

If You Don't Believe In God, What Do You Believe?

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A while back I delivered a message here that included the idea of a moral compass. I suggested that that compass may be delineated metaphorically by degrees for a “lifescape” navigation in “degrees” such as, specific religious beliefs, life experiences, values that the person develops and holds to and tries to live by, and by ideas and experiences of other sorts. As we all know, there are many and varied religious beliefs, some of which are similar and others are totally dissimilar. There are those who believe in God such as the Christian God and others who believe in gods such as Greek gods, and others who believe in Animism. Science, on the other hand, tends toward facts and evidence-based data that supposedly can be proved. At the same time, when scientific reports are written, they often start with statements like, “The data suggests....” Thus, there is wiggle room for scientists. Similarly, many “religious people” believe their beliefs are absolute and yet have little or no scientific data to support them. Clearly there is also plenty of wiggle room for interpretation.

I need to note that our founding fathers made it explicit that we need to keep church and state separated partly because they did not want to establish a theocracy. Still, as recently as 1954, “one nation under God” was added to our Pledge of Allegiance. My first question is under who's God? [Jewish, Islamic?] The words following that “...one nation under God” pare “indivisible with liberty and justice for all”. “...under God” suggests a reference to a Christian God and seems to me to form a division by its very existence.

Since I'm going to be discussing some of my beliefs, I think you need to know that I do not believe in God of the Christian faith. I do believe in love as a central part of my beliefs just as in the UU flower. It has been grounding belief for me since I applied for conscientious objector status back in 1968 when I was in the Army. At the time, I noted that if God was love then I believed in God or at least a God. I have preferred to use the term Love ever since then. Love is all encompassing for

me. If I use the term god, people tend to assume I mean their god whatever it might be. This suggests another reality. No matter what I say, there will be those who will find mistakes or take exceptions that “prove” I am wrong or misguided. When that happens, I try to use their input to clarify and improve my thinking and actions. There will also be those who make suggestions that are helpful in bringing light to my perceptions. A magnetic compass has 360° each of which may help to chart a person’s travels. So it is with a “life scape compass” which may have many more “degrees” to which beliefs can be attached and help to chart a person’s life course. Today I have chosen to focus on just a few of my beliefs to stay within the time we have available. Here we go.

Love

Love is an abstraction for which I have no scientific data and yet I believe in it wholeheartedly. I believe in it when I see it, when I experience it, and when I live it. It takes many forms and is ever present even when I am not engaging in it in what I think and do in the moment. The latter is what leads to my asking for forgiveness and in giving forgiveness. Love to me is the essence of relationships for good or ill. I have found that I can love a person even when I find their behavior totally unacceptable. In my humaneness, I'm not always able to do that effectively. That is where forgiveness comes in for myself and others. One of the hardest parts of that is forgiving myself. Then I'm reminded of the necessity for loving myself and not “guilting” myself.

Helping Others

I have been helped by so many people along the way that helping others takes many forms. I believe in giving back, not because it is “a payback”, but because it is a recognition and respect for another’s kindness. To show up without being asked can contribute to a person feeling safer. It's like that saying “I got your 6”. It means you do not have to even look behind you to know that another has your back. The same goes for standing up and speaking out not only for others but also for situations, for your country, yourself, and for what is right as you best can determine it. Mr. Rogers tells the story of when he was a child and becoming

anxious at reports of people in disasters or wars. His mother would tell him, “Be sure to look for the helpers because they will be there too.” In regard to helping in many unfortunate or difficult situations, answer the question by Rabbi Hillel, “If not me, who? If not now, when?” by helping in any way you can large or small. Give a hand up to people who need it. Also remember that asking for help is not a weakness. It is an honest and intelligent expression of knowing that you can't do it all alone. It will also help you to more readily recognize when it's time for you to give someone else a hand up. It is an example of “Been there, done that, and got the T shirt”.

Kindness

I believe in kindness as one of the most important attributes one can include as part of themselves. To me generosity in the UU flower is an aspect of kindness. Kindness allows a person to more readily engage in the practice of justice and equity and pluralism and interdependence and the rest of the flower. I believe kindness is love in action.

Questions

I believe questions are imperative to be able to expand knowledge by exploration for better understanding of new data in our life experiences. To that end, I believe that we have not only the right but the responsibility to question. It allows for critical thinking. Critical thinking does not necessarily mean criticizing; it means an honest and open consideration of new and old information. Certainly, there needs to be a place for criticizing one thing or another, but not for the purpose of removing critical thinking.

Sense of Humor

I believe that a sense of humor is critical to maintaining a reasonable balance in one's responses to life experiences. I was listening to an NPR program where the great Metropolitan Opera star, Marian Anderson, was being interviewed. She

apparently grew up quite poor. During the interview she noted that her mother told her, “Sometimes you may think you have lost everything. The fact is you have not lost everything until you lose your sense of humor.”

Unpleasant Realities

I believe that given the right circumstances, I would kill another person. Some people have told me that since I am a conscientious objector that's going against my beliefs. My reality is that that decision is in my hands not in another's hands. Fortunately, I have not had to make that decision, nor can I delineate for anyone exactly the circumstances where I might do that. Protection of my family or vulnerable others would be at the top of the list of possibilities.

Despair can lead a person to dark places of remembrance, depression, and even to the consideration of taking one's own life. That's why I have often said, “I may visit the dark places, but I’ll never live there”.

A lady I once knew had a penchant for what she called “churchy people”. She would say, “They are so heavenly bent, that they are no earthly good”.

A man I once knew used to say, “When you throw dirt at someone you are losing ground”.

Hope

I have recently noted that hope is my form of prayer because, for me, it means, hope for something more positive. Last week somebody quoted Kierkegaard saying, “Hope is a passion for the possible”.

Regarding my belief in hope, I'm going to end my message by quoting from a message I delivered October 15th of 2006 on “Why I am UU”. 20 years ago?!

“So much for my ideas. As you know, I tend toward quoting well-articulated thoughts of others. This is because much of my experience in life appears to me to be a reiteration, or at least another iteration, of that which has already occurred in history. We may be doomed to repeat history regarding war because we have not fully learned and applied the lessons we need to about war. We seem to know even less about making and keeping peace. I also believe that we are blessed to repeat the history of goodness in people in part because we have learned enough about goodness to do so. But I digress. Because I am UU, I can do that. ☺

I want to conclude my remarks with two quotes that bring us full circle to character of self, family, community, and “Why I am UU.”

First, from “A Man Without A Country” – Kurt Vonnegut, Seven Stories Press, NY, 2005, pgs. 79-80 - This is a book borrowed from a friend.

“Do you know what a humanist is?

My parents and grandparents were humanists, what used to be called Free Thinkers. So as a humanist, I am honoring my ancestors, which the Bible says is a good thing to do. We humanists try to behave as decently, as fairly, and as honorably as we can without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. My brother and sister didn’t think there was one, my parents and grandparents didn’t think there was one. It was enough that they were alive. We humanists serve as best we can the only abstraction with which we have any real familiarity, which is our community.”

Second and lengthier, from “Hunting for Hope: A Father’s Journeys” – Scott Russell Sanders, Beacon Press, Boston 1998, pgs 70-71 – This book is a Father’s Day present from my son.

Here, first, is a quote from the flyleaf of this book, “Hunting for Hope” begins with a hiking trip in the Rockies meant to get at the root of the strife between the author and his teenage son. On their first day in the mountains, Jesse lashes out, “You look at any car and all you think is pollution,

traffic and roadside crap. You say fast food's poisoning our bodies and TV's poisoning our minds.... You make me feel the planet's dying and people are to blame, and nothing can be done about it. There's no room for hope. Maybe you can get along without hope, but I can't."

Russell, later in the text of the book, articulates a set of ideals while honestly allowing for the disparity between those ideals and reality. Here is the question he asks and his own response to it."

"What values and behaviors should the family teach if it is to be a training ground for life in community? That all depends on what sort of community we desire. For my part, I wish to live in a community that is peaceful, that cares for the weak and the poor, that welcomes the immense variety of humankind, that fosters the health and happiness and full development of all its members young and old, male and female. I wish to live in a community that is beautiful, that encourages good work and discourages everything hasty or shoddy. I wish to live in a community that acknowledges the holiness of Creation by conserving the land and by respecting the creatures that share the land with us. I wish to live in a community that recognizes its links to the larger world yet also meets many of its own needs, especially for food and entertainment, and has a modest sense of what those needs are. I wish to live in a community inhabited by citizens rather than [just] consumers, public-minded who honor the richness of our shared life by supporting libraries and museums and schools, and by planning for the common good. I wish to live in a community that has a keen awareness of its own history, one that values continuity as well as innovation and aspires to leave a wholesome place for others to enjoy, undiminished, far into the future.

That vexed phrase 'family values' often serves as shorthand for a political agenda that is never spelled out. I have my own agenda, which is why I've sketched this vision of a desirable community. The family values that I embrace are the habits of heart and mind essential for creating and maintaining such a community, and among these are generosity and fidelity and mercy, a sympathetic imagination, a

deep and abiding concern for others, a delight in nature and human company and all forms of beauty, a passion for justice, a sense of restraint and a sense of humor, a relish for skillful work, a willingness to negotiate differences, a readiness for cooperation and affection. I don't pretend that we always live up to those values in my own family, but we aspire to do so.

While the family is not the only place where we might acquire such habits, it is the primary one. And above all it is the place where we are most likely to learn the meaning of love. In using that tricky word, I note Wendell Berry's distinction between the *feeling* of love, which may be no more than a warm fuzzy glow, and the *practice* of love, which involves 'trust, patience, respect, mutual help, forgiveness,' and other demanding virtues. If children and adults emerge from a household bearing those habits of heart and mind, I would declare that family a success, a blessing to its neighbors and its place.

I am all too aware of the distance between these ideals, for community, family and individual character, and the reality we are experiencing in contemporary America...."

I, as the presenter of today's message, find myself wanting to read you this whole book, but that would be like turning on the fire hose when all you asked for was a glass of water or, similarly, a UU discussion group instead of a one-sentence answer.

I identify with Unitarian Universalism because the tenets of Unitarian Universalism have the breadth and depth of acceptance, feeling, thought, character, and positive action to lead me to truly hope for all of us to more completely live those ideals of which Scott Sanders writes so eloquently.

Work Hard. Have Fun. Be Kind

Thanks for listening.