

LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, September 18, 2011
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven. . . "
Mark 13:32; Matthew 24:36

Reading

The Word

Tony Hoagland

Down near the bottom
of the crossed-out list
of things you have to do today,

between "green thread"
and "broccoli," you find
that you have penciled "sunlight."

Resting on the page, the word
Is beautiful. It touches you
as if you had a friend

and sunlight were a present
he had sent from someplace distant
as this morning—to cheer you up,

and to remind you that,
among your duties, pleasure
is a thing

that also needs accomplishing.
Do you remember?
that time and light are kinds

of love, and love
is no less practical
than a coffee grinder

or a safe spare tire?
Tomorrow you may be utterly
without a clue,

but today you get a telegram
from the heart in exile,
proclaiming that the kingdom

still exists,
the king and queen alive,
still speaking to their children,

—to any one among them
who can find the time
to sit out in the sun and listen.

[from *Sweet Ruin*.
© University of Wisconsin Press, 1992]

Offertory

A Fire of Love

Orlando Gibbons (1623)

Thou art that Comfort from above
the highest doth by gift impart;
Thou spring of life, a fire of love
And the anointing Spirit art.

Oh! give our blinded senses light;
Shed love into each heart of our,
And grant the body's feeble plight
May be enabled by thy power.

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“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven. . . .”
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We live in uncertain times, in case you haven’t noticed. I’m reminded of an old *New Yorker* cartoon. Adam and Eve are being expelled from the Garden of Eden. One says to the other, “Well, my dear, we seem to be in a time of transition.”

There is something very deep in our human psyche that does not like this. This summer I was talking to a parent of young children. Dad was complaining, “But when I let her choose a book, she asks me for the same stories – over and over and over again.”

“Do you know why?” I asked. “No, why?” replied. “I just get bored.”

“Because she knows how those stories turn out. No matter how many bad things happen in them – and there are usually more than a few in a good children’s story – in the end everything is OK, even if there have been frightening things, or losses, or even tragedies. She knows the ending. And that’s comforting.”

Just last Wednesday I was talking to a group of elders, mostly in their 80s. My theme was taken from the book we have selected this year as our First Parish “Book of the Year for 2011-12,” Karen Armstrong’s *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. In her seventh chapter, or step, called “How Little We Know,” Armstrong asks us to “stand back and listen to the aggressive certainty that characterizes so much of our discourse these days. Consider your profession or something that really interests you . . . Isn’t it true that the more you know about this special field of yours, the more acutely you become aware of all you still have to learn? Then notice how disturbing it is to hear somebody talking dogmatically about your subject, over dinner or on the radio, making serious mistakes and false claims that are almost physically painful to hear.”

A few minutes later one man in his 80s spoke up, “So many people my age, including myself,” he said, “seem to feel that the world around us is rapidly just going to hell in a hand-basket. We’ve assembled plenty of evidence. So what do you have to say to *that*?”

I replied, “The older we get, the more stories we hear, in the news and elsewhere, that are not like the familiar stories we grew up with and lived through. We know how those stories turn out. But we don’t know how these new stories end, much less the big story that we’re all in together. And that makes us anxious. Still, the late Norman Cousins, a great religious liberal, was no doubt right when he remarked, ‘No one of us ever has *enough* evidence to justify an ultimate despair.’”

“Good answer,” he said.

Mind you, there are many who do despair, some, ironically even in the name of religion or faith. Back when I was first starting out in the liberal ministry a fundamentalist named Hal Lindsey almost outsold the Bible itself with a little book based on his reading of Biblical prophecies, and predicting imminent global destruction, called *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. Religious historian Martin Marty reviewed it in one sentence: “This author gave up on the world before God did.”

Yet you may remember that last spring another Christian fundamentalist named Harold Camping predicted that Christ would come back to earth on May 21. When nothing obvious occurred, Camping said that “a spiritual judgment” taken place that very day, but the rapture of the saved and the physical destruction of the worldly would come only on October 21. Meanwhile, somewhat more humble Christians pointed out that in the gospels, Jesus himself is quoted as saying about the coming of God’s kingdom here on earth, “*But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, not even the Son [of man].*” [Mark 13:32; Matthew 24:36]

Although it’s not immediately obvious, I hear the Tony Hoagland poem that was our reading today as a liberal commentary on all of this – placing the kingdom or commonwealth of God not in some other world beyond this one, nor future, but in this present moment – in a reminder that “*among your duties, pleasure/ is a thing/ that also needs accomplishing.// Do you remember?/*”

*that time and light are kinds/ of love, and love/ is no less practical/ than a coffee grinder//
or a safe spare tire?/ Tomorrow you may be utterly/ without a clue,//
but today you get a telegram/ from the heart in exile,/ proclaiming that the kingdom//
still exists,/ the king and queen alive,/ still speaking to their children,//
—to any one among them/ who can find the time/ to sit out in the sun and listen.”*

Call me a hedonist with moral standards, or an agnostic if you wish, but I think that most certainty about what God wants, or even about “God,” is over-rated, both by fundamentalists and by the cultured despisers of all things religious, the so-called ‘new atheists.’ So does Karen Armstrong. So do the wisest of scientists, bowing before the mystery of how little we really know. In fact, “*Why Certainty About God is Overrated*” was an August article in *USA Today*, about physicist/theologian John Polkinghorne among others. Bill Bradley passed it on to me.

It includes a great quote from Rachel Held Evan’s book *Evolving in Monkey Town*, which tells her own story of being brought up in Dayton, Tennessee, site of the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial, among people who knew all the answers, one way or the other: about who we human beings are, where we come from, and where we are going. “Most of the people I’ve encountered,” Evans writes, “are looking not for a religion to answer all their questions but for a community of faith in which they feel safe asking them.” If that’s the case with you, you’re in the right place here! “*Unitarian Universalism: Where all your answers are questioned,*” said a recent ad about our approach to life-long religious education and spiritual development.

Because according the wisest voices of human knowing across boundaries of creed and culture, there are at least four limits to our pretense to knowledge and understanding, four enduring mysteries that give additional dimension to our ongoing human quest for meaning and value:

First, why is there something at all, rather than nothing? Call it Creativity, God, Cosmic Process, Mystery, Chaos. Who can name it? Perhaps just bow before it in humble unknowing. Let’s do.

Second, why is there life in this universe? life interdependent, life that competitively, even cruelly at times, seeks what Rabbi Jesus called ‘life, and life more abundant?’ Can we not still

seek that form of life for all the Creator's children? Seeing the sun shining and rain falling on the just and unjust alike, and in the rainbow over them both the sign of a peaceable kingdom in we seek to minimize killing others while still surviving and helping others to thrive.

Third, why is there human consciousness? Consciousness to ask such questions, equipped both to perceive and to measure, to answer and again question, to learn and yet propound ever-new possibilities, hypotheses, theories and axioms designed to keep open, God willing, in humility, the possibility that we mortals might, even in all our wisdom, still be wrong? I don't know.

All I know is this: I question whether our human future is pre-determined. With William James, let's make a leap of faith into the inner experience of our own free will. And into that uncertainty as I suggested here last week, despite our inability to control the winds or the waves or the currents, let us still, both each and together, try to adjust our course and set our sails to tack more wisely toward Home. That creative place from which we come and toward which our human ship must be headed – carefully loaded, with love, between the generations.

All too often, unfortunately, human evolution seems to get stuck somewhere in Monkey Town. Early on, religions arise around great spiritual wisdom designed to help us humans damp down our anxieties, and then take a spiritual leap of faith into an always uncertain moral future. Later generations of the fearful then interpret those originally wise teachings as literalistic orthodoxies, certainties, and fundamentalisms.

Our purpose here is to question all such fear-filled orthodoxies, whether of the Right or the Left. In 1944, the great federal judge Learned Hand said: “In the American battle of minds, too many are seeking ‘freedom’ and too few are seeking ‘liberty’. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the mind of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias . . .”

Frankly, I worry about the world into which we, or our children, or our children's children, are now bringing the next generation. It would be crazy not to -- not to worry, that is!. As our parents did -- some better, some worse -- their better examples coming from those who worried

with others, in community, and then learned and gave us good example of how we in our turn might live with uncertainty, while still being (more or less) steady and reliable. So . . .

Can I tell you exactly how to live with the many uncertainties you now face in your own life? Not really. Each of us must, in the end, both set and trim our own sails, calmly, reliably, and then help the whole society and global community to which we belong to set its collective sails -- toward a future in which both we and ours, and all God's children, can both survive and thrive. Even in the face of uncertainty.

So may it be. Amen.

*Hymn 86

Blessed Spirit of My Life

Shelley Jackson Denham

Benediction