

Skeptics and True Believers

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First Parish in Brookline

Responsive Reading: “*The Grace of Great Things*” Parker Palmer, adapted

We invite diversity into our community not because it is politically correct but because:

Diverse viewpoints are demanded by the manifold mysteries of great things.

We embrace ambiguity not because we are confused or indecisive but because:

We understand the inadequacy of our concepts to embrace the vastness of great things.

We welcome creative conflict not because we are angry or hostile but because:

Conflict is required to correct our biases and prejudices about the nature of great things.

We practice honesty not only because we owe it to one another but because:

To lie about what we have seen would be to betray the truth of great things.

We experience humility not because we have fought and lost but because:

Humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen—and once we have seen them, humility is the only posture possible.

Reading: "Miracles and Explanations" Chet Raymo

Like most children, I was raised on miracles. Cows that jump over the moon; a jolly fat man that visits every house in the world in a single night; mice and ducks that talk; little engines that huff and puff and say "I think I can"; geese that lay golden eggs. This lively exercise of credulity on the part of children is good practice for what follows—for believing the miracle stories of traditional religion, yes, but also for the practice of poetry or science.

Science is based upon our ability to imagine what we cannot see; nuclear reactions in the cores of stars, the spinning of galaxies, the dervish dance of DNA. Science, like the imaginative landscapes of childhood, is a world of make-believe.

If the prodigious energy of the new scientific story of creation is to flow into religion, the story will need to be translated from the language of scientific discovery into the language of celebration. This is the work of poets and artists. Only when we are at home in the universe of galaxies and the DNA will the new story invigorate our spiritual lives and be cause for authentic celebration. Knowing and believing will come together again at last.

Sermon:

Last week I officiated at a lovely wedding in Boston. I stayed for the reception and sat beside a dark-haired young woman who quickly began telling me the story of her own wedding just the year before. She gestured to the quietly handsome young man beside her as she told me the story of how they met and how blessed she feels that God brought them together at a church dance. I smiled and knew that I was the “minister” at the table, which, for some people, means that I am the expert on God.

She told me about their dream to create a communal space for book discussion groups with a coffee shop and small theatre—a place for families—and I almost told her that a good Unitarian Universalist community, the one in Tampa where she lives, was already living out that possibility. I decided not to burst her bubble by informing her that Tampa already had an intergenerational community alive with book groups, concerts, movie nights, and plenty of coffee.

I was too late to respond at all when she abruptly changed the subject, saying, “You know, God really did the right thing in New Orleans.”

I felt the rest of the table lean toward our conversation.

She went on, “There were terrible things happening there and God punished the unrighteous.” I asked what she meant, dreading the answer. She said, “Oh you know, all those gays and lesbians.”

I saw the jaws dropping all around our little circle as I exhaled very slowly.

I took a moment to remind myself that I am a minister. I think I managed to listen reflectively, saying something like, “Oh, so you believe in a punishing God.” She said “yes,” and I could see she had no reservations or questions about this cruel God who punishes some infractions of an ancient purity code while causing the suffering of the innocent.

I felt my table-mates holding their breath and stretching themselves closer to hear my answer.

I smiled and, forgetting that I am a minister, I said, “Then why isn’t Washington D.C. underwater?” She raised herself up to full height, and said, “I am a Republican!” And I knew that we’d traveled down that road about as far as we could go.

I recollected myself as minister, smiled to myself with gratitude, as I remembered that I was deeply engaged in working on the topic of skeptics and true believers for this sermon. I thanked the God of serendipity that I’d been seated next to a true believer. I relaxed into the posture of mirroring rather than challenging and learned that she believed that the Bible is literally true. Instead of challenging her views, I shared my childhood questions about dinosaurs and the Garden of Eden and she and her husband responded with gentle friendly conversation about Yeti, UFOs, the Loch Ness Monster, and the circular reasoning at the heart of carbon dating. It was the best we could do under the circumstances.

So let me tell you what I mean by the terms “true believer” and “skeptic.”

Several years ago, science writer Chet Raymo described two intellectual postures, the postures sitting at that wedding table. He wrote:

We are Skeptics or True Believers.

Skeptics are children of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. They are always a little lost in the vastness of the cosmos, but they trust the ability of the human mind to make sense of the world. They accept the evolving nature of truth and are willing to live with a measure of uncertainty... If they are theists, they wrestle with their God in a continuing struggle of faith. They are often plagued by personal doubts and prone to depression.

True Believers are less confident that humans can sort things out for themselves. They look for help from outside—from God, spirits, or extraterrestrials. They seek simple and certain truths, provided by a source that is more reliable than the human mind. They are repulsed by diversity, comforted by dogma, and respectful of authority. True Believers go out of their way to offer (sometimes forcibly administer) their truths to others, convinced of the righteousness of their cause. . . . Although generally pessimistic about the state of this world, they are confident that something better lies beyond the grave.” (Skeptics and True Believers: The Exhilarating Connection Between Science and Religion)

It seems that we are a people divided. We drive cars, fly in planes, get the latest flu shot, challenge gravity in space launches, enjoying the fruits of scientific knowing, and yet we hold beliefs that seem to contradict the evidence that we are not the center of a vast universe, that our lives are ephemeral. No doubt there are people sitting in our pews this morning that believe in channeling, reincarnation, spirit guides, and more.

Perhaps we manage to hold contradictory beliefs because skepticism offers little solace in our times of trial. Believing in miracles is a comfort when we face the abyss of non-being. Chet Raymo believes that as humans discover our real place in the universe and our real place in time, humans feel insignificant by comparison.

He demonstrates this moment when he describes an exercise in his earth science class at Stonehill College. One student, given the assignment of

making a timeline of geologic time came to class with a melon-sized ball of yarn. Each foot of yarn represented 10 million years. They had to go out to the football field to unroll it and it extended the length of one and a half football fields, representing 4.5 billion years of earth history. As Raymo and his students stood at the present end of the line looking backward toward that vast distance, he remembered the Fundamentalist claim that the earth is 10,000 years old.

This claim would be the equivalent of the thickness of a piece of paper. He could feel the vastness of 4.5 billion years of earth history compared to the intimacy of a mere 10,000 years and viscerally experienced the fault line in our culture. He could feel the tension between a way of knowing that works, a way of knowing that is agreed upon by a variety of scientists that come to the same conclusions about the age of the earth, a way of knowing that he believes is 100% accurate in its assessment that the earth is geologically ancient and a way of knowing that has no need for evidence, rests on faith, and brings a sense of security. He concludes that if we are to bridge this divide the skeptics among us are going to have to find a way to address our own very real and very human need for emotional security.

Huston Smith, teacher of world religions, takes issue with a world view shaped by dogmatic skeptics, a paradigm he calls, not science, but rather, “scientism”—a religion, or actually simply another version of True Believer in skeptic clothing. He hears contempt in the voice of these so-called empiricists as they suggest that religion is “wishful thinking” or “escapism” or a wish for “ease.” He allows himself an outburst of temper when he describes the difficult practices of Zen, the crucifixion of the radical Jesus, the faithful who retained their dignity in concentration camps, the devotion of those who care for the poor.” (*Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*)

Smith shares this poem by Unitarian Universalist Stephen Dunn at the beginning of his chapter on our human need for a good story:

At the Smithville Methodist Church

It was supposed to be Arts and Crafts for a week, but when she came home with the “Jesus Saves” button, we knew what art was up, what ancient craft.

She liked her little friends, She liked the songs they sang when they weren't twisting and folding paper into dolls. What could be so bad?

Jesus had been a good man, and putting faith in good men was what we bad to do to stay this side of cynicism, that other sadness.

OK, we said, one week. But when she came home singing "Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so," it was time to talk.

Could we say Jesus doesn't love you? Could I tell her the Bible is a great book certain people use to make you feel bad? We sent her back without a word.

It had been so long since we believed, so long since we needed Jesus as our nemesis and friend, that we thought he was sufficiently dead,

that our children would think of him like Lincoln or Thomas Jefferson. Soon it became clear to us: you can't teach disbelief to a child,

only wonderful stories, and we hadn't a story nearly as good.

On parents' night there were the Arts and Crafts all spread out like appetizers. Then we took our seats in the church and the children sang a song about the Ark, and Hallelujah in which they had to jump up and down for Jesus,

I can't remember ever feeling so uncertain about What's comic, what's serious.

Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes. You can't say to your child

"Evolution loves you." The story stinks of extinction and nothing exciting happens for centuries.

I didn't have a wonderful story for my child. And she was beaming. All the way home in the car She sang the songs.

Occasionally standing up for Jesus.

*There was nothing to do
But drive, ride it out, sing along
In silence.*

Huston concludes that we need to find a new story instead of shooting at each other with contempt across the divide. How shall we do that when folks like Nobel laureate in physics, Steven Weinberg, warn us that “the world needs to wake up from its long nightmare of religious belief?”

One solution, posed by a senior research scientist at the Space Science Institute in Boulder, Colorado, Carolyn Porco, is to create an alternative church. This is what she said in a speech at a forum of scientists grappling with the rise of superstition and fundamentalism: “We should let the success of the religious formula guide us,” Dr. Porco said. “Let’s teach our children from a very young age about the story of the universe and its incredible richness and beauty. It is already so much more glorious and awesome — and even comforting — than anything offered by any scripture or God concept I know.” She then displayed a picture taken by the Cassini spacecraft of Saturn and its glowing rings eclipsing the Sun, revealing in the shadow a barely noticeable speck called Earth.” (*New York Times, George Johnson November 21, 2006*)

When I read her speech in the New York Times last fall, I thought, much like I thought when listening to my fundamentalist table mate last week as she dreamed of creating a communal place for book discussions and coffee, that Unitarian Universalists already practice that religion imagined by Dr. Porco. At the very least we are and have been a home for those that practice the religion of skepticism full time. Alexander Graham Bell, Elizabeth Blackwell, Dr. Helen Caldicott, Norman Cousins, Clarence Darrow, Dr. Jean Mayer, Maria Mitchell, Dr. Ashley Montague, Florence Nightingale, Dr. Linus Pauling, and Joseph Priestley are just a few of those who found a spiritual home in our tradition.

Unitarian Universalists have the real opportunity and possibility of intentionally teaching our children a cosmology that is both accurate *and* emotionally satisfying. Fact and meaning do not have to be in conflict. We can spin the straw of scientific fact into the gold of human meaning.

It was once thought that God filled the gaps of human knowledge, that as science filled in human understanding of how this world works, the need for God would go away. This is obviously not the case. We know, when we listen to scientists like Chet Raymo and Carl Sagan, that the miraculous and the moral do not disappear in the world of the skeptic. The wonder space increases. Faith, awe, discipline, and miracle combine to make the practice of science religious in the sense of tying the world together. Faith in the logical order of the world is the backbone of a scientific spirituality. A creative curiosity in a community of dissent is its daily practice.

We are going to need to keep some version of God in this story, even if we tell ourselves that God does not exist apart from our mental construction of God, a belief in God being adaptive in our human evolution. Remember Chet Raymo's theory that believing in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny kept a space in his mind for creative imagination? I believe that a brain space for God serves the same function for the skeptical part of us. Witnessing from a "God stance" allows us to question our motives, to consider that our view is limited by self interest, or short sightedness.

Cognitive scientists theorize that our brains are designed in ways that allow us to imagine a God's eye view. This point of view gives us practice in two important functions of being human. The first is a resource to our curiosity: A God's eye view allows us to imagine beyond the evidence of our eyes, ears, touch, and smell. We can imagine DNA and the big bang and the beauty of mathematical patterns at the heart of any process. The second is a resource to our compassion: A God's eye view — a view that can imagine seeing the world from above, a view that can see the whole and not just the parts, a view that can see vast swaths of time, allows us humans to imagine a whole community instead of only experiencing our personal interests isolated in a moment of time. We have survived as a species because we have found a story that lets us practice compassion and self sacrifice as well as curiosity and hypothesis.

I finish with the story of my encounter with the woman who reads the Bible literally and imagines a God who destroys both the guilty and the innocent according to an ancient purity code. I have felt guilty for not challenging her view more directly in language she might have understood. I am your minister and you expect that of me in such moments. I could have said, quoting a Bible verse for emphasis, that the God of the Bible grows and changes. I would have turned to the pages that describe God's rainbow

covenant to never destroy God's creation again in anger or punishment. I could have pointed to the poetry of Isaiah, telling of God's new covenant written on the heart. I could have told the story of Job, who learned in the space of a whirlwind, that innocent suffering is possible in the complexity of creation and not evidence of sin.

When I take a God's eye view of the meeting and the larger work of ministry, I see that we were kind to each other, kind to our table mates. She and I each remembered that our conversation was not seated in a context for debate or a contest of wills. With the stance of humility in the face of unfolding reality, I believe we have both been changed by the meeting. Who knows what might result from our kindness in that moment? While we can take a temporary God's eye view, we are not God, and like Job, we can only reside in the space of gratitude, humility, and awe as we wonder how we are being transformed in the space of meeting.

For now, let our wondering take shape in our singing, singing our gratitude for creation, gratitude that shapes community as we turn toward our future.

Benediction: *“Cherish Your Doubts”*

Michael Schuler

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the servant of truth.

Question your convictions, for beliefs too tightly held strangle the mind and its natural wisdom.

Suspect all certitudes, for the world whirls on—nothing abides.

Yet in our inner rooms full of doubt, inquiry and suspicion, let a corner be reserved for trust;

For without trust there is no space for communities to gather or for friendships to be forged.

Indeed, trust—this is the small corner where we connect -- and reconnect -- with each other.

Amen