

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

March 21, 2010

“Please Call Me By My True Names”

Rev. Kathy Duhon

Please Call Me By My True Names

“When the man limped into the doctor’s office, he was bent double, arms hanging, face contorted in pain. The woman across the waiting room looked at him as he struggled from the doorway to a seat and then inquired of him sympathetically, ‘Oh, dear. Arthritis with scoliosis?’

‘No,’ the man said back through gritted teeth. ‘Do-it-yourself with cinder blocks.’” Joan Chittister tells this story to illustrate the importance of naming things correctly – the patient will not be helped if the doctor treats him for something else.

How we name stuff in our world is powerful. I know of a recovering alcoholic who said that naming alcoholism as a disease was not useful to him. He needed to use the name ‘addiction’ because he felt it carried more judgment, and called him to greater responsibility with that power. I am not saying that his is the right or the only way of naming, only that he realized that naming carries power.

They used to call homosexuality a disease, which was powerful and painful and wrong. Naming can be harsh, cruel, a power for evil. Martina Navratilova said, “I came to live in a country I love; some people label me a defector. I have loved men and women in my life; I’ve been labeled ‘the bisexual defector’ in print. Want to know another secret? I’m even ambidextrous. I don’t like labels. Just call me Martina.” She didn’t like names that were wielded like a weapon of judgment.

I, and all women, used to be named men, brothers, mankind – that was powerful and painful and wrong – it deprived women of a sense of place, of belonging, and it signaled our second-class status – we weren’t even important enough for our gender to be fully acknowledged in language. This has changed tremendously, and inclusion is

important in our naming. Unitarian Universalists have been tremendous leaders in using inclusive language.

Whole races and nationalities of people have been given derogatory names, and this is no joke, though such names often bring snickers and laughs. We struggle, sometimes, to understand what *is* the appropriate name, but it is always a good bet to name people what they call themselves or what they say they want to be called.

It is even true that *how* we call a name is important – Muslim is respectful when we are referring to the people of a religion, but a term of oppression when we use the word in a context implying that all Muslims are fanatics or terrorists, or both. There is a name for a people that comes up a few times in the Christian Scriptures – Samaritans. We hear “the good Samaritan” and assume that this was the name of a people who were considered good, but actually this was a name of a people whom the Hebrews generally believed were dreadful and condemned. Samaritan was a derogatory name. And yet, the longest conversation of Jesus’ in the Bible is with a Samaritan woman at the well. He was clear that this name of a people, made onerous by hatefulness, would not deter his compassion, and instead the name Samaritan lives on in beloved memory.

When Nazis wanted to de-humanize Jews and other prisoners, they gave them numbers, stripping them of their names and acting as though their humanity was thus lessened. The way we are able to go to war, or commit other acts of violence, often relies upon our calling people enemies or other delimiting names – that is a way to take away their names, which is to compromise their humanity to us.

I heard the founder of a community arts program for disabled adults talk about one of the women who had disabilities and was able to name herself in her writing, and

she wrote: “I am a dancer.” Anyone watching her might not think of that awkwardly moving young woman as a dancer, but what a joy to self-name, to declare a part of one’s identity. Our names often develop from self-identity. Native American names captured something of the unique spirit of the person, with animal names and adjectives.

Professions were passed down in families, along with the name: Baker, Smith, Wheelwright – I even knew a Dr. Bookbinder. Who are you? Do you name yourself by what you love, what you have a passion for? Are you a writer, artist, activist, peacemaker?

As we go through life, others name us. *Our* family has gone through numerous nicknames for everyone. I love nicknames – they give us an intimate view of someone. I knew girls who were named “Funny”, “Junior” and “Blue”. I knew boys who were named “Doodle”, “Beastie” and “Pooh”. Most of the time, we drop such names as we mature. We also change from Susan to Sue, David to Dave, Mandy to Amanda, and Bobby to Robert. When my nephew started college, he decided to go by his first name, when we had always called him by his middle name. Adulthood is marked, at times, by our being able to claim the right to name or re-name ourselves, usually just a simple adjustment, from the childish to the mature, and always, a claim for a better understanding of who we are to the world.

I remember claiming that one nickname for me could only be used by my boyfriend, and it wasn’t “Honeycakes” or anything too romantic. He called me “Kat”, and I liked it, but when a mutual friend tried it out, I wouldn’t let him – it felt like my boyfriend’s special name for me, a sign of his love for me, and my letting someone refer to me as a feline was a definite sign of me giving him power.

The ancient Middle Eastern view was that knowing someone's name was a way of having power over the person, which comes up a few times in the Bible. Actually, that is still true to some extent, as Frederick Buechner explains. He writes, "When I tell you my name, I have given you a hold over me that you didn't have before. If you call it out, I stop, look, and listen whether I want to or not."

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God supposedly names the first person "Adam", which is actually just the word that means humankind. Adam names all the rest of creation in this myth, which is to say that we humans have the power of naming our world, a responsibility that goes along with our stewardship. In the book of Genesis, Jacob wrestles with an angel, and he tells this divine presence his name, only to be renamed by the angel "Israel", which means "The one who strives with God" or "God strives". When Jacob/Israel asks for the angel's name, the heavenly being will not give it, for that would be giving away power.

But about that re-naming – it is common in the Bible. Abraham and Sarah were originally Abram and Sarai, renamed Abraham – meaning "ancestor of a multitude" – and Sarah – meaning "princess". Maybe these function like our nicknames – a personal, intimate glimpse at the founders of the religion. The miracle child of their old age and barrenness is named Isaac, which means "He laughs", which was their basic response to the idea of Sarah becoming pregnant in her very old age. Biblical names also sometimes just mean something, like "Pleasant" or "Bitter". These may be clues that the writers know they are dealing in the truth of mythic stories, not history, and that they want the readers and listeners to know it too. If we were told the story of Fussbudget and Longface, and their lawyer from the firm of "Dewey, Cheatum, and Howe", we'd know

that the names told a story that had powerful truth, but not the actual facts. And this was true in the Bible.

But back to the Biblical names and the understanding that giving one's name gave the other person power over you. When Moses relates his experience with God as being one in which he understands that he is given a name for God, this is huge. We heard this in Exodus 3:14 – the “Popeye passage”, as I call it (Remember Popeye always said, “I yam what I yam”). God says, “I am what I am”, or “I am who I am” or “I will be what I will be” or just “I am”. In Biblical Hebrew, no vowels are used, so it's hard to know the exact meaning sometimes, especially the tense, but the consonants rendered into English with vowels added becomes the term “Yahweh” or “Jehovah”. This is not a typical name, but more of a statement of theology. God is being-ness. God is not an object, but a subject and a verb. Moreover, Yahweh, I am what I am, is powerful, and not in the usual way at that time – not by hoarding power. This divine power is shared, symbolized by the giving of the name. That is why Moses is considered such a powerful leader – he has the divine spirit within. His “I am” is joined with “I am what I am.” Being able to name the source of one's power, and that it is universal, is the great legacy of the Hebrew religion. Although, ... they thought it was too powerful, and soon enough whenever they saw the word Yahweh, the “I am what I am” name, they said “LORD”. Yahweh is considered too powerful to name in Judaism.

I wonder if the hesitancy to *say* the name “I am what I am” was part of the problem, for it sounds almost heretical – it sounds like you are proclaiming yourself God. You are reading along in the Scriptures and come to the part that says “Yahweh is my Shepherd” and you're actually saying “I am what I am” is my Shepherd” – you and the

Divine are one and the same? No wonder they substituted “The LORD is my Shepherd.” But maybe that was part of the point, part of the inspiration received by Moses – the power of the sacred lies within.

Early Unitarians spoke about the “divine spark within”, which may have been related to their study of Hinduism and the concept of Atman, the innermost essence and powerful universal self. Today we sing about “The Spirit of Life” – naming a sense that we can bring within ourselves something of ultimate meaning.

Let me tell you a story from the mid-1990’s in Unitarian Universalism – that is when we finally got around to establishing an International group for the diverse forms which Unitarianism and Universalism had taken around the world, from Transylvania to the Khasi hills of India to Kenya and the Philippines. When they worked on a covenant, something they could all sign, the issue of God came up, as it does among us in the States at times. The greatest protesters about using God were Scandinavians, apparently, who could not, in good faith, sign a covenant under God, because they were clear about their atheism. The Transylvanians, who actually have bishops – I have met two –, could not bring back to their people a covenant that did not name the Supreme Being about which their lives were centered. Someone suggested using the term “Spirit of Life” instead of God, and everyone was fine with that. It translated to God, literally, for the Transylvanians, and the Scandinavians found it large enough to include their understanding of religion.

‘I am what I am’ is a name that sounds like a statement of power – my God is so powerful that this Spirit of Life is in me; I am powerful then too. Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson sometimes spoke of God as the Over-soul, which was part of his soul. He heard

the 'I am what I am' as Over-soul in his soul, in everyone's soul, what we might call today "Spirit of Life".

Back to the importance of naming – you know that what we do not name gets short shrift in our lives. If we don't name racism, or any other oppression, it does not exist for us and we are therefore not able to confront it in its real forms. If we don't name our feeling of love for someone in our lives, they may not know it as fully as if we call it out. If we don't name stress for what it is, we are likely to ignore it and get sick in any of a number of ways. If we don't name what is deepest in our hearts, what does that mean for our lives?

Emerson said, "A person will worship something," and many have said the equivalent. If you do not deliberately name what is most precious to you, and seek it and love it and serve it, then you may be in danger of unconsciously, subconsciously, following something much less worthy. As Bob Dylan said, "you're gonna' have to serve somebody" [or something]. That's what we do; it's in our nature. We serve our stuff or our ego or our country or our past or our addictions or the internet or whatever is claiming our spirits. How much better it would be if we name what is really at the heart of our lives, and try to live from that center.

You may or may not name what is most precious to you, what is at the heart of your lives, "God" or "Goddess" or any of the names that confer divinity. I am a theist. I have been an atheist at different points in my life, and at times an agnostic and a doubter.

Sometimes, when I try to understand what is most precious, when I want to name the center of power for me, I call it the Soul of the World. Sometimes I name the Spirit of Life or the Creative Source or the All in All or the Holy or sometimes I just say God.

What do you name that center for you? Gandhi sometimes called it Truth. The Bible sometimes calls God Love. Is Justice or Peace or Joy or the Universe Itself what you seek and love and serve? It's hard to keep seeking and loving and serving it if you don't have a name for it. Seriously.

Maybe we have to go back to the beginning and remember to name ourselves, for we are the ones who are experiencing this opening, which for lack of a better phrase, Mel Brooks called "something bigger than Phil". We are our own entities and we are also part of the whole, the interconnected web of all existence. We are all "I am what I am" and we are also all together in a larger sense of being.

Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh has written a remarkable poem, called, "Please Call Me By My True Names" in which he identifies with all. All that is joyful and horrible, beautiful and ugly – he is at one with the universe, or at least that's where he believes the truth resides. The poem finishes this way:

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and my laughs at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.
Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion.

What is our true name, our true names? If we are called by a true name, that is powerful for our lives. Is it also "I am what I am", the sacred being-ness that embraces all from within, the Spirit of our Lives that makes us one and compassionate? It seems to me that this is where Buddhism and Judaism and Christianity meet, and where Unitarian

Universalists tend to find truth and meaning. Our true name is the Spirit of Life. Our true name is Buddha, awakened to truth and compassion. Our true name is Moses, proclaiming the power within and beyond. Our true name is Everyone, which, by the way, is what Jesus called himself. He said, “I am the Son of Man” in the oldest layers of the Christian Scriptures, not “I am the Son of God” – a later addition – and the “Son of Man” was a phrase at the time which meant “everyone, anyone”. Jesus named himself by a true name when he said “I am Everyone.”

What is our true name? The reading from the prophet Isaiah that we heard today is a strong one. It gave people a sense of being named, loved and belonging. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” Perhaps a true name for us is the name that says we belong, that embraces our oneness with the all in all, that is powerful, that lives and breathes compassion and loving kindness. There is a name that has been used many times and in many places for Unitarian Universalist congregations and has been embraced by many others as well, including Martin Luther King, Jr. That name is Beloved Community. I have called you by your true name and it is good – you are the Beloved Community. You are Beloved.

Amen.