

The Lovers, The Dreamers & Me

A Sermon Preached by Marisol Caballero
on July 31, 2011 at Wildflower Unitarian Universalist Church

This week, I did something that I never thought I'd do: I finished the paperwork required to meet with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee by the Monday deadline! For those of you who do not know, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee is the ministerial credentialing body of the Unitarian Universalist Association & is made up of a combination of dedicated lay people and ministers. I go before them in September as the final hurdle I have yet to jump before I may be ordained. The paperwork required to complete a candidate's file is no small matter & can feel very much like a bearing of one's soul. In addition to asking you to document practically everything you've ever done or read, there are essay questions such as, "What Is the Theological Context of Your Call to Unitarian Universalist Ministry? Refer to at least one theologian, one personal experience and one sacred text in 2,000 words or less."

2,000 words or less to answer such a question?! I can tell you that it feels something like trying to shove a hippo into a mini-skirt.

Recently I saw a teaser for the new Muppet movie that is set to be in theaters this Christmas & I was reminded of how much I love the Muppets and their creator, Jim Henson. I remembered, and perhaps I'm not alone, how much his message of optimism; of belief in oneself and in others, carried out through his fuzzy characters, has taught & sustained me. As UU's we, draw from many sources, one being the "words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love."

If Jim Henson's name were in the dictionary, those words would probably be next to his name. Through humor, song, and felt-covered animals, Henson directed us to the awe and wonder of this beautiful world and its inhabitants, encouraging us to do right by others and ourselves through creativity. His legacy, though the medium of film, continues to do so for younger generations. The genius of his prophetic voice was so that we learn these lessons accidentally, so to speak, while laughing at the distractions of a Swedish Chef, a Grouch in a garbage can, or Gonzo being fired out of a cannon.

In particular, Kermit T. Frog's song, "The Rainbow Connection", has always gotten to me. Though it didn't make it into my essay (perhaps if I'd had over 2,000 words to work with), the lyrics so encompass the theology of my call to this Unitarian Universalist ministry and to my theology, in general that, for a moment, I entertained the thought of simply reading them out for you all today and following them with an "Amen" or a "may it be so" and calling it a day! But, then I thought it might be wiser to simply use the song as my text, so to speak, and say a little bit more.

The idea that this beautiful world in which we live, of which we attempt to make meaning of its wonders, can inspire us, connect us, and teach us to dream; to become who we are "s'posed to be" is such a powerful message- at any

age! The body of Jim Henson's work: *Sesame Street*, the Muppet franchise, shows like *Fraggle Rock*, and movies like the *Labyrinth* and the *Dark Crystal* all have this message in common. Henson believed and teaches us to, as well, that we are each here for a purpose and that that purpose, when guided by love and determination, will serve to connect us, each-to-each. He once said in an interview, "I believe in taking a positive attitude toward the world, toward people, toward my work. I think I'm here for a purpose. I think it's very likely that we all are, but I'm only sure about myself. I try to tune myself in to whatever it is that I'm supposed to be, and I try to think of myself as a part of all of us - all [human] kind and all life. I find it's not easy to keep these lofty thoughts in mind as the day goes by, but it certainly helps me a great deal to start out this way."

Those who knew him, described Henson as a gentle, kind soul. Many said that Henson based the character of Kermit on himself, which he never admitted nor denied. Deeply spiritual, and fiercely optimistic, Henson explained, "I spend a few minutes in meditation and prayer each morning. I find that this really helps me to start the day with a good frame of reference. As part of my prayers, I thank whoever is helping me - I'm sure that somebody or something is - I express gratitude for all my blessings and try to forgive the people that I'm feeling negative toward. I try hard not to judge anyone, and I try to bless everyone who is part of my life, particularly anyone with whom I am having any problems... I've always tried to present a positive view of the world in my work. It's so much easier to be negative and cynical and predict doom for the world than it is to try and figure out how to make things better. We have an obligation to do the latter."

Gratitude. Reverence. Grace. Optimism. Dedication. Do we ever come to a point in life in which we cease to be in need of these lessons?

When I hear "The Rainbow Connection" these days, the last verse, in particular, reminds me of my call to ministry. I wasn't having auditory hallucinations, or anything like that, but I *did* hear voices calling my name too many times to ignore them. These voices were those of the people who have challenged and encouraged me along this path. Friends, professors, mentors, congregants- so many of you in this room could count yourselves among them! This path is one that does require much gratitude, reverence, grace, optimism, and dedication, but ministers are not the only ones among us who are called. *We all* are called to live into our potential, to be our best selves, to act in accordance with the reality of our interconnectedness, to dream big. We each have our part to play, and no part is too small. When we take heed of that still, small voice- whether we believe its source to be God, our soul's yearnings, the universe beckoning, or all of the above- we not only grow more fully into our own potential, our own humanity, our own individualism, but we may experience the richness of this "interdependent web of which we are a part."

We, especially we religious liberals, often place so much emphasis on our individuality. We respect and guard autonomy and often juxtapose individuality with interconnectedness. But, as UU theologian, William R. Murray writes in his book, *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century*, "The human being is a social animal. We become individual selves and develop those qualities that belong to our humanness only in relationships- first in the family, then through associations with larger groups... We may feel like we are separate and distinct individuals, and we may often act like separate and distinct individuals, but we are not. We are interdependent and interrelated... [We] need to reaffirm the value of human community, especially communities that

work and act together for the common good. We need to proclaim that individualism and community are not opposites. Rather, they complement each other in that we become individual selves through relationships with others.”

Jim Henson exemplified someone who lived this truth. He said, “If you care about what you do and work hard at it, there isn't anything you can't do if you want to... (and) When I was young, my ambition was to be one of the people who made a difference in this world. My hope is to leave the world a little better for having been there... (and) I know I drive some people crazy with what seems like ridiculous optimism, but it has always worked for me.” Well, the truth is, Jim Henson does speak from a certain amount of privilege, as optimism and perseverance are not always enough. Systems of oppression, poverty, hunger, lack of education may prevent or make difficult the ability for someone to realize the full potential of their gifts and true calling. Sadly, tenacity does not always win. But, as Ray Charles once wrote of another one of Jim Henson's songs for Kermit, "The words say "It's not easy being green" but the song is about knowing who you are. And in it you hear Jim's message most clearly. He believed that people are good and that they want to do their best and no matter how or why we might be different from anybody else, we should learn to love who we are and be proud of it."

Because a frog can ride a bicycle, and fall in love with an overbearing pig, and play banjo, and sing about sophisticated virtues and aspirations, we are able to believe that we- no matter our circumstance or limitations, can leave this world a better place than we found it. We are able to dream of being and doing our best selves and, in doing so, we are able to lift others up along the way.

The late, great William Sloane Coffin, liberal Christian minister and peace activist, was reputed to have said of Unitarian Universalists that we have “such a thick ethic and such a thin theology.” I disagree. As we draw from such diverse sources, such as the prophetic voice of Jim Henson, I believe that we are (perhaps) uniquely poised to listen to the words of a frog playing banjo as truly divine wisdom.

UU minister and president of UU seminary, Starr King School for the Ministry, Rebecca Ann Parker, wrote the following, titled simply, “Benediction,” with a similar theological conviction as Henson and his characters- that we are co-creators of this, our world:

“Your gifts, whatever you discover them to be, can be used to bless or curse the world. The mind's power, the strength of the hands, the reaches of the heart, the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting. Any of these can serve to feed the hungry, bind up wounds, welcome the stranger, praise what is sacred, do the work of justice or offer love. Any of these can draw down the prison door, hoard bread, abandon the poor, obscure what is holy, comply with injustice, or withhold love.

You must answer this question: what will you do with your gifts? Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will a moving forward into the world with the intention to do good. It is an act of recognition, a confession of surprise, a grateful acknowledgement that in the midst of a broken world, unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide. There is an embrace of kindness that encompasses all life,

even yours. And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil, there moves a holy disturbance, a benevolent rage, a revolutionary love protesting, urging, insisting that which is sacred will not be defiled.

Those who bless the world live their life as a gesture of thanks for this beauty and this rage.

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude to search the sources of power and grace; Native wisdom, healing, and liberation. More, the choice will draw you into community, The endeavor shared, the heritage passed on, the companionship of struggle, The importance of keeping faith, The life of ritual and praise, The comfort of human friendship, The company of the earth its chorus of life welcoming you. None of us alone can save the world. Together- that is another possibility, waiting.”

I will leave you with the final words of The Muppet Movie that the cast of creatures sang directly to the audience in a reprise of “The Rainbow Connection”:

Why are there so many songs about rainbows?
That's part of what rainbows do.
Rainbows are memories, sweet dream reminders
What is it you'd like to do?
All of us watching, and wishing we'd find it;
I've noticed, you're watching too.
Someday you'll find it, the rainbow connection,
The lovers, the dreamers, and you.
Life's like a movie, write your own ending
Keep believing, keep pretending
We've done just what we set out to do.
Thanks to the lovers, the dreamers, and you.

Amen, and may it be so.