

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

WHAT I BELIEVE

By

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READING

Our Reading for today is from a sermon by my friend and colleague Forrest Church from All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. His sermon is entitled, "One Light, Many Windows." It was first preached on October 6, 2002.

In the Cathedral of the World there are millions of windows, each telling its own story of who we are, where we came from, where we are going, each illustrating life's meaning. Every religious, philosophical, even scientific worldview has a window, or many windows, through which the one Light shines, refracting truth, bringing illumination to worshipers and seekers.

No one can see the one Light (Truth or God, call it what you will) directly, only as refracted through the cathedral windows. Every great religion teaches this insight. We cannot look God in the eye any more than we can stare at the sun without going blind. This should counsel humility and mutual respect for those whose reflections on ultimate meaning differ from our own. Sadly, this is not always the case. Some religious leaders, perceiving the Light shining through their own window, conclude that theirs is the only window through which the Light shines. If they forget that it is in our lives and not in our words that our religion must be read, they may go so far as to incite their followers to throw stones through other people's windows. Skeptics, on the other hand, perceiving the bewildering variety of windows and worshippers, conclude that there is no Light. But the windows are not the Light, [they are] only where the Light shines through.

This metaphor is a perfect description of Unitarian Universalism. One Light (Unitarianism) shines through many windows (Universalism), illuminating human minds and hearts in many different ways. In our congregations we honor this truth by encouraging our members to reflect on the light through whatever set of windows they find most illuminating. We only require that this same freedom be honored for others.

WHAT I BELIEVE

The Reverend Drew Kennedy

Many religions set forth their beliefs in creeds, but ours is a non-creedal church where we agree to disagree, where we expect and desire no conformity of opinion, and where we welcome alike theists and atheists, pagans and pantheists, agnostics and humanists and all sorts of other viewpoints

So, ours is a non-creedal church. In this church, we don't tell you what to believe. Rather, in this church, it is finally up to each of us, with the help of our tradition and with the help of dialogue within our community, to come to our own conclusions, to arrive at our own set of beliefs.

In this same spirit, as one of your ministers, one of my jobs is not to try to tell you what you should believe. Rather, my job is to try to stimulate your own best thinking. Week after week, Craig and I share our views and our beliefs, but implicitly we are always tossing it back to you, saying, in effect: "Here's what *I* think, and here are some options, now what do *you* think?"

Last Tuesday, I concluded a six-week "Building Your Own Theology" class. It was a wonderful class. At the last session, each of the 40, or so, participants was invited to share at least an excerpt from their own personal "Credo" (or "I believe") statement summarizing some of their key beliefs. Well, today, in a similar exercise, I would like to try to bring together, in a fairly succinct fashion, some of my core beliefs, and to share them with you. But, again, please remember: these are *my* beliefs. Your job is not to believe what *I* believe; your job, of course, is to figure out what *you* believe.

II. THE COSMOS

So, let me begin at the beginning — with cosmology.

I believe. . . passionately. . . in both reason and mystery, and yet both beg to adequately answer, to my satisfaction, the age-old question of why there is *something* rather than nothing. That everything somehow emerged from an infinitely small, so-called "point of singularity" totally baffles me. I just don't get that. I know there is eminently good science behind it, but, again, the idea that everything — all of the matter of the universe, all of the galaxies and super-clusters of galaxies, all of the so-called "dark matter" and "dark energy" of the universe — that it all emerged from an infinitely small point in space totally baffles and bewilders me. So, I personally start with that, which to me is an inscrutable enigma.

In any case, in the beginning (or what we think of as the beginning), about 13.7 billion years ago, there was the Big Bang (it appears), creating time, space, plasma, and eventually matter. No one, in my judgment, brooded over the deep, masterminding Creation in seven or in any other number of days. Rather, the cosmos was (and is) a given, indifferent and impersonal, but it is, nevertheless, a glorious place to be and to behold.

Amidst the billions upon billions of light-years and stars strewn across the incredibly vast universe, in one of the arms of an inconspicuous "bar" galaxy known as the Milky Way, soon after the planet Earth's crust formed and cooled about three or four billion years ago, single-cell forms of life emerged quite naturally, but wondrously nevertheless, from the primeval cosmic soup. In time, more complex organisms developed specialized characteristics that helped them to adapt to their environment. Later, Homo Sapiens emerged, evolving spectacularly from lower forms of mammals, bringing life to consciousness. Humans, quite remarkably, are now capable of the most finely nuanced arts and technologies, and yet, are capable, at the same time, of the most primitive and savage brutality. And so we proceed from one enigma to another.

III. THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

I believe...in the spiritual dimension of life, which, quite simply, for me at least, is the dimension of depth

within us all: the dimension which theologian Langdon Gilkey calls the dimension of ultimacy, the dimension which psychotherapist Ira Progoff calls the Well Within, the dimension which Ralph Waldo Emerson calls the soul. I believe the spiritual, or depth, dimension is critically important to our lives. Why? Because it is here, I believe, within our spiritual dimension, that we face the ultimate issues, the ultimate questions, and the ultimate decisions of our lives. It is here, in the inner sanctum within, that we entertain our deepest thoughts, our deepest doubts, our deepest loves, our deepest fears. It is here that our deepest values and meanings are forged and honed and adjusted. It is here that we assess our identity, our integrity, our direction and the purposes of our lives.

And, finally, if we are going to, it is here, in our spiritual dimension of depth, I believe, that we will find intimations of God.

This, for me, is the spiritual dimension of life, which begs, which cries out, for our attention, our cultivation, and our celebration. Indeed, this, for me, is the primary purpose of the church: It is to cultivate the depth dimension of life in a caring community with others.

IV. THE PURPOSES OF LIFE

Now, what are we to do with our lives? What are the major purposes of life?

I believe...whether at work, at home, or at play, that there are at least five worthy purposes for our lives in relation to the five basic relationships in our lives — namely, our relationship to ourselves, to others, to the world, to the environment, and to the cosmos.

One — the first purpose is to know thyself.

Two is to love others — and to pay close, and loving, attention to all of our personal relationships, especially to our families and loved ones.

Three — a third purpose for our lives — is to reach out, and to serve the world — to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick, and so forth.

Four — a fourth purpose for our lives — is to respect the interdependent web, the ecosystem, of which we are a part.

And a fifth purpose for our lives is to continue to grow in wisdom.

So, again, I believe. . . we are called to know thyself; to love others; to serve the world; to respect the environment; and to grow in wisdom. I believe these constitute five basic relationships, and five worthy purposes, for our lives. This, for me, is the spiritual agenda.

V. GOD

Now, what about God?

I believe. . . that Forrest Church's image of the "Cathedral of the World," with its one light and many windows, is compelling. To remind you, Church suggests, and I quote, that:

In the cathedral of the world there are millions of windows, each telling its own story of who we are, where we came from, [and] where we are going, each illustrating life's meaning. Every reli-

gious, philosophical, even scientific worldview has a window, or many windows, through which the one Light shines, refracting truth, bringing illumination. . . .

So, there is one light, and many windows.

To me, this means: there is one reality, and many perspectives, many views, of it.

Consequently, it was not at all difficult, in our recent “What Do You Believe” religious viewpoints series, for me to be able to articulate, with conviction, the plausibility of both some of the western views of God, such as Einstein’s view of God, and then, the next week, some of the eastern views of God, such as the Buddhist view of *Sunyata*, the ultimate emptiness, which, paradoxically, frequently comes clothed in abundance and fullness as well as emptiness.

When we got to transcendentalism, Part III in our series, finding signs of the divine within nature and within one’s self, in what Emerson calls the soul, I was there. I was a Transcendentalist!

And likewise, when we got to atheism and existentialism, and naturalistic theism, and agnosticism and humanism. In each case, I could sympathize. It wasn’t all that difficult to make a case for *each* of these religious viewpoints.

So, what does it mean?

I think it means that Forrest Church is right. There is one light — one reality (which is a kind of Unitarianism), and there many windows (which is a kind of Universalism). Each of the windows represents a different point of view. Looked at from one point of view, in other words, we see theism. Looked at from another point of view, we see atheism. From yet another vantage point, we see agnosticism. And so forth. Each of the views is partial; none of them captures the whole. Yet all of them somehow hang together as one reality.

Nevertheless, each of us may still naturally have our own favorite viewpoints, those which best reflect our own experience, background, and present thinking.

So, what do *I* believe?

If I were to fill out the survey,¹ my first choice would be the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* — the ultimate emptiness undergirding everything.

My second choice is transcendentalism — God appearing through nature and the soul within, which somehow nicely fits with my T’ai Chi practice.

My third choice . . . ahh...this is difficult. It could be existentialism. It could be agnosticism. It could be humanism. Consequently, I suppose it actually *should* be. . . “Too confused to decide!” But, having to decide, I guess I’d say existentialism is my third choice, especially because of its tenet that life is ultimately inexplicable, that no one set of beliefs or principles can adequately sum up the totality of reality.

VI. ETHICS, VALUES AND MEANINGS

With the existentialists and humanists, I believe...that there are no pre-established, eternal, or divine values or meanings inherently built into the universe or coming down from on high. Rather, for me, values and meanings are the outcome of human choice and discovery. Thus, I believe values and meanings are best understood strictly in human terms, that is, they are set within no ultimate ontological, metaphysical, or theological context.

¹ As this service followed a six-part religious viewpoints series of services, a survey of personal religious viewpoints was included in the day’s Order of Service.

Similarly, I believe ethics are autonomous and situational, needing no absolute or theological sanction. The Ten Commandments, for example, in my judgment, are not to be revered because God supposedly etched them in stone, slipped them to Moses, and thus gave them to humanity. Rather, I would suggest quite the reverse. The Ten Commandments are to be revered to the extent – and only to the extent – that they set forth what we humans see as godly (or as exemplary) standards.

Likewise, with Jesus and God. What's important is not that Jesus be God-like, but that God be Jesus-like (or Christ-like).

When we see Jesus, in other words, scorning the arrogant and disabusing the abusively powerful, when we see Jesus empowering the poor and the humble, when we see Jesus healing the sick and blessing the bereaved, what we are seeing, I would suggest, are the human aspirations of how we humans would like to see God at work in the world, namely, binding up the world's wounds and exemplifying an ethic of love and compassion.

VII. JOY AND PAIN, JUSTICE AND HOPE

I believe...the world is awash with incomparable beauty, and that beneath all of the manifold complexities, difficulties, and pain of life, I have no doubt personally that there is a deep and abiding sense of joy and fulfillment just waiting to be tapped. I firmly believe that.

At the same time, I also believe...that the world is awash with pain and privation, and despite all of the manifold wonders and joys of life, at times the world is unspeakably cruel and brutish, and is without question filled with unmitigated terrors, misery, ignorance, and injustice.

Given these twin, counterbalancing realities of beauty and joy, on the one hand, and misery and injustice, on the other hand, I believe...in trying to seek a balance in life between savoring and saving the world. And this, as E. B. White says, "makes it hard to plan the day."

I believe...what Martin Luther King used to say when asked how long it would take to achieve civil rights for African Americans. He used to say: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." I believe King is right about that. Indeed, I believe that human nature is profoundly mixed, entailing both inspiring good and hair-raising evil. But I believe that the progress of human civilization bends, it tilts, as one of my colleagues suggests,² like a see-saw – ever so slightly, perhaps just one or two degrees – towards justice and towards the good.

I believe...in hope. I believe in hope even in the darkest places. I believe in hope even in the most forlorn of possibilities. I believe in hope even when despair has apparently won the day and darkness is strangling the light. Still, I believe I hope. I believe in hope because painful experiences teach us – they've certainly taught me – that, as the poet Theodore Roethke says, "even the darkness has its own light," that adversity can sometimes bring us to renewal, and that people – I've been amazed to find, over and over again – can live richly, sometimes even joyously, even in the midst of grim realities, dark circumstances, and, let us note, economic hard times.³

² I gleaned this image years ago from my colleague and friend The Rev. Patrick O'Neill, from a piece called, "Walking on the Edge," though I no longer have the citation details.

³ I am indebted here to my colleague, the Rev. Roy Phillips, of St. Paul Unity Church, St. Paul, MN, who wrote in his church's newsletter (February 14, 1993, p. 2): "I believe that we can live richly with the dark realities, that we can see the stars at midday from the bottom of a well, that adversity and travail can bring us to renewal of life, that the cross of Christ is prelude to the resurrection of Christ, that we die and are born again a thousand times and more as we live our span in this world."

Not coincidentally, then, I believe...in paradox: that in emptying ourselves we can be filled, that in giving of ourselves we can receive, and, contrariwise, that in gaining the whole world -- like Bernie Madoff, let's say, or Robert Allen Stanford -- in gaining what *looks* like "the whole world," we may actually seriously risk losing our own souls.

These, then, are some of the things *I* believe. Now, what is it that *you* believe?