

Greenfield Group Anchor Report
Spring 2010 Convocation~ Eros and Spirituality
Rev. Amy Bowden Freedman

Monday, April 26:

As members of the Greenfield Group approached Greenfield, NH, warm sunshine broke through overcast skies. Given that the UU Ministerial Convocation was held in the Fall of 2009, a full year had passed since our last gathering. This was our second time meeting at the Barbara Harris Conference Center. For some who were absent in the Spring of 2009, this was the first visit to BHC and a welcome reunion with the group.

Josh Pawelek served both as our Moderator and Happy Hour host. Josh confessed to being more nervous about the drinks and snacks that he had brought for refreshments than serving as Moderator. Truly, he handled both tasks with his characteristic ease and good humor.

Our Convocation convened at 3:00pm. Each person had three minutes to check-in about his or her personal and professional life. Struggling children, grief over the loss of loved ones, infidelity, divorce, managing health issues, aging parents, discernment of vocation, building expansion and repairs are just some of the challenges that were named. Joys included watching children find their way, time spent with family, published writings, and growth in our religious communities.

Twenty-two members and one saint, Dick Fewkes, attended this Convocation. Notably absent was Mary Harrington who has resigned from the Group and moved to Maine to be with her family for the final phase of her life. The decision to move to BHC came from our desire to include Mary in our gatherings for as long as possible given her challenges with ALS. Our hearts are with her.

Other members who sent regrets include Tony Lorenzen who could not travel for financial reasons; Martha Niebanck who needed medical attention for pain in her shoulder and hip; Tracey Sprowl-Jenks who had crises both at home and church; Rosemary Bray-McNatt who gave no response to inquiries; Carol Rosine who is home mending from hip replacement. In letting us know about her recovery, Bob explained that he with his new Titanium hip was ahead of Carol in the healing process. Plus as he recounted his doctor was a rocket scientist, "Chop, chop, chop, sew, sew, sew...Next!" May we all be so fortunate!

Our Moderator reminded us that topics for Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 would be selected at this Convocation. We agreed to table elections until the Fall so officers could serve for a full year. I agreed to fill the vacant position of Caring Maven. Joel Miller agreed to serve as Cantor.

After Happy Hour and Dinner, we reconvened at 7:00pm for our program. We were delighted to welcome Wendy Bell who arrived late from caring for her daughter with a

stomach bug. Given the topic, “Eros and Spirituality” I noted playful sexual puns and chuckling as our session began.

The tone changed significantly when Program Chair Joel Miller presented the first paper: *“The Heaven of Longing: Eros and Spirituality”*. The paper was a rich exploration of the relationship between Power and Eros including the affects of living with and without Testosterone, UU Seders viewed as a violation by Jewish colleagues, abandonment of a beloved ritual, the sensuality of worship space, eating cake as “desire laid bare,” the trickster Kokopelli in our living rooms, the spirit of Eros wanting babies of many kinds, sex work, erotic justice, and owning the consequences of our actions to make good memories. The group was deeply moved by Joel’s weaving of symbolism and personal experience.

Jim Sherblom offered the first response to Joel’s paper. Jim recounted cracking open his own sense of male sensuality and intimacy in UU Men’s groups about a decade ago. He described with appreciation that the Brookline congregation that he serves has become more open and inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity over time. The Brookline congregation also delights in participating in a Passover Seder. This comfort may come in part from the many Jews in the congregation. He also wonders whether President Obama’s holding a Seder at the White House will make a difference in society. Jim also recounted “the spiritual uses of mixed gender” in his community.

Rosemarie C. Smurzynski offered the second response to Joel’s paper first noting that it seemed like two or three papers. She found “The Soul of Sex” by Thomas Moore too Jungian and Western for her taste. Rosemarie does not accept or relate to his concept of Eros. The question that most intrigued her was ““How do we live with and by spirit?” (removing the word erotic). She asserted that the Passover Seder was a liberation story to re-member, a world story that she celebrates. She felt that the Berlin story and the spirit of Nelly Sachs are “the bingo spot” of the paper worthy of further exploration.

In the conversation that followed, many expressed anger or concern about Joel’s experience of the Rabbis’ critique of UU Seders and his decision to abandon a ritual he loved and knew well. Nina felt that Joel had not asked enough rabbis for their opinions. She worked with a Rabbi to create a UU High Holy Day service. Several people noted that it was UU Jews who led their Seders. Frank Hall treasures weekly conversations with a Rabbi even though they do not always agree. Bill Gardiner upheld Joel’s accountability. Anita asked that we honor the complexity, recognizing the survival of the Jewish community is in question here. She urged us to respect Judaism and remain in dialogue. Nina upheld Jewish heritage as our heritage.

The other theme that was explored in response to Joel’s paper was our right and need for our own interior life and identity. Eros will emerge always in our lives and our ministry. We need to know our boundaries.

Joel graciously stepped in to lead our evening chapel. Out of shared stillness came the recitation of poetry, chanting, prayer and the singing of “When our heart is in a holy

place”. Following such a full discussion, it was a contemplative and organic end to our day together.

Tuesday, April 27:

Tuesday morning began with chapel led by Paul Ratzlaff. The service awakened us to gifts from beyond ourselves. We expressed our gratitude for the people, history, structures, and sacrifices required for us to gather together.

Following breakfast, the program resumed with a paper by Rosemarie, *“Approaching God through Poetry: Women’s Perspectives”*. Rosemarie continued her critique of Thomas Moore. As an alternative to his “work” of soul or “educating the senses”, she offered “Women in Praise of the Sacred” a volume of poetry collected by Jane Hirshfield with women’s voices from over 43 centuries. Like the reminder of her Spiritual Director not to “work” but “be”, Rosemarie lifted up being in the senses, being in the body and poetry as a vehicle of enlightenment. Instead of reason or effort, she invited us to say “Yes!” whole-heartedly to what is holy.

The conversation that followed examined the place of violence in relationships. Susan asserted that God is not always Eros. Rosemarie countered that “Violence is not love. Love does not hurt. Love sets us free.” As a Jungian, Jim stressed that good and bad cannot be separated. Rosemarie agreed that there can be tension and conflict in relationship however she believes cruelty is not love. Keith Goheen disagreed. In his experience there is violence in love which includes shattering, longing, pain, and liberation. Keith feels passion points to this truth and he is hesitant to tame love too much.

Several people felt that the poets captured idealized love or highly mystical eroticized moments. Some expressed sadness about not having that sort of love and a longing for it.

Josh felt that there was a place for this poetry in our congregations. In the UU Sources we have the second commandment of the Hebrew scriptures without the first commandment, love of God. Perhaps this poetry is a way of reclaiming something currently missing in our UU practice.

Joel Miller offered his response to Rosemarie’s paper:

He laughed with recognition about the impulse to work rather than be especially in light of his upcoming Sabbatical. He highlighted “the paradox of being consumed without being violated” and the power of poetry to carry us there.

The Greenfield Group then discussed whether or not Hildegard of Bingen might have in fact sought to “educate her senses” or “work” on sensual experience or whether it was part of her “being” as Rosemarie claims. Topics included the role of effort and work in order to let go or surrender, reach greater understanding, transcend barriers.

Barbara Fast posed the question of what we mean by salvation. Frank Carpenter answered “wholeness”. Anita and Marta recalled Margaret Fuller’s definition “acceptance of the universe” as a call to sensuality if not sexuality. Nina asked “Is Moore conflating sensuality and sexuality and we are trying to separate the two?”

Definitions for April Convocation~ Eros and Spirituality

Next we examined a list of words and meanings prepared by the Program Committee related to our topic.

Jim offered “Incarnate” and “Incardinate” as distinct but interrelated words. Tom Wintle related that the Doctrine of the Trinity also is about interrelation. God does not exist as a Unity. He said, “Every action of the Triune God is about creating the world. The Trinity that Unitarians rejected was not the real Trinity.” The group expressed interest in this subject.

Bob told the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was motivated to stand with the humans, kill Hitler, and face his own death. As a pacifist, Bob both admires and questions this impulse. Some related this sort of passion to the acts of terrorists or killers of abortion doctors. The group expressed interest in revisiting principles of Non-violence.

The meaning of transgression was explored. Intimacy, Inclusion, Transformation were suggested as additions to the list.

Bill Gardiner shared his personal experience in a 47 year relationship with his spouse. Their passion born in a cold environment continues. The depth and intimacy of connection was a hard won life process, a soul journey. Sex has a healing power when things not going well. Rosemarie who is also married to her college sweetheart named that over the years she has had many different marriages with her spouse.

Marta cited DH Lawrence writing about wrestling as a prelude to sex. She asked, “When does wrestling lead to violence?”

Dick felt his new romantic and erotic relationship not included in the definitions. Anita felt nursing was a powerful erotic experience that remains unspoken.

Ian Whittemore shared his bodily response to the words. Just as there is a transgression of ego in sex, he would not be a minister by choice. He memorably said, “The spiritual life throws me down and I say ‘No, no, no!’ It says ‘Yes, yes, yes!’” He also acknowledged the chemicals running through his body, Testosterone.

Anita asked the longtime members of the Greenfield Group, whether they experienced intimacy when it was an all male group. Brian Kopke answered that it was found in shared free time not the larger group gatherings. Frank Hall said that he needed the critical responses he received from the older men and felt known. Tom said that the sharing happened late at night when folks were drunk.

Barbara called us to add the words: delight, chaste, joyous, being alive, juiciness, power, pleasure, creativity. Ian added nurture and nurturance

Bob offered stories of a four-day gender-reconciliation conference. He longs for our ministry to take up this work.

After lunch and two hours of free-time, we reconvened at 3:00pm. Due to a previous obligation, Rosemarie offered her response to Jim's paper and departed before it was presented. She upheld the power of light touch, how Jim's experiences recalled her own, and a scenario from Sue Miller's novel about how a married couple can become disconnected over time by being hesitant to undress in front of the other.

Jim Sherblom presented his paper~ *"Light Changes on a Body of Water"*

The paper opens with the following question, "*Can we grow our souls to the fullest potential while ignoring the sensual aspects of our being?*" Jim shared Thomas Moore's surprise that UU Ministers rarely preach about sex, sensuality and pornography. Moore feels that to do so is to avoid intimate relationships between us and falsify our living reality.

Jim asks "*Are we too frightened of our collective libido's to embrace the sensuality that comes naturally from our growing intimacy on this spiritual journey together?*" Through the poetry and teaching stories of Rumi, Jim offered insights into "the role of sex and sensuality in [his] own incarnation within the Divine Mysteries." His explorations include growing up as a Baptist minister's son, his affection for Biblical stories especially King David, his gay older brother, college seductions, and finally a deep secure loving relationship that continues to allow both partners to sore heights professionally more than individually.

Response:

Nannene was troubled by Rumi's story of the Master and the Maid —Is that Love or Lust? Jim answered that Rumi felt union with God is most important. Susan noted that this was passion and transgression revisited. Anita pointed out that running toward something can also be running away from something else. Dick offered that "Feels so good" is not always the best measure.

Frank Carpenter reminded us that Rumi's teaching stories and poems are not case studies. He asked about stalkers and also distinguished between Bonheoffer's passion, and abortion doctor killer's obsession.

Marta asked "How do we as ministers offer the sexual aspects of our beings when we may be single, unhappy, dry, etc?" Jim responded that as mammals we are always sniffing each other out and know this about each other anyway. She asked "How do you include Eros without becoming an event?"

Ian revealed that he had preached on Thomas Moore's book on Sunday. He shared openly with his congregation about his love of sex and sundresses. The sermon received an energetic response and interest in curriculum. Nannene wonders if the sermon was a preemptive strike or whether Ian has now thrown down gauntlet. The Greenfield Group expressed interest in how the congregational response takes shape. Will more women wear sundresses? Inquiring minds want to know.

Keith is thinking about "The transference and the counter-transference" (German accent) whether that is actually valid model for ministry. He questions if we as ministers actually have that much power. Wendy shared that the power dynamic is real as women have projected their mothers on to her. Frank Carpenter reminded us that we are vulnerable to accusations of sexual harassment. We also can be evaluated in light of our responses to such advances or communities can fall in love with our partners.

Bob appreciated Jim's thoughts about fidelity. In his experience, sensuality is not limited to just one person. Sensuality also includes woodworking, good meal, sailing, his fascination with Native Americans. Marriage is not about happiness. It is important for us to recognize that many congregants may be struggling in their marriages.

Tom quoted a Christian colleague who said, "Love is not passion. Love is a matter of making a decision."

Bob remembered Theodore Parker's assertion that marriage takes years. Joel then burst out that Parker was gay which elicited a titillating response among group members who had never heard this about our Unitarian ancestor. As someone remarked, "There we go, outing colleagues again!"

Nina shared her reticence to talking about mothers on Mother's Day and recent challenge in finding women willing to speak of that complex relationship. Joel has also found that a difficult subject and now takes Mother's Day off. Jim said that he preaches about mothers and his co-minister Martha preaches on peace. Susan's message is how the genders come together to nurture children.

In grappling on how to speak about Eros and Spirituality with a congregation, Josh acknowledged that he has not talked about sexuality or sensuality except within Safe Congregation boundaries. Given the taboo maybe we are not ready to talk about sex. He put forth that baby steps may be necessary like letting people know you have a body.

Joel offered his response to Jim's paper thanking him for sharing his amazing conversations with God. He wondered if we are acting out of past hurts in eradicating Eros from our ministry. Like the Rumi story, Joel fears that we may arrive too late or rape in anger or lose our communities as others run toward what they love. People come to us with longing. It is our duty to help express the erotic in healthy ways.

I shared that before being ready for public proclamation, I would need baby steps already mentioned like sharing in a small group setting, being more intentional about the sensuality of worship, and implementing Our Whole Lives for all ages and stages of life. Joel and Ian named an important bond in growing up UU with sexuality education. I named the Welcoming Congregation program as formative in my ministry. Anita named the Haunting House and AYS, both as embodied curriculum. Josh decided he would use the web-resource by Debra Haffner, Institute for Sexual Morality and Justice.

Bob and Bill explored that people may be coming to church to escape crass sexuality in our culture. Eros is on all TV channels and tabloids. Do we have fatigue about sexuality? Frank upheld how scandals of sex and power are used to destroy people and careers. He named this Plastic Sexuality.

Jim recognized how his father used his charisma to change people's lives. He also learned in seminary to be careful of charisma and was drawn to process theology. As long as we do not serve our own egos, charisma can help transform others in ministry.

Bill remembered our history of open marriages and prevalent divorces in the 1970's as well as sexual misconduct in our movement. He reminded us that this is part of our institutional memory. He wondered if our conversation had been not very productive and blocked. According to Friedman, we must self-differentiate and become clear about own sexuality.

Thanks to Susan and Nannene for an entertaining **Change of Pace**. Four groups created Who-dun-it mysteries from a bag of props. Although the killer was not always clear, the mystery of Theodore Parker's sexual orientation was exposed.

The evening came to a close with **Chapel** offered by Dick Fewkes. With the images of dreams as the text, we were invited into the sacred space of grief work. Thank you, Dick for sharing with us so vividly your love and loss, each profoundly informing one another in the light and darkness of the life cycle.

Morning Chapel offered by Keith welcomed the dawn and revered the darkness.

We gathered for an hour wrap-up **Group Discussion of Eros and Spirituality**.

Joel shared that this view of Eros challenges his Universalist theology. Many named the trickster-nature of the Divine. Bob claimed that the path of peace is through Eros. Quantum theory suggests random and spooky happenings.

Nina asked if as our discussion suggests the moral arc of the universe does not bend toward justice without human intention then we need energy and passion beyond the "Whoopie!" moment. What role does Eros play a part in the anger of justice-seekers? What about Eros in grief?

Keith asks “Why do we continue to ascribe to God our limitations? When the power of Eros comes to us do we use it unwisely?”

Frank Hall is thinking about how we share this with our congregations. He noted that we did not talk about the ongoing problems in the Catholic church with sexual misconduct. He uplifted an ex-Catholic priest who recently preached in the Westport pulpit about sex as natural human drive.

Jim wants to see more passion in our movement. Eros contains both positive and negative.

Joel shared about being asked to perform a wedding for four individuals and refusing to officiate. For him, marriage between two individuals is complex enough.

In the 1970’s, Frank Hall offered a paper for the Greenfield Group reflecting on “The New Intimacy” by Ron Maser who claimed that monogamy is a mass neurosis. He recalled Judith Walker-Riggs’ memorable initial response to his paper, a long loud scream of rage.

Bob asserted that society has confused sexual freedom with pathology. Where is the line of health? There is a common culture of infidelity, prostitution, and professional sexual misconduct that remains unspoken.

Bill named the dark side of Eros—sexual addiction and internet pornography that can lead to a trance-like state. Susan shared that women are challenged attending SA meetings that are mostly male. The path to recovery from addiction includes personal identity and relationship with God or Higher Power. Eros just is and how the community deals with it is what matters.

Josh recalled words spoken at an ordination “Go deep not wide”. His personal response to this Convocation is to return home and be more affectionate with his wife and children.

Nina wonders if instead of the single word “Eros” we should have are more than one to identify the different aspects. Jim feels there is a danger in subdividing Eros—failing to noticing the shadow.

Rosemarie referenced the list of definitions as important so we can engage with the same terms. Keith resists strict definition of language.

Other themes included Freudian and Jungian views of libido, the shadow-side of Eros, and Quantum theory. Josh asks “To what extent can you be aware of the wave of Eros when it collapses in real world?”

We are reminded of Father Thomas weeping in the stacks, “The word was Celebrate!”

Bob reminds us of different forms of love: Eros, Philos, Agape

In closing, Jim said this Convocation was more than he hoped for. Joel felt post-coital, too. Like in yoga, Rosemarie is ready for Savasna.

With a gentle snowfall outside, let us return home with passion, affection, sensuality and renewed awareness for the gifts and challenges of living.