

Beyond Belief

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

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PRELUDE *Imagine*, by John Lennon

WELCOME

It's good to be back. For the last couple of weeks I've been biking with my son in AZ and NM. I had a great time and I'll say more about the trip and its lessons this coming Wednesday in the Midweek Update (which, if you're unfamiliar, you can sign up for on buf.org).

I hear I missed a couple of great Sunday services, and an un-dramatic congregational meeting (the best kind).

Of course there are some things about BUF that I did not miss:
the experience of warmth and goodwill, beauty, resilience, freedom, and hope....
these are all present at BUF, but I did not miss them
when I went away
because they exist the world over
within and beyond us, through time and space,
within our memories and our hopes and carried forward
through the minds and the hands of the generations to come.

So acknowledging that we are one in this way, with the human family and the natural world, let's say together:

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago I shared this pulpit with Debu Majumdar, a devoted UU who offered a rather pointed critique of Unitarian Universalism as it tends to be practiced in our polarized political environment. In response to a recent article in the UU World magazine, entitled "Do you have to be an activist in order to be a Unitarian Universalist?" Debu offered his perspective that there must be more to Unitarian Universalism than ethics — more than the analysis of ethics and more, even, than the practice of ethics. We called that service "Beyond the Good." You can find the text at buf.org.

Today I offer a reflection on religion being, "Beyond Belief" — affirming a more conventional UU perspective: that while diverse religious beliefs merit respect, beliefs too are *just one aspect* of religion, and *not the very essence* of what we commit to, when we commit to religious freedom.

This is not an extraordinary view to express from a UU pulpit, but I feel it's important to reaffirm today when religious freedom, or freedom of conscience has been *twisted beyond recognition* to mean that: if I believe something, that *my belief is beyond critique*, even in matters of public policy.

I share this reflection on Memorial Day because, to me, Memorial Day is about honoring those who have given their lives for freedoms, including religious freedom, and freedom of expression... including the freedom to express the point of view that Memorial Day is a farce when it is used to imply that all who have died in American military operations have died for these freedoms, or that all who have died for these freedoms have done so in armed conflict.

I'm grateful today, as always, to be a minister in this tradition in which we do not have to agree with one another in order to respectfully engage with and learn from one another... where mine is not the last word, but where my word, to have merit, should be based in thoughtful consideration, and sometimes even evidence.

And yet... we who tend to take a rationalistic approach to religion also do well to be reminded of the beauty, and the truth, and the goodness (the ethical implications) of the non-rational, such as the profound imagery within our opening song. Will you sing with me...

GATHERING SONG Bring Many Names #23

*Bring many names, beautiful and good, celebrate, in parable and story,
holiness in glory, living, loving God. Hail and Hosanna! Bring many names!*

*Strong mother God, working night and day, planning all the wonders of creation,
setting each equation, gen-i-us at play: Hail and Hosanna, strong mother God!*

*Warm father God, hugging every child, feeling the strains of human living,
caring and forgiving till we're reconciled: Hail and Hosanna, warm father God!*

*Old, aching God, grey with endless care, calmly piercing evil's new disguises,
glad of good surprises, wiser than despair: Hail and Hosanna, old, aching God!*

*Young, growing God, eager, on the move, saying no to falsehood and unkindness,
crying out for justice, giving all you have: Hail and Hosanna, young, growing God!*

*Great, living God, never fully known, joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,
closer yet than breathing, everlasting home: Hail and Hosanna, great, living God!*

CHILDREN'S FOCUS adapted from variations of "Six Blind Men and an Elephant"

This is an amazing place. There are a lot of different things we do here. We can learn about and practice caring for each other. We can think about and dream about big ideas. And we can have profound experiences. That means not just thinking or dreaming but *doing things* to help us

understand something important about life.

So, last night we did something amazing in here. It was late and completely dark. I pushed all of the benches to the side and left a big space here in the middle. I asked six people to come play a game with me and I told them that I had hidden something here in the sanctuary. I asked the first person to come in, she was just 6 years old. She felt around in the dark and suddenly boom she hit something big and flat. She said, “You tricked me, there’s nothing in here... I just ran into the wall.”

Then I sent in a 12 year old. He felt around in the dark and found this long thin ropy thing frayed at the end. He said, “I know! It’s a rope.”

Then I sent in a 24 year old. He walked right into something sharp and said, “Ow, that hurts! It’s a spear, you should have set that somehow so it won’t hurt anyone.”

Then a 48 year old came in and found himself wrapping his arms around what he said felt like a big old tree.

Then an 96 year old came in and almost tripped over a big long fleshy tube. When she picked it up it was wiggly and super heavy. She shouted, “Look out it’s a snake!”

And finally my oldest friend, she’s 192, came in and ran into what she thought was a heavy rug hanging from a clothesline.

Then they all started arguing with each other about what it was ... until I turned on the lights. Boy were they surprised to find out that it was — can you guess? — it was an elephant!

Do you see why they were confused? One person ran into the side of the elephant and thought it was a wall. One person grabbed its tail and thought it was a snake. One person ran into the elephant’s sharp tusk and thought it was a spear. The next person wrapped his arms around something big and round and rough like a tree — but this was the elephant’s leg. The next person mistook the elephant’s trunk for a snake. And the last person thought the elephant’s ear was a big rug hanging from a clothesline!

Isn’t that amazing? But I think you know that that didn’t really happen; that was a story. But I think you also know that stories are real in a way. That they can teach us things that are true. What do you think this story can help us to learn?

REFLECTIONS, Part 1

Imagine no religion. Would that be hard to do? Just close your eyes and wish away all of the divisions, the debates, the pledge drives.

In his inspiring anthem, *Imagine*, John Lennon envisions humanity undivided. Stephen Prothero, author of the book, *God is Not One*, sees it differently. According to Prothero, maybe someday we can all get along. Maybe not. Maybe religion will help. Maybe not. But for starters, we’re not

going to get very far if, in the name of tolerance and goodwill, we pretend that all religious traditions can be boiled down to a single shared objective, nor even a shared question, or set of questions.

How can God allow millions of innocent people to die in natural disasters? This question is of no particular interest to many religious people. Explanations for this conundrum are sought, and delivered, only by those who perceive God, or wish to perceive God, as all knowing, all loving, and all powerful.

Did your soul exist before you were born? What happens to it after you die? These questions are meaningless if in your tradition, or in your personal experience, the concept of soul does not exist.

When people learn that I am a Unitarian Universalist, they often ask me what I, or we, believe. Whether they ask this as a challenge, or in the spirit of genuine inquiry, I often flinch. It's not that I don't know what I believe. But if they are asking about the problem of evil, or what happens after we die... I'm not always sure how to say concisely, and nicely, that these things *that are of ultimate concern to them* are of no particular concern to me.

I also flinch because the question itself distresses me. Because it often comes from a place of ignorance. As if religion is *only* about, and *always has been about* belief. Since the U.S. has long been a predominantly Christian country, in name, and I come from a Christian background, my critique of this perspective is based primarily in my understanding of the twisted path of Christian history which, over the centuries, has, from time to time, dramatically shifted focus.

Christianity's original focus was upon the wisdom and example of an inspiring teacher. After this teacher was gone, the focus shifted to sustaining a community to carry forward his legacy.

The growing emphasis upon *belief* began a few centuries after the death of Jesus, when Christianity became fused with the Roman Empire. And nailing down the specifics of doctrine created a form through which one could, and must, demonstrate loyalty to an all-powerful higher authority.

Later, following the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, there was a de-emphasis on creed and a flowering of Christian mysticism — that is, a focus on direct *experience of the divine* rather than *beliefs about the divine*.

But eventually Galileo and Copernicus and that lot, taking an observational approach to knowledge, created an unacceptable threat. *And so the age of mysticism, delight in unknowing, and the spirituality of silence, gave way to a strident demand for certainty* [paraphrasing Karen Armstrong in *The Case for God*] ... with religion and science, to some, becoming mortal enemies.

Christian fundamentalism, as we know it today, was born only 100 years ago as a fearful reaction not just to evolutionary theory, but also to new scholarly methods of biblical interpretation.

During the World War I era, a series of books called *The Fundamentals* laid out the core beliefs that have come to dominate (the conventional perception of) Christianity in the U.S. — and to determine, for many, who is in, and who is outside of that tribe.

So when Americans ask about religion today they ask about belief. It's what we know. Actually we know a lot more. We know about Jesus the teacher... *and* about Christian community... *and* about spiritual practices. But ultimately it always seems to come back to belief. And that's really a shame. Because religion is beyond belief.

Stephen Prothero points out that different religious traditions attend to different problems; so, naturally, they arrive at different solutions.

For Yoruba religion (originally practiced in West Africa, but now spread throughout the world) the problem is our forgetting of the destiny that our soul chose before we were born. The solution is to engage in rituals, stories, songs, and consultation with spirits to reconnect with our destiny.

For Hindus, the problem is the endless cycle of rebirth. Hindus seek to step outside of this eternal homelessness by devoting themselves to the experience of oneness with the divine.

For Buddhists, the problem is suffering. Their solution is to escape suffering through the *practice* of the Noble Eightfold Path.

For Confucians, the problem is social disorder. Their solution is a system of rules of etiquette, propriety, and interpersonal honor.

Taoists perceive the rigidity of social conventions (that the Confucians created) to be the problem! So Taoists seek to become free from artificiality — delighting in the constant and inevitable reshaping of all existence.

For Jews, the problem is exile from God and exile from one another, and the solution is found in the narrative of exile and return. We see this theme over and over in the stories of the Hebrew bible, in their quarreling with God and always returning to covenant. And in the Jewish political narratives from the time of slavery to Pharaoh, to the Babylonian captivity, to the Holocaust and the state of Israel: exile...return.

For Muslims, the problem is pride. Their solution is to bow down — to submit to the will of God. The Qur'an charges Muslims: "Say not, 'you have believed,' but rather say, 'We have submitted.'"

For Christianity, as it is widely understood today in the U.S., the problem is sin. The solution, according to many, is not to stop sinning, but to achieve salvation through correct belief.

These are oversimplifications of course. There are countless variations on these themes. Also, these generalizations suggest that each tradition is one-dimensional, which is not true. Each has a ritual dimension, a narrative dimension, an experiential dimension, an institutional dimension, a

doctrinal dimension, a material dimension, *and* ethical dimensions involving both personal ethics and social ethics.

And finally, every single person, everyone who practices, or self-identifies with any of these religious traditions is a complex multidimensional human being. So it's hard for me to imagine that any two people, even when they say they believe the same thing, actually mean the same thing.

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Why is it important to know about the world's religions? I think it's essential not only to understand one another's motivations, but also to understand that when someone else doesn't share your religious priorities, it doesn't mean that they are disrespecting you. For example, the goal of Salvation is irrelevant to Jews, but that does not mean that Jews inevitably disrespect Christians. The goal of Enlightenment is irrelevant to Muslims. That does not mean that Muslims automatically disrespect Buddhists.

All of this makes interfaith dialog complicated, important... and enriching. And it makes it hard to know, in any such dialogue, whether it's best to call attention to our differences... or to what we have in common.

And when is it better to skip the words altogether, and focus instead on practical projects that are important to all of us? Or might it be possible, someday, to simply celebrate together, and to grieve, and to be grateful together, and determined, and astonished?

MUSICAL MEDITATION *Blowing in the Wind*, by Bob Dylan

REFLECTIONS, Part II

An elephant encountered — and therefore interpreted — in six different ways: this story is found in various forms in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sufism. Interestingly, the story itself can be interpreted in different ways.

- A Hindu, for example, might say it's a story about the divine — and how, though each of us sees only in part, we're all grasping at the same thing.
- A Sufi might take it as to mean that God cannot be experienced through the senses, but only through the heart.
- A Buddhist might learn from the story that speculating about large abstractions leads nowhere... and when we keep it up anyway, this leads to suffering.

A Taoist, however, might twist the story into something completely unexpected, like this: *Six blind elephants were discussing what humans were like. Failing to agree, they decided to find out by direct experience. The first elephant felt the human, and declared, "Humans are flat." The others, after similarly feeling the human, agreed.*

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Julia Gillard, recent Prime Minister of Australia, is an atheist. At one point, when a Catholic

bishop implied that her religious perspective could cost her votes, an Anglican bishop stated publicly that Christianity does not have a monopoly on morality and that “Christians need to remind themselves that those who do not profess the Christian faith are still capable of adopting an ethical...framework, which assists in public policy decision making for the common good.” It’s encouraging to hear statements like this as our world becomes increasingly religiously diverse, and politically polarized.

So should we ever be concerned about the religious perspectives of our elected officials? According to the U.S. Constitution, it’s not supposed to matter. But there is an angle on this that does matter to me: Regardless of what they call themselves, I’d like to be represented by someone who *knows something about the religious convictions and motivations of people around the world...* especially anyone with whom we might do business, negotiate treaties, or go to war.

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Finally, I think an understanding of what belief is, and is not, is important because somehow it has become taboo to criticize another person’s beliefs. Our own religious liberalism, emphasizing radical inclusion and tolerance in the late 20th century, may have sent us down this murky path. And somehow our good intentions have come back to bite us — such that we find ourselves embroiled in nonsensical debates over public policy... tongue-tied... because beliefs, so often now, are understood to be the equivalent of facts. We’ve told ourselves for so long that we should respect other people’s religious beliefs. So now when we’re confronted with archaic mythical texts used to assess factual aspects of contemporary matters of public policy, it’s hard to know how to respond. (Myth and other non-rational forms are well-suited for forming *values*, which are a necessary component of policy-making. But values and facts have to be considered together, and not lumped undifferentiated into “belief.”)

In the name of freedom of conscience, I do believe that everyone needs to be allowed to express what they believe, what they think, what they value. As long as the expression is not a threat or harassment, even if it is abhorrent to me.

I say this because I know that my own views may be abhorrent to you and others, including my lack of concern for the philosophical problem of evil, or the destiny of my soul. And I say this because I am confident that if we can all freely express what we believe, that it will remain possible to respectfully engage with one another.

Possible, but not guaranteed. Possible, if we have the courage, and take the time to develop the skill, to so engage. I say this based on limited and inconsistent, but real, personal experience. And I say this guided by wisdom from my own religious heritage, such as that of Francis David, the sixteenth century Transylvanian Unitarian who said: “We need not think alike to love alike.”

And Hosea Ballou, the 18th century American Universalist who said, “If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury; but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good.”

And in the 20th century, Rev. Ken Patton, who shared this insight: “To criticize is not to reject.

This point must be emphasized, for it is the dividing line between the free mind and fanaticism.”

How might these timeless ideals be interpreted for the 21st century? In a multicultural, religiously pluralistic society?

Is it simply a matter of honoring whatever people say they believe? I’m reminded of a headline from the satirical newspaper *The Onion*, some years ago, which read: “One in Five Americans believe that Obama is a Cactus.” Maybe stuff like this doesn’t matter when it comes to private belief. And there’s only so much we can do, or should do, to change the mind of those who believe that fornicators should be stoned to death, or that the earth was created in seven days, that it doesn’t matter if we pollute because we’re going to be raised up in the rapture, or that if I blow myself up to kill the infidels I am doing the will of Allah.

In matters of public policy however, and within our own sphere of influence, we need to overcome our fear, our reticence, and perhaps our lack of practice when it comes to thoughtful and loving and evidence-based conversation and debate.

Amen
Ashe
Namaste
Blessed Be.

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I invite you now to share an anecdote that reflects your own struggles or your own breakthroughs on this topic. It’s not a time for abstract musing or complaining about how other people think, but more about your own aspirations and growth.

DIALOGUE

RESPONSIVE READING “For You” by Walt Whitman #659

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG *Meditation on Breathing* #1009

BENEDICTION #534

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

CIRCLE ‘ROUND