

Credo: God, Humanity and the Universe

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Several times every year, Carol Haag and I lead a program called *INTRODUCTION TO UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM*. Intended especially for people who are new to our congregation and to our movement, these evenings are structured to permit participants to ask those questions which are foremost in their minds. This fall, the question that came to us with greatest insistency was, "What do Unitarian Universalists believe? We have a fairly good idea" the participants said, "of what Unitarian Universalists do not believe, but what precisely is it that they do believe?"

It is a good question; one I have been asked often over the years and one which is never easy to answer. Because we are a people who refuse to be bound by any creedal formulation, it is difficult to be precise about what Unitarian Universalists as a group do or do not believe. No matter how you answer that question, someone somewhere is almost certain to stand up and assert, "I am a Unitarian Universalist and I do not agree with that." As a consequence, I came away from the Introduction to Unitarian Universalism sessions this fall feeling once more that I had failed to answer the most important question that was asked by the group. The reason for that persistent failure, of course, has to do with the fact that it is an impossible question. In a tradition which values radical freedom of belief as ours does, no one can answer faith questions for anyone else, no one can say what Unitarian Universalists believe. This morning, I would like to attempt a more honest response to that central question by describing not what Unitarian Universalists believe, but something of what this one Unitarian Universalist believes.

Several years ago, the members of The Unitarian Church in Summit overcame their curious terror of ever taking a vote on anything important, and actually amended their constitution to put in place a new statement of purpose for this congregation. That statement of purpose, as close to a creed as we are ever likely to come, is often used, as it was this morning, as one of our covenants. Like many such statements embraced by Unitarian Universalist Congregations, this one begins by defining why we come together: to seek truth, to serve humankind and to dwell together in peace. Then, it goes on to affirm that each individual has the right and, the implicit responsibility for his or her own understanding of the nature of God, Humanity and the Universe. What is central to us as a corporate body is not what we believe, but how we live together--open to truth, caring for humanity, and living in peace. That does not suggest, however that matters of faith are somehow inappropriate subjects for discussion among us. We believe that what you think about the nature of God, Humanity and the Universe is profoundly important--too important to be dictated by anyone else. Indeed, the reason we stress openness, caring and a determination to live together in peace is that it is only in this climate that we can

be free to be honest with each other and share our diverse understandings of fundamental concerns. In this kind of institution, it is particularly appropriate for people to want to know what faith motivates those who fill positions of leadership in this institution.

So, let me begin by reflecting on the nature of God, humanity and the universe. If you have been around this congregation for any length of time, undoubtedly you have noticed that the word "God" does not slip easily from my lips. In our Sunday services, I do not pray to God; I rarely choose readings or hymns which make reference to God; and my sermons often do not mention that three letter word. This, of course, is not a matter of accident. God is a term and a concept with which I am profoundly uncomfortable.

That discomfort is rooted in my experience in religious communities over the decades. I grew up in a religious tradition in which God was a charter member--the focus of prayers and sermons, the source of all wisdom, the creator of the world, the protector of all who embraced the true faith, and an endless source of comforting nostalgia. But over time it seemed clear to me that whatever the theology, God had a different, more functional role within the religious community. By invoking God, people were able to clothe their opinions with unassailable sanctity. In essence, God became the answer to the unanswerable, the mechanism by which difficult questions were evaded and old habits of thought were allowed to continue unchallenged. The more I understood of the nature of the world, and the way religion functioned, the clearer it became that God was being used to paper over the abyss, to domesticate the vast mystery of this universe and of our own existence within it.

If people wondered how the world came to be, and why it is as it is, the answer was "God." If people wondered why suffering existed in the world, the answer was "God." If people wondered why some were set to rule over others, why some had so much while others had so little, inevitably, the answer was "God." Over and over again, God was a mechanism used to stop deep questioning, and to encourage the acceptance of things as they are. As I grew in understanding, this response to life began to offend me. I found myself questioning the existence of God, and dropping God-talk from my discourse, not because I ceased to believe but because "God" had become a barrier to faith. I could not permit the mystery, the wonder, the awe, the challenge of the world to be dimmed or dulled by a soporific named God.

If I am not certain about the existence of God, there are things I do firmly believe. I believe that we are part of a universe which is dynamic and evolving and changing. I believe that there is a directive in the history of that universe, that change is not random but purposive. The universe moves from singularity to multiplicity, from simplicity to complexity, from lesser to greater mindfulness, from necessity to choice. This means that change is the defining characteristic of reality--that nothing ever remains the same, that all of existence is eternally in process, that we and all the world we know are products of that process and that we and the world we know are, at every moment being transformed.

The evidence of that change is to be seen at every level of existence. Consider the world of the high energy sub-atomic physics. I am told that this is a world in which existence is

often measured in nanoseconds, in which particles spontaneously arise from the void and return to the void, in which emergence, subsidence, birth and decay, coming and going are the invariable order of existence. Consider the world of the virus, existing on the border between animate and inanimate, in which changes occur with such rapidity that it takes all our ingenuity to keep ahead of the threat posed by the influenza virus. Or consider the world of the macrocosm. It is clear beyond any question that the universe as a whole is a dynamic place, with stars dying and being born, with galaxies moving rapidly away from one another, with white holes and black holes constantly altering the picture. And, of course, this mesocosm, this middle space wherein we live our lives is forever changing. One need only glance into the mirror, or out the window, or into a photo album for the evidence that the human world forever changes.

I believe that we are part of a dynamic reality, forever moving from what has been through what is and on to what shall be. If this be true, and I believe it is, then the greatest human folly, the original sin, the unforgivable sin, if such there be, is the human conceit known as conservatism--the persistent effort to prevent change, to keep things as they are, or worse, to return them to some previous state. Such efforts cannot succeed, for they run counter to the very nature of the Universe. Existence does not stand still, nor does it run back. All that I know of the universe calls me to have faith in the future, to know that even as I let go of the world I have known, a new and different world opens before me, rich with possibilities and challenges, and dangers and opportunities. I trust the process and I believe in the future, and, knowing that I cannot both hold on to what has been and reach for what will be, I am eager to embrace what is to come.

Even as I believe in a dynamic process of growth and change, I also believe that this is a reflexive universe, that underlying its dynamic process there are patterns which repeat themselves over and over again, at different levels of magnitude. Chaos theory and fractal geometry reveal a universe in which there are deeply structured patterns, which reveal themselves time and again across many different scales of size. It is this implicate patterning of reality which allows high energy physics to infer in the behavior of sub-atomic particles evidence for the state of the universe itself only a few nanoseconds after it came into being. In this infinitely small world, in the emergence and decay of particles, in the fusion and fission, in the release of energy, the earliest history the universe, of our emergence can be discovered. The pattern is deep and real and unaffected by the eons of evolutionary change which can be read in the night skies.

Nor is this the only place where the patterning can be read. Last Sunday, stuck in a traffic jam on Route 81 in Virginia, I was listening to the radio, and wondering why the steady stream of traffic had ground to a sudden halt. As if in answer to my question, the radio station broadcast a discussion of traffic problems, in which the experts were explaining what had happened to me and to millions of others across the country that evening, in terms of fluid theory. There is a pattern in the flow of fluids which helps explain why, for no obvious reason, the traffic will suddenly seize up along a stretch of road. The pattern which causes turmoil in the flow of fluids, causes turmoil on interstate highways.

Chaos theory has suggested that there are patterning relationships between such disparate phenomena as the smoke rising from a burning cigarette, the dancing of a candle flame, the dripping of a water faucet, an epileptic seizure, a heart attack, the orbit of a comet through the solar system, the path of the earth around the sun, perhaps the spinning of the galaxies. I take a greater leap of faith and affirm that the patterns are real, and are the basis for my conviction that the world out there and the world in here is one world, that the distinctions we make between this and that, now and then, here and there are convenient and necessary to our living on this mesocosmic plane, but that beneath all apparent diversity and complexity there is a fundamental unity which cannot be breached or broken or escaped. Beneath the world of the many, which is always and forever changing, is the world of the one, forever improvising on the basis of persistent patterns. As I trust the process of change forever moving us from what we have been to what we are to be, so I affirm the fundamental oneness of existence in which our being rests.

And I affirm that in the midst of this world of change and persistence, human beings are the most mysterious creatures I know. We seem to bridge in our existence the worlds of the macrocosm, of the microcosm and of the mesocosm. We--so far as we know, alone--are able to look back upon the history of the universe and see it as it may have been a fraction of a second after its birth. We--so far as we know, alone--are able to speculate upon its possible future course. We--so far as we know, alone--are able to draw the connections between what was and what will be and see how the lines converge upon this middle level of existence, this fleeting moment of time. We are the universe, contemplating itself and understanding itself, and in modest ways, directing itself. And yet, even as we recognize the unique position we occupy, most of our energy and attention are directed elsewhere, to mere survival. We struggle into birth, we grow and scabble out a living, we reproduce, we fend off the indignities of illness and age and in the end we die and return to the source from whence we came. And through it all, we, who have the ability to understand the history of the universe, seldom understand our own history. I am forever amazed at what we define as important, and the mysteries of our own existence which we so blithely ignore.

I do firmly believe that our lives are purposive and that we are participants in a larger structure of meaning than we know--a structure of meaning which has significance beyond our lives, perhaps universal significance. There is no reason to believe that human beings are not subject to the same reflexive qualities which seem to pervade the rest of the universe. Thus, I find myself intrigued by the existence of mitochondria in the cells of our bodies. Mitochondria, as I understand them, are small organisms which, eons ago, set up housekeeping within the walls of our cells. They have their own DNA, their own genetic history; they have a separate, but symbiotic existence within the tiny confines of the world that is our cells. There, largely ignored by us, they go about their business; they live and reproduce and die. And in the process of pursuing their own goals and drives, the mitochondria process all the energy which our cells require, all the energy which we must have if we are to live. Almost certainly, they have no knowledge of our existence or of the part they play in our lives, just as we usually give no thought to the contribution they make. And yet, as they mindlessly go about their quotidian existence, they make it possible for us to live, to pursue our petty concerns, to explore the

macrocosm and the microcosm, to dream our dreams and weave our theories and fulfill whatever function is ours in the larger scheme of things.

If this is a reflexive universe, a universe of change founded on patterns which recur over vast scales--from atom to galaxy--is it not possible that in the tiny mitochondria there is a whispered message about our own existence? It is not possible that in the pursuit of our mundane affairs, in the effort to tease some meaning out of our experience, we are an essential part of a larger process, hidden from us by its very scale and scope? The meaning of our existence may never be clear to us, but that it has meaning and import I do not doubt. There is meaning in our drive to understand what lies behind the facade of the night sky; there is meaning in our drive to know whence we have come and whither we are tending; there is meaning in our living and our dying and in our caring for one another. That meaning may escape us, for it may be part of a structure as far beyond us in scale as we are beyond the mitochondria, but I do firmly believe that the meaning is there and in our living and in our dying we further processes and causes we do not fathom.

By the same token, I believe that the process we call mind, is not confined to us or to this planet, but pervades the universe. I cannot prove it and will not try, but if there is no distinction between in here and out there, and if the universe is reflexive, then knowing and thinking, and awareness are properties of the universe. In some way I cannot describe, I believe that mind pervades all of existence, that particle and atom, that virus and bacterium, that mitochondrion and human being, that planet and star are, in some sense, aware, attuned, responsive. Our knowing is part of a larger knowing, and plays a role in the knowing that is the universe itself.

I believe that we live our lives in a vast sea of mystery and wonder. There are no final answers to the questions which a richly purposive, deeply patterned, constantly changing universe poses for us. There are provocative hints and suggestions and whisperings, all of which tend toward the conviction that we are part of a reality larger and more amazing and more surprising than we can imagine. It seems a betrayal of our nature and our implicate purpose to close off the questions, to shut down the metaphors, to paper over the wonder and the mystery with the answer which answers nothing: God.

And so there you have it. I believe in a universe of constant change and of underlying pattern. I believe in the fundamental unity of all things and all beings, a unity which encompasses all our diversity. I believe in a universe which is pervaded with mindfulness and with meanings and purposes beyond my ability to know or understand. Therefore, I believe it behooves me to live gently and with care and consideration for all of existence, and especially for all the children of the earth, for I cannot know the larger implications of my actions or the larger role each being plays in the universal scheme of things. I believe that we have our being in a vast sea mystery, and that we live by metaphor. I believe in the process by which we are transformed in ways we cannot transform ourselves to meet the evolving challenges and opportunities which come our way. I may never be sure about God, but I do firmly believe in mitochondria.