

WHY WE BELIEVE WHAT WE BELIEVE

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CALL TO WORSHIP

Good morning!
Come into this circle of love and justice,
Come into this community of mercy and holiness and health,
Come, and know peace and joy—
Come now, and let us worship together!

I love living in progressive Portland, but when you leave Portland and go out into other parts of this vast country, you come to understand that every place isn't like Portland, and all the people are not like those here in the First Unitarian Church. The last time I did a book tour, I went to the Deep South, and I kept running into people whose belief systems were strange to behold.

First there was the woman in the bed and breakfast, who was explaining about the tsunami deaths in Bangladesh. She said that the Christians had gone up on high ground to worship just before the tsunami and so when the waters came, the Christians were all saved, and the Muslims were drowned. OK.

And then there was the driver who drove me across Montgomery, AL, and explained as we passed a local Episcopal Church, that it was shutting down, because the members didn't approve of the gay bishop who had just been ordained, and so they left the church. All right.

Finally I thought I was done with all this, but oh, no. I get on the plane in Pensacola, and this young woman sitting next to me asks if we can talk. It seems that she hasn't flown all that much, and she is frightened. "Of course," I say. So far, so good. We begin chatting, which I am not so good at, and I ask her, "So what do you do?" She tells me

that she works for a Dr. Somebody-or-other, who is a Creationist Debater. It seems that he travels all over the U.S. debating people who believe in the dastardly evil concept of evolution. She sets up these programs for him. The plane is revving up, to take off. Her body tightens. I really want to go back to my book, entitled *Capitalism in Crisis*, by Fidel Castro. But no, I should try to comfort her. She continues talking. She tells me that her boss has two rocks—two out of the only six rocks that exist—with pictures of dinosaurs on them, rocks that prove that dinosaurs walked the earth at the same time as humans. The plane has left the ground, and is flying, is stable in the air. She calms down a bit. “I should be kind,” I tell myself. But I don’t follow my own advice. I am not kind. I lose it totally. I say to her, “Do you realize that no reputable scientist anywhere on earth believes that?” She puts her hands over her ears and tells me that she is going to pray for me, which she does for the rest of the flight, thus allowing me to return to my book.

How is it that people come to believe what we believe? What are the influences upon those beliefs? How do those beliefs change—or refuse to change?

To begin with, I want to set out some assumptions. Let’s talk about free will. I’m assuming there is such a thing—that we are choosing creatures. If we are not, if we are nothing more than a B.F. Skinner boxed-in product of our heredity and environment, then I wouldn’t bother standing in this pulpit today, trying to influence you, trying to myself grow and change. On the other hand, I believe that we are not nearly as free as we would like to believe we are.

We are animal creatures, pushed by animal needs and fears. And we are creatures of a particular culture, dominated by powerful beliefs and themes that largely go unquestioned—for us, for example, the American Dream of the Good Life. We are male and female, formed by hormones and expectations. We are tribal, and as such have a biologically based tendency to trust members of our own group, believing that what they tell us is true, despite the evidence. This tendency was beautifully demonstrated one April Fools Day when the BBC showed a film of spaghetti being harvested from trees. So many viewers called up wanting to know how to grow their own that the station replied by telling them to place a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce and wait.

And so, much is determined, and yet I would maintain, that within these limitations, we do have a modicum of choice.

Human beings are all “meaning makers”— we are pattern-making, story-telling creatures. We “believe” because we must, by our very nature— we must impose some coherent, predictable pattern on the chaos and unpredictability of our lives. Some of us adopt more closed systems than others. It’s easier on the psyche to have a more closed system— because that makes the organism less anxious. Unitarian Universalists have a notoriously open system, and we therefore can expect to be more anxious than most people, perhaps more imbued with the cultural angst. Typically, we UU’s try to defend ourselves against fear with our steely logic, which of course can go only so far in explaining the great mysteries. You want to know why evangelical Protestants are growing faster than any other religious group? Well, for one thing, to know that what you believe is the word of

God and beyond a doubt is ever so much more comforting than to allow yourself to question.

I ran into that wall of certainty when I was invited to speak a few years ago at the Multnomah Bible College. I accept all such public speaking invitations, and I had casually told my secretary “yes” months before without stopping to think about the name: *Multnomah Bible College*. I thought, “I’d better check this out.” So I called up the Ph.D. organizer of the conference and began a very awkward conversation. I asked him who the audience would be, and he said chiefly students from the school, and professors, and other evangelical leaders, and so I said, “Well, what do they believe?” And he said, “Well, they believe various things” and I said, “OK, OK, let’s start with salvation. What do they believe about salvation? Would everyone at this conference believe that you need to ‘accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, or you’re going to hell’?”

“Well, yes,” he said, “I think it would be safe to say that.”

“In other words,” I asked, “you believe that Gandhi is in hell?”

He kind of waffled on that one. “Well,” he said, “if certain people have not really had the opportunity to hear about Christianity”

“Gandhi knew all about Christianity,” I said. “In great depth. And he decided to remain a Hindu. So is Gandhi in hell?”

“Well,” he said, “I guess you’d have to say, yes, he is.”

And I said, “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

I tried to get out of speaking at the conference, but he said, “You have to speak--you’re in the brochure!” So reluctantly I agreed to speak, writing speech after speech and tearing each one up, and finally speaking on the topic “Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?” I had a good experience there at the College, was warmly welcomed, and subsequently invited this professor to speak on environmental concerns at our General Assembly this past June here in Portland.

So I was not going to move, and he was not going to move, but we got together on the things we have in common--Jesus and the Bible and social justice.

We cling tenaciously to our belief structures — and if and when they crumble, we feel lost — because it is impossible for humans, who are reflective beings, to live without context, without a meaning structure, in which to operate.

Ernest Becker, in his classic work, *The Denial of Death*, explains compellingly that we are the only animals who know that we are going to die, and that we must repress this terrible understanding, in his words, “in order to live decisively in a world so full of beauty, majesty, and terror.” So we make up a story to live by, an illusion, in order to live at all. Becker calls this “a vital lie.”¹

The problem with belief—or this constructed story that we live by, if you will—which appears to be necessary in order to exist, is that some beliefs work better than others in the world. Some beliefs let you down when you need a ground to support you; some beliefs hurt and divide. So here’s where the importance of choice comes in. Maybe your culture has told you that life is all about the American Dream—making money and buying things. The cultural message seems stronger than ever, but its shallowness becomes apparent in our broken homes, broken lives, our addictions, our alienation from one another.

Or maybe your family’s religious message was that we are right and everybody else is wrong, and then you grow up, and you see people you love and admire who have traveled an alternative path. And you see wars fought in the name of religion. And you just can’t stick with that family message, so you are forced to look for a different way.

Belief that is more systematized becomes ideology, and then what you have is a deep intuitive foundation supported by an intellectual framework. And so you believe, on the one hand, and you have a structure of support, and a name and terminology—you have a theology or a political philosophy or even an approach to knowing, itself. Ideology, again, is inescapable for thinkers, for we need to construct ways of seeing the world—but heed this warning: we shouldn’t *reify* these ways of seeing the world, or believe that our ideas are any kind of concrete reality. Ideas are always arbitrary, always constructed, can always be changed.

In her wonderful essay, “The Way of All Ideology,”² Susan Griffin warns us that ideology tends to split the world into the superior and the inferior, the righteous and the evil, the above and the below. And by rights, of course, all that is superior must have reign over all that is inferior, and so we become divided the one from the other, and we become divided from the parts of ourselves we don’t wish to own, which we then project upon the other. So we must consign Gandhi to hell. Muslims must be drowned. Gays must be stamped out.

My younger son Madison, who has a scientific bent and a keenly logical mind, tells me that he is an atheist. He thinks that bothers me. Actually that is the least thing of all that worries me about him. I just wish he would find the right woman and get married. He’s a fine man, with good values. That’s plenty enough for me.

¹Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, New York: The Free Press, 1973, pp. 50-51.

²Susan Griffin, *Made from this Earth*, Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1982.

You see, I'm very pragmatic about belief—I really don't care what people believe: I care what they value. I care what those beliefs do for their lives and for the people around them.

I had a minister friend who had been looking for the right guy for a long time, and she thought she had found him. She told me of his many virtues, with love shining in her eyes. "And he has been meditating for 17 years!" she said. I thought they would marry. But the next time I was back visiting in her area, she told me that she had broken up with him. "What happened?" I asked. "Well," she said, "the first time we had an argument, he slapped me." What was all that meditation about, anyway?

I don't care if you are a humanist/atheist, a Christian, a Jew, a Buddhist, a Muslim, or whatever. The Numinous broke through in various forms about the same time in history—that would be about 2,000 years ago—on this planet, and the message from all those god-figures (Jesus, Buddha, Mohammad) was the same core message—love. It was really that simple.

And what about God? Do you believe in God or don't you? I am reminded of the time when I was interning in the Dallas church with John Buehrens, who subsequently became President of the Unitarian Universalist Association. We were standing at the back of the church greeting people after a sermon John had preached when an individual came through the line, just hopping mad. He was an older man, one of the humanists in the congregation, and he was red of face, and he shook his fist in the air, and he said to John, "John, you used the word *God* again in the service, three times, and you know how offended I am when you do that!" And John just said, "Now George, you'd be much less offended if you just realized that when I use the word God, I have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about."

Do you think you know about God? Please! Hear the words of Saint Augustine: "God is not what you imagine or what you think you understand. If you understand, you have failed."

I myself am a believer. I believe in God, but that is an arbitrary choice. I have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about. I have given my life to a Mystery. I just know one thing: I must give myself to something larger than myself. My life just works better that way. Perhaps Becker is right—I need to be, in some ultimate way, ignorant of myself, because living in the face of death may just be too difficult otherwise.

But I will say this much. Living with faith, as I do, and stepping into the unknown, has served me well thus far. When I thought I was in charge of my life, that I was smart enough to call the shots alone, I found myself making quite a mess of things. When I put myself in service to something larger than myself—albeit something I can't begin to understand and can speak of only in metaphor—I seem to be led, again and again, to openings that are right for me. So I trust life itself, experience itself, to tell me if my story, my constructed story, is sound.

So let me end with the Unitarian Universalist's checklist for quality of belief:

--Does this belief separate me from others or does it open me to others?

--Does this belief support me when things in my life fall apart?

--Does this belief help me develop and give my gifts?

--Does this belief encourage me to become a person of integrity and good character?

--And finally, does this belief stir love in my heart?

Being fully human—and by that I mean being awake—means living with some fear and trembling from time to time. As Unitarian Universalists, you have chosen the courageous way—you have chosen to search and to question, to learn and to grow. It's not the easiest path, but it's the richest and the most fulfilling. And because this is a free faith, you will and must choose your own way. Here, in community, with the support of others. Choose well. Choose what most stirs love in your heart. So be it. Amen.

PRAYER

God Whose Name We Cannot Know, we are creatures who live with loss and the promise of loss, creatures who live in fear and trembling far too much of the time. Grant us that larger peace that comes with giving ourselves away, trusting in the Mystery we cannot fully know. May we know in the love we share that Larger Love that is the ground of all our living, and there find a place to lay our fears to rest. Amen.

BENEDICTION

As you go from this place today, ask yourself, "What is that wall upon which I'm placing the ladder of my life? Is it worthy of my life?" Go in love, and go in peace.