

The Hunger for Meaning

- a worship service crafted by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister; presented on Sunday, October 18, 2015. Vicki Chessin, Worship Associate.

Story for All Ages

[*A Roomful of Questions*](#) - by Tracy Gallup

Meditation and Prayer

“Another Psalm 139”

- by Mark Belletini

To be present to the life of this place,
and to the deep that calls unto deep,
it matters only that we know there is no place
to flee from what presents itself to us here.

We can imagine flying to dark green islands
far away in a teal sea bronzed by sunset,
but still the questions and answers
will dance within us, knock at our doors,
haunt us in the dark.

We can imagine pulling up the corner
of the autumn morning sky,
and slipping away into a place too strange to name,
but still the questions and answers will glide within us,
pound on our doors, call to us in the dark.

We can imagine running away
to the dark side of the earth,
where spices float in the rivers
and children nurse at midnight breast,
but still the questions and answers
will circle within us, rap at our doors,
and touch our shoulders in the dark.

For there is no place to flee from the presence
that presents itself here, the face we each recognize
in the mirror of our lives, the yearning that is the
breath in our own breath.

Flee to the presence, or stay here for it. It makes no
difference

for we are here, present to what presents itself to us.

Welcome.

Welcome to the silence.

Sermon

Our sermon for this morning, “The Fourth Principle: A Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning” was first delivered on March 18, 2012 by the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, Palatine, IL. Sermon was presented to our congregation this day by Vicki Chessin, UUFCM Lay Worship Coordinator.

Who didn't feel with either the older or newer Starship enterprise – the sense of adventure swell up with the captain's words – “the final frontier”...? You could almost feel the universe stretch out before you as an expanse of nearly infinite possibility. Whoosh! – the freedom was intoxicating.

I wonder how many of you know that the creator of Star Trek – Gene Roddenberry – was a Unitarian Universalist? And the great space adventure that he created was precisely a metaphor for the human adventure of mind, spirit, and body – the adventure that rises before humanity with every rotation of the earth and again in every revolution of the sun.

This is the fourth principle of Unitarian Universalism. [~~Yes – I skipped the third in order to come back to it a little later this spring.~~] We affirm and promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. In many ways this principle – and the powerful reality behind it – draw and sustain so many people into this faith.

People may phrase it all sorts of ways – but they all mean this principle. It's what you feel – when you come here for the first time and are amazed. It's what you feel when you come back the second time to kick the tires and discover that it's still there. And it's what you find again and again – it is central to what keeps you coming back.

It's the feeling of freedom – actually it's what you feel when you recognize real freedom. Here we have no graven creed to which all must adhere forever and ever. No bounded horizon within which we are confined. If you ever saw the movie the Truman Show – when Truman's boat bumps into the edge of his world – that's what I mean by a bound horizon. There is no secret perimeter of faith – no hidden creed either.

Instead this principle announces that each person is free to seek truth – and that word isn't capitalized, either.

Yesterday, while I was at church for a meeting, a Jehovah's Witness left a leaflet at our house. It said: "How do you view Jesus? As a new born infant, a dying man, or an exalted king. Come Thursday at 5 to hear the answer!" *The answer* – not an answer, or our answer. If that had been a leaflet from a Unitarian Universalist Congregation it might have the very same opening line – How do you view Jesus? But then it might say "Come Thursday and explore how some people have answered that question through history, or come and share your answers for a stimulating discussion. Open minds required."

Over and against the history of religions in which only certain people have been considered conduits to wisdom – we believe that each one of us – given the right conditions may have something to add to the insights of humanity. We believe that – just as religion has appeared in different ways to different people over the very different ages – in fact – we are all made to experience and know differently and that we must each be free to seek meaning and truth in ways that speak to us. You know that there are still people who don't realize that most people read the Bible in translation – and, therefore, is colored significantly by the time, place, person and politics in which it was translated. Here we take for granted that much of what we know and understand -- scripturally and in other ways -- has been lost and will always be, to some degree, lost in translation. That won't keep us from sharing our hope, visions, insights – but it makes us more modest and far more eager to hear and know someone else's perceptions and understandings.

We value the search. I think that Unitarian Universalists understand that it is our curiosity about meaning and truth – **it is our yearning to know and actively seeking meaning and truth** – that makes us truly, deeply, human and alive.

We are a meaning-craving creature – we want to know who, how, and when, but above all we want to know why – why about everything. **Humans yearn for answers** – sometimes this yearning makes us settle for answers even when they don't quite work or don't entirely make sense.

Overall – Unitarian Universalists don't rest with convenient fictions – or even the truths of the past – but we want to press forward toward new insights. You know that stage of development when a child tends to hide behind her or his parents? You can sometimes catch a glimpse of them around a leg which they hold on to for security, before they dart back behind the leg for safety. Then – they reach the stage where they may start on a parent's lap -- then slide off and wander to the other side of the room to find a new toy, look out a different window, even sit close to a new person. Once they've mastered that – well – perhaps you've been walking down the hall here when a young child has gone zooming by – or you've run into some parent – running after a joyfully fleeing child. By that point the child – secure with parents and feeling safe in their universe – is ready to venture forth eagerly – and alone. The child may want to explore – or the child may simply want to feel the thrill of freedom as they cover a wide ground. Unitarian Universalism seeks to be the faith that encourages that sense of freedom – that encourages each person to go forth boldly and explore – as one of our hymns sings.

This is no easy path – because it might really be reassuring to have one special holy book or a minister tell you the meaning of your life. I can hazard a suggestion – that your life is meant for your own freedom and joy and also in solidarity for the freedom and joy of others -- you know – no one is free until all are free. But truly – each one of us is faced with the human dilemma of meaning – without the comfort of one particular and prescribed formula. Instead we are invited – by this principle and all the others – to strive to see our meaning in the context of a world in which every creature –

each of you and all of creation – has inherent worth. We are constrained to seek meaning as part of our spiritual growth.

This is no easy path – any more than the path of childhood from dependence to interdependence is easy. We quaver as our children venture forth – encouraging them in spite of our anxieties.

But we're convinced that every new pair of eyes – so to speak – every new mind – has the potential and deserves the freedom to take us further – not toward some final truth – but toward a greater truth.

It's this spirit of the quest that has informed so much of our history. Many of the leading figures in our religious history were both scientists as well as theologians. Miguel Servetus – the brave 16th century Spaniard who poured through the Bible to find references to the Trinity – and found only one allusion to a trinity that had been added later by the church – he was also a physician. He recognized that the body had a system of veins and he proposed the idea of a circulatory system. Or Joseph Priestley, whose sermons on the need of rationality in religion and on the character of a loving god so angered the people of Birmingham England that a mob formed and destroyed his home and the laboratory where he had developed the theory of oxygen, and discovered ten new gases. There was Benjamin Rush whose work was informed by his passionate Universalism, his belief that all souls would be saved and united and who, out of that faith in a loving God, established health clinics to the very poor and who pioneered good and lasting medical approaches particularly with regard to diagnosis. For the sake of full disclosure I will say that the man was not infallible as he remained a staunch adherent to the practice of bleeding as a treatment for a wide array of diseases and – while we today, still use some forms of bloodletting in medical treatment – he was simply wrong about its overwhelming benefit in so many cases. I can point to Ben Franklin and Carl Sagan and even to Rod Serling whose sense of intellectual freedom spurred him to create haunting stories in which the human condition could be encountered and explored.

And in the arena a philosophy and social theory – there was the brilliant 19th century feminist, Unitarian, and transcendentalist Margaret Fuller – who broke through so many barriers of gender in her time and lived with both passion and keen intelligence. Fuller inspired a generation of women to leap from their spheres and take their places where only men had stood before. And more than one hundred years later – it was her grandnephew – Buckminster Fuller – with vision fostered in his Unitarian upbringing -- created new forms – like the geodesic dome and the magic of unsymmetrical balance as well as positive ideas of living in greater harmony with the earth and one another.

One example brings this to life. Although people want to dispute his authenticity as a Unitarian – Charles Darwin was raised in a Unitarian household and the church in Shrewsbury England has a plaque that claims his involvement and membership there. Now it could be that churches all over England have plaques like this – but – well – I am claiming him for the moment... It is Darwin who gave us this most Unitarian of ideas – that there is a tendency for life to keep moving, changing – evolving – not necessarily toward something in particular -- but changing and moving nonetheless.

We don't value this movement – this evolution – simply for the sake of change or the thrill of adventure. We value new insight for the sake of life and well-being. Benjamin Rush's broad bloodletting aside – we reach for new truths that they may better serve the cause of life and of the common good.

Thus, as the heirs of the likes of Darwin, we find ourselves not only affirming his wise science – but recognizing that the very course of evolution depends upon the choices that are made in the present - - there is no guaranteed outcome to history – but we have a hand in influencing its arc.

It was a passion for the search for truth that made these forebears keep striving for new discoveries – and it is what stands behind our fourth principle and keeps us faithful to that pursuit.

I will admit that my heart aches a little for Clyde Tombaugh. His passion for the truth kept him scanning the heavens until he found the point of light that was Pluto and the small gravitational pull that told him that it was one of the bodies revolving around our sun. He died 9 years before the astronomical community decided that, in fact, Pluto was not really a planet. Still – sad as that may seem – I feel confident that Clyde would have – as we all have, in time – graciously let his discovery evolve toward a more accurate truth.

So – we are a free faith – in that you may bring your deep questions here and dedicate yourself to pursuing new answers. In that we will not tell you what creed to recite. But the truth itself is a stern guide. And when we say that this is a free and responsible search – the truth is one place where our responsibility lives.

We are a free faith in one way – but there are times when I find myself cringing when someone says – oh – I love this faith because we can believe anything we want to. You know – this is partially true – but already we have found one strict parameter – that of truths that make sense and cohere -- that stand the test of reality.

And there is another parameter – we use our values and principles to guide our search. **We are free within a framework of compassionate ethics.** Now all faiths, it seems, have a framework of compassionate ethics – but – other faiths too often also have to adhere to ancient words written to address conditions which have long since passed away. We are not only free but encouraged to look critically though respectfully at everything. We are free – but we are constrained to honor traditions and the people who hold them – not with mere tolerance – but with the confidence and curiosity that they will find their own wise ways. **We are free – but we are not free to use our ideas to crush others.**

It is a free – but demanding faith – well – let me qualify that – no one is going to look over your shoulder to see if you are on the greatest possible adventure. No one ever expects that you will strive every minute of your life – it is vital that our searching be balanced with being – breathing – savoring – sitting – living and loving.

It is free – but a demanding faith because – while we do not look at every child or at every person who comes to this faith and expect a new Darwin, or Fuller or another Clara Barton or Frances Moore Lappe or – well – we do not expect every person to be a titan in her time or his time – but here's the thing – ultimately we have faith in every soul and every life and therefore out of our relatively small number come very large souls.

There is one belief that we hold as well – and that is that the frontier of knowledge is always expanding. Whether the insights are scientific – or religious or ethical – we believe that there are new and better truths that will bring more wisdom – more well-being – more justice there are new and better truths that will help us understand one another on this fragile and lovely planet.

Therefore, at our best – we greet one another with reverence and we listen to one another with respect and hope. **While we are free in one sense, we are utterly responsible to one another.**

Bear with me – because I’m reminded of an episode of the first Star Trek series. An episode of Star Trek entitled “the Empath” which Roddenberry uses to show the idea that we cannot rely on reason alone – we must feel with others and use our compassion in the service of life. It could have been a unit for a Sunday morning Religious Education Program or an evening adult education class.

I know that there is an expression – I’ve given up the search for reality and I’m just looking for a good fantasy. And it’s true -- the search for meaning and truth is a demanding adventure. It is both the gift and the challenge of this very grown up faith. It has inspired discoveries in life saving science as well as flights of cosmic fantasy.

It asks that we live deeply and fully – that we take nothing and no one for granted. It asks that we not only celebrate life – but that we also expand it – that we not only serve the realities of the present – but that we expand the possibilities for the future. Seen in the context of all our Principles – it reminds us that we are free in one spirit and yet fully responsible for discerning meaning and for serving truth through acts of justice and compassion – in the context of a cosmos that has inherent meaning and worth.