

# Oberlin Unitarian Universalist Fellowship “That’s Original!”



**Sunday, August 14**  
**Cal Frye, service leader**  
**Katie Cross, pianist**

Order of Service, Sunday, August 14, 2011

## **Gathering**

Prelude, Maurice Ravel, "Minuet" from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

Welcome & Announcements

Chalice Lighting

First Reading, Sam Harris

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

Sharing our Offering, Malcolm Archer, *St. Columbia*

Meditation

We have always known that heedless self-interest was bad morals;  
we know now that it is bad economics. -- Franklin D. Roosevelt

Discourse, "That's Original!" - Cal Frye

## **Dedication**

Closing Hymn, # 112, "Do You Hear"

Closing Words

Extinguishing the Chalice

Postlude, Georg Telemann, *Fugue in F Major*

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Delivered August 14, 2011, Oberlin Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

## Gathering

Prelude, Maurice Ravel, "Minuet" from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

Welcome

*Welcome, everyone, to the Oberlin Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Whether you ran in on little feet, came in briskly on big feet, if you ambled in or rolled in, whatever the face of the flags of your heritage or the ones you love, you are welcome here. My name is Cal Frye, and I am leading the service this morning.*

*We would like to offer a special welcome to our visitors this morning. We hope you will feel free to stay and chat with us while we enjoy coffee, tea, and goodies after the service.*

*I would like to call your attention to the announcement sheet that lists upcoming events. In the lobby, there are announcements on the bulletin board, as well as other materials of interest on the tables behind you.<sup>1</sup>*

Announcements

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!”

Covenant

We covenant to live together in our quest for truth, love, social justice, and environmental responsibility. In this spirit of caring fellowship, we offer our combined gifts and resources.

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<sup>1</sup> standard language used at OUUF by convention, slightly modified.

First Reading, Sam Harris:

The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason

"It must be possible to live ethically--with a genuine concern for the happiness of other sentient beings--without presuming to know things about which we are patently ignorant. We are bound to one another. Our conversation with one another has not reached an end. There need be no scheme of rewards and punishments transcending this life to justify our moral intuitions or to render them effective in guiding our behaviour in the world. The only angels we need invoke are those of our better nature: reason, honesty, and love. The only demons we must fear are those that lurk inside every human mind: ignorance, hatred, greed, and faith."

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 – Owl at Home ]

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, Malcolm Archer, *St. Columbia*

If you are proud of this fellowship, 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. If you are giving us your pledge today, please make sure it is marked or in an envelope for the Fellowship.

Your cash donations today will go for the benefit of the Oberlin Weekday Community Meals, hosted at Christ Episcopal Church, which serves a free hot meal to anyone in need Monday through Friday from 5:15 - 5:45 pm.

The Community Meal feeds an average 25 – 30 people each evening, with numbers higher towards the end of the month when other supports, such as food stamps, run out. In many cases the meal a diner receives at the Community Meal is the only healthy and nutritious meal they will receive all day. Your gift to the Oberlin Weekday Community Meal will help us continue to feed those in our community who would be at risk of not getting their daily food needs met.

We have always known that heedless self-interest was bad morals; we know now that it is bad economics. -- Franklin D. Roosevelt

## 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.*

*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?*

*Ponder that, if you like, for a bit, and I'll come and get you in a few minutes.*

## Discourse, "That's Original!"

I'm a socialist. I am a conservative. I am totally depraved. I am a child of God. I am a secular humanist. I am a Godless heathen atheist. I am a Unitarian Universalist and a member of this church. Depends on how you view me...

Some time ago, a book title jumped out at me from the library shelf. "I Don't Believe in Atheists" was written by Chris Hedges, the son of a Presbyterian minister, a Harvard seminarian, former foreign correspondent for the New York Times, the Christian Science Monitor, and National Public Radio. He received the Amnesty International International Global Award for Human Rights Journalism in 2002, the same year his team of New York Times reporters received the Pulitzer Prize for their coverage of global terrorism. He has spent two decades covering war and terrorism around the world, and the impact and influence that has had on us here at home. Some of his other books include "The World As It Is," WAR IS A FORCE THAT GIVES US MEANING and "American Fascists: the Christian Right and the War on America." You may know his writings also from the online blog

Truthdig.

With a title that seemed to take square aim at me, I was prepared to dislike this book. I did, a lot. Reading the author's biography on the endpaper, I was prepared for it to also be thought-provoking. It was, but not in the simple ways I anticipated. I got so mad in the first chapters that I didn't come back to it for weeks. Why was this so frustrating?

Hedges' book has come out of the author's ongoing debates with the atheists Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris, with not a little Richard Dawkins and even E. O. Wilson included for good measure. Not without justification, he identifies these authors as "leftist fundamentalists," every bit as dangerous as those on the right, the subject of his earlier book. This may be true, it may be hyperbole, but why is Hedges, a widely published antiwar speaker and a senior fellow at the Nation Institute, indulging in such venom at those of the left, too?

Quoting: "We are not saved by reason. We are not saved by religion. We are saved by turning away from projects that tempt us to become God, and by accepting our own contamination and the limitations of being human.

The belief in moral advancement implicitly calls on us to ignore the common good and place our faith in the empowerment of the state. It teaches that everything should be dedicated to private gain. The corporate state--the engine, we are assured, of our great moral progress--instructs us on how to view the world. Corporatism is about placing our faith in unchecked corporate advancement, as well as in the neutral disciplines of science and technology."

Okay, as a socialist, I'm good with some of this, but why again pick on the atheists? Can there be less-radical, more conservative atheists? Can there not be socialist humanist atheists? Are capitalism or Christianity our only choices? I think the title of his book really ought to be "I don't believe in these three atheists." Hedges constructs a straw man half atheist and half capitalist, and blames science for it's creation. Note that interesting phrase, "accepting our own contamination." Limits on being human I can accept, but *contamination*? Where did that come from? I have the most difficulty with this argument against progress.

There's more: "The belief in a world morally progressing through

reason and science feeds an old fantasy human beings have long cherished about themselves. Reality cries out against the impossibility of such a vision. But reality is not an impediment to fundamentalists. The utopian dream repeatedly overpowers the intellect because it satisfies deep emotional and psychological longings. It makes us feel safe and assured. It justifies our indiscriminate use of power. Built on a scaffolding of lies, such beliefs allows the believer to reject compassion and empathy. They eradicate individual conscience. They are hard to resist. The alternative means facing a world that will not be glorious. It means we cannot place ourselves at the center of creation and must accept that, tainted and flawed like all human beings, we will never rise to the heights of angels or create a paradise on earth. It means that we too are bound to this earth on a wheel of fire."

"The worst tyranny in human history was carried out by utopian idealists. These idealists plunged their nations and societies into famine, war and genocide for great ideals and laudable virtues. Utopian dreams are always psychotic. They promise that we can achieve what no generation before us has achieved. They ask us to unleash, one last time, acts of horrific violence and repression to make ourselves happy. These dark visions begin with the annihilation of the other, but end with self-annihilation. In the name of beauty, progress, goodness and truth they bring death."

Wow. But if paradise is outside our reach, if Utopia turns out to be toxic, can't we still search for the good, can't we at least dream of better? Hedges isn't necessarily anti-science, and he certainly isn't a creationist. But he isn't letting Darwin off the hook, either:

"There are unfortunate implications in Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin believes in the possibility of compassion and benevolence. He argues that these adaptations give one species advantage over another. In his discussion of compassion, however, he insists that sooner or later the "superior" races--those with compassion--will exterminate the "more savage" races. Compassion, he implies, does not exist, or certainly not in the same abundance, in others as it does in us. " This was hard for me to take. Here Hedges confuses Darwin with Social Darwinism. Is this what Darwin really said? No. In "The Descent of Man," he discusses this situation in depth, and always holds that the

more compassionate will win out over generations through reproduction, not by any sort of Spencerian struggle and certainly not through "extermination." Darwin's heart was always sympathetic and kind, and he strove to remove prejudicial *racism* from his work on race. The Darwin family and his cousins the Wedgwoods were leaders of the British abolitionist movement.

But Hedges' objections go beyond the fear of our establishing a dystopian future like either "the Handmaid's Tale" or "Brave New World." I was puzzled by the vehemence in Hedges' words. He seems particularly joyless. I believe the mystery here lies with dogma. Take these examples:

"The new atheists respond to this human hunger for *telos*, a belief that all that has gone before us is leading us somewhere. This desire for moral advancement has repeatedly corrupted religious and secular ideologies. We want to believe that our lives make sense. This yearning for *telos* creates imaginary narratives of moral and historical progress. It feeds into the faith that human society will finally become reasonable and work collectively for the common good. It is a way to ward off the awful fact that things often do not get better,.. and that the irrational urges of human nature will never be conquered."

"The belief that the human animal is evolving morally and will finally become reasonable is possible only when we close our eyes to the human predicament. Human beings prefer hope, even absurd hope, to truth. It makes life easier to bear. It lets us turn away from the hard choices ahead to bask in a comforting certitude that God or science will bring about our salvation."

Neither "Science *nor* God?" Darwin specifically argued that Natural Selection does not have a "built-in" notion of progress. But neither does it raise any particular barrier. Evolution has produced parasites as well as orchids. Why was Hedges so adamant on this point? The mystery that so puzzled me at first seems to be his belief in Original Sin, or more particularly, the Augustinian doctrine known as Total Depravity. St. Augustine's argument, mostly based on some verses in chapter five of Paul's letter to the Romans, has it that not only have we inherited death as a result of Adam's sin, we share equally in his guilt. Total Depravity means that we are totally unable to even *choose* to follow

God or hear Christ's call on our own without the assistance or grace of God, hence the phrase, "there but for the grace of God go I..."

Original sin is not an act, but a state; even before the use of reason, sin is already in the soul. In the Catholic sense, free will itself is a part of this sin. We as a species chose to eat the apple, and Adam's choice is our consequence.

The Puritan church in America was firmly Calvinist in theology, and feared it would be only by strict practice that they could keep their depravity in check. John Wesley spoke strongly on original sin. But is this doctrine universally Christian? Not really. The Orthodox Church does not hold the same understanding of the sinful nature of humanity, nor do the Latter Day Saints. And later revivalists argued forcefully against the doctrine, helping sway the Methodists and Congregationalists toward a more generous understanding.

The Bible itself remains unclear on this doctrine, and has been used, of course, in support of nearly all interpretations. The great Charles Finney was educated as a Presbyterian, but certainly developed an original message when he began preaching revivals in 1828. He came to be Professor of Theology in Oberlin in 1835, became president of the College for fifteen years, and continued as pastor of First Church until 1872. His preaching and influence had few geographic bounds. Finney said of the doctrine of original sin, "It is a relic of heathen philosophy, and was foisted in among the doctrines of Christianity by Augustine, as every one may know who will take the trouble to examine for himself."

New England's Standing Order of congregations, our forebears as Unitarians, had also been wrestling with this doctrine. Right in William Ellery Channing's great Baltimore sermon on "Unitarian Christianity" given on May 5, 1819, he held that, "We believe that God is infinitely good, kind, benevolent, in the proper sense of these words; good in disposition, as well as in act; good, not to a few, but to all; good to every individual, as well as to the general system."

"Now, we object to the systems of religion, that are adverse to these purifying, comforting, and honorable views of God; that they take from us our Father in heaven, and substitute for him a being, whom we cannot love if we would, and whom we ought not to love if we could. ... According to its old and genuine form, it teaches, that God brings us

into life wholly depraved, so that under the innocent features of our childhood is hidden a nature averse to all good and propense to all evil, a nature which exposes us to God's displeasure and wrath, even before we have acquired power to understand our duties, or to reflect upon our actions. According to a more modern exposition, it teaches, that we came from the hands of our Maker with such a constitution, as to render certain and infallible the total depravity of every human being, from the first moment of his moral agency; and it also teaches, that the offense of the child, who brings into life this ceaseless tendency to unmingled crime, exposes him to the sentence of everlasting damnation.”

“We farther agree in rejecting, as unscriptural and absurd, the explanation given... of the manner in which Christ's death procures forgiveness for men. ... the system teaches, that sin, of whatever degree, exposes to endless punishment, and that the whole human race, being infallibly involved by their nature in sin, owe this awful penalty to the justice of their Creator. It teaches, that this penalty cannot be remitted, ... unless a substitute be found to endure it. It also teaches, that, from the nature of the case, no substitute is adequate to this work, save the infinite God himself; and accordingly, God, in his second person, took on him human nature, that he might pay to his own justice the debt of punishment incurred by men, and might thus reconcile forgiveness with the claims and threatenings of his law... Now, to us, this doctrine seems to carry on its front strong marks of absurdity; and we maintain that Christianity ought not to be encumbered with it, unless it be laid down in the New Testament fully and expressly...”

“Not ONE WORD of this description can we find in the Scriptures; not a text, which even hints at these strange doctrines. They are altogether, we believe, the fictions of theologians.”

“We believe that all virtue has its foundation in the moral nature of man, that is, in ... his sense of duty, and in the power of forming his temper and life according to conscience. We believe that these moral faculties are the grounds of responsibility, and the highest distinctions of human nature, and that no act is praiseworthy, [except] than it springs from their exertion.”

I believe that we have evolved in our understanding of our world and our limitations. Many of us realize there is not unlimited oil beneath

Arabian sands or within the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge. There are limits to the world, and our duty is to share. The errors of the self-regulated free market and the commoditization of the workplace and workers alike are being fought in Wisconsin and Washington yet again. There is even a growing environmental movement within the evangelical movement, reinterpreting what the Bible means to have “dominion over Creation.”

Hedges concludes his book, "We are bound to this Earth by our common urges and instincts, our capacity to be moral and immoral. It is when we face the intractable nature of our being that we begin to build a viable system of ethics. Utopian dreamers, lifting up impossible ideals, plunge us into depravity and violence. It is those who are broken, those who see the shifting sands of our inner lives and the fictive narratives we hide behind, who can save us. They speak to our common humanity. They appeal to our humility. They talk not of power but of the transcendent. They talk of reverence. And in their words we see the limits of reason at the possibilities of religion." But it remains unclear to me what Hedges' religion asks us to do.

I do not think our nature is intractable, that we are entirely depraved and incapable of choosing to do good, and our Universalist ancestors certainly didn't think their God shared that view. But neither do I feel we need the light of God to shine the way. I do not choose to wait for the Second Coming to put right the woes of this world. I do not dream of Utopia but I firmly believe we have the power to improve our lives. "For evil to triumph, the good must do nothing." But the good are not doing nothing, not even Chris Hedges. Our differences appears to be a matter of faith, but where he places all his faith in God and none at all in humanity, I refuse to give up so easily.

## **Dedication**

Closing Hymn, # 112, "Do You Hear"

Closing Words

I think I much prefer the closing paragraph from Chris Hedges' earlier book **WAR IS A FORCE THAT GIVES US MEANING** (2003):

"To survive as a human being is possible only through love. And when Thanatos is ascendent, the instinct must be to reach out to those we

love, to see in them all the divinity, pity and pathos of the human. And to recognize love in the lives of others -- even those with whom we are in conflict -- love that is like our own. It does not mean we will avoid war or death. It does not mean that we as distinct individuals will survive. But love, in its mystery, has its own power. It alone gives us meaning that endures. It alone allows us to embrace and cherish life. Love has the power both to resist in our nature what we know we must resist, and to affirm what we know we must affirm. And love, as the poets remind us, is eternal."

Extinguishing the Chalice -- "Quaker Benediction, mod"

I still have faith in the creative powers of life,  
With hope for the future of life in this world,  
With good news on our lips and in our hearts,  
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, Georg Telemann, *Fugue in F Major*