

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman

A Reflection on Love for Valentine's Day:  
being a close reading of Hymn #286 by Jim Reilly, "A Core of Silence"

Love—Emotion, that which moves and holds us. Warm affection, sexual passion, intimacy. Strong emotional attraction, attachment. Touch, scent, sight, sound, taste. Loving-kindness. Whole-hearted liking, romantic tenderness, dearly loved, dearly beloved.

Lovers dancing on their wedding day, in one another's arms. Planets swung in the arms of the sun, gathered up in orbits and revolutions of gravity, and suns swung through the cosmos. The whole universe held together in loving attraction.

We live and die by love. Love holds us, knows us, sees and hears us. To love is to perceive that another person, another being, the earth itself and sea and sky are as real as we are, and of similar worth and dignity. To love is to put another's needs before one's own, to hear one another into speech. To love is to listen beyond speech, for that which speaks out of the silence.

Let's do some theology.

I take my text this morning from words and music of Jim Reilly, born in 1943. I offer you a close reading of one of his hymns, A Core of Silence, published in 1986, when Reilly was 43 years old.

The source book, "Between the Lines, 2nd Edition, published 1998, names Jim Reilly as a musician who wrote this hymn for use at the First Universalist Church of Minneapolis, where he served as director of music (1979-1988; aged 36-45).-My internet search didn't tell me much more about Jim Reilly; but it did tell me a little more about the church he served, First Universalist in Minneapolis. It's a large church, waxing and waning and waxing once more, over six generations. Jim Reilly's time with them as music director coincided with what the folks at First name as "Our Civil Rights Years", and the tenure of their emeritus minister, who marched at Selma and beyond [1963-86]. So we know that our Jim Reilly was aware of civil rights issues, especially if he had to play through double services every Sunday morning, and hear the sermon twice!.

One more thing: if we look carefully at the bottom of the page, we will see there is no flaming chalice beside his name. This tells us that Jim Reilly might have worked with UUs, and sung with UUs, but he had not named himself a Unitarian Universalist, at least not as represented in this 1986 anthology.

What is left to us is the music and words that are published here. My purpose is to approach Jim's work with respect and care, as best I can. What are the words telling us? What is the music telling us? Hearing with my own eyes, seeing with my own ears, what can I read here from what

Jim Reilly has woven into his gift to us for our study of value and meaning and worth, for theology?

Let's hear Jim's words again:

*A core of silence breathes beyond all words,  
or else the words have little worth;  
to "Heart" or "Soul" or "Spirit" it comes forth  
(the words we name them matter not).*

*And half the music lies within the pause between the arches of the heart;  
the print upon the page means less than ink unless the white and black both speak.*

*The "True Religion" gathers up its text: "In the beginning was the Word."  
But I seek quietness behind that start and name it nothing, much less "God."*

This is poetry; the words are more tightly woven than their simplicity at first suggests.

Let's try a paraphrase first, to try and get at the literal meaning: Reilly tells us that he senses a noiseless centre to the universe, something that seems alive; this centre communicates in silence—words do not bear the meaning; we call to this centre with certain names, and it responds, but the names don't really matter. The meaning it offers us depends as much on what is unsaid, as on what is said. Some proclaimed authority relies on word. But the poet looks behind the words to the quiet centre, the poet feels no need to name the holy.

My paraphrase leaves out the poetry. There are memorable phrases here, images and metaphors. "A core of silence", not a visual image—though I do have to think of an apple, nibbled to the graceful curves of its central structure of seeds and stem—for Reilly core of silence is more a sound image; this core "breathes".

And so I am drawn to an intertextual reference [NRSV], Genesis chapter one verse two, "a wind ... swept over the face of the waters", the creative breath of the holy, the same biblical God who at Genesis chapter two verse seven is said to breath the breath of life into dust made living human being. The silence breathes. Set aside the words as meaningless; we have names for the creative silence, but our names don't matter.

Thus the first verse: there is a creative impulse, we can call it forth, but our naming does not confine it.

Moving on: *And half the music lies within the pause between the arches of the heart.* I have no idea at all what this means, but I really like it—the *pause between the arches of the heart*. The moment between breathing in and breathing out? The moment for thought? The very ribs of our bodies that cage our own breath? The aching, the reaching, the springing of the arches that lift heart and lungs? The arches that lift the soaring vaults of a cathedral?—and so our hearts are our cathedrals? Or simply the repetition of the internal assonance, that "a" sound, the *arches*, the *heart*. I have no idea what Reilly might mean by these words; or did he just like the sound?

He has been so careful, so sparing, so selective in his use of words.

I wonder.

The second verse continues:

*the print upon the page means less than ink unless the white and black both speak.*

This seems easier, a literal image, that letters can only be deciphered when there is space as well as word. So... so we need to make a space, to rest, to listen, so that sound can be heard.

I'm intrigued by the word choice—the print upon the page; this is press, not pen. This is Caxton and Gutenberg; and their first works were Bibles, and so begins Erasmus' corrected version from the Greek of the New Testament, and so the Reformation is born.

But is that Jim Reilly? or Fran who loves language?

Back to sound—*unless the white and black both speak*—voice again, the image in sound, from the music director. But more: remember how First Universalist Minneapolis frames its history in Jim Reilly's time as "Our Civil Rights Years"? Remember how their senior minister marched at Selma? The print means less than ink "unless the white and black both speak". Not 'black 'n white' but 'white and black'—that takes longer to say, it defies the slurring of elision, it makes us take our time to say the words in that order. Jim Reilly is a poet, and he chooses his words with great care.

*Unless the white and black both speak*—this is about more than letters on a page. This is about the struggle for justice and lives and letters lived out on the pages of the holy in the fullness of their characters. More than a metaphor: the print upon the page—the law, perhaps? or our pretensions to piety?— *the print upon the page means less than ink unless the white and black both speak*. Both speak: speech is power. To be heard is to be empowered. We are heard into speech.

Verse one brought us the unnamed breath of creation.

Verse two can be read literally, or as an allusion to the struggle for civil rights; one might even stretch to read back into this a reassessment of how we use black and white imagery in symbolism—light and dark, night and day, like the cowboy in the white hat who is always the good guy, while black is code for evil—black hearted, black listed, black balled. The black sheep of the family.....

Sticks and stone will break my bones, and words can really hurt me.....

Am I reading more into this business of black and white and re-thinking our symbolism than Jim Reilly might intend? Or is he setting me up for verse three? *The "True Religion" gathers up its text: "In the beginning was the Word."*

The Gospel according to John, Chapter One: “In the beginning was the word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (1.1) ..... “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (1.5) Word again. Jim Reilly listens for the breath of the holy, not the holy made word: ... *I seek quietness behind that start and name it nothing, much less “God.”*

If we needed to tie a label to this theology, I fear we would be hard pressed to do so.

Theist? There is very much a sense of some creative force at the heart of things. The centre breaths towards us, and responds when we call it forth, by whatever name.

A personal, mystical relationship with the holy? This music knows us in our bones; it breathes into the “arches of the heart”. Even so, it eludes our naming and our urgencies for ownership.

Deist? If deist means the holy sets forth a clockwork universe, then steps back and does not tamper with the mechanisms, can Reilly’s silent core with its creative force be made to bear the name of deist? It breathes, it knows our bones, we feel some dynamic connection beyond mere praise and admiration.

Atheist? God is not a name to be lightly bestowed, nor does Jim Reilly do so. But still there is some holy thing he seeks, “the quietness behind the start”.

Humanist, certainly—it is we who call it forth; but something seems to answer.

Agnostic? Perhaps. It is not that Jim Reilly has no knowledge of the holy—he has described the sounds and silences of his experience well enough. A-gnosis, a-gnostic, meaning away from knowledge, meaning not known. Not named, certainly. Jim Reilly will not name that which some might name as God. But for Jim the poet, the holy is not entirely unknown or unlocated.

We’ve looked at the words. How does Jim Reilly use the music to sustain his spoken thought? I wonder what came first—music to lift up the thought? Or words to particularize the sound that carried the emotion?

If we glance at the bottom right hand corner of the page, we’ll see the name of the tune that Reilly wrote to carry his words: TRUE RELIGION. Underneath that are some numbers: 10.8.10.8. That’s the syllable count, or something like that, something that can be counted—metrical, measure, meter.

If we turn to the metrical index of tunes at page 667 in the grey hymnal, in the middle of the page we’ll see 10.8.10.8 True Religion, 286. No wonder Jim Reilly wrote his own tune! There’s none other in the hymnal capable of carrying that 10.8.10.8. combination.

What else does the music tell us? 72 half-note beats per minute, A stately pace, but not too slow. Dignified. Serious. Time to think about the words.

Also, there’s no time signature; for example, the hymn on the facing page is  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, waltz time—with a rhythm to it, strong-weak-weak, strong-weak-weak.

But Reilly has done away with any time signature; each of the words in the phrase could be equally strong. It is we, in the singing of it, who will impose a pulse upon it—we are creatures whose pulse marks each heart beat; even in prose speech, let alone poetry, we will tend to shape a rhythm upon the stream of notes. [Ed. Note: Thanks to Ray Stone for his observations here.]

It is the coherence of the words, their syntax and meaning in relationship, that carries the phrase, and we who sing it have to pay attention to the whole of the line at once.

In the second verse, in fact, Reilly makes us work: we have to hold the sense of the phrase together for two whole lines to capture the logic of the syntax, and there is no relaxing into a rhythmic beat to carry us along.

Now let's look at the notes: black notes with stems are quarter notes (one beat), hollow notes with stems, are half notes (two beats). The big goose eggs, with no stems, are whole notes, four beats, four times the length of the quarter notes. With no designated rhythm to lend emphasis to words, the emphasis comes from the length of the word. Silence—a long word. Soul—a long word. Long notes at the end of each line. Five long notes at the end of the last line in each verse. There is our emphasis. [Ed. Note: *Ancient Greek and Latin poetry, both inflected languages, shaped metre much the same way, by the length of the sounds, not by rhyming.*]

Reilly isn't even relying much on rhyme: there is an internal assonance to the words at the end of each line in the first verse: words, worth, forth, not. Sort of o-ish, here, but not the reliance on rhyme that a more traditional or conventional poet might use.

What about the second verse: pause-heart-ink-speak—he's making us slow down, with those consonants. For the third verse the lines end with text, word, start, God. Text, start: there are those strong consonant endings again, making us slow down. Word, God: not quite a rhyme, there, but some similarity, to offer a little sense of completion, not a lot.

Reilly has one more trick: the name of the tune—he calls his tune true religion. He's used those words "true religion" at the start of the third verse, set apart in quotes—he's being ironic. He doesn't think religion based on word is true at all. What Reilly calls true religion—is the music, not the word. And so he gives that name, True Religion, to the music—the music [that] lies within the pause between the arches of the heart. There is our true religion, says Reilly.

And that is how I read the theology of Jim Reilly's hymn, "A Code of Silence": that there is a creative silence—a breathing silence, at the heart of the world, that we can call forth, that we need not name, that is beyond words. The sheer silence, from which emerges the small still voice heard by Elijah at Mount Horeb [1 Kings 19.11-12].

I think Jim Reilly would like us to listen for this voice a little more, and be in no hurry to put words to its music.

May it be so.

FD/fd