

“Metaphorical Religion: Or As You Like It”

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All true spiritual reference has to be to the silence beyond sound. And this is the ironic piece of this puzzle, the spiritual reference that comes from the silence beyond sound, propels us to speak about its power to others. And what words will you use to speak of what you have felt of the mystery that is you, but so much more than you? Will you use poetry, dream images, superlatives, adjectives, or will you like so many before you, just give up because there often are no words to explain what has been felt, experienced and gifted to us. Sighs often work, dance or art, but when pressed for an explanation, there is nothing like the metaphor for a way out of the deadlock of the image too big for words and yet begging to be shared.

Albert Schweitzer tells us, imagination is more important than knowledge. Imagination is the eye of the soul. All spiritual thoughts and experiences are part of our imagination. Truth often comes in small installments, and whether we believe it or not, through our imagination. And what about the truth of sorrow? The deeper the sorrow, the deeper the experience, the less tongue it has. The quest for many people is to somehow take that deep sorrow, that deep experience and give it a tongue, give it a voice. Because people throughout history have tried to express a deep experience they had had, there is in the world therefore, the great religions of the world today. These people and their attempt to share what they felt have facilitated the sacred to dwell, in the guise of language, in this very world, in their very lives. The sacred in the guise of language. And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us. The word, letters put into a cohesive pattern, made into what...a new reality, a beginning of wisdom, the epitome of a whole new way of looking at life.

The idea of the supernatural as being something over and above the natural, is the very killing of the religious imaginative idea. This creates the feeling that the earth and what we do here on this earth is a wasteland of meaningless actions. Because we are all having mystical spiritual experiences, even as we speak, how wonderful it would be if those mystical happenings could be shared. If, like voices of old, we could speak of the awe and mystery of our lives without fear of judgment or reprisal. Majesty and wonder are a part of our everyday life, whether we feel at ease talking about them or not.

All religious expression is metaphor. Metaphor; used as a symbol, a figure of speech, an allegory. We use metaphors in creative writing to describe a new reality to an old thought. For example; “My Father is very old, he is in the evening of his life.” As soon as you hear the word evening, you immediately have an image in your mind of the end of a day, twilight, therefore, my father is in the ending part of his life, like the end of the day. But you can also use

metaphors to explain deeper realities, like to say Jesus is the rock of the Christian faith. Is Jesus really a rock, of course not, but the line says, think of all the qualities of a rock and you will imagine how we think about Jesus. The rock becomes the symbol of Jesus' place in the Christian world. So why can we agree on that use of the metaphor and not agree on the next step? That Jesus himself could be a metaphor for a deeper religious reality? But why should this mean anything to us today? Hasn't everything already been revealed that could possibly be told about religion, God, salvation and humans? Well, not if you are a Unitarian Universalist. You see, one of our beliefs is that revelation is continuous. That means that there will be always something new, exciting, earth shattering even in our life time, and wait...could it be, yes, even from our own two lips. Do you believe that? Do you think that that is possible? Living in this day and age one would think that only churches have the right, the responsibility to speak of religious ideas. But when one lives and believes and revels in the metaphor, the whole of the religious world opens up for new interpretation, new thoughts and new revelations.

Metaphors can impart a whole new way of looking at life. In spiritual metaphors, there is an emphasis on the ways of experiencing and therefore the models for spirituality arise out of moments of these cosmic disclosures. And because metaphors are so powerful in their ability to impart new realities, we must be very careful not to fall down and worship the metaphor, but rather remain open to the new reality, the new image that it can give us. To worship the metaphor, is to lose the power of its gift.

Did you ever feel like you have had thoughts and feelings or experiences beyond sound and words that have already been spoken? Did you ever have a dream or an experience of a near-death nature, like just missing hitting a car while driving home? You get home, walk into the house and your eyes are wide, jumping out of their sockets and everyone says, "What happened, are you ok?" And you look at them dumbfounded and mumble, "I just missed being hit by a car!" "Oh," they say and walk away, and you just sit there shaking in the chair. Your coat is open half-way, keys still clutched in your hand. You smile and think, "How could I ever explain to them what the feeling of this near-death experience meant to me?" Either you give up trying, or you take on the task of trying to make them understand, by using language that uses some experience they may have had, to make a link for them so they can share in your experience. If you take this path, of trying to make them understand your experience, and decide you are not going to let the experience go without more explanation, you have now entered the world of the spiritual metaphor. This is what every prophet, every healer, every visionary, every savior felt at some time in their life. And those who shared did not let the experience go, simply because it was so difficult to get people also excited about this new reality.

Metaphors are like links in a chain that hold the ends of what we have or others have experienced with reality. Every religion had a person who had an experience of the extraordinary, the spiritual, the mystical and came back to

reality and tried in the best way they knew how to explain in words we all could understand. Metaphors use the words “as” or “like” in their description. They link a new reality to an old idea already known. Metaphors are powerful tools to illustrate a new certainty, but we must be aware of their power and their limitation and remember we too have discerning powers or the metaphor may become what we worship, rather than them taking us to a new reality. Try to pick out all the metaphors that I’m using in the sermon this morning. Take some time this week and see if you can hear how metaphors are used in advertising, in every day speech and maybe how you use them in your life and maybe were unaware of their presence or their power. Are they the new reality, or only a finger pointing to something far more powerful beyond itself?

On another level, people can also become metaphors for a deeper reality. Jesus was a powerful metaphor for the 1st century Jews and the early Christians to explain a reality they had never experienced before. They experienced something new and wonderful in the 33 years that a certain individual lived, who was called Jesus of Nazareth and in a desperate act to make his life real and lasting, they devised a story to remember him and his works by, and this new reality, this creation are the stories of the New Testament. What the stories tell us is that Jesus, through his life and works, was indeed a new truth. One in which a human being could live in a wonderfully balanced way with other humans and with nature. Jesus was a message that said people can live very simply, orderly, compassionately, and for the welfare of others and still be happy in doing it. Jesus was figure, a reality, but instead of letting the metaphor of his life be the symbol by which to learn a new reality, he became the object worshipped. It could be likened to what Joseph Campbell talks about when he says worshipping Jesus as a god is like eating the menu because it described the food you could order. Jesus was the menu, but the food, the reality of a healthy, giving lifestyle is available for all to order and eat and be healthy. Jesus showed the way, he was the menu, not the meal.

We, as people of faith, discover the power of any spiritual experience only in an act of surrender. In order for a spiritual experience to impact upon us, we must at some point let down our guard and submit to the truth of what is being told. This is brought home most strongly for me when I listen to people who have had experiences of dying and then coming back to life. They can only speak in metaphors because often there are no words available for them to use to explain their experience. They say things like, “I felt like I was surrounded by a bright light. It was as if I was flying. I felt like I was transported in a tube to another place.” While listening, I have to surrender my past disbeliefs in order to allow myself to be open to their experience. But one problem remains, how does one begin to speak of broader realities? How does one express a new reality when there seems not be language available to express that new reality?

Well, let’s look at a master. Jesus of Nazareth was a master of the metaphor. Just as Jesus himself was a metaphor, he was a master at the art of using the metaphor to give people a whole new way of looking at life. Remember the

kingdom of heaven is like a...a what, a mustard seed, a pearl of great price. Those who had great faith he called the salt of the earth, or the light of the world. He compared a person living out their faith in the world as someone who does not leave their light under a bushel, but lets their light shine for all to see. Trust was seen as considering the lilies of the field and how they do not toil or reap and yet they are more beautiful than Solomon in all his glory and riches. Prayers being answered he compared to knocking at a door and knowing that it will be answered, or simply the act of asking for a favor from someone and knowing that it will be answered.

Jesus took the images of the people around him and used them to create a new spiritual reality for them. He used images and metaphors like; the eye of a needle, wolves in sheep's clothing, grapes gathered from thorns, trees bearing good fruit, building a house on sand or rock, a log in one's eye, specks of sand in another, pearls before swine, bread and wine and on and on. These are rich images that we all can see, we all can visualize, we can all relate to. That's all religion is really, someone somewhere using images and symbols and rich realities to move a person or a group of people from one reality to another.

What I am proposing, if we really think about it, when metaphors are used and we comprehend a new reality within the context of our present reality, a very powerful encountering or change can happen to us. We can be moved, we can travel to new ideas about life, we may grow, and we may even be converted.

Good metaphors are novel, original, striking. Good metaphors invent a new perspective to lead the hearer to envision a new story in place of the old one. Good metaphors are active. They present the images and we must decide if we will keep them or send them away. A good metaphor allows for a comparison, a correlation, a focus, a similarity, a contrast, resemblance, an affinity to someone or something, a parallel, a new harmony, a different relationship, a different representation.

Metaphorical religion, or as you like it theology, is a bigger part of our lives than we may have at first glance realized. We all live our lives according to paradigms. Without a paradigm we would be like a puppet with no strings, like a house built on sand, like a story with a beginning and no end. These paradigms are foundational to our decision making. Once the paradigm is set we can make decisions, live our lives without figuring it out each time we need to make a decision. Now the big question is, what is the foundation by which I will choose? It is already set in your paradigm. These paradigms are patterns, standards, models that have been given to us as children and now in our present state of maturity, we have either simply accepted those from childhood, or we have developed new ones that fit us better now in our maturity.

Some paradigms we may shifted from may have been; women do not work outside the home, same sex love is a sin and always forbidden, real men don't eat quiche, spare the rod and spoil the child. A good example for a paradigm shift for me is I was taught that God is like a father. That is no longer the

paradigm of my religious foundation. The metaphor of God as father has lost its power to move me in a certain direction. My spiritual paradigm has been shifted. To me now, God is neither mother or father, God is rather a universal wisdom that is not a personal entity. The personal God-father metaphor/ paradigm of my youth no longer fits my experience, so I no longer use it. The paradigm of my spiritual faith system has been changed, so the metaphors of God as parent are no longer valid for me. The consequences and the growth that has happened to me because of that paradigm shift has meant monumental changes in my life.

Perhaps we all underestimate the extent to which we absorb and live by the paradigms and the spiritual metaphors that have been given to us and their importance in our lives. Fortunately for us UUs, no one metaphor is able to interpret adequately the networks and complexity of the spiritual experiences we all have and that constitute our lives or the reality where we reside. Metaphorical thinking is an acknowledgment of multiple interpretations and relativism in dealing with our world at this level. And change in the root metaphor, signals a revolution in the paradigm.

Once I began thinking in terms of religious language as metaphor, I found there was the whole world of thought and symbolism for me to play with. Some I like better than others, of course, but the whole purpose is that as UUs we do, do the playing around with these religious metaphors until we come upon a balance, a word, a phrase, a thought that matches exactly what we are feeling, learning, experiencing, and growing into.

What is the broader reality of religion, faith and our lives you may ask? I am taking a lifetime defining it for myself? If that is true, how could I say what your religious belief is for you? And that is the beauty of the metaphorical spiritual language. It is limitless, it has no boundaries, and if it is not worshipped for itself, it can teach us and move us and help us reach far beyond what we could imagine on our own. Be open to the metaphor, surrender to its power so you can learn, but never believe it is the end reality, remember it is only a description of some actuality, far beyond its own small walls.

We are in the year 2009, and if you have made those resolutions on New Year's eve, remember they too are only metaphors of the better life you are hoping to create for yourself. Do not fall down and be too willing to worship any new lifestyle as the be all and end all of your life. Do not worship the new conception, it is only a symbol, a metaphor for the larger reality you wish to embrace. May your metaphorical life be like a flower opening up to new understandings.