

The New Atheism

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

"We need not think alike to love alike", these words of 16th c. Unitarian martyr, Francis David...are the core of my sermon this morning.

For it is my firm belief that what is most meaningful and most unique about Unitarian Universalism is that we do not think alike.

The very source of my faith is religious community...and its most salient energy is the creative power of love that moves in and among us. Definitions of what we believe matter little when we are held in and living from Universal Love.

Thus, I consider myself to be a religious humanist. I define God, (which I think of as holy and sacred energy)...as Universal Creative Love. And I see it, I feel it, I try to plant it, everywhere.

I hope you're not disappointed this morning if I don't offer a thorough history of atheism, but here's a quick overview.

This country founded for religious freedom, none the less, was in it's earliest days strongly Christian...and the religious debate regarding the nature of God and of Jesus crossed the ocean with the Pilgrims.

With the 18th century Enlightenment and the scientific advances of the 19th century...more people came to question the Bible and the idea of a God who continued to act in history.

Amid the tragic horrific wars of the 20th century, the optimism of liberal belief-in-progress darkened, and God was declared dead by some. Humanism and atheism grew in numbers.

Humanists, are either secular or religious. Secular humanists find meaning and hope only in human achievement and the human spirit. Religious Humanists hold similar hope in humanity alongside of an openness to something more...something larger and encompassing humanity.

Still in America today, we are still considered a Christian nation, so much so that it takes courage to say aloud..."I am an atheist, I don't believe in God." So much so that Jews and Buddhists, Muslims and many, many other groups feel marginalized.

And in recent decades fundamentalist and evangelical Christian voices have silenced not only atheists, but also liberal Christians.

And the basic separation of church and state has been at risk.

Atheist defenders, often scientists, like Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins went on the attack against the fundamentalists.

Lines were drawn. Their arguments suffered.

Hopefully, those days are past.

And there is something on the recent horizon called the new atheism...it seems a less strident, less evangelical atheism...

The two authors that I read, seem to be searching- rather than being closed and separate, they are interested in connection.

They are asking questions of a spiritual nature...like religious humanists and church-going atheist Unitarian Universalists do.

They seem to agree that we need not think alike to love alike.

Atheism is a form of humility. So says contemporary French philosopher, Andre' Comte-Sponville in his "Little Book of Atheist Spirituality".

Comte-Sponville comes to this conclusion while considering the pettiness, hatreds, and egoisms of humans. How could a perfect God create such imperfect creatures, he asks...and why?

He writes: "Faced with the flagrant mediocrity of our species, how can we believe it was made by an infinitely perfect Creator?"

Humility is, for me, a pre-requisite for any belief system...religious or otherwise. Human triumphalism or religious fundamentalism...lead toward destructive hubris. And really, certainty has little place in Unitarian Universalist scholarship.

So humility is good, whatever the cause or form.

In theological and philosophical thought it is also good to look for and consider paradox.

So join me now in consideration of immensity and intimacy.

The question is often asked, why do Unitarian Universalists come to church?...and more particularly why do atheists come to church?

This is the question I hope to answer in my sermon...I hope I can adequately explain or at least offer a plausible hypothesis as to why it is that our beloved atheists come to church, sing in the choir, teach in our Sunday school, come to Wonderful Wednesday and do all the other wonderful things they do here at UUCR.

First let me reassure you, that I don't know who our atheists are...just as I don't know our Christian UU's or our Buddhists, or our theists or pagans, or our agnostics...I just know for sure, that you are all here. I rather like to simply lump us all together as Unitarian Universalists knowing that that means a diversity of beliefs.

Wherever we might be on the theological spectrum, I believe that we are all here for the immensity and the intimacy.

I believe we all are here because we need something to take us to immensity...to a life out-of-self...to a time out-of-time, to an experience of being filled, as Kendyl Gibbons says...with the deepest reality of what we are. It's so hard to get there just on our own.

And I believe that we often arrive at this experience of being filled, this awareness of the immensity of the All or absolute of life...I believe we get there through relationship, through intimacy...with a little help from our friends.

It matters little what brand of UUism we follow...we all long for something to take us to the immensity – to a deeper understanding of what it means to be human... that experience that contains the All of life.

Different ideas, different beliefs, different rituals, different approaches to relationship and to exploration of life work for different people. People are nothing if not unique.

Some at UUCR find their way to the immensity questions or experiences through our worship services, some find their way through Socrates Café...some through teaching the children...some through small group ministry groups.

That's why we offer many paths. But we all seek to be open to the depth questions. Many of us do our seeking outdoors under a blue sky, or through meditation or in physical adventure, or in relationships of love...we seek for an experience of oceanic feeling or at-one-ness. An intimacy within immensity. There is within humans, an urge toward inner knowledge and an openness toward the All of Life. It is the urge, the desire, to live as fully human as possible.

This urge can be called spiritual action or religious living...the outward signs might be pietism, or ethics or morality or serenity, or mysticism. But it is, I think, the same urge.

Most of the time we live in the mundane world of everyday routine, but if we deepen our awareness...we might, when taking a walk or sitting with a friend, we might stumble on the surprise, the revelation, the enchanting fact, that there is *something and not nothing*, that we are and life is....that the truth of existence is immense...and we a part of it.

There's nothing supernatural about it. There's no need to bring God into it. Neither is there good reason to deny or resist it...we are humbled and grateful in the knowledge of immensity and the intimacy of our place within it.

It surprised me to find that both of the books I read on the New Atheism made a case for atheism as a path of spirituality...one, *"Living Without God"* by Ronald Aronson; stressed the action/reflection of justice work and the other *"The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality"* the emptying meditation of Buddhism. Comte-Sponville arrived, at the end of his philosophic reflections at the famous quote of Nietzsche;

"I am a mystic and believe in nothing."

The good news is that the conversation has moved beyond explaining or defending atheism...it has moved beyond attacking theists. The religious fundamentalists are no longer in charge of national policy. Separation of church and state may still need protecting...and atheists may still be misunderstood...but now atheists can turn toward a consideration of what it means to live with depth -without a belief in the supernatural.

The paradox which I suggested earlier...is this...one cannot move toward experiences of immensity except through intimacy.

Depth meaning , living with spirit, living for a higher purpose, living as humanly as we are able...is a possibility, a gift a grace accessible only through relationship...which means only through risk and vulnerability. We cannot get there alone.

The relationship we seek might be with nature, to open to the beauty and impact of a sunrise or a meteor shower we must be vulnerable...open our heart, stand and lift our face to the sky.

I believe every moment holds the possibility of this kind of communion.

Because I am a part of the immense All of Life...I can commune and connect in intimate relationship with every other part of the All. Nothing is outside of Life. All is contained within all...and the creation of moments of communion is possible.

Sometimes I call this possibility holiness or sacredness.

Today I'll just call it intimacy and communion. 35 years as a mother, and 18 years as a minister has filled my life with moments of communion. Experience of the immensity has been a blessing of my adult life.

And finding my way to Unitarian Universalism has opened ever more possibilities. And ever deeper relationships.

Remember, the quote at the beginning of my sermon...atheism is a form of humility. Well I think being Unitarian Universalism in all of our disguises is a form of humility...because we confess that we don't know, we admit that we are in search, we let the world know that we are uncertain, without authority, open to new revelation, confused and unsure of where we stand...

And though I hope this reasoned, evolved stance of our faith brings us to humility...I also hope we realize its' power.

It is no small thing to be a theologically diverse faith tradition. It is no small thing to welcome people from all religious backgrounds and to ask them to add their wisdom to our collective understanding. It is no small thing to risk traveling toward immensity and intimacy together when we know we speak different languages.

And yet it is powerful to do so. For me it is an experience of communion...a communion of hearts and souls.

Let me tell you about a communion that happened in this sanctuary several days ago.

It couldn't have happened if we weren't already prepared to welcome people of differing faith backgrounds. It wouldn't have happened if Seanan and I weren't willing and able to use inclusive religious and spiritual language. It wouldn't have happened, if we weren't already known within Montgomery County as a church of integrity and trust.

It wouldn't have happened if we weren't open to trusting and working with strangers to achieve a compassionate purpose.

It was truly an experience of Universal Love...it was a communion of hearts and souls.

It was an opportunity to serve the larger community in a way that only a diverse, open, loving, religious community can.

We were asked to plan and offer a memorial service for two little girls who were killed by their mother here in Montgomery County.

The service was attended primarily by police detectives and social workers and victim assistant office personnel and others who serve Montgomery Co. These men and women whose job it is to

respond to tragedies like the murder of children, were profoundly effected by the evil circumstances of the lives and horrible deaths of these two little girls.

They wanted to give voice to the girls' suffering...and they wanted to give honor to their young lives...these good men and women see themselves as the brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, parents and sons and daughters of all the victims who go unprotected. In the face of evil, they were filled with compassion and care. And they made a service for these children.

And we were here to help. The Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville is here to be of service. And it is because we are people of a free faith, people who are rational and spiritual, people who honor many religious and spiritual and ethical paths...because we are trained and prepared to embrace all faiths, all people...

And because our beautiful sanctuary is open to light and the natural symbols of hope and beauty...because our hymnbook contains wisdom from all world religions...because we know the prayers of Judaism and Christianity and Buddhism...and the words of rational acceptance of death.

And because we offer consolation that makes room for all beliefs about life after death...and holds all pain without having to wash it away with creeds....

For all these reasons and more...

Our altar table held the urns...the ashes, of these girls...

And the people who came brought their tears and brought stones to the altar....stones which will be placed at the grave...

And they sang...the lullaby from our hymnbook..."Sleep My Child and Peace Attend Thee...all through the night."

And they took with them flower seeds to be planted in memory of the children.

There is sacred power in communion such as this. There is power in our open embrace of different beliefs.

And there is humility...when we can serve.. And gratitude.

Unitarian martyr, Francis David, said..."We need not think alike to love alike." So let us love one another as we celebrate and explore the immensity and the intimacy. "AMEN"