

~~SCAM~~  
THEOLOGY

of being connected to every thing.

## Getting over dualism

by Myriam Renaud

Many UUs reject  
the separation of  
the spiritual and  
the material.

WHEN I ASKED SIRI, THE IPHONE'S new virtual personal assistant, if she believed in God, she punted by answering: "I believe in the separation of spirit and silicon." I tried to corner Siri with the follow-up question, "Yeah, but what *is* spirit?" only to confirm that Siri isn't much help with religious questions.

The separation of the spiritual from the material, each in tension with the other, is an old and well-established idea—Siri could invoke it to avoid offense—but it results in a dualism that not every Unitarian Universalist accepts.

Many UU pagans agree with the pagan teacher and writer **Starhawk**. Spirit and flesh are one. In Starhawk's poetic *theology* (*thea* is Greek for "goddess"), the Goddess—the source of wonder, joy, and delight—manifests herself in the whole of the natural order. Nothing about us is set apart from her; our being, our lives, our world are the Goddess, immanent. In *The Spiral Dance*, Starhawk writes, "Matter sings."

Starhawk practices the Faery tradition of witchcraft, which recognizes a "God Self" within, or what she calls "the ultimate and original essence, the spirit that exists beyond time, space, and matter." The God Self is "our deepest level of wisdom and compassion"—it "is conceived of as both male and female" because their opposite (but not opposed) energies balance each other.

Like Starhawk, **Margaret Fuller** (1810–1850), a Unitarian, essayist, and prominent Transcendentalist, sought the Goddess within, but in contrast to Starhawk's ecstatic paganism, Fuller's path was one of suffering and solitude.

Aspiring to the self-reliance championed by her friends Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Fuller wanted, above all, religious self-determination. Her innermost self, she believed, had been warped by the male-dominated teachings of Unitarian Christianity. The masculine Christ had to be deposed from his place at her center before her female divine (the Goddess of her poem "Leila") could emerge. She described this agonizing process in "Raphael's Deposition



from the Cross." Other writings reflected this as well—Fuller scholar Jeffrey Steele observes that her 1840–1844 poems focused on the tomb and on "spiritual death and resurrection, psychological burial and rebirth."

Through her pain, Fuller expected to give birth to a transfigured self, a spiritual child born of a "sacred marriage" between the masculine and feminine aspects of her being. Thus freed, she hoped to achieve a life of harmony with the genderless central soul—the God of Emerson's understanding.

Snapping back to contemporary times, we turn to **the Rev. Dr. Galen Guengerich**, whose God-Spirit is already and always genderless. Guengerich, senior minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City and a popular UUA General Assembly speaker, describes God not as separate from the world but as an experience—"the experience of being connected, ultimately, to everything."

Drawing on the process thought of twentieth-century philosopher **Alfred North Whitehead** (1861–1947), Guengerich holds that God is refuge, hope, and possibility. Our loves, joys, sufferings, and sorrows are preserved for eternity, "woven into the harmony" of God, the "completed whole." Because nothing we say or do is lost to the ages, every moment is meaningful. And Spirit, or God, serves as the "ground of novelty, the source of possibility," beckoning us with a desire for a more fulfilling tomorrow.

Go ahead, ask Siri: "What does spirit mean?" She'll explain that spirit is an alcoholic beverage—

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and last page

# Primal Reverence

*Reverence is an organic human experience  
that requires no supernatural explanations.*

by Kendyl Gibbons

**T**HE SITUATIONS ARE SO FAMILIAR that they are pretty much clichés. You stand at the shore, with the waves beating out their rhythmic crash, and the water rushing almost to your feet, seeing nothing but a thin line of horizon where sea and sky meet. The distances suggest infinity, the ocean's unfathomable depth and power, its ceaseless, primordial force and mystery. The air, too, moves in a huge current, and the soaring gulls catch light on the back of their wings. Something within us unlatches and expands in that immensity, catching some hint of our finitude, the oneness of all life emerging from the sea's embrace eons ago, the sovereign beauty and freedom of so much overwhelming space and light and sound.

Perhaps for you it is the stars at night, somewhere beyond the reach of our puny, interfering city lights, the whole sky filled with uncountable rays originating from trillions of light-years away, planets and galaxies beyond imagining, made of the same stuff we are made of, and you stand amazed in the shower of brilliance. Or perhaps your taste runs to the deep forest, or the towering redwoods, or the stunning ribbons of color in the Grand Canyon, or the suspense and drama of a thunderstorm, or the reflection of sunset on a hidden lake, or even the first unfolding green of the garden, coming back to life after winter's severity, or the mystery of a pair of sky-blue robin's eggs.

Somewhere this planet has a show-stopper for you that takes your breath away and makes you tug on other people's sleeves to make them see what you see: the whirling autumn leaves with their wedding song of death and beauty; the heartbreaking call of the loon, or the wolf, or the whale; the nuzzling of newborn creatures after the labor of birth,

or the struggle of the monarch out of the chrysalis into unfamiliar wings. For me, it is waterfalls. I could stand all day, dumbstruck by the vision of such endless abundance, the living energy of creation poured out unceasingly before my eyes, seeming to promise a truth that something in the world, and therefore something in me, is never and can never be exhausted. It makes me want to weep, want to dance, want to fall on my knees and be one with whatever that is, in everlasting praise.

Let me promise you: As clearly as I am capable of knowing what I know, none of that has anything to do with Jesus. Or Buddha. Or silly people who want to burn assorted writings, or equally silly people who take violent exception to the burning of their favorite texts. The primal experience of reverence in and for the natural world precedes theology of any variety. It is an organic human experience that requires no supernatural explanations. Like everything else about the human condition, our aesthetic sensibilities are a product or a by-product of the evolutionary pressures that have shaped us for reproductive success in our particular ecological niche. If they have any advantage in themselves, why would it not be to help us appreciate our home planet, and find sustenance in its beauty? The visceral response of reverence is as real and as functional to the kind of creatures we are as our hunger, our fear, our sexual impulses, our protection of the young. And just as our hunger and our fear can make us cruel and dangerous, just as our sexuality and our parental concern can be perverted into destructive self-serving, so can our innate capacity for reverence be twisted into oppression and misery.

Perhaps the most essential tenet of liberal religion, across all mythologies and ritual vocabularies, is that each one of us is responsible for what we do with,

Bentley doctrine  
ECOME

Primal experience  
Bentley

and about, and because of that experience of reverence. It is not society's job, it is not our parents' job, it is not even ultimately the church's job or any minister's job, but yours alone, to decide how you will respond to that breathtaking beauty, which consists partly in the recognition that you and the world around you and the creative energy of the whole universe are embedded in the same source, and are in some profound way the same thing.

**T**HE PRIMAL EXPERIENCE OF REVERENCE also comes in the stories of human lives that move us with their courage, with their dedication to justice or beauty, with their embrace of sacrifice for some larger good. It is found in the story of Paul Rusesabagina, the Rwandan hotelkeeper who risked his life to shelter his countrymen from genocide at the hands of their neighbors. It is in the story of Harriet Tubman, leading her fellow slaves to freedom. It is in Gandhi's witness against the brutalities of British occupation in India. It is in the endurance of Aung San Suu Kyi, living for decades under house arrest and threat of worse in order to offer a democratic alternative in Myanmar. It is in the stunning mercy of Nelson Mandela, leading South Africa's reconciliation after generations of apartheid violence and oppression.

It is in every mother who has ever gone hungry so that her children might eat, in every soldier who has ever died so that his comrades might live, in every rescue worker who ran up the stairs of the World Trade Center on that awful day. It was in Michael Servetus, who gave himself to the flames rather than deny the freedom and truth of his conscience. And it was in the life of a radical Jewish peasant who called for a community of love and justice that took no account of Roman authority and followed his scorn for oppressive power to the cross. There may be a little bit about Jesus in this one, but he's not alone, not by a long shot.

One of these stories, or one of the thousands like it, brings a lump to your throat. Somewhere there is a hero—living or dead, close or distant, historical or mythologized—a hero of conscience or mercy, of generosity or duty, whose story whispers to your secret heart, "This is the life you were made for; this is the kind of person you ought to be. Reach for this. Grow into this. Prepare yourself for the moment, you know not when or how it may come, that you will be offered a choice between the nobility that is possible, and the sleepwalking path of least resistance. Learn courage; learn wisdom. Practice the highest values you know. Be ready."

That whisper, too, is reverence. That lump in your

throat is the counterpart of the gasp elicited by nature's breathtaking beauty and power. Neither one has anything to do with an old man sitting on a cloud with a long beard keeping score. For heaven's sake, let go of that picture. Even if you are a believer in God, that portrait does your belief no justice. In the name of all that is holy, set that image aside, and start over, with the reverence that is real for you. Perhaps in time it may lead you back to the story of Jesus and the Christian God, and you will, as T.S. Eliot put it, "arrive where you started, and know the place for the first time." But if not, if that place turns out not to be the home of your soul, then welcome. Welcome to this larger, longer, more pathless journey that we Unitarian Universalists, we humanists, we religious liberals share. I promise: You will not be alone.

So many of our inherited religious traditions want to put the cart before the horse. They want to start with the vocabulary of ritual and the structures of belief before we have a chance to reflect on what it is that actually calls forth the experience of reverence in our bodies and minds, our hearts and consciences. Without that primal experience, all the rest is hearsay; it's all rote and drudgery and guilt. No wonder we resist it, reject it, find it full of hypocrisy and arbitrary, meaningless rules. No wonder the skeptical mind and contorted conscience rebel, and contend that it must all be nonsense. Good for the mind and the conscience. Good for the heart that will not embrace merciless virtue or saccharine piety. Good for the body that will not deny its hunger, or kneel to authority, or dance for the sake of a rumor. It seems to me that skepticism is actually the most reverent posture there is: the longing to know for ourselves, not to be misled; the willingness to take responsibility for discovering what, if anything, might be actually worthy of our worship, and to give our reverence to nothing less.

We are not skeptics because nothing is sacred. No, we withhold our assent to unproven claims because integrity matters, because the real experience of reverence is so primal and so powerful that it must not be captured and exploited for lesser purposes. Which is all very well, but how then shall we live? Must we simply wait for those flashes of beauty to arrive unbidden, for heroes of the human spirit to appear in our midst, inspiring us with their honor?

This brings us to the question of spirituality for skeptics. It is not just those who are confident of their orthodox certainties who might wish to cultivate the capacity for reverence, to expand the ways in which our lives are enriched through those breathless, lump-in-the-throat moments.