

## **A Rose by Any Name...**

**Prepared and Shared by Rev. Dianna Niemann-Harris**

**8-23-09 at Red River Unitarian Universalist Church**

Long before it was fashionable I had an inclusive language Jones. Like most of you, I was not born into Unitarian Universalism. Friday evening Kate Cherry, Kris and I were sitting on the deck solving the problems of the Universe. I discovered that not even Kate was a life long Unitarian. Nope. She and her family did not discover the UU until Kate was already in second grade! Wow. The journey to being UU's takes some time...a more leisurely and twisted route for some of us than for others. Despite the challenge of not being UU from conception, words and their meaning have been a life long passion for this convert.

It may help to know I grew up in a rural Missouri town of less than a thousand people...and it was a distinctively Christian town. Now Missouri in the 60's and early 70's did not have the fundamentalist flair of Texas, but by Godbywhatevername, we were CHRISTIAN. The good old fashioned Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost was on the town council and school board, showed up at every Lion's Club meeting and even sat in the stands at little league ball games! Oh it was not a closed community. There was religious variety in that wide spot in the road where I was reared. A person could be Evangelical and Reformed or Methodist or Nazarene or even Baptist (if they weren't too loud about it). Heck, we even let in a few Catholics and made 'em feel welcome by servind fish on Fridays for lunch at the public school!

In that profoundly Christian context, I was in Sunday School and church every week, a leader in the Youth Group and an enthusiastic (if not gifted) member of the Community Interfaith Choir (formed to occupy teens and keep them from sneaking beer or parking on the

backroads). As a preteen, I participated in the requisite rite of passage known as CONFIRMATION. This is a two year weekly class where the doctrines of the church were spelled out while young people memorized the exactly worded “answers” to Catechism questions. It was the Catechism that got me in trouble .

**Question 1. What should be the chief concern of man?**

Man’s chief concern should be to seek after the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Trouble already with the first question. Little Dianna’s hand shoots up in the air: “But Reverend Ring, shouldn’t that also be woman’s chief concern? And what if God isn’t a ‘HE’?”

“Dianna, “man” means men and women, boys and girls.” No response to the HE –God question.

**Question 10. What mystery concerning God does the Bible reveal?**

The Bible reveals to us the mystery that in the one God there are three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and that these three are one.

Hand up again. “Gosh, it seems to me there are lots more important mysteries than THAT in the Bible!”

“Okay class, let’s move on now to the next Catechism question.”

Several weeks went by with numerous questions and wonderings and challenges to the words. After a time we reached

**Question 81. What does God do for us when we come to him in repentance and faith?**

When we come to God in repentance and faith, he forgives us our sins for Jesus’ sake, counts the merit of Christ as belonging to us, and accepts us as sons of God.

Not even a hand up this time, the words are just blurted out, “But I can’t be a son of God...I’m a GIRL!”

Annoyed and harsh the response, “It means you too Dianna. Now shut-up and read it like it’s written!”

At age 12 going on 40, my spirit was troubled. The words didn’t include everybody. And I just knew the Great Mover and Shaker was BIGGER than the words printed in that book. Maybe I was Unitarian from birth after all!

The Universe must have had some reason for making things so hard on Reverend Ring...maybe he had some Karma to work through.

As a young and middle aged adult I had the good fortune of being active in the Christian church and attending seminary when inclusive people and God language were all the rage. It was a wonderful feeling and somehow seemed to redeem the “shut up and say it like it’s printed” of my youth. In a way, it even, dare I say the word, oh heck, I’ll risk it...in a way, there was justification for the questions and questionings of my youth.

If you had asked me when Unitian Universalism found me, or I found it or the Universe decided it was bloody well time for this earth creature to evolve, I would have said that my language was most inclusive. Over the past few months Suzanne Durland and LD Clark have been teaching me otherwise!

Heck, I thought my Diannaspeak term godbywhatevername (no capital G and written as one word) was about as inclusive as a person could get. Then LD mentioned in a conversation he really liked the concept behind the “word” but needed to mentally change it to “naturebywhatevername” to fit his belief system. Wow...who says you can’t teach an old Bia...uh female dog new tricks! Suzanne has helped me recognize words that have deep spiritual serenity and meaning to me like worship, preach, and spiritual communion offer only a narrow negative message to others.

So what’s in a name? What language of heritage is worthy of using, redefining, reclaiming? What words are best tossed to the winds and replaced with others? What I have discovered my friends is just like that Evangelical Catechism of my youth supposedly had THE correct answers, when anyone or anything proposes to be THE answer, it ain’t necessarily so. Often the “right” answer to a questions is there isn’t A right answer.

Some of us **need** times when some words others see as traditional, old fashioned or negative are used and celebrated. Some of us **need** times when those words are avoided and different, newer, fresher words are used. As Unitarian Universalists we are not who we claim to be when we take an “either/or” stand...inclusive means being radically “both/and” not only in our thinking and doing, but also in our speaking!

It helps me in language use sometimes to study word origins. The actual factual meaning of a word is often wildly different from the common use or meaning placed on it. Two particular words which have been cussed and discussed in various RRUU gatherings which fit this category are the word “worship” and the word “preach”.

“Worship” means literally "worth ship - giving worth to something, recognizing value or respect". In Education and the Spirit of Worship, Evelyn Underhill defines worship as: "The adoring acknowledgment of all that lies beyond us—the glory that fills heaven and earth. It is the response that conscious beings make to...the Eternal Reality from which they came forth...realized through religion, through nature, through history, through science, art, or human life and character." Its really not a bad word.

The word “Preach” dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and can be a transient or intransient verb. To Preach means “to urge acceptance or abandonment of an idea or course of action; to advocate earnestly; to deliver (as a sermon) publicly. Maybe we need to move away from preconceived notions about the word. Gosh, when we share a meal here we avoid wasting food, we recycle, we eat off reusable plates with real tableware and cloth napkins. Those simple acts are “preaching” environmental responsibility by being earnest advocates. I was taught in seminary to preach with or for others...and told to run not walk away from the pulpit if ever I preached to or at a congregation. Maybe “preach” isn’t a 4 letter word either!

Seems to me the real lesson is we the members and friends of Red River Unitarian Universalist church/fellowship/community (pick your favorite or add another) see and hear and

experience things in unique and passionate and individual ways. Well, duh, we sorta knew THAT already. A visitor at last week's Board meeting commented on a worship service he found empty and pointless...“just some pictures of flowers and not even any words spoken” seemed empty. That is okay. Others praised the same service as a spiritual oasis. That's okay too. The nature of our gatherings is that certain weeks will speak profoundly to some and other weeks will deeply impact others.. On any given Sunday the time of reflection, the words used, the style of leadership will effect different people in different ways, or not at all. That is how we are and WHO we are as a Unitarian Universalist body. Heck, if we wanted it all cut and dried and absolute we wouldn't be here...we'd be at the Evangelical and Reformed church in Wright City, Missouri memorizing Catechism questions and answers! May it not be so!