

Toward a Faith for a New Age

Rev. David E. Bumbaugh

The Unitarian Church in Summit

May 31, 1998

When I was young and very new in this profession, a wise woman once told me that ministers only ever have one sermon, and that they spend their careers trying to find new ways to introduce the same old subject and new titles to disguise the same old concerns. At first I resented the notion that I had only one message to give the world. I was convinced that I was far too clever and versatile a fellow to be trapped into the same old message all the time. As I have grown older, however, and as I have looked back over more than 40 years in the trade, I realize that I really only ever had one sermon, that I have preached it over and over again, that if I really work at it, perhaps before I retire, I may yet get it right. What is more, I have come to accept that one message is enough -- if it is the right message.

Perhaps, if you have been part of this congregation for a while, you already know that my one sermon centers around the notion that we live our lives in an age of cultural transition, a kind of crack in history, a time when one era has ended and a new era is struggling to birth.

Sometimes, after propounding this thesis in sermons, or in more private discussions in which I attempt to sketch out the role of liberal religion in this kind of transitional society, and some of the dangers and temptations inherent in living in this world of "all-done-and-not-yet," I have been challenged to suggest what form I believe a faith adequate to our time might take. This morning, as we approach the end of one more church year, my 10th year as your minister, I would like to respond to that challenge, by preaching my only sermon once again.

I must confess some real discomfort with this attempt to suggest what the faith of the future might be like. To begin with, I have always been suspicious of efforts to define trends and directions from a position in the middle of things. What appears in the midst of the action to be a definite pattern may prove to be little more than a hiccup, a momentary aberration in an otherwise static pattern. More than this, I am always skeptical of efforts to define a new religion, to establish a new mythos, to create a new metaphor for explaining and appropriating existence. It has always seemed to me that religion is more organic than this, rooted in the interaction between people, between the human and the non-human world, between the cultural needs and the physical opportunities of a given time and place. Religion, like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Topsy, just grows into itself and is seldom the creation of conscious human effort.

Despite these misgivings, however, I have not been able to push aside the feeling that in various corners of our corporate life, developments seem to be occurring which might

well come together to create a new cultural synthesis for the Western world, perhaps for the entire planet. I have convinced myself that there is nothing wrong with examining these developments, playing with them imaginatively, in an effort to see what kind of faith might be bodied forth from their interaction. Consequently, I would like to share with you this morning some of the thoughts which issue from an amateur placing into unnatural juxtaposition ideas and insights which he only half understands and to which he undoubtedly does unintended violence.

In final defense of this venture, I would suggest that religion is not judged on the accuracy of its insights into the structure of reality; rather, religion develops when an insight -- however poorly understood -- gives birth to a metaphor of such commanding presence that individuals attain new insight into the nature of their own existence and the nature of the human venture; that they are able to organize their own lives and the world in which they live with new power; that they are able to give coherence and direction to the otherwise random events of their existence. Religion is not a tool for exploring the physical world; it is a resource for constructing a psychic world in which the human spirit may be nurtured and the physical world embraced.

The religion which gave structure to Western civilization was one which took the world of physical appearance quite seriously. The Christian and the Jewish metaphor posited a God who existed outside of and independent of everyday reality -- a God who created the world, who intended it to be good, who revealed himself in terms of the world, who loved the world, who, in the Christian tradition, at least, was willing to die for it, and who urged human beings to take the everyday world as the focus of reality. In Western religion, this solid world of physical interaction was the reality, the locus of revelation, the focus of divine concern and the proper concern of humanity.

When that Jewish-Christian world view began to break up at the beginning of the modern age, the personal God of Christianity was gradually moved out of the center of the world, from central actor to distant prime mover, to even more distant and abstract first cause, to hypothetical possibility to innocuous poetic fiction. However, the central conviction about the world remained. The priests of the new science were convinced that the route to knowledge was to be found in taking the physical world seriously. They, too, believed that the world of everyday interaction was the locus of revelation and the proper concern of human intellect. And so they measured and weighed; they classified and cataloged; they broke reality down into its constituent parts, proving over and over again that the world was not as simple as it seemed and that a number of human conceits were without basis in fact.

In studying the heavens, they discovered that nowhere could they find God, but they also discovered a universe incomparably larger and more complex than any had suspected -- except, perhaps, the ancient Sumerians. In studying the composition of matter, they discovered that nowhere could they find God, but they also discovered a universe of infinite regress, in which bits of matter could be resolved into smaller and smaller constituent elements. In studying human beings, they thought that at last they had found God -- in the fevered human imagination; but they also discovered that human beings

were almost as complex as all the rest of the world -- a mass of interacting drives, instincts, complexes, genetic codes and environmental influences.

Before long, science -- without knowing it -- had moved beyond the world of everyday reality, the world of simple appearance, the world accessible to the senses, and had entered into a world where nothing was as it seemed, a world which defied common sense. We were told that no matter what our eyes might tell us, no matter what interpretation was built into our common language, the sun does not circle the Earth; it does not rise, neither does it set. Rather, this solid Earth moves around the sun while spinning on its axis, creating the reality of seasons and the illusion of a rising and setting sun. And we were then told that this is not a solid Earth, that the world is not composed of solid objects which persist through time, but of congeries of energy patterns called atoms and electrons which are constantly changing and interacting.

We were told that we, as individuals, do not function as it appears to us, that we only think we choose, we only think we decide, we only think we have options, we only think we think. In truth, we are defined by our genes, by our traumas, and free will is but an illusion designed to keep us from going mad. In short, science taught us to distrust our senses, to look behind the appearance of things, to measure reality more finely and carefully than our natural equipment would allow. And in the process, science carried the Western conviction of the centrality of the physical world to its logical conclusion, landing us in a world of speculation and uncertainty in which the very nature of physical reality is in dispute. It is in response to this situation that the new age of faith will emerge.

Central to that new age of faith will be a new understanding of human beings as not separate and distinct from the natural world, but as an integral part of the universe, a specific function of the universe. In the study of high-energy, subatomic physics, we have entered upon a world of infinite regress. This is a world in which matter is continually broken down into its constituent elements, a world in which language becomes too cumbersome a tool to convey reality, a world in which the observer and the observed merge in their interaction to alter perceived reality. Thus, we are told that no matter how small the particle we discover, it seems that it is always composed of constituent elements, and that using the right experimental methods, we can split off those constituent elements, allowing us to release various kinds of energy, even though some particles seem to have no mass and no charge. And if a massless particle boggles the mind, that's all right, because the physicists suggest that the term "particle" is only a metaphor anyway, since they are dealing with energy fluctuations, not concrete pieces of something. And after all, matter is nothing more than energy fluctuations of longer or shorter duration anyway.

And if this seems confusing, just consider the fact that at some levels of reality, the process of observing the activities of these ghostly particles changes the reality observed, so that the observer and the observed become one interacting system. At the most minute levels of reality we have been able to penetrate, the hard concretions of this middle level we inhabit disappear and we find a world of constant interaction, of something coming

into being and passing out of being like a thought; a world in which the very term "being" ceases to have much meaning. At those levels, we and the tree and the rock all participate in the same processes, are all bodied forth by the same energies, and there is no distinction between us. As we study the world at these levels, the distinction between us and the world falls away, and we become energy studying energy, the universe inspecting itself. To what end, we do not know.

Similarly, when we examine the far reaches of the universe, we find our middle level of existence, our world of this or that, of either-or, of solid concretion suddenly dissolving. The study of the heavens has opened to us a vision of a universe larger than our imaginations can comprehend. Within that universe, there are countless clusters of galaxies, those galaxy clusters uniformly distributed through space. At the far reaches of the universe, the galaxies seem to be rushing apart at incredible speed, giving support to the notion that the whole universe was once a densely packed singularity which blew apart and is still moving out from the center of that first big bang, that moment of creation. Except -- except that galaxies near us do not seem to be moving away from us, and Andromeda galaxy, our nearest neighbor, seems to be moving toward us.

Similarly, all of the universe is thought to be moving toward entropy, toward a steady state of equilibrium in which all energy will be used up and all will be in balance, and nothing can happen. Except -- except there are places where new stars are being created, where white holes seem to be spewing new matter into the universe; and there are places where black holes seem to be withdrawing energy from the universe. There is evidence that the universe will expand forever; there is evidence that the universe will collapse back upon itself to a time of new creation. And in the midst of all this abrupt and violent change, the Earth hangs in relative security, balancing forces in such a way that life can emerge and be sustained. We know we are made of the same stuff as the stars; we know that the warmth of the human body is the fire of the stars tamed to the uses of life; we know that in studying the heavens, we are studying ourselves. We are the stars examining the stars; the universe inspecting itself. To what end, we do not know.

Finally, when we examine the human mind, we find an equally complex mystery. We are endowed with a brain which has resources we have never tapped. It is estimated that throughout our lifetimes, 90 percent of our mental capacity goes unused, and we have no way, within our theory of evolution, to account for the emergence of so much unneeded, unused, redundant resource. We are not at all certain how the brain is related to the mind. What is more, we are increasingly confronted with evidence that in subtle ways, the human mind may alter reality. The questions we ask of the universe, the assumptions we make concerning the universe seem to shape the reality with which we work. If we ask how to split the atom and release its energy, we discover that the atom is fissionable, even though generations before us knew the atom to be the smallest fragment of matter and therefore, by definition, indivisible. By asking the question, we change the reality. How much that change is only a change in our understanding, and how much it is a change in the universe, we cannot say, since our minds are a function of the universe. When we study ourselves, we study the universe; we are the universe seeking to understand itself. To what end, we do not know.

Combine all of this and what begins to emerge is a new metaphor, a new mythos, an embryonic faith. That mythos begins with a radical unitarianism, a conviction that at its heart, all of existence is one continuous fabric, and all forms existence takes are interrelated and interdependent. We and the stars, we and our fellow creatures, we and the smallest particle we can imagine are all bodied forth out of the same mystery, are held together for longer or shorter periods of time by the same mysterious patterning and are destined inevitably to the same end. Therefore, all that happens in this vast sidereal universe is of potential consequence to us. We are not separate from the world; we are a function of the universe. Perhaps we are the organ of self-knowledge by which reality -- whatever it is -- begins to comprehend itself and its own nature. That may suggest the ultimate significance of our irrepressible curiosity and point toward the meaning of our existence.

Out of that radical unitarianism grows a conviction that at this middle level where we have our existence, we have been provided a very special gift. This beautiful planet, hung in the vastness of a violently changing universe, is the only home we have, the only home we shall ever have. It is our responsibility to care for it, to preserve it from the danger with which human folly threatens it. Here, the universe is experimenting with self-consciousness. Perhaps there are other such experiments elsewhere, but we do not know of them. Here the experiment is being carried on and our survival is related to the outcome. And in a universe in which all is interrelated, we can no longer sustain the illusion that what happens to this planet and its fragile cargo of life is a matter of indifference in the universal scope of things. The new mythos carries a hint that though we cannot define precisely how, our existence does matter; that in a universe whose center is everywhere, this planet is not an insignificant dot on the map of galaxies.

The new mythos is also defined by a radical universalism, by a conviction that there is no outside, no place of separation, no other reality; there is only the universe of the infinitely large, the infinitely small, and the infinitely middle. Consequently, whatever the holy may be, it cannot be seen as outside of or separate from the universe. What has been called God is an integral part of all that is; what has been called God is at risk in the game of existence; what has been called God is the mystery we confront when we stare into the world of the infinitely small, the mystery we confront when we stare into the world of the infinitely large, the mystery we confront when we stare into ourselves. That which has been called God is the something which comes into being and goes out of being when we examine subatomic particles, and when we study the heavens; it is the origin and the destination of all, the place where opposites unite, the thought which flows through our minds and inspires the universe.

And all of this is captured in that beautiful icon, the vision of the Earth as seen from space. There, in the beautiful ball, shrouded by wisps of clouds, we see messages too profound to capture with words. Standing before that image, we glimpse truths we always knew but did not know we knew; a sense of our relatedness to all that is; a sense of our unity with our fellow creatures everywhere; a sense of our responsibility for a venture which is larger than we know, begun in a distant time before our imagining and moving to a destiny we cannot conceive; a sense of purposive motion through time and space.

Standing before that image, we see our home for the first time, and begin to understand ourselves as relational beings, involved in an adventure beyond our ability to conceptualize, an adventure which is focused upon this tiny ball in the vastness of space.

What sort of religious structure might emerge from this mythos, this metaphor, this incipient faith, I cannot say. I suspect it will be a religion which urges the widest possible loyalties, which imposes the deepest sense of responsibility, which inculcates a sense of wonder and awe and mystery in the face of the common and ordinary. I suspect it will be a religion which helps us to see the world as everywhere purposive and alive with rich potential and unexpected novelty. I suspect it will be a religion which helps us reverence ourselves and our fellow creatures; which helps erase the artificial dividing lines we have erected between ourselves and the rest of the universe.

I doubt I will see the full flowering of this faith for a new age in my lifetime. But I am willing to accept this world of all-done-and-not-yet, trusting that the hints and suggestions of what is to come will prove sufficient to enable us to resist the idolatries offered by the times in which we find ourselves, and to permit us to wait in trust for that day when a new faith shall grow out of the human soul to inspire a new age.