

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

2.8.15 Sermon: “This I Believe”

Presenters: Al Berzinis, Jan McCracken, John Sherman

Al Berzinis

Good morning! To be honest I was a little surprised when asked but decided to embrace this opportunity to share with you my personal perspectives and beliefs. If you had met me 10 years ago and asked me to give this talk I probably would have been able to summarize my beliefs in a fairly straightforward manner – and they would have been different in some significant ways from where I am now. So today I will share with you what has been a journey of personal evolution in my beliefs. Many things I strongly believe in have not changed so much over the years. The area where a lot of personal evolution has taken place is in trying to reconcile them with a belief in a God, and essentially re-programming myself to think differently about certain “truths” imparted to me by my parents and the culture in which I grew up.

The most constant aspect of my life is that I have always been a scientist and an experimentalist. I believe in power of the scientific method in offering a testable framework for understanding how the physical world works, and for predicting future outcomes based on current conditions and potential future actions. I have been working in chemical research for 45 years, and this has offered me many opportunities to create and shape new materials via theoretical and experimental science. The chemical sciences have also enabled the revolutionary findings in evolutionary biology and genetic sequencing. We now have countless supporting examples for how all of the amazing cellular machinery and chemistry of life has evolved over time in a manner consistent with Darwin’s theories on natural selection. By examining and dating the fossil record we can come to appreciate the power of selective pressures on adaptations over very long spans of geological time. As we celebrate this week the anniversary of Darwin’s birth more than 200 years ago my sense is that the challenge that many have to accepting that such complexity evolved in the absence of a deliberate designer is simply our human inability to grasp the passage of time over spans of billions of years.

Despite my scientific world-view, once I entered my early 30’s I kept getting surprised by the fact that I had a side of me that for lack of a better word could be described as “spiritual”. I realized I had a strong need for more than science to understand what it means to be human and live a full and worthy life. My own experience and reading has taught me that humans have a strong need to live in community. To this end, organized religions have much to offer in terms of providing caring communities of like-minded people, and informing the ethics and system of justice that underpin our form of government and system of laws. As Sam pointed out the other week Science owes its birth and early support from a Christian belief that the universe was orderly and pre-destined. I believe that Fundamentalists who contend that there are no connections between the perspectives of Science and Religion are being a bit naïve.

While I was raised in the Roman Catholic faith, my parents were not at all active and so it was fairly easy for me to reject much of that dogma in my teens. When I later recognized my needs for community and opportunities to serve I became fairly active for three decades in the Lutheran church. I was encouraged in this by my father-in-law who set a very strong personal example. Of course, this necessitated some accommodation of my scientific worldview with a Bible-based theology that incorporates a personal savior.

The Protestant Reformation enabled and encouraged personal study of the Bible. After my own study the sparse factual basis for the events in the Bible and the evident human hand by its writers and the Christian Church in shaping of its content and emphasis made it impossible for me to take the events and quotations literally. So if instead the “holy books” are to be used primarily as metaphor and instructional examples then it follows that we should open the dialog on ethics and morality to include all of the wisdom accumulated over the thousands of years of human societies, and not limit it to theist societies that were rooted in the Middle East of two thousand years ago. I am thus appreciative of the UU tradition of embracing the wisdom of all the world’s religious traditions.

That said, those parts of the older traditions which emphasize the primacy and uniqueness of Humanity while ignoring or diminishing the other creatures that share the planet with us, whether Humanist or Theist, do not strike me as defensible or sustainable traditions. We must face the fact that Humanity has been remaking the Earth and encouraging the extinction of organisms ever since we began to domesticate plants and animals more than 10,000 years ago. I believe this means we must inform the wisdom of older traditions with what has been learned from the scientific method of analysis and prediction. “Be fruitful and multiply” is a dangerous ethic when we now have a human population of more than 7 billion putting immense pressure on Creation. Believing “God is in control” flies in the face of all the evidence that random events are the key to evolution and how life on Earth actually plays out – and encourages a kick-the-can-down-the road mentality on problems such as climate change. Our recent fossil-fueled developments are only an intensification of practices we have embraced as “human progress” ever since humans learned to control fire more than 200,000 years ago. Humanity has evolved and thrived with a reliance on combustion. This will make it a very difficult habit to break – but the scientific evidence is telling us we must quickly find some ways.

I can remain optimistic since I believe in the power of humans gathered together in common cause, and that when we are open to each other’s thoughts and emotions we reach places and take actions that we would not come to on our own. I used to regularly engage in prayer: I used to lead congregations in prayer. Over time I started to pay more attention to what was happening in myself, and in larger groups, during times of prayer and I came to conclude that whatever power we might ascribe to prayer comes not from accessing a supernatural being, or a personal savior, but from our deeper collective unconscious minds. I believe we do humanity a dis-service when we look to some godlike supernatural force to sustain us. There is deep subconscious power within all of us, and it is magnified when we gather together and are open to it. If prayer works for you, I understand: I only suggest that if you try being more mindful during the process you’ll discover where the power is really coming from.

So I was glad to discover FUUSA seven years ago at the time when I had come to realize that creedal, theist religions were no longer going to be a place I could call home. The fact that Unitarian Universalism is practiced by less than one percent of the population is I think a testament to the difficulty and work involved in evolving this sort of synthesis of belief on your own when your starting point is from one of the more popular creedal religions that assert that they have all the answers. As a chemist I can appreciate the notion that the UUA tends to view itself as a catalyst for change and growth towards the world we envision: this is the best way to have an impact given our small numbers. So I will stand with you on the side of Love – in return I ask you to stand with me on the side of Reason. Humanity is endowed and marked with both capacities – I believe we are at our best when we use them both.

Thank you.

This I Believe
Jan McCracken

When I was a little girl, about five years old, I spent a few nights exploring my relationship with God. What might have prompted me was a television contest that I entered to win a Romper Room drum. The entry involved completing a checklist of behaviors. It was part of learning how to be a “do-bee” not a “don’t-bee.” The last thing on the checklist was “I say my prayers every night.” This item stumped me and my parents assured me it was okay to leave it blank. I think that might be when I decided to try praying. With no instruction, I did my best to figure it out in the quiet of those couple of nights. But the intention soon dissolved. Without support or understanding of this practice, it wasn’t so clear whether God was listening. Soon after, I developed a relationship with an imaginary friend, which was more fun and satisfying than those conversations with God in the dark. I kept these relationships private, probably in part due to messages I got about the hocus-pocus of certain religions that us rational people didn’t fall for. And so grew my skepticism about supernatural power, pearly gates, and a masculine God. By the way, I did win the drum, without any guilt or shame. And I’ve since figured out how to pray. I wasn’t handed a package of beliefs but I was given a lot of possibilities to consider. Growing up Unitarian, the exploration of truth and meaning was an inspiring subject for interpretation and critique. The intellect was more welcome than the spirit at our dinner table, and it was served with respect and concern for humanity. Exposure to rational humanist thinking had its benefits. My beliefs were shaped by a value system that consistently supported liberal causes, social change, respect for the planet, a meaningful vocation, compassion, and service. I grew up under the influence of wonderful humanitarian role models who didn’t talk much about God, but demonstrated a beautiful reverence for life.

Soul searching and addressing the ultimate questions were valid entertainment but I lacked focus and perseverance. I proclaimed myself an atheist for a short time as a teenager, but dropped the label when realizing I wasn’t being true to myself. Spirituality was a loosely defined concept that I leaned into, but not with complete acceptance or clarity about its distinction from religion. God was hugely problematic. I imagined being ostracized if I took a firm stand on the side of God. And at times I did the ostracizing.

The tasks of life kept me busy, as did its endless problems, making it impossible to quiet my mind long enough to find real deep peace or presence. Plus, I had no clue how to quiet my mind or why I would want to give up precious time to do that.

Fast forward to today. The intention to live as a spiritual being has become my way of life. The practice is simple in theory. Live with an open heart. Find, loosen, and let go of the constraints. Connect with others. Go slow and repeat. Doing this, I experience emotions as moving energy, thoughts as fleeting information, and appreciation for my physical body that is making it possible for me to be in the world.

I love communing with the sensation of energy in and around me. This awareness strengthens me to the core, helping with my body-mind connection. Perhaps spirit is in the energy. Whatever it is, it moves me. My experience with this life force, this energetic essence, has added lost pieces to my spiritual puzzle. Maybe some day science will catch up to explain this ancient wisdom. I'm not convinced that something isn't real just because it can't be seen or proven. How can you "see" or "prove" my experience?

In my fifties, I was inspired by a rather loud wake up call that said "change or die." And while some changes were behavioral, the call for transformation was far deeper. It was time to unfreeze the emotional blocks that clogged my inner works for so long; to face what was holding me back and engage in a healing process, because focusing on everyone else was no longer a viable option. That's when I started to meditate which has helped me to keep this little light of mine lit.

Meeting and greeting my demons and disturbances has been complicated but ultimately makes my life more simple and certainly more joyful as I practice ways to let them go; indeed, as I learn that I have the power to let them go. I highly recommend taking off your protective gear and getting naked. It's the only way I know to experience being free, without all the weight of shame, blame, doubt, guilt, worry, and fear. This investigation has become a game of curiosity for me. Who are these demons? Who's left in there? Who's coming back? Many have appeared in the form of alienating beliefs: I am not good enough. I am invisible. I am not smart. People are idiots. How do I meet and greet these demons? At the door with compassionate presence.

The essence of presence is finding that place where my mind is not running the show; I practice conscious awareness. In his book, the Untethered Soul, Michael Singer refers to two parts of our inner being, the one that watches and the part that never shuts up. He claims that if even for a moment you can get rid of that noisy part, you'll have the nicest vacation ever. I'm working on taking a long vacation.

Mindfulness helps me tap into this compassionate presence that I don't think really belongs to me but to which I have access. You might think of it as fearlessness. It's frustrating to wrap words around, because it's such a unique and personal experience. UU minister Doug Taylor refers to this deep commitment to individual experience as one of the chief organizing concepts of our faith. I want to sustain this unique relationship with my true nature. As reflected in the words of our next song, I keep returning to the home of my soul.

My spirituality gives me energy and patience to bear witness to such a complicated world and find ways to use my gifts. My friendships are thriving. I'm making contributions. I am finding my purpose to be supporting myself and others in the fall out from our human condition. I want to support this spiritual evolution that needs to pick up some speed on the planet.

I'll end by highlighting just a few of the practices I do to feed my spirit and motivate me to action. I meditate, I move. I breathe.

I practice nonviolent communication, which requires intention, presence, and focus. In addition to the study, I frequently practice with others. I have a very strong belief in the healing power of empathy and dream about a world where it's the default.

I also get nurtured in nature, one of the easiest places for me to find the spirit of presence. My dog supports me in this practice. I love my dog and she's a great role model for living in the moment.

I am an active participant in my own spiritual growth and development! It goes far beyond attending church service on Sunday. I dedicate a lot of resources to it. I buy inspirational books; I go to trainings and retreats; I participate in Wellspring. I even employ spiritual guides. I gravitate to people and communities who hunger for wholeness.

Where do all these contemplative arts get me? With peace in my heart, I can make peace where I go, choosing words and deeds that cause no harm and support life. Each day is a celebration, in darkness or light. I was blessed with the happy gene, I am blessed by the love and care of others, and I feel guided by loving presence. I will probably always wonder about my good fortune and never stop being grateful.

Knowing how we Unitarian Universalists love the questions more than the answers, I'd like to end with a question to you on the basis of my remarks.
Do you think I believe in God?

Followed by hymn "Return Again"

Return again

Return again

Return to the home of your soul.

Return to who you are.

Return to what you are.

Return to where you are.

Born and reborn again.

This I Believe

John Sherman

These are my thoughts on the "Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, The Universe, and Everything." I agree with Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* both that the process of seeking the Answer to the Ultimate Question is driven by our human needs and that, if we are not very careful, we are likely to come to a result that is as wrong and useless as the number "42."

I can't help but look for the "Answer" to the ultimate question because that is how I find meaning in my life. Knowing that I'm likely to get it wrong and that there are multiple answers helps me maintain perspective and my sense of humor about that process and life in general.

When I began wrestling with the concepts of God and Faith as a teen, I was unaware that there was any choice other than the biblical God sitting on His heavenly throne. Since coming to the Unitarian Universalist church in the late 1970's, my personal search and beliefs have been nurtured and grown. I have had the opportunity to explore the tensions between various religions

that believe in God and people who are adamant that God doesn't exist and would dispute this is even a religion. I have made peace and find common ground in Christianity, Paganism, Atheism, Science, and Philosophy.

I now believe that God, as I define God, exists. One of my philosophy professors made the point that "That which is 'real' always trumps that which is 'unreal.'" I cast my lot with people like Pete Seeger and Deists, like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Mark Twain whose conviction that God exists was based on close examination of the natural world rather than ascripture or prophets. When it comes to beliefs, I look first to what I know is real and try to avoid beliefs that are at odds with Reality. The Bible, other religious stories, and literature remain instructive to me and clearly contain great wisdom but they do not take precedence over Reality.

My belief that God exists begins with my awareness that Earth and the rest of the vast Universe are far greater and more significant than me or you. In addition to being big beyond all imagining and populated by billions of galaxies which are themselves composed of billions of stars, the universe is simply beyond our present capacity to understand. Even here on Earth, we are all constrained by gravity and yet we can't identify how gravity is transmitted.

While I would love to have a personal God who loves and protects each of us, I part company with many theists at the point where their descriptions of God ignore the whole, random, implausible, absurd, unfair, and awesome Reality. My examination of all that we know from science and life convinces me not to put my faith in the idea of a God who possesses human characteristics or is measured or understood using human benchmarks.

I don't hold God responsible when bad things happen. I feel very lucky and consider life to be a great gift, but I am discouraged from believing that God is walking along side me and looking after me or you. All of the trouble and grief that gets visited directly on most of us for no perceptible cause and without any human involvement argues against the existence of a loving, protective, personal God. If the biblical God actually is responsible for things like cancer in children or Ebola, then He has a lot of explaining to do. God isn't talking to me and I have not heard a plausible explanation elsewhere. The routine success of people who mistreat other people also discourages me from believing that God is spending time rewarding people based on their merit or devotion.

I think that there is some truth to the notion that the biblical God resulted from people creating God in their own image, reducing God until God was hardly more than a "little man behind the curtain." You have to admit the possibility of a little male wish fulfillment in the biblical God's supposedly making Man in His image, giving Man dominion over the Earth, and, best of all, creating Woman from Man.

I believe that God neither demands that we worship and express gratitude to Him nor responds directly to our prayers, worship, and gratitude. It would be egotistical and pathetic if the God of all creation actually needed, looked for, or even cared about human affirmation. I'm also not going to hold people even partially accountable for the tragedies in their life by assuming that God didn't like their prayers. Nevertheless, I pray, worship, and am grateful. This reality that

we are part of is so fantastic that I can't help but be personally humbled and grateful to be a part and to have this short opportunity to do something. I feel better when I worship.

I part company with some of my atheist friends however when atheism merely rejects theism and becomes an excuse not to seek the Answer to the ultimate question. As the late Mario Cuomo noted, "Any jackass can kick a barn down." Mocking or feeling superior to people who believe in God is not the answer to the ultimate question. Of course, criticizing atheists gets me no closer to the meaning of life.

So, what is my Answer to the ultimate question? I admit that I continue to grieve over my removal of that loving and protective God from the firmament. I want to find something like that in the world. As I look about me at all of the wonderful things in this world, I find people loving each other and taking care of each other. I see communities, like this one, where people come together and do good. I think that there is meaning and wisdom in the Bible stories of people doing good. When we do good to one another, I believe that we are truly instruments of God.

I also believe that for the foreseeable future people will not explore the vast Universe much less colonize it. What we have here on Earth is all that humans have to work with. I believe that our primitive ancestors had it right when they worshipped nature: The Earth is not simply our home. It is our life-support system. It is holy. It is worthy of being treated with love and respect. We need to protect the environment.

I do not believe that humans have dominion over the Earth, but when I contemplate all of the ways that people threaten the environment, we are clearly messing things up. If ever there was a time for the biblical God to intervene and stop us from destroying this paradise, this is the time. But that is not going to happen. We need to stop ourselves.

Humankind's greatest successes have always been the result of our responding to crisis by working together for the greater good. I am hopeful that we will use the lessons that we have learned in our church to work together with others to change ourselves and make this a better world for all of us.

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