



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

## At the Corner of Reverence and Openness

Jack Wills, Guest Preacher

August 7, 2011

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William Carlos Williams was one of the great American modernist poets of the early twentieth century. He also was a physician in general practice in Rutherford, New Jersey; his poems show him much more in touch with the grit and terror of ordinary life than his fellow modernists. (I'm not sure how much I want to make of the fact that his parents were founding members of the Unitarian Church in Rutherford; Thomas R. Whitaker, *William Carlos Williams* (1989), p. 3) *A Forgotten City* may well draw on his own experience of the great 1938 hurricane. We all have had moments when, in a place we thought we knew, we encounter a strange commonplace. Even in Pasadena. Come with me to admire the old church building at Mountain and Summit, two blocks east of Fair Oaks that has been painted a remarkable saffron orange and has a very impressive Buddha statue outside. It is part of the Los Angeles Buddhist Vihara, Sinhalese and Thai, thus Theravada, and isn't it nice to have a tradition in which mountains are very important at the *corner* of Summit and Mountain? Stand with me on a Saturday morning on the first block of North Wilson and watch nice young families walking to the Chabad Pasadena in the next block north, past the Taiwanese Evangelical Holiness Church. Come to any community festival where all the ways of doing good and seeking justice put out their tables. So we join Doctor Williams in surprise at the **strange commonplaces** we find "at these sharp **corners** and turns of intersecting avenues".

I passed by our corner many times before I turned in to the parking lot. I was seventy when I found you. I came to a Christmas Eve service. The Choir sang the Tomas Luis de Victoria "O Magnum Mysterium". I was transported back over fifty years to my high school days in Urbana, Illinois. The University of Illinois hosted a big "All State Chorus" on Thanksgiving weekend. Local students could join in without limit, because the University didn't have to find housing for them. "O Magnum Mysterium, et admirabile sacramentum, ut animalia viderunt Dominum jacentem in praeseptio" "Oh Great Mystery, and the admirable Sacrament; that the animals should see the Lord born, lying in a manger," a wonderful evocation of the Christmas story and a deep revelation for those of us who cherish our kinship with the animals.

Five hundred young voices on risers in an old gym. I can hear them as I stand here before you, and sing the bass line, but I'll spare you that. And that's not the end of that tape in my head. At the same All-State Chorus we sang a marvelous Purcell anthem, "Rejoice in the Lord Always." (You have just heard both of these wonders this morning; heartfelt thanks to Stephen, Laura, Elizabeth, Roger, and Sean.) The Purcell is Baroque, not Renaissance, so instead of stately even measures it has heart-stopping changes of tempo. "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice. Be careful for nothing, but in every thing, by prayer and supplication," and it begins to slow down, "let your requests be made known unto God." And then it almost stops. "And the Peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds, through Jesus Christ our Lord". And then it bounces away again, "Rejoice in the Lord always."

I shared this story several years ago with my Bible-reading daughter Joanne, who promptly said, "Oh. Philippians 4, verses 4-7." Notice that it does not promise that God will answer our prayers by giving us what we ask for. The peace of God which is promised is one that "passeth all understanding," and to my mind that certainly means one that can't be fully recovered in any text in a human language. The effect it has on me when I hear those young voices and that heart-stopping moment of silence is definitely **embodied** and truly **beyond full understanding**.

My point in sharing this story with you is to suggest to you that we are the ones who are at home with the idea that there are real **mysteries**, real **unknowables** to which we have to relate, which can't be resolved by any one revelation or sacred text, although as in the words of Paul of Tarsus the great traditions do regularly confess that the peace of God **passeth all understanding**. Mankind has used **metaphors** to deal with the Unknowable: cause in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, pattern in Daoism, person in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Person may be the most powerful, because we deal every day with the unknowable mysteries of other persons, but the most subject to abuse when we think we have God's Word in front of us in understandable human language. Our liberal religion at its best doesn't deny the revelatory power of those texts but remains **open** to all the Unknowable is teaching us in music, in poetry, in the

intricate natural beauty around us, in our new openings to understanding our fellow humans, like our Muslim neighbors in recent meetings and Esma Ali's short course, in the new science that is giving us such a rich sense of the depths and mysteries of our embodied minds, in the remarkable self-openings in Chalice Circles or in the Preaching Class.

**Now here's the sharp corner where I think we should take our stand. Let's make our stand at the corner of Reverence and Openness.** Now the trouble with corners is that if you don't want to stand still you have to go one way or the other. Yes, you can walk half a block, double back, and go the other way. But most of the time you have to choose. We might take this as a reminder that **there is no risk-free religion.** We UUs sometimes think, I think, that by choosing openness we've avoided risk. "Oh, you're a Pagan? How cool! Tell me about that!" For many of us that's easier than being open to the reverence of traditional Muslims or Catholics or evangelical Protestants. I find that when friends and loved ones walk down those paths of reverence to their sacred texts and daily and yearly practices they sometimes come to some very deep and surprising bits of openness. If it seems to me that they had to come the long way around the block to get there, **well, what do I know?**

**On the other hand,** I can't shake the feeling that any reverence that isn't **open** to many kinds of encounter with the Unknowable is less **reverent** than our awe at the unexpected, the never-thought-of, at **extraordinary places and their strange commonplaces. But what do I know?**

Professor Diana Eck told the All Souls congregation in Manhattan that UUs have a theology. I suspect quite a few said to themselves, "**Oh really?**" So did I. Reverence and openness may be useful clues to pursue. JoAn Kunselman two weeks ago preached about "Listening as a Spiritual Practice," which seems related. I just stumbled on a reference to a German writer in the 1920s, [Carl Christian Bry, cited in Safranski, *Martin Heidegger*, p. 153] when Europe seemed to be going crazy and everyone was pursuing extreme solutions – Communism, Nazism, Theosophy, you name it – who argued that "a genuine religion educates Man for reverence for the inexplicability of the world." **That sounds like us, doesn't it?** Other clues might be the Chan patriarch's verse on awakening to what we already have, with which we began, and the music that surrounds us here.

Quite a few of us in this congregation would be willing to describe ourselves as recovering Protestants. One Protestant practice few of us want to leave behind is **congregational hymn-singing. The voices all around us open our throats and our spirits. As we stand on our corner, we can see both ways. Reverence and openness harmonize.**