

Agnostic Religion. Sermon by David Belden at the Unitarian Universalist fellowship, Poughkeepsie, NY, at the Sunday morning service October 9 2005.

Opening words of the service:

It takes at least two generations of exploding stars for there to be enough heavy stuff floating around in space for a planet like ours to form. It takes a vastness of time and space for even one small hard planet to be found spinning around a sun. And however life began on this ball of rock and water with its seething molten core and its slowly floating tectonic plates, it took eons of time for that life to gain complexity. But when the first creatures, made of this planetary starstuff, developed eyes, the universe for the first time looked at itself. When they developed ears, the universe for the first time heard itself. When they developed minds, the universe for the first time thought about itself. When we look at each other in this room, we are the universe looking at the universe. May our minds boggle and our hearts expand.

Words prepared but not used for the Chalice Lighting, which was done by a member of the congregation instead:

We light this chalice for peace, at a time when our country is at war. We huddle around this small flame for warmth, whenever we feel alone, in our individual selves, or as a small community, or as a small planet. We stand back and let its light shine in boldness, to connect with all the other flames that people are lighting today for peace, for warmth, for joy. Let it symbolize the faith that we need, and the hope we have for a world in which we learn to love each other better. That's a lot to lay on a small flame. But it is always like this.

The service continues with hymns, a time for people to share their joys and sorrows, a collection, a song by the choir.

Sermon. Agnostic Religion:

Talked without a script about the 19,000 deaths reported this morning from the Kashmir earthquake. People sometimes ask why God allows such things to happen. But as the opening words said, we were created in unimaginable violence and it continues – it is the way the universe is. It's how we respond to that reality that makes the difference.

I was brought up in an extremely religious household. My home and several others in the same neighborhood were part of the London headquarters of an intense religious movement. For about five years from the age of 17 I took this extremely seriously and tried very hard to live up to the ideals of my parents. Their religion was less theological or fundamentalist than it was experiential in approach: they expected and experienced miracles and believed God spoke to them in their minds often. They believed their experiences proved the existence of God daily. I had never been taught to question these basic beliefs nor given myself permission to do so. But when I did, at university, it appeared to me that there were other possible explanations for the miracles and voices: some of them entirely secular, psychological explanations; others invoking psychic phenomena, which may be entirely natural phenomena that science hasn't explained yet; and then there were potential supernatural explanations that conflicted with the Christian theology my parents espoused. When I realized that there was no definitive way to choose between these various explanations, because nothing was conclusively proven, I saw that I didn't have to believe in

God at all. It was like a huge weight rolling off my shoulders. I stood taller and was light on my feet with joy.

For the thirty plus years since that time I have been an agnostic. For me and many other agnostics this does not just mean that we do not know if there is a God or not, it means that we think there is in principle no way of knowing. I like to tease my atheist friends that they are just another variety of believer. It takes as big a leap of faith to jump to the conclusion that there is no God as to jump to the conclusion that there is one.

We went to the Kingston UU congregation when our son was around eight years old. We were looking for some like-minded liberal families to connect with, and maybe a youth group. Highly suspicious and group-phobic, I was surprised to find I liked it for myself. In a nutshell, that is how I came to be an agnostic who, much to my father's amusement, became president of the board of a religious congregation.

Yesterday evening I met a woman who is very involved in an Episcopal church. She sounds like the sort of person that any church would be lucky to have, an upbeat personality, ready to do what's needed on any scale large or small. But the interesting thing is that she doesn't believe in God, or the resurrection, or heaven and hell. We go into a pile of earth when we die, she said cheerfully. And yet, she said, with great delight, we live on in our children's DNA, if we have children, and in the effects we have on other people. We are so lucky to be alive, she said. I met her husband and two children, a boy who is going to be a Shaolin warrior at Halloween and his bright little sister.

This woman's Episcopal church was very involved in fighting apartheid in South Africa, and so had been visited a number of times by Desmond Tutu, who is the first black African Episcopal Archbishop of South Africa. We have probably all heard good things about this man, who chaired the truth and reconciliation hearings in South Africa after the end of white rule, but it was intriguing to hear my new acquaintance say that meeting him in person she feels he is like a Martin Luther King, or a Jesus. She pointed across the room at one of her best friends and said – I totally love this friend of mine, she's the best cook I know, but with Desmond Tutu it's something on a different level. And yet, she can't believe what Desmond Tutu believes about God.

We commiserate. I think what we are saying to each other is that there are some wonderful, positive things about religion and about a Christian congregation like hers, things worth preserving, and even a religion that neither of us believe in can be meaningful to a person like Desmond Tutu and help him become... well the old word would be holy, which means whole, integrated, the spiritual and the physical. But just as she says she has ten words she would rather use than the word 'god', I don't think either of us want to use this word 'holy.' I am conflicted about using the words religion or spiritual also. I am trying to become at ease with them, for reasons I will explain, but I am not at ease with them yet.

The name Desmond Tutu came up because I had just given a talk to a roomful of strangers about religion and world politics – the two topics you are not supposed to raise in polite company – and when talking about the left's disillusion with religion I had quoted Desmond Tutu, who said, *"When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said "Let us pray." We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land."* I gave this as an example of what Marx meant when he called

religion the opiate of the people. But its an interesting example to quote, because Desmond Tutu now wears the purple shirt of the Anglican or Episcopal bishop.

My new friend and I speculated about this holy man who sees so clearly what the Christians did to his people and we wondered exactly what he believes. She said she felt presumptuous in criticizing such a good man's beliefs. It's a dilemma for us. Of course, time and again the prophetic social justice tradition in Judaism and Christianity has inspired people to rise up against their oppressors. The struggle of African Americans in slavery was a struggle against Christians, but it was the liberation stories in the Bible that inspired them; the civil rights movement led by young pastors like Martin Luther King was as much a religious movement as a political one. Still, for many of us it's hard to believe these bible stories in anything other than a very, very metaphorical way, and I have to say that the metaphors of blood sacrifice at the heart of evangelical Christianity are total turn-offs for me. But other metaphors I can appreciate better, such as that the ruling principle of the universe is love. We don't know everything about this universe. Science is still young. If science develops over another 1000 years you can bet that scientists then will think our science now is crude and primitive, just skimming the surface. Some of our current God language may turn out to be a better poetical take on the reality of the universe than some of our current atheist language; perhaps science will discover a countervailing force to entropy, an organizing, connecting force in the universe beyond those already recognized by physicists. So we agreed, metaphor – that's how we understand the religious stories of the past. And we wonder to what extent Desmond Tutu sees it that way as well.

This woman and my wife and I and many of our friends, especially many of those we know at the Kingston UU congregation, and many others across America and who knows where else, are searching for how to do something for which we have few models. For this morning at any rate, I will call it agnostic religion.

Agnostic I think everyone in this room will understand. Religion – well we all have our views about that. But the two together? There are many agnostics, atheists and humanists of course who dismiss all religion because of the evils that people have done in religion's name. I certainly don't wish to minimize those evils, though it's not my task to list them today. But there is more to religion than its evils. How could there not be? Religious language has been the principle language of humanity's quest for meaning since the beginning. It's all stories by which we try to make sense of our lives and our precarious situation in this world.

There is a wonderful book that I totally recommend on the evolution of the mind by a young British academic, Geoffrey Miller. It's called *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*. Miller tackles the question of why humans have such large brains, able to take us to the moon and create the internet, when all natural selection really needed to do for our survival was enable us apes to hunt and gather on the East African savannah. Other evolutionists have said that the big brain was a by-product of hunting, or of the female's need to teach her children the complexities of savannah social and material life. But wild dogs hunt the savannah very efficiently without big brains and female chimps teach their offspring highly complex things about the forest and the chimp community. Nature is usually not wasteful, and the energy and protein that is invested in the human brain just seems out of all proportion to the tasks it was performing. But natural selection was only half of Darwin's understanding of evolution. The other half was sexual selection. Sexual selection

accounts for the absurd investments that some animals have made in display – like the ram’s horns, the stag’s antlers, and the peacocks tail, of course, which must hinder a male peacock’s ability to escape from predators and to gather its own food, as if you or I had to wear a vast and extravagant New Orleans carnival costume every time we went to work or the supermarket. Miller argues the large brain was our peacock’s tail, the organ we developed to impress each other. Men and women both preferred to mate with those of the opposite sex who painted their faces the best, made the nicest pictures, told the best stories, acted out the best dramas. Stories that explain the world – that is what conscious beings need.

If you saw the penguin movie this summer you could not but be stunned at the tenacity with which these penguins hold on to life. They waddle 70 miles from the feeding grounds to lay their eggs in such brutal cold that the eggs will freeze in moments, unless balanced on their feet and protected by a fold of flesh and feathers that falls over them. The female awkwardly transfers the egg from her own feet to her mate’s feet, and then sets off to waddle 70 miles back to the feeding grounds so she can eat and survive and build up enough reserves to waddle back and relieve her mate, who is by now starving but has to waddle 70 miles for dinner etc. Evolution has programmed these birds to do this. The trouble with the consciousness and intellect with which evolution has programmed us humans is that instinct is no longer enough: we need to have reasons we can believe in. People speculate that we may have a God gene – that believing in supernatural powers may help us survive when everything looks as hopeless as the Antarctic would surely look to a smart and questioning penguin.

But Geoffrey Miller’s hypothesis is wider than any one gene. It’s that the whole evolution of the human brain to such astonishing size and ability is due to our species’ liking for clever mates. Art, display, story-telling, theatre, ritual, and religion then become not peripheral things to human life but the very things that created our species. Our passion for them built our brains. Of course the stories that made sense to the savannah dwellers or the later cave people made no sense to their descendants in agricultural villages, and the villagers’ stories didn’t entirely convince the inhabitants of fortified towns; while the town dwellers’ stories seemed way too local and provincial to the people in great imperial Roman or Chinese or Indian cities; at every stage of human social evolution we demanded better and more convincing stories and art from our fellow humans, stories that worked in the puzzling new circumstances we found ourselves in. Naturally the old stories make little sense to us today, with our new understandings of the cosmos, the Big Bang, evolution. But that doesn’t mean we have to throw out story-telling, ritual, spiritual practices, and all the other valuable aspects of religion.

I am writing an article right now for a British print magazine called the New Humanist, which I am tentatively calling, *Is there a humanist baby in the religious bathwater?* I think there is. In other words, I think there are many aspects of religion that do not require belief in the supernatural, and these elements of religion are extremely useful for us humans in our lives and predicaments today.

What are these valuable elements of religion? I am thinking of all the things you do here; ethical teaching and practice; mutual help; social and political action; shared rituals for life passages and regular inspiration; shared meals, art, poetry, song, and meditation; small groups for psychological support and philosophical investigation; and all within one

community so that connections between individuals become ever deeper and more multi-faceted. None of these require belief in the supernatural or any creed.

Presumably I am talking to the converted on this issue, since you are mostly UUs. So what do I want to say specifically to UUs about agnostic religion?

Unitarianism has changed over the centuries. It evolved within Christianity and, even as it challenged Christian theology and certainties of belief, it remained a theistic religion. Then in the 20th century it became increasingly dominated by non-theists. I want to quote from an article, *The Unitarian Quandary*, by James Haught from Free Inquiry magazine, fall 2002. Haught writes:

The largest identifiable body of agnostics in America is within the Unitarian Universalist Church, a traditional stronghold of freethinking. A 1987 survey found that only 3 percent of UUs believed in the standard supernatural God of conventional religion. Two-thirds acknowledged a life force or spirit of love - but 28 percent called the word God "an irrelevant concept."

More recently, in a 1997 survey of the denomination's 220,000 members, about half of respondents described themselves as humanists - by far the largest category. Doubt was strongest among older members. They're a remnant of a postwar heyday when multitudes of skeptical scientists and professors joined UU as a new Enlightenment. In those days, the denomination's Beacon Press printed hard-hitting critiques of religion... Some churches displayed slogans such as "To Question Is the Answer" and a Peter Ustinov remark: "Beliefs are what divide people. Doubt unites them."

Today, thousands of these UU secular humanists feel voiceless, because their organization rarely questions the invisible spirits and magical heavens of major religions. Unitarian Universalism has grown so diverse - embracing Wicca priestesses, liberal Christians, Buddhist meditators, New Age mystics, Postmodern symbolists, etc. - that any official rationalist assertion would hurt someone's feelings. Questioning the supernatural is taboo. A polite silence prevails. Beacon Press now prints "uplift" books."

He goes on to complain that the denomination's president and many ministers nowadays talk about God. **"In the past," he writes, "UU took no stand on the existence, or non-existence, of God. Now our national leader and numerous ministers are proclaiming the former, and we who lean toward the latter are left out in the cold."**

I want to give a contrary opinion to this. I do not feel out in the cold in my congregation. In fact, I suspect that the reason that the UUs have embraced spirituality in a new way is because it is, in fact, warmer. An overly rational approach to life can be cool, even chilly; it can also be dry; it can be narrowly dismissive of metaphor, story, ritual; it can be judgmental in a superior moralistic way to all those benighted beings who are still stuck in their irrational modes. But I want my congregation to be juicy not dry, warm not cool, broad not narrow, celebratory not judgmental. Middle class manners, not least in religion, have tended towards the repressed, the tightly controlled: it was lower class people who rolled in the aisles, lifted their arms to heaven, sang passionate gospel songs with that African beat. The American middle classes over the last thirty years have been trying to loosen up – there was the hippy

era, the sexual revolution, the liking for the sensual and physical whether through aerobics or nouvelle cuisine or rock music or the cultivation of the female orgasm. The middle class has tried to let down its hair a little. The religious expression of that is what haughty is complaining about in his article about spirituality and New Age and so on invading the UUs.

Religion does not have to be irrational. There is nothing irrational about the agnostic religion I practice. But it has to *add* something to the rational. It has to add warm juicy life to the purely rational. For example, a rational, scientific approach will lead you to realize that there is no sharp disconnect between humans and the rest of life. But that understanding may not change or deepen your life unless you let it seep into your bones. You might meditate around it, immerse yourself in nature, feel your connection to other living things, create rituals and songs, experience awe and gratitude, humility, joy, despair, or power in face of the mystery of life. Even atheists may call these experiences 'spiritual' since spirit can just mean 'breath.' We lack words that refer to feeling and searching for the deepest meanings of our lives that don't have religious echoes. So why not reclaim the words? You can see all religion as metaphor for things not understood – so make your own metaphors or invent your own words. But don't throw the breathing baby out with the wrong-metaphor-contaminated bathwater

I think it's all part of creating the new religion, the new spirituality for our times. The religion of the next few centuries, the stories and rituals and warm intentional communities that will help us through the challenges of this coming era, will help us respond to global warming, genetic engineering, extended lifespans and so on, that religion is being created now, in places like this. We have to experiment, to go with what inspires us. We have to have faith, even when we don't know what exactly we are having faith in. I have a good deal of faith in nature, in human beings, in the processes by which cooperation outperforms dog-eat-dog or man-kill-man competition. I think we are going to make it, as a species and as a experiment in consciousness made by nature and evolution, if only we can hold together in love, and song, and story.

There is another hymn and then these Closing Words:

The following words are by Tom Mahon, who is the kind of theist I can appreciate. He is talking about the Big Bang and evolution, and how much more wondrous it is than the ideas of the creationists. When he uses the word 'god' he writes it with a small 'g' and follows it with a description of what he means: he calls the word 'god' 'a placeholder word for a reality we can't fathom'. So here are some quotes from a longer piece called Intelligent Evolution.

Something accounts for being being. Whether we call it God, or Tao, or String Theory, or Chaos, or Quantum Flux or Randomness or Elmer's Glue, this cosmos is held together with an elegance and subtlety so profound ... That is to say, eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has it entered the mind of time-bound beings to conceive what preceded or surrounded or underpinned or caused 'the initial condition' when time was naught ($T=0$) and all that was, is and will be was contained in a singularity of zero mass and infinite density...

It's not that there is no god (a placeholder word for a reality we can't fathom). It's that we refuse to abandon the image of a static, unmoving, implacable God even as we discover we

live in a fluid, dynamic, evolving, expanding, big-bang, quantum, relativistic, uncertain, indeterminate universe...

The Biblical God had to make each thing piecemeal – fish here, birds there, cattle over there. The big-bang god made everything from one thing; everywhere from one where; and everywhen from one when.

That a single explosive release of energy of whatever origin could, when cooled over time, produce bougainvillea, hummingbirds, the star-spangled nighttime sky and W. C. Fields speaks to a far more awesome cosmos than the ancients could ever have imagined. ...

We've been taught we're fallen angels who need to apologize for our existence and claw our way back, inch by painful inch, to God's good graces – a hard and bitter story that has often produced hard and bitter societies.

Far more awe-inspiring is that we are very, very, very highly evolved starstuff, seawater and sunshine, come alive and become aware. And a god that could factor all that into a really, really, really hot ball of gas from the outset is a wonder to behold.

And furthermore, to do all that without having to make mid-course corrections, and beyond that, to make the whole she-big-bang out of little niblets of energy whose next moment is unpredictable... now that's a god (the placeholder word for a reality we can't fathom) worthy of our reverence. That's a reality before which or whom we all stand equal in our awe. That is truly *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

True reverence then might consist in emulating the quanta; that is, having properties both substantial (science) and insubstantial (faith): exalting in the awareness of which we, and indeed the entire cosmos, partake; simultaneously humbled by the certain knowledge that this is still the first day of school.