings for how *we* might differently look at naming the Sacred, and, if we find our way into such naming, what might be the result.

In the reading today from *The Color Purple* we find Shug describing to Celie what *she* has come to believe about God based on her experience. This book is written from the perspective of Celie in the form of letters between her and her sister, Nettie, from whom she was traumatically separated, and it includes the letters that Celie writes to God.

In fact, the book begins with Celie’s letters to God, which tell of the struggles of her life, her attempts to survive in poverty, abuse and oppression. In our reading, Celie writes to Nettie about a conversation with Shug, a free-spirit who has become her confidant, champion and her lover. Celie has just told Shug that she doesn’t write to God anymore.

In responding to Celie, Shug uses “God” language, but clearly her understanding of God is very different from traditional Western notions of God. Her God language – her naming of God – I believe is a **reclaiming** that can liberate God from those qualities that are oppressive and beyond credulity, a reclaiming which can perhaps be considered as we look at a language of reverence.

Some might find that Shug is describing that which is understood by some as the Goddess... others of us may not use God or Goddess language and refer to the Divine, the Spirit of Life or Love, or the Sacred as expressive of a sense of oneness with All That Is.

Shug and Celie have been raised, as have many of us, to think of God as an *old, white* man. From their perspective, as *poor, black* women, white men have been nothing but oppressive to them.

The white, male God has been constructed *by*, and *for*, white folks and no longer has relevance for them. It no longer has relevance for Celie in light of the abuse heaped upon her, in light of her cries, which had fallen on God's deaf ears.

Shug, who has suffered as well, is no stranger to tragedy - she has not, though, abandoned a notion of God, but her understanding reflects her *experience* - *not* what she had been taught.

In telling Celie what she believes God to be, Shug also reveals what God is *not* to her – God is not an old, white man – transcendent...out there...disconnected...unconcerned...unfeeling - outside of creation.

That God has been called the unmoved mover, or seen as a puppeteer pulling the strings of an unwitting humanity, or a king demanding obedience from his subjects - able but unwilling to

intervene in the suffering and evil of the world – a difficult idea that has caused many to reject any notion of God.

Rather, for Shug, God can be found in all of creation – God *is* everything, and is *in* everybody and “everything that is or ever was or ever will be.” This move from the old, white man led her to conceive of God as It.

In the Goddess tradition, naming the Sacred as Goddess signifies the same move. The move away from the patriarchal God to Goddess is not to God-in-a-skirt. Rather it is a move from total transcendence – from God only outside and removed from creation. Here we find the Divine as immanent – as intimately, inextricably interconnected with creation.

In this view, the Sacred animates all of nature - is in and through all that is.

“I who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the mysteries of waters, I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me, for I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe.”

And God feels the feelings of the world. Shug says later in the text that God wants to share in the love of creation. She says she thinks it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it. We have here the notion of the Sacred as responsive to the creatures.

But how did Shug and Celie get there? What kinds of experiences result in this understanding?

Let’s look for a moment at what we might gather from Shug about how *we* can gain that insight.

Shug says that often having trouble causes people to search for God. Times of discontent, despair, disillusionment – when we’re beaten down, beat up or turned out. Those would be the times when it feels like there’s nowhere to turn and the bottom’s fallen out. When we say, “God, help me” and we don’t *even* believe in God!

But Shug also tells Celie that sometimes God manifests even if you’re not looking for it, or don’t know what you’re looking for. Perhaps these are the times when in the depths of despair we have found hope, or in the midst of sorrow known peace, or when we have been at our loneliest we have been saved by Love.

Shug’s move from the old, white man was through trees. Then air. Then birds. *Then* other people. Shug experienced her connectedness with the rest of nature - with the earth - and *named* that *connectedness* God.

Here we find that the embodied experience of the Holy - the experience of the sacred - the experience of oneness- came first and *then* the naming. This route to the sacred honors embodied knowledge- it privileges experience over doctrine or dogma, and it makes the body primary in knowing.

Shug also tells us that, “only them that search for it *inside* find it,” letting us know however *else* we look for God, we *must* look inside. One of the implications for finding God inside is that there is no Deity that can interrupt the course of natural events. Rather life and Love requires human cooperation to end evil and sustain life.

“For if that which you seek you find not within yourself, you will never find it without.”

So we can see that the Divine is available to us, both when we search for It, and even if we don’t.

But if we choose to search for the Sacred, how might we do that? How might we discover and reflect on our intimate interconnectedness and our interdependence with all that is?

I got some ideas about this a few years ago when I was talking to my friends, Lea and Billy. They had just had their first child, Samantha. We met one afternoon when Samantha was still quite tiny. I was in awe of this beautiful creature as we talked about every detail of her little life. Lea told me that the last remnant of Samantha's umbilical cord had just fallen off. Lea poignantly shared the feelings of sadness that this caused as the tangible sign of their womb connection was released.

It was inevitable, of course that this remnant would be sloughed off. In some way this signals the burgeoning individuality of the child. It *ostensibly* signals separation from the mother. We come into the world – not alone, not separate at all, but still attached to the life cord through which we were sustained in the womb.

During our conversation together, Billy shared that at the hospital when Samantha was lifted out of the womb the nurse *invited* him to cut the cord. With his feminist sensibilities, Billy shared that **he did *not*** want to be the one to cut Samantha's umbilical cord after her birth. Sensitive to the symbolic, patriarchal connotations of cutting the cord, he said, "I didn't want to *do* that."

Our discussion was lively and fruitful – the ideas just tumbled out. We talked about the processes of birth, differentiation, and nurturance, and we talked about the damage that has occurred to human beings, and the Earth and all creatures as we have lived in the "illusion of independence" that Thich Nhat Hanh identified in our meditation. It occurred to us then that the belly button, the navel, is actually a continuing sign of our connectedness.

The three of us agreed that this puts an entirely different spin on the idea of navel-gazing, which has always gotten a bad rap - this disparaging term for the senseless, frivolous, time-wasting preoccupations with the one's spirituality.

Navel-gazers are thought of as self-absorbed and out of touch with reality, their heads in the clouds – contributing little to society. But now, taken literally, navel gazing can now be thought of as a worthwhile, perhaps even, a *necessary* practice.

Think about it. We all have belly-buttons. There's inies, and outies. It's the fashion now to show them, to pierce them, to adorn them with jewels. What if, instead of worrying about if our stomachs are flat enough to get away with exposing them, we saw them as a reminder of our connection to All That Is - to the Sacred.

I was thrilled at playing with the idea of navel gazing, in fact, I got a little carried away and thought about it a lot.

And then I thought about it in the context of our reading for today. Shug's powerful insight - her feeling of being a part of everything, not separate at all" . . . that she knew if she cut a tree, her arm would bleed" - came to her when she *was sitting quiet*.

Perhaps sitting quietly - being mindful of our bodies, our own embodiedness- is one way to remember that we are interconnected and the remnant of our cord can be a symbol of our ongoing interdependence.

This was a rich image, but contains a tension that I hadn't considered at first. Shug is sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which she was! It occurred to me that some people, like Shug, are abandoned by their mothers, have *not* felt nurtured, and had not been connected to a loving human presence at birth. Then I realized that Shug actually offers a way through this. She says, "You come into the world with God."

So perhaps even if our conditions at birth (and in life) are less than ideal, if those who were supposed to love us well, loved us not at all, we can know that we are never separate from God - we connected with and embraced by Divine love.

The holy is in and through us at our birth and embodied by and through us all the days of our lives. For Shug, when you feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It.

“I have been with you from the beginning and I am that which attained at the end of desire.”

So what, then, are the fruits of navel-gazing? What will this experience of the Sacred in All Things lead to? Certainly not to withdrawal from the world in self-absorbed inertia – preoccupied only with ourselves.

If, like Shug, we know that if we cut a tree our arm would bleed... what response will flow from such radical, intimate interconnectedness - from seeing the link between ourselves, each other, the Earth, and the cosmos?

Shug tells us that when it *came* to her - “that feeling of being a part of everything, not separate at all” - that she “laughed and cried and run all over the house” ... So this connection – this longing fulfilled - leads us to unbounded joy, to utter relief, to incarnated Love, and I believe, to Service.

“Let my worship be in the heart that rejoices for, behold, all acts of Love and pleasure are my rituals.”

As we name God as embodied in the world, as that which animates all things - the Earth, the cosmos, me, and you - we re-member and reclaim all life as Sacred.

These traditions each ask *us* to re-member and reclaim the knowledge of the Sacred in all things, and this *naming* of the Sacred both *challenges* and *comforts* us.

As we understand our interdependence with All That Is as a *sacred* connectedness, we live into the possibilities of a renewed world - a world in which bodies count! We care for the Earth-body by consuming less, recycling, by knowing where our food comes from and where our toxic waste goes.

We care for the bodies of nonhuman beings by taking into account their suffering, by protecting the habitat of fragile creatures.

We care for the bodies of other people - near and far - and work toward the well-being and flourishing of all Life- because we are linked by many stems.

And then the choices that we make are not sacrifices – they are acts of Love...for ourselves...each other...the Earth...God. We do what we do on behalf of the Earth and our fellow creatures – affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of each person, respecting and caring for the interdependent web – we do this not because we ought to, or because it’s the politically correct thing to do, but because we can’t do anything else. Love – once apprehended- cannot be denied.

Wherever we are and what ever we do - whether sitting quietly, crying sorrowfully, singing joyfully, dying certainly, working madly, dancing wildly - we are everywhere and in all things, linked one to the other - the air we breathe, the earth we walk, the Love we share – and then language that we use to describe this **is** the language of reverence. As we know ourselves connected one to the other, we know God.

...and when it happens, you can't miss it.