

# Rethinking the Language of Religion

March 5, 2006

## Opening Words – Lois Durran

As Unitarian Universalists, we avoid using “religious” words. Most of these words carry a lot of emotional baggage for us, and sometimes we would rather abandon them than sort through our feelings and try to salvage the words themselves. And so we have given these words over to the Christian church. We tell ourselves that we don’t need them. We think that we are better off without them.

Words like God, heaven, worship, sin, salvation, prayer – these words are seldom used in this place, and when they are, everyone looks around to see what the reaction will be.

I’ve had my own battles with some of these words. I took on the word “God” first of all, and it took me years to come to peace with it. I started by rejecting the male sky god of my childhood, using “Goddess” and thinking of God in only feminine terms, and finally rejecting the idea of God as a being altogether. I still believe in God, but my God is more of an all-encompassing presence or force. And in the process of this inner battle, I reclaimed the word.

I like Emily Dickinson’s idea of heaven – “Who has not found the heaven below/ will fail of it above”. I think that we worship whenever we commune with nature, or with the spirit inside of us that seeks expression in art or music. I think we can pray by holding others in our thoughts and sending them energy. And I believe that we sin when we don’t live up to our potential, and that we find salvation when we work to make this world a better place for those who will come after us.

Words are powerful. When we allow the fundamentalists to define these words for us, and then refuse to use them, we are giving away the power that these words embody. This morning we will hear about some personal journeys around some of these words. I light the chalice in the spirit of re-thinking, re-defining, and reclaiming the language of religion.

**Reading** from *Heretics’ Faith* by Fredric John Muir

## Sharing: “Blessings” – Dan Moerdyk

The word is **BLESSINGS**. And a beautiful word it is!

My dictionary lists many definitions for the word: “a benediction ... a beneficent gift,,, a charm,,, a spell ... an invocation of divine favor ...” and many others.

Many UUs associate the word with past negative religious experiences. The word has painful baggage for them.

In my early years, blessing had a joyful meaning, which is best exemplified this way:

(**SING**: Count your blessings, Name them one by one,  
Count your blessings, See what God hath done.  
Count your blessings, Name them one by one.  
Count your many blessings, See what God hath done.)

Later, around the age of 16-17, that word and many others, disappeared from my vocabulary. For me, they were painfully reminiscent of traditional churches and the rantings of preachers on Sunday mornings.

Then, about the age of 60, I began giving serious thought to religious matters. The phrase, "Don't throw out the baby with the bath water." kept cropping up. And I realized that we UUs had done more than that ... We threw out **ALL** the babies. During the period of time from the 1940s, through the 1980s, we forgot that human beings have a spiritual aspect which needs nourishing, along with the intellectual one.

Then, in the middle '80s, the Christian UU movement became quite strong in New England where I lived. It was so strong that I became concerned that it would take over UUism.

As you know, that hasn't happened. But the Christian UUs are bringing the spiritual aspect back into UUism.

Now, to the present.

Several things happened to me over the past 10 months which have caused me to reflect on the many blessings I experienced during those months.

The first blessing began on this past April 27<sup>th</sup>, at 3:30 in the morning, when I had a heart attack. It resulted in open heart surgery two days later.

The second blessing is the realization of how fortunate I am that this happened to me in 2005, rather than 15 years ago, when my brother-in-law died from the same cause, because the procedure was not available to him.

The third blessing has been the depression which hit me full force on the Monday before this past Christmas. I am on medication now and this has been beneficial. But, even more so, is the healing work I am doing with a wonderful therapist. That is the **real third** blessing.

In that healing work, I have begun to re-examine my life. Repeatedly, the word "blessing" comes "creeping in on cat's paws ..." to borrow a phrase from Carl Sandburg.

The physical happenings of the past 10 months have made me more acutely aware of the importance of my relationship with my world, my friends, my wonderful family, my church, and most especially, with my loving, supportive partner, Richard.

Blessing is a key word for me. It carries a healing, mystical, spiritual aura which I need.

And, I wonder ... Have these blessings come from God? I don't know. I don't know who, or what, God is.

You can call these events by other names ... fate; good fortune; beneficent gifts; divine favor; good karma ... whatever feels right for you.

But, let me call them blessings, even within these walls.

BLESSED BE.

### **Sharing: "Redemption" – Annie-hannah Mancini**

Jesus Christ is often referred to as "Redeemer". In the past, my experience of this Christian term, this reference, gave rise to the notion of some outside "Force" coming upon me and changing my life without regard to my will or reason or need. It just happened to happen! I was not a partaker of the process – rather, I was a recipient thereof – and I better like it!

But, as I have come to experience God as The One Who is Creator, it is This One Who invites me to be "Co-Creator", that is, a person who is fully active in and fully aware of the process of "Being Redeemed"; the process of becoming all of who I truly am in and with The Creator. Not just for a single time in time....but constantly, every moment of every day. And, for me, that awareness of this "grace" (another word) becomes something that is not put upon me....but that which is freely offered to me....and so – gratefully received.

So I offer this small meditation of the word “Redemption”.

Redemption is knowing – to the fullness of “knowing”-  
That something of my human condition  
Has been revealed to me  
To be eternally transfigured  
Yet not through my design or effort  
-but, still, perceived....and received.

Redemption is the deepest part of Divine Love –  
Manifested to the deepest parts of the  
Human Heart.

Redemption is the result of my “Fiat” – YES! –  
To God’s Grace active in my life  
And given freely to all of Creation;  
Things seen  
And unseen.

Redemption is right here, right now – The Presence;  
All encompassing,  
Surrounding  
This very moment.

To be “Redeemed” – to be “Becoming”  
...realized with the mind and  
embraced by the heart,  
I respond,  
With silence and thanksgiving.

**Reading** from *Amazing Grace* by Kathleen Norris

**Sharing: “Prayer” – Peggy Halleck**

When Lois first asked me to participate in this service I was initially a bit wary about how I might contribute. After all, I too am someone that is uncomfortable with some of these words---in particular the concept of “prayer”. I agreed that I would think about it and what I found was that in considering how I might share with you how I felt, I learned a lot about **myself** and **my** reaction to these religious words.

Unlike many of us here who came to U-Uism from other faiths, I am a “birthright” Unitarian. My parents were members of the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York, and my mother’s side of the family was rife with Unitarian ministers. The minister of the church in Rochester until I was 13 years old was David Rhys Williams, whom I remember as a kind, grandfatherly man with a booming Welsh voice that immediately got your attention. The church was a traditional old Gothic

structure that boasted a long, rich history that included attendance by Susan B. Anthony. Rev Williams served that church for 30 years but in the late 1950s the city, intent upon building a mid-town plaza, sought to purchase the church and surrounding property and marked it for demolition. Although Rev. Williams strongly opposed the idea, the congregation was anxious for the opportunity to build a bigger structure away from downtown and the church was sold. Rev. Williams sat in **prayer** in the old church as it was torn down.

Coming from such a tradition, you'd think I'd have my head straight about the meaning and practice of prayer. Instead I find myself uncomfortable with the whole concept. Why is that?

One of the dictionary definitions of prayer is "A humble entreaty or a request addressed to God"

I have a problem with that because if we are talking about supplication to a greater being, just who is it that is listening? God or the Great Hairy Thunderer? This forms the basis of the old joke about Unitarian-Universalists that in fact we pray "**To whom it may concern**".

Another thing that makes me uncomfortable is the **misuse** of prayer. In this category I include the praying by believers of one faith for victory in battle over the followers of another faith. .and... on a lighter note, but still just as confusing...the recent instigation by the Johnstown Diocese to get school kids to pray for the Steelers to win the Super Bowl...although it seems to have worked...

So, how about me? Like many of us, I find that I hadn't really much thought about these things until I found myself in a time of great stress. For Phil and I this happened in 1997 when I was diagnosed with cancer. The shock of this situation led both of us, who had not been part of a religious community throughout all of our marriage to reexamine our beliefs and it was then that we sought out this Fellowship. Here we found a loving community with which we could share our distress and rejoice in our good fortunes. It is wonderful to be amongst people who care about us. And that is not to say that we do not have connections with other people in our lives. I found, for example, when I underwent high dose chemo and a stem cell transplant at Hershey in the Spring of 98 that many of my friends at work or other places told me that they would pray for me and some said that they added me to their church prayer circle. The notion that folks were praying for my recovery felt strange and I didn't know what to say but finally learned that a simple "Thank you" sufficed. It has been almost 8 years since that treatment now and it is becoming easier to think that maybe something worked.

So, do I "pray"?

Another definition of prayer is "Any spiritual communication with a God or a sovereign". I think for U-Us, this is better described as a spiritual communion with the interdependent web of life...be that other people or other organisms. To me, prayer must be a way of interconnecting with those around you---whether it be a deep introspection about yourself and your motives concerning others or an understanding of how you fit into the bigger picture. I said earlier that you'd think I'd have my **head** straight about prayer. I see now that prayer is an opening...a desire...a willingness that comes from the **heart**...not the head.

Thus, prayer can take many forms. To some it might be singing together well and really connecting on a deeper spiritual level. While to others it might be chanting or drumming, reveling in the comfort provided by the repetitiveness of the effort. The oft-quoted lines from Mary Oliver's poem *The Summer Day* offer a great non-definition of prayer:

I don't **know** exactly what a prayer is.

I **do** know how to pay attention,  
how to fall down into the grass,  
how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed,  
how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

### **Sharing: “Sin” – Paul Carlisle Kletchka**

When Lois approached me about speaking today, I immediately thought that I would talk about sin. I was raised Catholic, so what better topic could there be for me? Go with what you know, right?

As I began to formulate this speech in my mind, I thought, “well, it’s probably good to be clear on the concept of *sin* before I delve into how we, as UUs, can reclaim it in our religious language.” Well, that sounded like a good idea, but not unlike many religious concepts, there are so many interpretations of what *sin* is that I could never hope to reconcile them into one complete, concise definition. Now, I’ll come back to that confusion in a bit, but first I want to share with you some of what I found.

One definition that made me chuckle was “Anything that we do or don’t do that God does not approve of.” Some were even more vague, like “estrangement from God,” or “serving oneself instead of God.” There were descriptions that I felt were more honest than others, like “an act that is regarded by *theologians* as a transgression of God's will,” and “the breaking of one of the Ten Commandments and any non-adherence to the *teachings of the Christian Churches*.” There were definitions that gave specific examples of sins, and some told of that to which sin would lead. In the end, the only thing I found to be a common thread in all of these explanations of sin was a dependence on *someone* or *something* else to grant one the knowledge of what is sinful.

Now, if you don’t know me too well, you may not be aware that I’m not only very resistant to figures of authority, but I’m an atheist, as well. So it’s not hard to understand why I developed a problem with the concept of sin at a fairly young age. During a high school RE class in which we were discussing sin, one of the class leaders described it to me as “something that is wrong, that you know is wrong, but you do it, anyway.” She’d gone with a more secular approach to avoid the argument of “when did God say that was wrong and who heard it?” I remembered her words a few weeks later when I unexpectedly found myself faced with the choice of either going to confession or explaining to my dad why I didn’t go to confession. I glided into the confessional, sat face-to-face with the priest, looked him straight in the eye, and said, “Father, we’ve been discussing sin in

our class, and if that's what sin is, then I haven't committed any." Now, I was a good kid, but there were plenty of things I did at age 17 that the Catholic Church would consider to be sins. I figured the priest would ask me if I'd done this or that and try to get me to see that I had sinned. Instead, his reply was, "Paul, I think that God has a calling for you." I had to wonder if this was a common recruitment tactic for the priesthood. That was the last time I would go to confession.

In the years that have passed since my near-priest experience, I've put a good deal of thought into trying to figure out what guides me, morally. After I became a UU, I found the words to describe my feelings in our seventh principle, *respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part*. But where does that leave me with the word *sin*? If pressed to give a definition, I would have to say it is *knowingly showing disrespect for the interdependent web of all existence*. I can't say *sin* is a word I can lovingly embrace, but despite having left the Catholic Church so many years ago, it's a word that I still hear on a regular basis. And, although *sin* is no longer a word that scares me as it did when I was a small child introduced to the concept of Hell, it's still a powerful word in our culture.

Ah, yes – *Hell*: another concept that went by the wayside for me a long time ago. I haven't really mentioned the consequences of sin so far, but that's the big one – the big, scary one. But what are the consequences for an atheist who doesn't succeed in respecting the interdependent web of all existence? All I can tell you is that when I'm disappointed in myself, the feelings I experience are my own torment and anguish, far more real than a pit of fire.

What does all of this mean for us as a congregation, as a religion, as Unitarian Universalists? If I remember my UU history correctly, neither Unitarians nor Universalists were tight-lipped on the subject of sin. With all of those confusing definitions of sin floating around, why shouldn't we join in the discourse? We may not have a binding creed, but we do have our seven principles. If we can agree that living by our principles is a way to be in right relations with everyone, including ourselves, then what is it when we purposefully act in a way that moves us away from right relations? Is it too much of a stretch to call that sin? I think not, because simply calling something a sin does not include the condemnation of the sinner. Thus, the phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin."

For many years, we have all been bombarded with rhetoric on the supposed *sins* of homosexuality and abortion. Much of what we hear comes from the Catholic Church. It's not as though we don't have our own causes. Last year at General Assembly, we as an association agreed to tackle the issues of criminal justice and prison reform. Is the injustice and inequity present in our current court and prison systems not a sin? I can tell you that the word *sin* is not included anywhere in the final statement of conscience drafted in Fort Worth.

What about torturing prisoners of war? How about subsidizing tax cuts for your wealthiest constituents by cutting services to the poorest ones? Or drawing a 7 or 8-digit yearly income off of the business you own, while more than half of your employees aren't making enough to afford basic health care? We could sit here this morning and come up with a list of hundreds of issues that have a negative impact on our society – issues that dwarf any argument claiming abortion and homosexuality are sins. Yet, those will be the issues that continue to dominate our national moral dialogue. Why? I believe that a large part of the reason is our unwillingness to engage in the simple yet effective "language of morality" that is so prevalent in today's political discourse. I'm a church-going UU who wants to affect change on the pressing social issues of our day. Doesn't that make me a "person of faith who is ready to tackle the sins of our society?" Are these issues I've mentioned not sins?

I have to admit, when I began thinking about reclaiming the word *sin*, the idea didn't sit well with me. Since I began preparing this speech, two states have made major moves toward making abortion illegal. The time has passed for us to try and fight a battle of ethics without using the basic artillery. The only way we will bring the important moral issues of our day to the forefront of our national conscience is to reclaim simple words, like *sin*, to make our voices heard in the cacophony of our national moral debate.