"Four Faiths in a Modern World: Naturalism"
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode
October 10, 2004

(Note: To go immediately to the sermon, please click here.)

Poetry for Order of Service

> The coast hills at Sovranes Creek:
> No trees, but dark scant pasture drawn thin
> Over rock shaped like flame;
> The old ocean at the land's foot, the vast
> Gray extension beyond the long white violence;
> A herd of cows and the bull
> Far distant, hardly apparent up the dark slope;
> And the gray air haunted by hawks;
> This place is the noblest thing I have ever seen.
> No imaginable
> Human presence here could do anything
> But dilute the lonely self-watchful passion.
>
> (Robinson Jeffers, "The Place For No Story")

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history; blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Lighting the Chalice

> We are here to abet creation and to witness to it,
> To notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature
> So that creation need not play to an empty house.
>
> (Annie Dillard)

Introduction to Responsive Reading

I mentioned last week that with each of these four faiths I am speaking about in this sermon series I would be trying to identify a representative poet to go along with that faith. The choice for me this week as I speak about the Naturalism faith was an easy one, namely, the American poet Robinson Jeffers, whose work took me by storm 25 years ago.

Robinson Jeffers lived from 1887 to 1962, most of that time on the rugged and beautiful coastal area in Carmel, California, a thousand miles south from here on the Monterey Peninsula.

His poetry was rooted in that rugged place. In his poetry he tried to express his philosophy of life, a naturalistic one. Jeffers thought poetry had given away too much ground to prose and he wanted to reclaim the philosophical function of poetry.

I will be leaning heavily on his poems this morning in my explication of the naturalistic faith, beginning with this responsive reading, which consists of lines drawn from a number of his poems. Please note that the word "God" for him is to be equated with Nature or the Universe.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: To feel and speak the astonishing beauty of things: earth, stone, water, sun, moon, stars, plants, beasts, man, woman. Unbridled and unbelievable beauty covers the world.

CONGREGATION: To feel greatly, and understand greatly, and express greatly the hushed magnificence of things.

MINISTER: Look how beautiful are all the things that God does. God's signature is the beauty of things.

CONGREGATION: The greatest beauty is organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things.

MINISTER: However ugly the parts sometimes appear, the whole remains beautiful.

CONGREGATION: Love that, and not humans apart from that, or else you will share our pitiful confusions, or drown in despair when our days darken.

MINISTER: And know that the enormous invulnerable beauty of things is the face of God.

CONGREGATION: Worship it, give you hearts to it, labor to be like it.

ALL: And live gladly in its presence, and so die without grief or fear knowing it survives us.

(from the poems of Robinson Jeffers)

Introduction to reading

My reading this morning, like the responsive reading, is from the poetry of Robinson Jeffers. It's a narrative poem that expresses a philosophy of "ecstatic naturalism" - seeing through the surface of the natural into a depth dimension, seeing divinity in the natural.

The story this poem tells is set on the Monterey Peninsula near Carmel where Jeffers came in the early 1900's. If you visit his house in Carmel, which you can still do - it's open on weekends - you will see a number of cypress and eucalyptus trees on the streets nearby. These trees were planted and tended by the poet.

In this poem, titled "Oh, Lovely Rock," Jeffers recalls an experience on an overnight camping excursion with one of his sons and a friend of his son.

Reading

We stayed the night in the pathless gorge of Ventana Creek, up the east fork.
The rock walls and the mountain ridges hung forest on forest above our heads, maple and redwood,
Laurel, oak, madrone, up to the high and slender Santa Lucian firs that stare up the cataracts
Of slide rock to the star-color precipices.
We lay on gravel and kept a little camp-fire for warmth.
Past midnight only two or three coals glowed red in the cooling darkness; I laid a clutch of dead bay-leaves
On the ember ends and felted dry sticks across them and lay down again. The revived flame
Lighted my sleeping son's face and his companion's, and the vertical face of the great gorge-wall
Across the stream. Light leaves overhead danced in the fire's breath, tree-trunks were seen:

it was the rock wall
That fascinated my eyes and mind. Nothing strange: light-gray diorite with two or three slanting seams in it,
Smooth polished by the endless attrition of slides and floods; no fern nor lichen, pure naked rock. . .as if I were
Seeing rock for the first time. As if I were seeing through the flame-lit surface into the real and bodily
And living rock. Nothing strange. . .I cannot
Tell you how strange: the silent passion, the deep nobility and childlike loveliness: this fate going on
Outside our fates. It is here in the mountain like a grave smiling child. I shall die, and my boys
Will live and die, our world will go on through its rapid agonies of change and discovery; this age will die,
And wolves have howled in the snow around a new Bethlehem: this rock will be here, grave, earnest, not passive: the energies
That are its atoms will still be bearing the whole mountain above: and I, many packed centuries ago,
Felt its intense reality with love and wonder, this lonely rock.

"FOUR FAITHS IN A MODERN WORLD: NATURALISM"

Introduction

My sermon this morning is the third in a plan of five sermons based on an adult religious education curriculum of The Reverend Fred Campbell, a recently retired Unitarian Universalist minister, who found that in the 11 different Unitarian Universalist congregations he served over a period of 31 years there were four basic faiths in these congregations which he identified as Humanism, Naturalism, Mysticism, and Theism. Last week I spoke on "Humanism" and now this week I turn to "Naturalism."

Before I do, however, let me repeat something of what I said last week, namely, that to my mind these four faiths are not so much mutually exclusive of each other as they provide different frames, lenses, or paradigms through which one may view reality.

An analogy

Imagine, if you will, a house high on a hill with large windows on the four sides of the house opening to different vistas in the four directions. Moving from window to window you would frame a different vista in each of them.

Now, perhaps, there is one window that you prefer to look through, one view that most attracts your attention. Still, you would not imagine that this is the only window in the house or that what you see through this window constitutes the whole of what can be seen from the house.

Nor, perhaps, would you be so arrogant or supercilious as to say that this is the "best window" or the "best view" in the house. It may be the "best" for you - the most interesting, the most enjoyable, the most refreshing and energizing, the most spiritually sustaining. It may be the window with a view that seems to you to focus on the heart of things. It may be the window to which you would wish to invite your friends for a view: "Look, isn't the view through this window astonishingly wondrous and grand!"

For all of that, however, there may be other persons, who though appreciative of the view through your window, find that they are attracted to other windows and other views. After all, this house with its multiple windows allows for different vistas and visions. Same house, same reality, but the windows frame different views of that reality.

Thus, even though the views through the different frames are different, and even though they contrast with each other, they may be better considered as complementary rather than as contradictory to each other.

And, assuming that these are large windows in this house, it is possible to see some of the same objects from more than one window - there is some overlap. Nevertheless, even here, the objects seen would be observed from a different angle so that different parts of the objects may be illumined or hidden depending on the window through which you are viewing the scene.

For this sermon series the house on the high hill may be named, "The House with a 'Modern World-view'" - I say nothing at this time about other houses with differing other world-views - and the windows in this House are four in number: Humanism, Naturalism, Mysticism, and Theism.

I suggest they represent both overlapping and contrasting views that are better understood as complementary than contradictory to each other, views to be held in dynamic tension rather than adversarial opposition.

For example, the Naturalistic faith I will be talking about this morning doesn't necessarily deny or contradict the essential Humanistic values of which I spoke last Sunday, values such as the development of the human personality and human society, the importance of scientific inquiry, and the value of rational thought and open-ended search. The Naturalistic faith doesn't deny these things, but the emphasis of Naturalism, its trajectory and tone, is quite different. Quite clearly, it is a different frame of reference, a different window, through which one is looking.

Humanism and Naturalism: similarities and contrasts

Let me get at the Naturalist faith by contrasting it, first of all, with the Humanist faith.

The two faiths begin with some very basic agreements. There is significant overlap in what can be seen through the two windows.

Both, for example, focus on *this* concrete reality, this "manifest" world and universe. The views through these two windows may take you far into the distance where you can no longer clearly make out what the objects are because of their smallness in relationship to you, but looking out of these windows the sun is shining brightly; there are no clouds, mists, or fogs to affect one's vision. That is to say, in these frames of reference there is no attempt to look for or to imagine other realms or realities, no attempt to look behind or beyond or beneath or within this concrete, material, and natural realm.

Additionally, both of these perspectives recognize the vastness of time and space, as well as the immense evolutionary journey this universe has been on.

Further, both recognize the littleness of the human being in this larger context. And, neither believes that the cosmos "intended" the human species, or that it favors the human species or any particular individuals or groups within that species.

On these things there is straight-out agreement. The overlap of the views is such that you see pretty much the same thing. But after that the faiths, the frames of reference, can be quite different.

The focus, energy, devotion, and reverence of the Humanist faith, as I said last Sunday, is oriented to individual humans and to the human community as a whole with the goal of fully developing the human personality and of "humanizing" human society, of bringing the "Kingdom of God" to *this* earth - a vision of love, justice, and peace for all peoples, in our time, on this earth, and through human will and effort.

The Naturalist faith would not wish to deny the meaning, value, or beauty of this vision. Nor is the human community unimportant in Naturalism, not at all, for this is the particular part of nature to which we humans belong.

But what catches one in the Naturalist faith is the sense that even though one belongs to the human community by virtue of recent birth, one belongs even more to the larger community of Nature through a more ancient and primal birth.

Thus, the Naturalist faith locates the meaning, value, and purpose in life as primarily centered in the

natural world. This is where its heart is.

The Naturalist faith is related to the seventh principle of the Unitarian Universalist covenant of affirmations that speaks of a "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

But "respect" seems a little weak here. It is *reverence* for the life of Nature. It is seeing and feeling in the deepest possible way one's relationship, kinship, fellowship, and partnership with Nature.

The connection with Nature is the primary connection. This is what sustains one. This is where one's devotion, reverence, and love are located.

Nature is what is ultimate. In traditional religious language, Nature is "divine."

And if there is a God-concept in a Naturalistic paradigm, it is most likely a pantheistic concept, one in which God and Nature coincide. Divinity is, as it were, spread out in nature, even dissolved into it. If you were to diagram this pantheistic concept of God using two circles, the one circle representing God and the other circle representing Nature, you would only see one circle, for the one would be directly set upon the other.

To one of a Naturalistic faith, Nature is what one serves. The task of life, then, is to appreciate, to praise, to protect, and to enhance the life of Nature.

It is out of a Naturalistic faith, for example, that the philosophy of "deep ecology" arises with its strong urge to protect the "natural" life of the Earth from the "unnatural" ravages of the human form of life.

And it desires to protect the Earth not, first of all, because a good and healthy Earth enhances human life, though it would seem to serve that purpose as well, but rather one of a Naturalistic faith desires to protect the Earth because that is its primary spiritual connection. Though the human species is valued as a part of the Earth, it is the Earth itself as the larger whole that is more valued.

As with Humanism, a Naturalistic faith values scientific investigation and the careful study of the natural world. But, again, the primary interest in a Naturalistic faith is not first of all for the technology that can be created by which to attempt to improve human life but rather for the possibility of a greater appreciation of our natural world.

The place of the human in Naturalism

Those of a Naturalist faith may sometimes feel that those of a Humanist faith overemphasize and overestimate the value and place of the human in the scheme of things.

For example, the Naturalistic poet, Robinson Jeffers, of whom I spoke earlier, was so disturbed by what he saw as the overemphasis on the human creature that he developed a philosophy he called, "**In**humanism."

It's probably not the wisest thing in the world to name your philosophy on the negation of what disturbs you, but that's what he did. A number of his long narrative poems relate stories of human incest, a symbol for him of our species being too self-involved.

On his less disturbed days Jeffers did find a place for humans in the scheme of things. He envisioned a truer humanity in which humans would be less incestuously turned inward on themselves and more turned outward toward the beauty and value of the natural world.

> Civilized, crying how to be human again; this will tell you how.
> Turn outward, love things, not men, turn right away from humanity.
> Let that doll lie. Consider if you like how the lilies grow,
> Lean on the silent rock until you feel its divinity
> Make your veins cold, look at the silent stars, let your eyes
> Climb the great ladder out of the pit of yourself and man.
> Things are so beautiful, your love will follow your eyes;

> For what we love, we grow to it, we share its nature. At length
> You will look back along the stars' rays and see that even
> The poor doll humanity has a place under heaven.
> Its qualities repair their mosaic around you, the chips of strength
> And sickness; but now you are free, even to become human,
> But born of rock and the air, not of a woman.
>
> (Robinson Jeffers, "Signpost")

One of a Naturalist faith may feel, more than most, the need to get away sometimes from the human world: to leave all things that have the human scent upon them and to get out to some place on our Earth where there no are lights, no sound of engines whirring, no smokestacks spewing, no sign, if possible, of any human civilization. To do this brings cleansing from human over-indulgence, clarity for what is real, and refreshment so you can again live a "human" life.

Those of a Naturalist faith put the emphasis on what Nature is and what it can do. And the praise is directed to Nature as a whole, not so much to the human as a part. In this larger context and by contrast, the human enterprise is diminished and finds its proper place.

Out of a Naturalistic perspective there can be an odd comfort - perhaps you have felt it - in the experience of one's finiteness and littleness in relation to this larger reality. The vastness of time and space absolutely wipes you out, but it's okay.

It's okay in the way that being in the Grand Canyon is okay. You realize as you gaze upon this "grand canyon" that one day you may be a tiny particle of the stone that makes up one of the multiple layers of this Canyon. But as you behold its grandeur and beauty, how can you raise a complaint?!

So it is that the Naturalist window on reality contains and promotes the long view of things so that you understand that you are connected to a larger process, connected to the natural life of things, their comings and goings, their births and deaths, the ebb and flow. These are but the two sides of one larger reality.

With one's vision thus informed, one of a Naturalist faith sees one's own end in this larger context and can willingly give over the temporal and temporary body to the larger body of Nature when that time comes.

Late in his life the poet Robinson Jeffers wrote a somewhat humorous poem titled "Vulture" about the giving over of his body to the larger body of Nature. You won't find Jeffers being humorous often, but in this poem there's a display of some of his humor. The poem was found in his effects after his death and published posthumously.

> I had walked since dawn and lay down to rest on a bare hillside
> Above the ocean. I saw through half-shut eyelids a vulture wheeling high up in heaven,
> And presently it passed again, but lower and nearer, its orbit narrowing. I understood then
> That I was under inspection. I lay death-still and heard the flight-feathers
> Whistle above me and make their circle and come nearer.
> I could see the naked red head between the great wings
> Bear downward staring. I said, "My dear bird, we are wasting time here.
> These old bones will still work; they are not for you." But how beautiful he looked, gliding down
> On those great sails; how beautiful he looked, veering away in the sea-light over the precipice. I tell you solemnly
> That I was sorry to have disappointed him. To be eaten by that beak and become part of him, to share those wings and those eyes -
> What a sublime end of one's body, what an enskyment; what a life after death.
>
> (Robinson Jeffers, "Vulture," *The Beginning and the End*)

The task in Naturalism

Lastly, briefly, what is the task of one of Naturalist faith?

I've spoken of the possibility of protecting the Earth. That is an ethic that emerges "naturally" from a Naturalistic perspective.

But there is also a task that is not so much ethical as ontological, that is to say, having to do with "being" rather than "doing."

Again, Jeffers takes the lead here speaking of us humans as being "sensory organs of God." (Remember that God and Nature coincide for him.) He says, we are "nerve-endings [that] Enrich the consciousness of the one being Who is all that exists." Our mission, he says, is to be "eyes and ears" of the universe.

Or, as Annie Dillard has expressed it in the words used for the lighting of this morning's chalice:

> We are here to abet creation and to witness to it,
> To notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature
> So that creation need not play to an empty house.

Or, again, the poet Mary Oliver speaks of us humans as being a "rich lens of attention" saying that she feels when she isn't attending to Nature in this way she is off-center.

> This is the earnest work. Each of us is given only so many mornings to do it -
> to look around and love
> the oily fur of our lives,
> the hoof and the grass-stained muzzle.
> Days I don't do this
> I feel the terror of idleness,
> like a red thirst.
>
> (from "The Deer," *House of Light*)

Conclusion

Let me conclude my delineation of the Naturalistic faith with a final poem, again from Robinson Jeffers, words written as a tribute to his wife, Una, following her death in 1950.

His wife was about the only human being with whom the poet was able to deeply connect. He paid her, what for him would be the ultimate compliment, saying, "You were more beautiful/ Than a hawk flying." (from "Hungerfield")

And when she died he could hardly stand it. As much as he related to and was sustained by the natural world apart from humanity, he, too, needed the communion and community of that part of nature that was closest to him, the human part of nature, even if was essentially only one person. He buried his wife's ashes in the flower garden next to their house in Carmel, California.

This poem, addressed to Una two years after her death, speaks of her human consciousness in relation to the "consciousness of the earth" and the "consciousness of the universe," which begins to prepare us for the mystical and theistic frames of reference about which I will be speaking in the next two weeks.

The poem is titled, "Whom should I write for, dear, but for you?"

> Whom should I write for, dear, but for you? Two years have passed,
> The wound is bleeding - new and will never heal.
> I used to write for you, and give you the poem
> When it was written, and wait uneasily your verdict...
> but now, to whom?
> - As for you,
> You have gone up with the flame to the high air; and that pitiful bone-ash,

Not buried deeply, lives in bright flowers In the garden you loved. - As for the precious human consciousness -
(Yours was most precious to me, not mine, not theirs)
I think it is taken into the great dream of the earth; for this dark planet
Has its own consciousness, from which yours came,
And now returns: as the earth's consciousness,
Half-separate for a time, will return at length
To the whole galaxy; and when that perishes
To the whole endless universe - that is, to God,
Who will make all things new.
But for me, here, the momentary loneliness
Is hard to bear.

Concluding Hymn

Our concluding hymn is number 79, "No Number Tallies Nature Up," that is, you can't grasp or measure Nature. The tune is lovely and these words from Ralph Waldo Emerson in target with today's message. I count Emerson as essentially a mystic in this four-faith scheme - more about that next week - but his is a "naturalistic mysticism," very close to the "ecstatic naturalism" of a Robinson Jeffers.

Benediction

We cannot be sure of life for one moment;
We can, by force and self-discipline, by many refusals and a few assertions, in the teeth of fortune assure ourselves
Freedom and integrity in life or integrity in death. And we know that the enormous invulnerable beauty of things
Is the face of God. Live gladly in its presence, and so die without grief or fear knowing it survives us.

(Robinson Jeffers, from "Nova," slightly adapted)

Extinguishing the Chalice

Now may peace be in our hearts,
and understanding in our minds,
may courage steel our wills,
and the love of truth forever guide us.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on October 10, 2004. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

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