

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Attachment to Disbelief”
 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 12, 2010

Spoken Meditation

Blessed Spirit of Life and Love,
 presence in us we cannot see, hear, taste or touch;
 beingness, we may only fully acknowledge
 in its absence
 when someone near to us and dear to us
 releases his or her final breath and becomes still.
 May that animating energy
 in us and around us this morning
 be known to us and inspire our gratitude and appreciation.
 What a joy to exist in human form!
 Even as we approach, shivering, the shortest day; Still--
 to feel the brisk, bracing western wind on our cheeks;
 to smell the crisp, clean, chilled air devoid of flora or fauna;
 to hear the scraping of dead leaves on a quiet, frozen morning;
 to see purple-pink daybreak clouds forecasting the afternoon weather;
 all, a spare, sensual pleasure that betrays the harshness of winter.

Spirit of Great Mystery, put us at ease
 recognizing we will never comprehend
 the full grandeur of a universe we can only know
 through long delayed speed-of-light snapshots.
 Shake the narrow and weak foundations
 upon which we build tiny boxes of belief
 and claim we know more than is knowable.
 Stimulate in us an openness and curiosity
 to hold yesterday's truth
 both tenaciously and casually,
 both securely and lightly,
 both respectfully and irreverently,
 Ready to abandon what is proved false,
 And willing to embrace today's truth
 as a provisional hypothesis for tomorrow.

May we be guided by both our hearts and our heads
 as we do the best we can
 to live into the mystery that is life, that is love.

Sermon

Often, it is an older brother or sister who first challenges our belief in Santa Claus. With tear streaked cheeks we run to a parental authority figure and demand to know the truth. For some, this might be their first crisis of faith. As adults we might chuckle about childhood foolishness, but I suspect there is a psychic wound in the fracturing of our faith that can linger on in our religious lives.

How might children who have just had their belief in Santa Claus shattered feel on Christmas Eve in a Christian Church as they look upon Mary and baby Jesus laid in a manger? Immaculate conception and a virgin mother? Wise men following a star? An angel talking to shepherds? In school, they learn about the laws of physics, the Big Bang, the solar system, ancient fossils and dinosaur bones, evolutionary biology, physiology and human reproduction. Compared to what they are learning in school, religion starts sounding more and more fantastic. "I can't believe this crazy nativity story!" thinks the sullen, disappointed child. And a future Unitarian Universalist is born!

Unitarian Universalism owes its existence to the development of rational scientific thinking applied to religious truth seeking. When we find scriptural stories that conflict with natural law, we tend to chuck them out. This has made the Christian creeds unacceptable for us as a foundation for our institutional identity. Over time, we've become quite suspicious of religious truth claims that are inconsistent with what science can verify independently. You may feel that suspicion here as a climate of disbelief, even a rejection of belief. And I wonder if "attachment to disbelief" can begin with losing our faith in Santa Claus.

This morning, I have no intention to argue against disbelief. What concerns me deeply, however, is the *attachment* to disbelief. I know a number of people in our congregation who have come to conclusions about what they do not believe, and are no longer open to any new information or evidence that might support the belief they reject. Not only do I see it in others, I see it in myself. Please let me explain.

Growing up a secular humanist in a Unitarian fellowship, I came to Buddhism from a strongly atheistic perspective. I greatly appreciated the Buddha's experiential orientation. Don't believe anything I say, the Buddha would tell everyone, just sit down, follow the meditation practices and discover the truth in your own experience. That said, Buddhism does teach ideas that I'm still suspicious of. The Buddha talked about heaven and hell realms. The Buddha talked about psychic powers monks could develop. The Buddha talked about rebirth.

The inspiration for this sermon came from listening to a fascinating lecture that

addressed my doubts about rebirth by Buddhist meditation teacher, [Joseph Goldstein](#), a founding and resident teacher at the [Insight Meditation Society](#) in Barre Massachusetts. I go there, to deepen my practice. In their library, I listened a recording of one of Goldstein's talks on "right view," one of the steps of the Buddhist Eightfold path. One of the right views is understanding how rebirth works.

I have two excerpts from that talk I'd like to play for you today. Here is the first section:

([link to first audio segment](#), about 2:20 in length)

Coleridge used the phrase "willing suspension of disbelief" to describe the process of creating and reading poetry. During the eighteenth century, fiction and poetry involving the supernatural had gone out of fashion, due to the declining belief in witches, sprites, fairies, gnomes and other magical creatures. The educated classes had embraced the rational approach of the new science that rejected the supernatural. The concept of "willing suspension of disbelief" explained how a modern audience might continue to enjoy stories with supernatural content.

Today, we can't hardly read fiction, go to the movies or turn on the television without having to suspend disbelief. From the world of Harry Potter, to Star Trek and its many different generations, to shows about vampires, werewolves and zombies, our ability to suspend disbelief is constantly being tested often with pleasurable outcome.

But when many Unitarian Universalists come through our doors and sit down for a service, there is an *un*-willingness to suspend disbelief. They want the facts without fiction or supernatural content sprinkled in.

When considering the supernatural sounding content of the Buddha's teachings, Goldstein, persuaded by what the Buddha taught that he could verify in his own experience, decided, "let me keep an open mind to what I can't verify."

A supernatural sounding term like rebirth is no small part of the Buddha's teachings. The cycle of death and rebirth is integral to his twelve step system of understanding cause and effect called "dependent origination."

Let's listen to the second section of the recording from Goldstein's talk. You need a little bit of context for this section. [Pali](#) is the language very close to what the Buddha spoke, in which his teachings were first recorded. Known as the "[Pali Canon](#)," these texts, called "suttas," are still in active use throughout the Buddhist world. Another book mentioned, the [Path of Purification](#) by Buddha Ghosa, refers to a well-known, ancient meditation manual still used by monks today.

([link to second section](#), about 4:01 in length)

Very interesting! Here are two more intriguing rebirth stories I found ([link](#)):

- A six-year-old boy named Taranjit Singh from India, claimed, since he was two, that he had been a boy named Satnam Singh. Taranjit insisted, he knew Satnam's father's name and that Satnam had been killed while riding his bike home from school. An investigation verified the many details Taranjit knew of his previous life as Satnam. But the clincher was that their handwriting -- a trait experts know is as distinct as fingerprints -- was virtually identical.
- Another Indian boy claimed to remember the life of a man named Maha Ram, who was killed with a shotgun fired at close range. This boy had an array of birthmarks in the center of his chest that looked like they could possibly correspond to a shotgun blast. So the story was checked out. Indeed, there was a man named Maha Ram who was killed by a shotgun blast to the chest. An autopsy report recorded the man's chest wounds -- which corresponded directly with the boy's birthmarks.

The Buddha told stories of his previous incarnations, called the [Jataka stories](#), and explained how to remember previous incarnations through certain meditation practices. Yet the Buddha cautioned that focusing on memories of previous lives is a distraction from the useful work of developing skill in concentration and mindfulness needed for liberation. These mental abilities and not remembering rebirths would lead to nibbana, the cessation of chronic discontent with existence.

I greatly appreciate the Buddha's categorization of questions like “the existence or non-existence of an eternal soul” and “the existence or non-existence of God” as *unfruitful speculation* that did not lead to liberating inner peace. So much of what we term supernatural isn't *necessary* to separate what is helpful from what is harmful for living a good life. This can be discovered directly in very carefully and systematically examining our moment to moment experience. That *reality based* process of examination requires an open rather than a closed mind, a detached rather than an attached mind, an inquiring rather than an aversive mind.

What limits our ability to have an open and inquiring mind, is our fear of being deceived. There are so many charlatans out peddling attractive, seductive, too good to be true belief systems. We don't want to repeat the Santa Claus disappointment and heartbreak when attractive ideas evaporate like a mirage. And so we build up walls around our belief systems and defend them against all comers. Or we wall out beliefs and try to live on only what science can prove.

But that can be problematic too, as science is a moving target. Both Newtonian physics and Euclidean Geometry have been superseded by larger systems of understanding. Genetic research turns established theory upside-down on a yearly basis! And scientists can also resist new data just as self-righteously as a religious fundamentalist. After all, who wants the emotional pain of being wrong?

That's why I'm so happy to be a Unitarian Universalist minister! I don't have to defend

any system of belief or unbelief. As individuals, each of us is encouraged to undertake a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I'm free to share what I believe without expecting you to believe that way too. In fact, I relish the opportunity to hear your opposing views so that my beliefs may grow, develop, even be corrected. I'd rather endure the pain of having my views corrected than propagate views that are wrong, or worse, harmful.

My request is that you bring an open *enough* mind on Sunday morning to allow your thinking to be tested. And sometimes, that might mean, you'll need to *willingly suspend your disbelief* in the subject of the sermon I'm delivering on a particular Sunday. You may *think* you know what I'll be talking about reading the sermon title or description. You may have a stack of refutations in mind as you sit down for a service. All I ask is you open your mind wide enough *to consider* what I have to say. And my pledge to you is I will do the same for you, as a fellow truth seeker.

Sometimes that truth will be found metaphorically in stories with supernatural content. Stories like the one told of the Buddha's enlightenment, the burning bush that talked to Moses, the command of the Angel Gabriel to Mohammed to recite, and even the nativity story told of the birth of Jesus. Their meanings will be available to us, *if*, we are temporarily willing to suspend our disbelief and let the stories move us, communicating their universal messages that transcend the content and touch the heart. So be it.

Benediction

I close with these words, adapted from the Rev. John Brigham,

Go your ways,
 knowing not, the answers to all things
 yet seeking, always, the answer
 to one more thing than you know.

Be searchers with your fellow travelers through life
 be adventurers in paths untrod.

Hold the hope of discovery high within you
 sharing that hope,
 and whatever discovery that may come your way,
 with others, for the greater good of all life.