

Order of Service, Sunday, November 4, 2007

## **Gathering**

Gathering at the Bellsound

Prelude

Welcome

Announcements

Centering Music?

Chalice Lighting

First Reading, Richard Feynman

Opening Hymn, # 360, "Here Are We Gathered"

Joys and Concerns

A Story for All Ages

Students leave for RE Classes...

## **Affirmation**

Responsive Reading, #650, Cherish Your Doubts

Meditation

Sharing our Offering

Discourse, "How Does an Atheist Go to Church?"

Community Response

## **Dedication**

Closing Hymn, # 121, "We'll Build A Land"

Closing Words

Extinguishing the Chalice

Postlude

## **Gathering**

Gathering at the Bellsound – *from the notebook...*

Prelude

Welcome – *also from the notebook...*

Announcements

Centering Music from the Occasional Singers

Chalice Lighting:

“Let there be light!”

Let it shine in dark places,  
in moments of pain, in times of grief,  
in the darkness of hatred, violence, oppression,  
where there is discouragement and despair.

Wherever darkness is to be put to flight,

“Let there be light!”

First Reading, Richard Feynman:

"Turning to...the inspirational aspect [of religion] brings me to the central question... The source of inspiration today--for strength and for comfort--in any religion is very closely knit with the metaphysical aspect; that is, the inspiration comes from working for God, for obeying his will, feeling one with God. Emotional ties to the moral code--based in this manner--begin to be severely weakened when doubt, even a small amount of doubt, is expressed as to the existence of God; so when the belief in God becomes uncertain, this particular method of obtaining inspiration fails.

"I don't know the answer to this central problem--the problem of maintaining the real value of religion, as a source of strength and of courage to most men, while, at the same time, not requiring an absolute faith in the metaphysical."

Opening Hymn, # 360, “Here Are We Gathered”

Joys and Concerns:

We lift up every joy, every gladness,  
We hold up every hurt, every sadness  
Spoken in this good company  
As well as every secret feeling  
Held quiet in the hollows of our hearts.

A Story for All Ages – Millions and Millions of Cats  
Students leave for RE Classes...

## **Affirmation**

Responsive Reading, #650, Cherish Your Doubts

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

*Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge; it is the servant of discovery.*

A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief.

*Doubt is the touchstone of truth; it is an acid which eats away the false.*

Let no one fear for the truth, that doubt may consume it; for doubt is a testing of belief.

*The truth stands boldly and unafraid; it is not shaken by the testing:*

For truth, if it be truth, arises from each testing stronger, more secure.

*Those that would silence doubt are filled with fear; their houses are built on shifting sands.*

But those who fear not doubt, and know its use, are founded on rock.

*They shall walk in the light of growing knowledge; the work of their hands shall endure.*

Therefore let us not fear doubt, but let us rejoice in its help:

*It is to the wise as a staff to the blind; doubt is the attendant of truth.*

Sharing our Offering

If you are proud of this church, become its advocate.

If you are concerned for its future, share it's message.

If its values resonate deep within you, give it a measure of your devotion. For that measure which you are ready to give today, we will now collect your offerings.

## Meditation

*Strike the chime...*

*I'd like to invite you to settle in now and get comfortable, and then gently close your eyes.*

*Begin by taking a couple of deep, full, breaths and as you exhale let it be a real "letting go" kind of breath.*

*As you begin breathing slowly, comfortably and easily, invite your body to relax and to let go of any unnecessary tension.*

*Take the time to bring your attention to each part of your body, and invite it to release and relax, letting go, easily, comfortably.*

*Just let it happen, releasing, letting go, relaxing even more, now feeling a warm wave of pure relaxation rolling down your body, from the top of your head, to the tips of your toes.*

*Let me pose for you a question: Suppose there had been no religion, no gods. You've volunteered to join the UU committee for the creation of ethics and morality. Where do you begin? What would be your first principles?*

*If you like, ponder that for a bit, or not, and I'll come and get you in a few minutes.*

## Discourse, "How Does an Atheist Go to Church?"

My path toward this talk was a roundabout one. As the resident webmaster for the Oberlin Fellowship, I was in the usual position of begging for something to actually *say* on the website. Bob knows how this works; I dropped the ball in getting him just a little thing like the order of service for today in a timely manner, for which I'm truly sorry. Fortunately he's a resourceful man with a good sense of humor...

As I was saying, I was building the web site for the Oberlin group, in the time-honored tradition quaintly known as plagiarism. It seemed a good idea to have an introductory set of questions and handy answers, what we in the geeky businesses know as "FAQs" -- short for "Frequently Asked

Questions.” Here's where you put quick answers for someone who is finding your web site for the first time, whether they are new to your congregation or new to Unitarian-Universalism itself. From conversations among other UU webmasters (there's an electronic mailing list, of course) and using Google, I found a likely set of such questions and witty answers created by Ted Pack of the fellowship in Modesto, California. I liked what I saw, so I stole 'em. I wasn't the only one. Ted is bemused but tolerant of our borrowing – I asked him.

Ted's FAQ list contains the usual information a first-time visitor might hope to see, such as directions to the church, whether there's child care, what to wear, that sort of thing. He also has a series of questions on just what UUism is and what do UU sorts of people believe, if anything. One of his questions stands as the title of my talk, “How does an atheist go to church?” Ted's answer begins, “By automobile, or bicycle, or on foot...”

Another familiar joke we tell on ourselves is the one that claims UUs are just “agnostics with children.” Good jokes work because they contain an element of truth, and this one strikes home. Two parents may not be enough to balance the quaint and curious collection of beliefs our children can acquire from the society and their friends at school, and if the village is what is needed to raise children, I'm glad there's a UU one. But my message today is both more personal and more general than the good work done by our religious educators.

I've been emboldened lately to describe myself as an atheist rather than an agnostic. But then again, I've always been something of a gadfly. I learned as a debater in high school the delights of argument, and we were trained to do the best we could to argue both sides of the issues. “Agnostic,” while more correct for a skeptical soul like mine, still sounds a bit wishy-washy, uncommitted.

It's hard to trace the history of atheism. I'm currently reading a light book by the Cambridge prehistorian Peter Watson called “Ideas: A History of Thought and Invention, From Fire to Freud.” Watson can only trace true atheism to the time of Isaac Newton, saying “at that time the word 'atheist' was used not as we would use it today but as an *insult*. People in the sixteenth century never dreamed of calling *themselves* atheists.” Indeed, at this time the term “atheist” was often used to describe one whose view of God was different from the speaker's.

It's possible some of the more skeptical Greeks, such as Anaxagoras of whom Socrates spoke, could have been atheist as we now understand the term, but our sort of atheism grew out of Christian Europe, rather much as Garrison Keilor describes one of his Lake Wobegon characters as a “Lutheran Atheist,” “for it's a Lutheran God in whom she does not believe.”

As the Bible was translated into the common language and inexpensive printed copies became available, those uncomfortable with what they read in their Bibles when compared to the discoveries of Galileo, Newton, and the explorers tried to reconcile their beliefs with *rational supernaturalism*, which takes God the Creator as a given and develops as logical a system of ethics one can from there. Later there came the Deists, a little before the time the Unitarians were differentiating themselves from the Calvinist Puritans of the New England church. Deists are not Christian, generally, and tend to view God as a distant Creator, launching the Universe with a set of natural laws which have governed it's evolution since the beginning. Jefferson may be considered one of the last historical Deists, and the Jefferson Bible reveals much of Jefferson's regard for the divinity of Jesus.

Stronger still are the skeptical philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, but while their attacks on religion were scornful, few men of the period were bold enough to come out and say flatly they did not believe in God. Heresy was still a weighty charge in the eighteenth century, and I've spoken before on the pressures Darwin felt to keep his personal areligious views to himself in the nineteenth. But Hobbes and Hume started the task of rethinking the grounds for morality in a godless world. It's clear this is not obvious to many people!

When we are young, our sense of how to behave stems from obeying the inexplicable demands of our parents and a selfish way of sharing that is concerned with making sure our part of the pie is at least not smaller than any one else's portion. As we grow, this innate sense of ethics develops into a loose system of pleasing others, particularly those whose opinions we value, seeking approval, “being nice.” Later this expands to maintaining the social order and deferring to a generalized authority. Right behaviour consists of doing ones duty. There is strong evidence that this sense of what is right can be considered the result of our having evolved as social animals, where the survival of the group is crucial to one's individual survival (and reproduction.) Michael Shermer suggests we have evolved a “sense of

purpose,” a desire to accomplish goals, that has its fruit in behaviours that enhance the survival of such groups and the individuals within. The sense of serving a higher purpose as one of your god's chosen people fits right into this scenario. While the sense of purpose may be inherent, moral purposes are learned, thus they can be changed and relearned.

This view of the stages of moral development were first set forth by Lawrence Kohlberg, a student of Jean Piaget who worked in Chicago in the fifties. Kohlberg noted that the next stage is one which formalizes the rules of authority as the social contract made by a society with its members. Right action is defined in terms of general rights and societal standards. “There is a clear awareness of the relativism of personal values and opinions, and a corresponding emphasis upon procedural rules for reaching consensus” such as Roberts' Rules of Order. “Law and Order” still remain central, but there is recognition that the laws can be changed as the society finds useful. This is the “official” morality of the American government, and the writers of the Constitution clearly were crafting such a structure.

Kohlberg's final stage of development is more universal, comprehensive, and internalized. The principles “are abstract and ethical, like the Golden Rule; they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. Instead, they are universal principles of justice, the equality of human rights, and respect for the dignity of human beings as individuals.” Without God's Laws to follow, philosophy offers the utilitarianism of Mill, Bentham, and earlier, Helvetius, who coined the phrase “the greatest good for the greatest number.”

As Watson puts it, “The arguments against God not only brought about a decline of faith in a strictly religious sense (in the nineteenth century, this is), but stimulated a new attitude toward history (that the past went back much further than anyone thought), laid the grounding for much of modern science (evolution, continental drift, sociology), for modern economics (Adam Smith's economic theories), and for modern politics. 'The greatest good for the greatest number' is yet another of those statements/cliches that we take for granted today. But it was unthinkable before skepticism and doubt had brought about the great divorce between religion and morality.”

But without God, why should we be good?

Are we doing right just because our ancestors hung around in small family packs, where social unity held the group together and perhaps allowed it to compete with other packs in the area? Is that all I can offer you, a watered-

down appeal to just “be nice” and do what Daddy says for the good of the family? I suppose it depends on what you consider your family these days.

Only a few generations ago, one could expect to find one's mate within a day's walk of home. This tribal sense of human relationships can still be found in much of the world today, but what may have had survival value in our past grows more dangerous with each passing day.

Let me expand on the parable of the cats.

Garrett Hardin published a succinct article in the journal *Science* in December 1968. In it, he described the “Tragedy of the Commons” which was the conceptual background against which the famous image of Earth taken from space launched an entire “Whole Earth” industry but which really solidified the environmental movement.

Imagine a small village, cut from the forest, perhaps, with a pasture open to all townsfolk. Each shepherd will try to keep as many sheep as possible on the commons. Such an arrangement might work satisfactorily for centuries, until the population of the town, and hence the sheep, reach the limit the commons can support. Ecologists call this the “carrying capacity.”

As a rational shepherd, each seeks to maximize his profits. Hence, each considers the pros and cons of adding one more animal to his herd. Since the shepherd receives all the products and proceeds of the additional animal, the benefit is high. The cost is the effect of overgrazing caused by one more animal on the commons. But as this is shared by all shepherd equally, the cost to each is slight.

The rational shepherd concludes the only sensible option is to add another animal to his herd. And another. And another. And every other rational shepherd can conclude the same. This is the tragedy, where each shepherd is compelled to expand his herd without limit, in a world of limits. Hundreds of cats. Thousands of cats. Millions, and billions, and trillions of cats...

This isn't a new observation, even in 1968. But we're discovering new limits on our commons every day, on fish populations in the seas, on dispersal of pollutants in the atmosphere, on water supplies and range land in the Western states. It looks to be past time for us to recognize that on Planet Earth today, there's only room for a single tribe, that interconnected web of which we are a part.

For the first time our survival and that of our children depend on our regard

for people on the other side of the planet, their livelihoods and their well-being. The Golden Rule isn't just a saying from holy writ, although it can be found in nearly all such books. It's becoming a matter of survival. To the extent to which our religions isolate and divide us, they have become destructive. Liberal religion speaks the language, frames the debate, in a way that science, by its nature, cannot. Although my favorite "bumper-sticker" version of this argument comes from Canada. As Red Green says, "I'm pulling for you. We're all in this together."

Back in September, Bill Moyers, filling in for Charlie Rose, had a conversation with the philosopher Daniel Dennett,

Moyers: Is there a 'ground of all being'?

Dennett: Sure! I'd like to be able to thank someone for the universe we live in but the best I can do is study it, learn about it, with awe. Anselm described God as that being than which no greater can be conceived. If that is your definition of God then I DO believe in God. The universe is greater than we can conceive and it's far greater than anything I can fully comprehend.

I am still in awe of the beauty of life, this Earth, and the Universe. The sense of purpose, even if it's purely a genetic trick of evolution, still has the power to stir great emotion and feeling. This is not a bad thing, but doesn't constitute proof of the existence of anything supernatural. The world is not somehow diminished by it.

The Buddha once said, "Don't believe me, don't believe anybody, don't accept anything based on tradition. Don't believe anything based on the fact that your community believes this or your country believes this or the people that you are around believe this." An odd pronouncement for a religious leader, don't you think? Buddhism can be considered an atheist religion, in the sense that there is no higher God from whom the rest depends, but at least some forms of Buddhism are certainly religious in nature, with supernatural beliefs in reincarnation, karma, and the rest. Interestingly, the Dalai Lama himself – a believer in reincarnation – maintains that science should take precedence over these sorts of notions. He once said, "My confidence in venturing into science lies in my basic belief that as in science so in Buddhism, understanding the nature of reality is pursued by means of critical investigation: if scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims." I'll let Sam Harris have the next-to-last word:

There is clearly a sacred dimension to our existence, and coming to terms with it could well be the highest purpose of human life...[I]t must be possible to bring reason, spirituality, and ethics together in our thinking about the world. This would be the beginning of a rational approach to our deepest personal concerns. It would also be the end of faith.

Ted Pack's FAQ answer to the question of what atheists are doing in church concludes, "Finally, there is the social aspect of church. Even agnostics like potlucks." I'd like to remind you that there will be a potluck lunch downstairs following the service today...

## Community Response

### **Dedication**

Closing Hymn, # 121, "We'll Build A Land"

Extinguishing the Chalice -- "Quaker Benediction, *modified*"

With faith in the creative powers of life,  
With hope for the future of life in this world,  
With love for all others who share this life with us,  
Let us go forward together in peace and unrest.  
Our meeting has ended; let our service begin.

Postlude