

## ***We Need a Religion...***

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship  
Rev Paul Beckel  
September 18, 2016

Power consists to a large extent in deciding what stories will be told. —*Carolyn Heilbrun*

Genuine power is power-with, pseudo power, power-over. —*Mary Parker Follett*

Silence and invisibility go hand in hand with powerlessness. —*Audre Lorde*

Power's twin is responsibility. —*Willa Gibbs*

If you have principles but no program, you turn out in the end to have no principles. —*Source unknown*

### **PRELUDE**

### **LIGHTING THE CHALICE / COVENANT**

### **GATHERING SONG** *Spirit of Life* #123

### **CHILDREN'S FOCUS**      *7 Principles Song*      Rev Tony Larson

Oh I believe in every person's worth and dignity / with justice and compassion I believe in equity / acceptance of each other and encouragement to grow / a free and open search for truth to find the way to go.

Affirm the right of conscience and affirm democracy / the goal of world community with peace and liberty / respect the web of nature, of which we are a part / these are UU principles I hold close to my heart.

### **RESPONSIVE READING**      Rev Scott Alexander, adapted

In a world filled with both discrimination and empathy,  
*We need a religion that proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person.*

In a world of brutality and fear, kindness and goodwill,  
*We need a religion that seeks justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.*

In a world of dogmatism and falsehood, new discoveries and critical thinking,  
*We need a religion that challenges us to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*

In a world with so much tyranny, oppression, and accumulated wisdom about human dynamics  
*We need a religion that affirms the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.*

In a world with so much inequality and strife, generosity and understanding,  
*We need a religion that strives toward the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.*

In a world with so much environmental degradation, and beauty to behold,  
*We need a religion that advocates respect for the interdependent web of all existence—of which we are a part.*

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In a world of uncertainty and despair, courage and love,

*We need a religion that helps us to live within it all, giving over our hearts to hope and our hands to service.*

## MESSAGE

Answers in Genesis is an organization in Kentucky that celebrates the first book of the Hebrew Bible as a primary text for historical and scientific research. All of the answers, they proclaim, all of the answers about how the earth was created, and how we should live today, are there in Bible. Answers in Genesis owns the Creation Museum, which has dinosaur skeletons that testify “to the truth of God’s Word,” plus camel rides, and zip lines for the kids.

A new exhibit has just opened called Ark Encounter. Billed as a life-size replica of Noah's Ark and built for an estimated \$102 million — and \$18 million in state tax subsidies, like any museum, the Creation Museum actively recruits public school classes and offers steep discounts to students and teachers if they attend as a class.

Asked why this full-sized replica, which costs \$40 for adults to enter, has only 30 pairs of stuffed animals, an employee explained, “There just isn’t enough space. We have to have dozens and dozens of bathrooms for visitors. Noah didn’t have to have that.” Fortunately, though, they did make room for a pair of stuffed unicorns.

Do we need this kind of religion? No. It may provide comfort by affirming some prejudices, and by lining the pockets of charlatans. But it does not make the world a better place.

I learned about the Creation Museum’s new exhibit from a clergy organization I’ve belonged to for many years. This group has an unfortunately non-descriptive name—it’s called The Clergy Letter Project because it started out as a simple gathering of signatures of clergy objecting to the policies of a small public school in northern Wisconsin—school policies that cracked down on the teaching of evolution. This was not the anti-evolutionary fury of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this was 12 years ago. Since then the clergy letter project has expanded to become four letters now signed by over 13,000 christian ministers (Methodist, Mormon, Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran and many more), plus slightly different letters signed by 519 rabbis, 453 Unitarian Universalist ministers, and 25 Buddhist clergy.

What do these letters say? Here’s a phrase from the one signed by Christian clergy: “the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as “one theory among others” is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children.”

I’m happy to say that the school district in Wisconsin reversed its policy.

Now do we need religions like this? We do. And over the next several minutes I will explain what I mean both by “religion” and by “need”—in this particular context. I will not be suggesting a definitive definition for either of these words when used in other contexts. And next week I’ll be talking about why I think it’s fruitless to attempt to do so.

One way to approach the question, “do we need a religion”? is to ask whether religion does more good than harm, or whether particular forms of good would be lost if we didn’t have religion. A lot of good and a lot of harm has been done in the name of religion. I am not going to speculate as to whether it’s been a net gain or a net loss, because there are too many things done “in the name of religion” that in fact have little to do with religion. Also, I don’t think we can know what is and isn’t “caused” by religion. Though there are interesting

statistical correlations: on the one hand (the anti-religion hand) there are higher rates of social dysfunction in communities with higher rates of belief in God, and on the other hand (the pro-religion hand), there is a tendency toward higher individual well-being for those involved in congregational life compared to those who are not.

But instead of looking at this question, “do we need religion?” from the perspective of net good or net harm, here’s another way to look at it: If somehow all existing forms of religion were wiped off the face of the earth (and humanity somehow remained to start over again), would new forms of religion emerge? I speculate that yes, new forms would emerge, because there is something inherent to the nature of humans, and the nature of society, that will inevitably lead to the formation of cultural traditions, ethical norms, and potluck dinners.

If we started all over, not every individual would be drawn to whatever emerges—no more so than today. Although, at first the new traditions might be more appealing to some of us because they’d be encumbered with less baggage ... but eventually new baggage would accumulate. And anyway, some people are drawn to baggage, so I’m confident that they would quickly invent it: new forms of religion would emerge asserting traditions going back not just to when everything started over, but to in an infinite regression into mythical pre-history.

When I say “religion,” in the context of the questions we are asking today, I mean mutually reinforcing stories and customs out of which behavioral norms arise. Mutually reinforcing stories and customs out of which behavioral norms arise. Pollsters and social scientists, unfortunately, use a lot of different/inconsistent/self-contradictory definitions of religion, and so do you. And so do I when I’m referring to religious institutions versus when I’m referring to a nebulous state of mind. Next week I’m going to talk about why that’s ok and probably inevitable, and therefore why we don’t need to argue about whether Unitarian Universalism is a religion (though there are both loyal UUs and dogmatic opponents of our tradition who insist we are not religious).

For now I’ll just say: Since religion or something with essentially the same components, is going to be around at least through any of our lifetimes, I will affirm and promote that which, whatever it is called, affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I met this week with a local group of progressive clergy. What we have in common, what initially brought us together, was our support for Planned Parenthood. There are now 31 local ministers and rabbis in the group, from a variety of denominations, and our shared concerns have expanded to include other matters not typically associated with American churches: such as welcoming our Muslim neighbors, and supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights. We all have slightly different takes on what it means to practice inclusivity...and I have to acknowledge that I probably wouldn’t feel fulfilled if I only attended their congregations. But I’m really grateful that there are many many people of faith, and many many people who squirm at the mention of faith, who are 100% in support of this principle. So again, since something akin to religion is going to exist not only for us, but probably for the children of our children, I am going to affirm and promote those which, whatever they are called, strive to build world community, with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Donald Trump this week proclaimed that under his administration, “...we will be one people under one God...” Now you can like Mr. Trump’s policies. I hope you’ll vote for him if you believe he is the candidate most likely to affirm the right of conscience and use of the democratic process. But on this particular matter I must say that he is getting it wrong. Because in terms of religious demographics, the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population is unaffiliated. This is the largest group in the state of Washington, at 33% (when the

groups are labeled “Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Unaffiliated, and Non-Christian Faiths).

Again definitions are notoriously slippery when we try to count self-reported religiousness. But whether the question is about personal theology, denominational affiliation, or actual practice of religion, the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population is that amorphous group composed of the so-called “nones” plus “nothing in particular,” “atheist,” and “agnostic.” (It’s interesting, in the most recent, highly respected, Pew Research Center Study “agnostic” comes in at 4% while an additional 0.6 % apparently answered, “I don’t know.”)

As to the question, “Can religion make us better people?” I would say that it often does. But the more pertinent question, I think, is not “Can religion make us better?” but “Can we make religion better?” That is, if religion is going to be with us, even if all the current denominations were to get wiped out, if humanity is bound to re-create stories and customs out of which behavioral norms arise, then we have the power to choose the stories we tell and the customs we practice. So, though I’m sure I will do so imperfectly, I will strive to tell those stories that challenge us to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Beginning in my home and in my congregation. Today I challenge you to look at these seven principles. They were not dropped to earth on golden tablets, they were not manifested in the dreams of a starving man in a cave. These principles were created by majority vote in contentious committee meetings in large halls with thousands of people. And by the time they reach the children of our children of our children, they will have been re-phrased. Or if there is no Unitarian Universalism in the time to come, I believe that these principles will be re-conceived, and will live to serve both the individuals and societies of generations to come. Beginning in our homes and in our congregations.

Today I challenge you to look at these principles. Tweak them a little if you have to so that you can affirm them with all of your heart, all of your mind and all of your strength, but don’t get so caught up in wordsmithing that you miss the more important step. I challenge you to embrace these seven principles not as abstract good ideas, but as essential to who you are and what you do, beginning in your home and in your congregation. They are not meant for other people; they are not meant for another time or place; they are not meant to reinforce stories and customs that you’re likely to repeat today simply because you repeated them yesterday.

Unitarian Universalists came together about 30 years ago to articulate these principles, in this form, out of similar formulations crafted by our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors going back, institutionally, for over 200 years, and drawing inspiration from good ideas we can trace back thousands of years. But today we begin again; we make these principles our own. We start all over if we have to; practicing what we preach in our homes and in our congregation. We can begin again without fear, knowing that what we need will dawn among us anew. So let’s begin again, because we are needed. We have a purpose to discover, each of us, individually. We are needed, we have a purpose to discover together.

## **SHARING OUR GIFTS**

**SENDING SONG**      *We’re Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table* #407

**CIRCLE ‘ROUND**      (please join hands)