“Praying with Purpose”

A Sermon by Rob Keihan
Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville, MD, on April 11, 2011

On one hand, I’m sure that everyone here has some feelings of respect, or at least tolerance, for Islam. Whether we know a Muslim or few personally, feel empathy for the horrible treatment of American Muslims since 9/11, or affirm the value of religious freedom generally, I feel like we could generate many positive thoughts and feelings and Muslim people and the Islamic faith.

On the other hand, I’m also quite sure that we could easily generate a long list of concerns and objections.

In the last few years, I’ve had the opportunity to study Islam in some depth, which has included a close reading of the whole Qur’an and also a seminary course taught by a female Muslim scholar from Northern Virginia. While I went into these experiences expecting to learn a great deal, I wasn’t prepared for the other thing that would happen. And so it came as quite a surprise when I found myself deeply moved by the life and work of Mohammed, so much so that I became fiercely convinced that what he set out to do, and did, in 7th century Arabia, is tremendously applicable to the United States today, and, in many ways, to Unitarian Universalists in particular. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that Mohammed and Islam issues us an ethical and spiritual challenge that cuts right to the heart of who we are; and not just who we are in an abstract sense, but who we are as liberal religious people living in the United States today.

In her book A History of God: the 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, author Karen Armstrong describes Mohammed as a man of “exceptional genius.” By the time of his death in 632, “he had managed to bring nearly all the tribes of Arabia into a new united community, or “ummah.” (135). I think she’s is right: what he did was absolutely brilliant. Here’s some of his story, as told by Armstrong.

The year is approximately 610. Mohammed ibn ‘Abdullah is about 40 years old. He’s married to a successful businesswoman; they’re living a relatively comfortable life in Mecca. But Mohammed is discontent over what’s happening in Arab society. Just two generations earlier, Arab people had been nomadic. In recent years, however, Mohammed’s own tribe—the Quraysh—had prospered, which turned Mecca into the most important city in Arabia. In addition to being a center of religious practice, Mecca had become a center of trade and finance.

This made the Quraysh ridiculously wealthy, and in Mohammed’s view it was destroying the cooperative, communal culture that used to exist among his people. In short, he thought that the Quraysh were making a new religion out of money, and he feared that it would destroy the tribe (132).
Karen Armstrong writes: “In the old nomadic days the tribe had had to come first and the individual second: each one of its members knew that they all depended on one another for survival. Consequently they had a duty to take care of the poor and vulnerable people in their ethnic group. Now individualism replaced the communal ideal and competition had become the norm” (133). Sound a little familiar, doesn’t it?

Anyway, religion and culture and politics were all deeply intertwined in those days, so whatever solution Mohammed pursued would need to have a religious element to it. Eventually, he became convinced that in order to overcome the egotism and greed there needed to be a transcendent value at the center of people’s lives. (133). There needed to be something that unified the people and reminded them of their obligation to each other, and most especially of their obligation to the poor and vulnerable.

According to Mohammed, he was visited by an angel of God and commanded to recite. He described the initial experience as terrifying, and years passed between his first encounter and the time he started preaching publicly. Whether or not he was actually visited by an angel of God, the end result does border on the miraculous: a man who can neither read nor write produces some of the most beautiful poetry ever composed in the Arab language, and within twenty years he has essentially united his people.

Unite is the operative word here. The chapter in Armstrong’s book is actually titled “Unity: the God of Islam.” The text of the Qur’an, and Mohammed’s life in general, are focused on this theme of unity. And it’s a specific kind of unity. First, let me tell you what kind of unity it is not. It is not unity around theological doctrine or creed. Instead, as in Judaism, God was experienced as a moral imperative. (143). In practical terms, islam meant that Muslims had a duty to create a just, equitable society where the poor and vulnerable are treated decently (142).

I love the idea of God as a moral imperative. That’s the unity on which Islam is focused: the unity of ethical action. The main point of worshipping God in Islam, of praying to God, is to remind Muslims to be responsible and to be grateful.

And so ever since learning this I’ve been wondering what we can do, what we Unitarian Universalists can do, to remind us of our ethical values. Of course, this begs the question: do we really want to be reminded of our values? After all, it would require us to actually know what our values are, and then to endure the inconvenience of being reminded of said values at times other than Sunday morning or the occasional weeknight meeting. I mean, c’mon, spiritual practices that remind us of our values? Isn’t that awfully...religious?

To which I say, YES, it is absolutely religious, and yes, Unitarian Universalism is a religion. And you know what? I think Unitarian Universalism is a transformative, spirit-growing, justice-seeking, life-affirming, world-changing religion. And we have enormous potential to grow and thrive if we are willing to take our faith and take our power seriously.

You and I wouldn’t be here today if we didn’t have some commitment to Unitarian Universalist values, right? And for good reason: our religious values, which tend to be
expressed as ethical obligations, are compelling. They’re great values, both for what they offer us as individuals, for what they offer our congregations, and for what they help us do in the larger world.

In sum, they are values worth reminding ourselves of. I’ve always felt like one of the best things about Unitarian Universalism is that it’s not just a Sunday morning, you go because you feel like you should kind of faith. Because of our inclusive theology, because of our focus on living joyful meaningful lives here and now on earth, ours is a faith that can and I believe should be lived all day every day.

So what would it look like, for example, to have a spiritual practice that reminded us that every person has inherent worth and dignity? Consider the greeting and response used by many Muslims: the initiator says “Assalamu Aleikom,” which translates roughly as “peace be unto you;” then the responder says “Wa Aleikom Assalam,” which is peace be unto you also.

I don’t think that we should copy this exactly, but it’s not a bad idea either. I mean, what’s a simpler, kinder way to show respect and care for another person than greeting them with “peace be unto you?” It’s beautiful.

Quite honestly, I think we would do well to learn from Islam. And notably, pretty much all of the Muslim spiritual practices involve more than just words. Take the daily prayers, for example. As an embodied reminder of their obligation to God, followers of Mohammed bow down in ritual prayer. The external, physical gesture of bowing was intended to cultivate a humble internal posture.

The Quraysh, however, were horrified when they saw people from their proud clan bowing down, as if they were slaves. They were so stridently opposed to the practice that early Muslims had to pray in secret. As Armstrong writes, “the reaction of the Quraysh showed that Mohammed had diagnosed their spirit with unerring accuracy” (142).

Given how much we Unitarian Universalists tend to live in our heads, it seems to me that we could really benefit from getting our bodies involved. And, I have to admit that my initial reaction to the thought of bowing down in prayer is not all that different from the Quraysh. I’m not horrified exactly, but there’s something about the idea that makes me deeply uncomfortable. Which may be exactly the point, and exactly why it’s necessary. Perhaps we should be willing to bow down to a transcendent value greater than our own self. Again, I don’t think that we should copy this exactly, but it’s not a bad idea either.

Even when Muslim spiritual practices involve mostly words, it’s words and music. While music was used in early Islam, as in early Judaism, because writing and literacy was rare, it still makes sense today because music affects us in entirely different ways than just words alone do. It can help us remember things, which is handy, but it also touches our emotions. Maybe it even touches our souls.
One of the reasons that Muslims know the Qur’an so well is that when it’s recited it’s sung. There are many people, I would guess thousands if not millions, who have memorized the entire Qur’an because they can sing it all. In just a moment, our worship associate Karen Malley is going to come forward and read a sura (chapter) from the Qur’an. In it you’ll hear an affirmation of economic justice, affirming the value of generosity and the consequences for being selfish. One note about the pronouns: the Qur’an is written in the first person, as if from God, and uses the “royal we,” so when you hear “we and “our” in this passage it’s actually just the singular God speaking.

After the text reading, we’ll hear the verse recited in the Islamic tradition, which means that it will be sung in Arabic. The reciter is Ahmad Saud, who I believe is about 10 years old. I encourage you to really open up to the recitation. Let it wash over you, and flow through you, and imagine how it could be a connection to your values and to your community.

READING

“Al Lail” (The Night)
Sura 92 of the Qur’an Translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy,

By the enshrouding night, by the radiant day, by His creation of male and female! The ways you take differ greatly. There is the one who gives, who is mindful of God, who testifies to goodness—We shall smooth his way toward ease. There is the one who is miserly, who is self-satisfied, who denies goodness—We shall smooth his way towards hardship, and his wealth will not help him as he falls.

Our part is to provide guidance—this world and the next belong to Us—so I warn you about the raging Fire, in which none but the most wicked will burn, who denied the truth and turned away. The most pious will be spared this—who gives his wealth away as self-purification, not to return a favor to anyone but for the sake of his Lord the Most High—and he will be well pleased.

RECITATION

“Al Lail” Recited by Ahmad Saud [link]

SERMON, continued

Did you feel a sense of connection? A sense of transcendence? Does it seem like something we could do in Unitarian Universalism?

If you’re suspicious, consider this: the hymn sung most widely in UU congregations; many of which sing it every Sunday, is Spirit of Life—a song written by its author, Carolyn McDade, explicitly as prayer. It came to her after a long day of challenging justice work, when she was feeling an acute need for reassurance and a reaffirmation of our values. I
personally love the phrase “Spirit of Life,” and can think of no other better way to summarize the transcendence at the heart of Unitarian Universalism.

_Spirit of Life_  
_Come unto me_  
_Sing in my heart_  
_All the stirrings of compassion_

_Blow in the wind_  
_Rise in the sea_  
_Move in the hand_  
_Giving life the shape of justice_

_Roots hold me close_  
_Wings set me free_  
_Spirit of life_  
_Come to me_  
_Come to me_

--Carolyn McDade

We sing together in church as a shared prayer, but there’s no reason we can’t sing it at other times as well. The same goes with our closing hymn, The Meditation on Breathing. Both are resources that we can use to remind us of our values and our community at any time of the day or week. Sing it by yourself in the shower or in the car on your commute. Sing it with your family. Sing it whenever you need it.

The same goes with lighting a chalice, or at least a candle. I wonder, how many of you have some kind of chalice at home? And how many of you light it regularly?

The chalice is another part of our communal faith that we can easily use it home for centering and sustenance. Mandy and I have a few at different places in the house. I tend to light a chalice at home or at work anytime I hear of a great joy or a great sorrow. Especially with sorrows, there’s often little if anything we can do in the short term to make a difference. Lighting a chalice is a simple, and I believe meaningful, way to acknowledge that something significant has happened; that we even though we can’t do anything about it we are aware and alive and connected.

One spiritual practice that works very well for Mandy and I is toasting before meals. Anytime we’re eating together, and most of the time when we’re eating with others, we take a moment to look each other in the eye and we toast to something. Sometimes our toast is giving thanks for the food; sometimes it’s appreciating friends old and new. Sometimes we just take a few deep breathes and toast silently. When we’re out having a drink together, we toast. When we have ice cream, we toast with it. One of our favorite things to do at breakfast is pick up our toast and toast to toast.
While it may be tempting to think that these acts of religious reminder are a new idea for us, the Rev. Rob Hardies, senior minister of All Souls Church in DC, recently wrote his doctoral dissertation on 18\textsuperscript{th} century Unitarians spiritual practices, including prayer, journaling, and meditation. So I’m not really advocating something new, I’m advocating something old.

I believe that our God—our Spirit of Life—is also moral imperative. It’s an imperative to economic justice, yes, and also to racial justice and sexual justice and environmental justice, among other things. It’s a commitment to affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It’s a commitment to values that are worth living \textit{and} worth being reminded of.

So let us pray with purpose, that we may act with purpose.

Amen.