

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Honoring Agnosticism”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 19, 2017

Call to Celebration

The great agnostic Robert Ingersoll gave a talk in 1896 about why he was an agnostic. It was a long talk but full of colorful illustrations and passionate opinions. (you can find the entire talk online) I came across this story in his talk and I couldn't figure out any way to fit it into my sermon. So I thought I'd use it here as a way to begin our service.

When I was a boy I heard them tell of an old farmer in Vermont. He was dying. The minister was at his bed-side – asked him if he was a Christian -- if he was prepared to die. The old man answered that he had made no preparation, that he was not a Christian -- that he had never done anything but work. The preacher said that he could give him no hope unless he had faith in Christ, and that if he had no faith his soul would certainly be lost.

The old man was not frightened. He was perfectly calm. In a weak and broken voice he said: "Mr. Preacher, I suppose you noticed my farm. My wife and I came here more than fifty years ago. We were just married. It was a forest then and the land was covered with stones. I cut down the trees, burned the logs, picked up the stones and laid the walls. My wife spun and wove and worked every moment. We raised and educated our children -- denied ourselves. During all these years my wife never had a good dress, or a decent bonnet. I never had a good suit of clothes. We lived on the plainest food. Our hands, our bodies are deformed by toil. We never had a vacation. We loved each other and the children. That is the only luxury we ever had. Now I am about to die and you ask me if I am prepared. Mr. Preacher, I have no fear of the future, no terror of any other world. There may be such a place as hell -- but if there is, you never can make me believe that it's **any worse** than old Vermont."

Our lives may be **much easier** than the old farmer's but we, too, need have no fear of the future if we are agnostics, if we are not believers. In that assurance, let us join together in the celebration of life.

Spoken Meditation

In looking for a meditation that honors agnosticism, I found this beautiful one written by the Rev. Judith Quarles titled How Shall We Pray? She was a UU minister I knew who died a while ago who served the UU congregation in Oneonta, New York. She was a very loving and tender, agnostic Humanist.

Let us join our hearts and minds in the quiet of meditation and prayer.

How shall we pray?

First, let us be open to the silence. Let us hear the sounds in this room, the noises outside, and the comfortable murmur from the children [around us]. Let us begin to hear the soft beating of our hearts. And let us listen intently for messages from within.

Next, let us feel gratitude for our lives and for our beautiful earth. As hard as life gets, as sad or lonely as we sometimes feel, let us always be warmed by the gifts of this life.

Next, let us hold in our hearts all those, known or unknown, who are in need. May we find in ourselves the energy and knowledge to bring care to the world.

And finally, let us be aware of the blessing that it is **not** ours **alone** to do the work of the world. Love and community work wonders that we, by ourselves, could never manage.

In this time of silence let us form our own prayers out of the concerns of our hearts.

Reading

From *Agnostic: A Spirited Manifesto* by Lesley Hazleton

There are some four hundred houseboats in Seattle. Many, like mine, are little more than shacks on rafts, but this may be the only one with a mezuzah at its entrance...Most of the time I don't even notice the mezuzah and neither does anyone else. But I know it's there, and that does matter.

Yet why should it? I am firmly agnostic, and haven't been to a synagogue service in years. Decades, in fact. So, is the mezuzah an empty sentimental gesture on my part, or does the word "hypocrisy" apply? Could I be in denial, a closet theist, or a more deeply closeted atheist? Or am I just a timid fence-sitter, a spineless creature trying to have it both ways, afraid to commit herself one way or the other?

To be agnostic is to love this kind of paradox. Not to skirt it, nor merely tolerate it, but to actively revel in it. The agnostic stance defies artificial straight lines such as that drawn between belief and unbelief, and shakes off the insistence that it come down on one side or the other. It is free-spirited, thoughtful, and independent minded—not at all the wishy-washy I-don't-knowness that atheists often accuse it of being. In fact the mocking tone of such accusations reveals the limitations of dogmatic atheism. ...

I stand tall in my agnosticism, because the essence of it is not merely not-knowing, but something far more challenging and infinitely more intriguing: the magnificent oxymoron inherent in the concept of unknowability. This is the acknowledgement that not everything may be knowable, and that not all questions have definitive answers.—certainly not ones as crudely put as the existence or non-existence of God. At its best, however, agnosticism goes further: it takes a spirited delight in

not knowing. And this delight is no boorish disdain for knowledge and intellect. Rather, it's a recognition that we need room for mystery, for the imagination, for things sensed but not proven, intuited but not defined—room in which to explore and entertain possibilities instead of heading straight for a safe seat on one end or the other of a falsely created spectrum.

What's been missing is a strong, sophisticated agnosticism that does not simply avoid thinking about the issues, nor sit back with a helpless shrug, but actively explores the paradoxes and possibilities inherent in the vast and varied universe of faith-belief-meaning-mystery-existence.

Sermon

To be a Unitarian Universalist today requires a significant level of doubt. Because we are open to different religious sources and do not claim any one tradition as orthodox; because these different sources conflict with each other; and because we also welcome direct personal experience as a source, we are forced to accept religious uncertainty that is baked into our purposes and principles.

That uncertainty happened very early for the Unitarian side of our tradition. Transcendentalists like Emerson and Theodore Parker challenged Christianity as our tap root in the 1850's proclaiming we could directly contact the divine through our intuition, through nature and human experience. Unitarians, and to a parallel degree the Universalists, started fighting over our relationship with Christianity in 1865 with a reformulation of the American Unitarian Association and continuing that struggle through 1934. By the end of World War Two, this controversy had settled down with Humanist dominance by the 1950's.

That dominance began to shift starting in the 1970's as women began exploring pre-Christian spirituality in curriculums like *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*. This exploration led women to advocate for more religious ritual such as lighting our chalice and using water as a symbol for our September ingathering service. Add in an interest in Earth Centered traditions, Buddhism, Judaism, a more liberal Christianity and a mix of these labeled generically as spirituality, the Humanist dominance began to weaken. Today we are much more serious about inclusion of diverse views as well as the inclusion of diverse people that doesn't assume one source is privileged over the others. To be the open and welcoming tradition we envision in our purposes and principles, we almost need to be agnostic to get along with each other.

The idea of agnosticism is quite old and can be found in any developed tradition of rational thought. Agnosticism was championed by Skeptic Greek philosophers Protagoras, Pyrrho, and Carneades. One can argue that Socrates was one based on his unknowing method of inquiry. Protagoras said:

Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not or of what sort they may be. Many things prevent knowledge including the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life.

Jews have long struggled with their relationship with and belief in god as they have suffered so much oppression over the centuries. I like the Yiddish expression to bracket the presumption of certainty about god that says, “If I knew God, I’d be God.” The Buddha was silent when he was asked ultimate questions. He directed people to discover the answers for themselves through meditation practice.

The word agnostic was coined by English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869. Striving to reconcile science and religion, Huxley said:

Agnosticism is of the essence of science, whether ancient or modern. It simply means that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe.

And

Agnosticism, in fact, is not a creed, but a method, the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle ... Positively, the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable.

Agnosticism is very suspicious of revelation, of accepting what enters a human mind and is then communicated as the words of God. Agnosticism, like science, would ask for independent verification from a worldly source. The revealed law might be supported or rejected through its practicality rather than supernatural origin. Dietary restrictions due to the potential of intestinal disease from pork or shellfish and the value for building a pluralistic society through loving one’s neighbor can support commandments rather than blindly accepting every law as revealed truth. Agnostics seek multiple sources because of the potential for error in scripture and religious authority due to mistakes as it was received, recorded and transmitted.

Anyone who has lived at least to middle age knows from their own experience **the unreliability** of the human mind. Magicians are mentioned in Exodus. Moses is said to have changed a rod into a snake but the Egyptian magicians could do it too. Anyone who has been to a magic show knows the power of deception to fool us. How many times have we fooled ourselves into thinking something that didn’t turn out to be true? How many times has our ego or our suspicion misled our mind and heart? And how many people who have defects in their brain talk to God directly receiving revelation that doesn’t stand up to scrutiny? **Scarier** are the ones who claim to receive divine messages that are able to gather followers through the persuasive power of their certainty.

How can we possibly achieve 100% certainty of anything – especially the existence or the non-existence of God?

Atheists and Theists don’t accept this argument. They claim that you have to choose what side are you on. You may not be able to absolutely know 100% but we have to live, make choices and act in

the world. They say whether you believe or don't believe makes a big difference. Otherwise one is condemned to sitting on the fence, not being able to make a commitment either way.

I've struggled with this personally over the years. Sometimes I like to think of myself as a Deist. Many of the early Unitarians were Deists. They thought God made the world, set everything in motion, then left to work on some other project or building another universe. God isn't watching us right now ready to tweak things or make adjustments to bias events one way or another. There may be unusual powers, energies or principles we can discover but we cannot influence God to tilt the table one way or the other.

Believing or disbelieving in this kind of a God doesn't have any effect on the world. The belief that troubles me is a God who is active in the world, who has a work plan for humanity and an agenda for Sam Trumbore. This personally oriented God is waiting for me to say the right prayer or profess the right belief to unlock something and release a potential not possible *until* I believe and act correctly. So far, given the wretched state of the world and the terrible future we are blundering towards, given the horrendous wars fought in the name of God, given the diversity of belief around the world, so far I haven't recognized a coherence of divine activity, vision or plan. And if I did, I wonder if I can trust my own mind to receive it.

But that doesn't mean we can't have faith.

Hazelton, in her book outlining her agnostic stance, claims "Reality may require acceptance, but it does not require belief."

Because of our precarious state of existence that can be cut short at any moment by a misstep in traffic, a misjudgment on the edge of a cliff, or an illness or accident, people long for certainty. Belief offers that kind of security, a security of convictions. Beliefs easily move from abstract intellectual propositions to personally held convictions. But how secure is a conviction?

Hazelton has this to say about that:

"If you know something for a fact, you have no need to believe it or be convinced of it. You need belief only when you are not sure. Belief is thus the product not of knowledge but of uncertainty. It contains within itself the possibility of disbelief."

Hazelton continues:

Those I know of deepest faith are not convinced. ... Their minds are not made up, and their faith offers anything but smug self-satisfaction. ... They have made a commitment to faith, not in the assurance that they are right and that they have found or possess the truth—the consumerist approach to religion—but in the acknowledgement of how much *cannot* be known, and how presumptuous it is to imagine that everything can be... Abolish all doubt and what's left is not faith, but absolute, heartless conviction. ... [Thus] to conflate faith with belief is to *eviscerate faith*, even though the two have been used as virtual synonyms

for centuries.... Where belief tries to expel doubt, faith walks with it, offering no easy answers. Belief insists, while faith hopes and trusts.

I love this distinction between faith and belief as it opens the door for the agnostic to use the word faith authentically. A Jewish agnostic can have doubts about the existence of God and faithfully follow the letter of the law without a sense of conflict. A follower of Jesus can appreciate his moral teachings, accept guidance to take personal responsibility for one's actions, and follow the call to create a realm of God on earth *without needing to believe* Jesus was resurrected from the dead. One need not believe in reincarnation or heaven and hell realms to have faith, or alternatively to have confidence, that the methods taught by the Buddha can and will lead the practitioner to a liberated state.

Faith then becomes a commitment rather than a conviction. Faith is what we do, not what we believe.

It is Christianity that has tied us up in knots demanding people make a decision about belief. It all began with the problem of Jesus' nature. Was he simply an inspired teacher or was he the one and only Son of God? How could we work this out with no evidence except what we know of Jesus presented by the New Testament, all written by believers to persuade unbelievers. There is precious little historical evidence *except* those documents. To stifle controversy and dissent, the Church decided what the right way to believe was *using creeds*. To the Church, correct belief matters *absolutely*. The state of your soul depends on it.

That is not the Unitarian Universalist approach. We reject orthodoxy of every religion. But we honor and welcome the leap *to* faith, as Kierkegaard called it, as a personal decision in spite of uncertainty. Even though I don't know if what the Buddha claimed about reality is true, I have great confidence, great faith, that practicing meditation will lead me toward a liberated state. I don't know if Jesus initiated the realm of God on earth, but I have faith in his teaching about beloved community. I don't know if the commandments from Moses are God given, but I have faith in the practice of love thy neighbor.

Unitarian Universalists mostly think **what we do** is far more important than **what we believe**. To believe in a loving God and to harm others will do no good. Especially so when it comes to killing unbelievers in the service of God. To believe there is only one way to believe violates our principles that welcomes a plurality of ways to believe and to have faith. Our ideal, if we have one, is to live a good life that both believers and unbelievers could affirm.

But what of death? What about the nature of the soul? The believers will tell you your soul is at risk after death if you have not subscribed to the correct belief and are not aligned with the truth. The Universalist side of our tradition has an answer for this: don't worry. If we are going to suffer, like the Vermont farmer, we'll suffer in this world not whatever might be next. There is no hell, if it ever existed. Universalists think it was abolished when Jesus reconciled God with the creation. Alternatively, however we live, whether we reap reward or sorrow in this life, we live in oneness with

all beings. Being alive is a dance between that oneness and the particularity of an individual body. Always, though, our real identity is that oneness.

Yet even that is ultimately unknowable though it may be sensible. No matter what we believe, no matter what we think we know, again and again, we will encounter the limits of our minds and bodies. Ultimately we are left in mystery.

I like how Hazelton puts it:

[Those I know of deepest faith] do not claim to have all the answers, or worse, **the** answer. Instead, they have a deep sense of unknowability, of the ineffable mystery of existence referred to in metaphysical shorthand as God...faith demands an active engagement with uncertainty.

The agnostic can thus behold, in awe, a deep sense of unknowability, an ineffable mystery of existence without the need to believe anything. There is deep beauty in this stance connected to human experience without needing to reach beyond it. When released from the need to know what is unknowable, we can live our lives as best we can, with gratitude, humility, love and appreciation for the tremendous good fortune to be alive and to contribute to the whole of which we are a part.

Benediction

I send you out with these lovely words by Lesley Hazelton:

This is the agnostic's faith: not in answers, but in possibilities. It's in the way doubt opens up thought instead of closing it off—in the vitality of a mind intrigued, challenged, dancing with uncertainty instead of being plagued by it. That is why, as an agnostic, I place my faith in inquiry. Or as Emily Dickinson poetically put it, "I dwell in possibility."

Let us dwell in possibility as we go in peace, make peace and be at peace.