

2008 March 2nd - Nefertiti

Opening Words

We are here

as children of earth, part of a vast circle of life

which robes our blue-green world in beauty.

Now is our time to celebrate life in peace,

to move past the superficial toward the deep,

letting wisdom's bright sun illumine our way.

So we prepare for worship with these words:

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence

I am grateful to be alive, here and now.

But I know very well that “here and now” always slides into “then” eventually. For the people who built the pyramids lived then, not now, and they are gone. The ancient sphinx is cracked and crumbling. The hanging gardens of Babylon? Dust. The Parthenon? A ruin, dissolving in car exhaust. The crowns of queens and kings, and the amulets of peasants? Both trod underfoot.

But now you and I are alive, children of all history, under this wooden pyramid crowned with glass. We breathe, live, and are present.

Here we know we are part of the world, made of the same stuff as the bare tree branches which now prepare to burst into flame of bud and bloom. Here we know we are in a world where all those who breathe in far away places, in Kenya and Darfur, in Shanghai and Moscow, in Chiapas and Melbourne, live lives as important to each of them as ours are to each of us. Some are powerful, some defeated, some are suffering, all of them are our brothers and sisters, children of shared and sacred procession of evolution.

The empires and villages of old are gone. The ancient centuries have rolled up like a scroll that no longer opens with ease. But modern empires and villages spread out around us, and new monuments, built of electricity and plastic instead of stone, thrive among us. All of these one day will join the crowns of queens and kings and the amulets of peasants in the empire of dust.

But now, look! We are alive! It's our turn now. Our day. Let us be aware, during this brief but spacious silence, of where we are in time and place.

silence

fear of crashing in an airplane haunting us. Meanwhile, the true wonders revealed by the scientific method---

species that change into new species over time, continents that drift around the planet, a quantum mechanical world where nothing is for sure...are worse than counterintuitive. To a depressingly large number of us, they are downright threatening. In other words, thanks to evolution, half of all Americans don't believe in evolution. That's the universe for you: impersonal, uncaring and...ironic.

Sermon

Don't worry. This will not be an ancient history lesson, per se. But I am choosing to walk a less familiar path today, a road not usually taken, to approach my concerns this morning. You may not figure out at first how I am going where I am going, but I promise to get us all there.

When I was visiting Berlin last April, one of the highlights was clearly my visit to the *Altes Museum*, in the eastern part of the city.

There were many fine works of art there to be sure. You expect such excellence in a major world capital like Berlin. A lovely Vermeer, an excellent Matisse. But I strode quickly past many such masterpieces, with determination in my eye. You see, there was one work of art I wanted to see above all else. It was the famous bust of Queen Nefertiti, the elegant, beautiful face magnificently crowned, the splendid eyes, the long neck. Her image was simply beautiful, more beautiful than I could have imagined. I spent over an hour admiring her, and the artist's superb craft. Afterward I understood why only the pyramids themselves are more emblematic of that ancient African civilization, that remarkably steady culture, which endured more than 15 times longer than our own United States has so far been around.

The bust was found in 1924 in the ruins of an artist's studio in Amarna, Egypt. We even know the artist's name, Tjehuti-mes, or in its more familiar Greek form, Thutmose. The so-called Amarna era in Egyptian history encouraged artists to portray their subjects with greater freedom and honesty. Nefertiti's husband, for example, Akhenaten, was portrayed so accurately that modern physicians have been able to diagnose him as a man dealing with Marfan's Syndrome, a congenital condition which effects joints and bone structure.

I used to love to read about ancient Egypt, especially about Nefertiti and Akhenaten, when I was a child; those big picture books from the Benjamin Franklin branch library in Detroit always grabbed my attention. They were so colorful and exotic, those two. I wasn't the only kid reading about Nefertiti and Akhenaten, however. In many Unitarian and Universalist Sunday schools back in the 50s and 60s, these two were touted as our ultimate ancestors, the first Unitarians, the first champions of an honest theology replacing the strange collection of gods and goddesses, tricksters and sacred beasts that signified religion in those days.

Their sole deity was called The Aten, and it was quite simply the visible disc of the sun in the sky. It was not a statue created by an artist, nor was it housed inside a dark temple, but it appeared to brightly stride the heavens from dawn till dusk with predictable elegance. It was real. You could see it, feel its warmth, and actually watch the very flowers move through-out the day following its light with their face. This was a reality you could see with your eyes, and feel on your skin. It wasn't something that could be manipulated by the priests, or used for clerical gain and power. It was not something that needed miracle stories to buoy up the belief. The wonder of the grain, seemingly pulled up from the earth by the very hands of the sun's rays, was wonder enough.

And, the Aten also transcended the concepts of male and female too, and was not prone to temper tantrums and other emotional outbursts as were the other deities.

Nefertiti and Akhenaten replaced the priests of the old gods and goddesses....with themselves. *They* conducted worship in their new open-air temple. They even wrote the ceremonial words for their celebrations. The Hymn to the Sun, which was found inside the tomb of Aye, an official from that era (and eventually "an interim king"), is attributed to them. This famous hymn to the sun was written over 3200 hundred years ago, and was so beautiful, so memorable, that 600 years after it was composed, a Hebrew songwriter, scholars say, plagiarized its gorgeous text as a song to his or her own god. A version of which psalm, psalm 104 in the Bible, was sung as the opening and interlude music this morning. It's in our hymnbook in a modern translation. But what's important about that is that it's still around, after well over three millennia. Whatever else you can say about these ancient religious revolutionaries, their fragile verbal art has lasted almost as long as those other Egyptian wonders, the pyramids, built of enduring stone.

The new and only god, The Aten, obviously did not make the traditional priests happy, to be sure. They were critical and obstructionist, mocking the new religion. Fearful, I suppose, about losing their authority and influence. And many of the peasants were unhappy too...they sometimes compared their new government to a pack of monkeys merely imitating human behavior. So Nefertiti and Akhenaten simply got up and left. They spent the vast budget of the state to build a new capital far to the south, with gorgeous open-air temples of superior design. It was to be a utopia of sorts, with wide streets and pools, parks and schools and plenty of work for all...

It was also, by all descriptions, a totalitarian state. That is, if you happened to want to worship in the old way, you had to do it underground, secretly, furtively. There was no multicultural approach to urban life in the new city. And there was no multicultural approach to family life either. Nefertiti and Akhenaten spoke of themselves as the daughter and son of the Aten, the daughter and son of god. They allowed themselves to be worshipped by the people when they appeared at high noon in the Appearance Window in their palace. No other family could be worshipped or touted. They claimed to be right about all their decisions, their critics utterly mistaken. They alone embodied the truth, or Maat, as they said in their language. Everyone else was living a lie.

As I see it, digging up history, archeology, is not only physically demanding, it's disappointing. It always only leads to a partial discovery. Our archeologists only find fragments, and from these fragile small things, they try to recreate pictures of whole seamless civilizations. But new discoveries cause them to revise their pictures and change their minds. For example, when I was a child, people used to say that the reign of Akhenaten and Nefertiti was a time of peace, an anti-war era. But new evidence in the dust tells us that this was simply not true. The two of them spent so much of the national income building their utopia they seemed to have neglected the military. But they were hardly Gandhi's predecessors...they were only humorless true believers who spent all of their money on their religious needs. We have even found wall paintings of Nefertiti herself dressed in the blue helmet of a military general, and wielding the kind of mace they used to use to bash in each others' heads, so they were hardly anti-war.

Now again, this is not an ancient history lesson. This is a cautionary homily asking each of us in this room who are Unitarian Universalists to reflect on how we do theology.

I suppose I am not the only one in the room who feels downright annoyed when some modern preacher tells me that he is right, I am wrong, and that I am on the path diverging straight to hell, eternal torture and abandonment.

Downright annoyed. Irritated. And, to be fair, just a little pitying and superior. After all, *I'm* the one who is totally right, not that fool preacher. I know that the Bible is hardly a perfect authority, that evolution is real, and that an honest theology is not based on ancient words in dead languages written in an ancient book, but only on the sensible methods of science, which use sight, touch, measurement, mathematics, experiment, humility, and patience to unravel the mysteries of the universe, piece by piece, molecule by molecule.

Yes, I am right, they are wrong. Evolution is the only sensible "cause" that arrives at the "effect" we call life. It's the only explanation that makes any sense to me.

But do you remember what Joyce Tyldesley wrote in the First Reading? *"The religion of the ancient Egyptians was the equivalent of our modern science. It did not intend to teach us how to behave, but to provide explanations for the seemingly inexplicable."*

Now you may tell me that there is a great difference between a microscope or a telescope and the animal-headed statues of the Egyptian god Thoth, or the feathered crown on the Egyptian goddess Isis. And you would be right, of course. But what Tyldesley is saying is not that this ancient religion *was* science, but that this ancient religion was trying to answer, albeit in a very different way, some of the questions *posed* by ancient science...questions like "Why does the sun look like it does?" "Why is the moon shaped differently every night?" "Why do some of the stars seem to fall from the sky?" "Why does the Nile River flood like it does every year?" etc.

As she said, the ethical life of persons was not a part of Egyptian religion. The scribes, that is, the cultural leaders, established the do's and don'ts of Egyptian morals, and outlined their spiritual life, as opposed to their religious life.

But then our second reading proclaims the same thing about modern science. Thomas Hayden says, pretty playfully, that it too doesn't concern itself with things like morality and spirituality.

Morality, spirituality, the meaning of life, writes Hayden, ...science doesn't handle those issues well at all. But that's cool. We have art and religion for that stuff. Science also assumes predictable cause and effect in a world that is a chaotic, bubbling stew of randomness. But that's OK too. Our approximations are usually good enough.

But, he suggests, this is why there is so much resistance to science in America these days. Why the whole idea of evolution makes some religious types nervous. So nervous that more than half of the American population think Darwin's grand idea is downright frightening.

Don't get me wrong. Some of the anti-evolution blowhards trucking around these days are simply deranged, by my lights at least...either sick fanatics at the same level as David Khoresh, or dangerous with arrogance, like Pastor Hagee down in Texas with his bizarre grand schemes.

But I think Mr. Hayden explains the reason why evolution disturbs many Americans quite well. After all, he says that evolution's answer to the question "Am I important? Does the universe or even God care about me?" is simply "No." We are "just a bunch of hairless apes on a wet rock, orbiting a minor star in a marginal galaxy," that's all.

He's saying that science's New Story isn't about love any more than the Egyptian religion was about morality. I like the New Story personally, the Big Bang and all that. I like knowing that there is nothing ultimately important about me as a human being on this wet rock. I like being a small part of the larger great Story of the Universe. My real importance is in my unimportance, so to speak.

But many religious people are not asking the question, "How did things come to be?" but rather, "Who loves me? Who will comfort me when I need comfort? Who will hold me when I need to be held?"

Some natural stoics among us might reply to such questions, "Oh, grow up. The world does not revolve around you. So the world is tough! You simply feel too much, and are too soft, so the solution to your problem is to think more and feel less."

But personally, I don't think there is anything wrong, weak or pathologically soft in wanting be held, in wanting intimacy and love, in wanting warmth and acceptance and grace and joy. In wanting justice on this earth, and a bit of compassion. I don't think that such feelings and needs are selfish, either, but very, very human. I think it's

understandable that some folks might find the coldness and silence of the Universe a little empty.

And so these folks come up with answers that I don't personally share. Jesus loves them, God the Father loves them, the Universe of its own accord bends in sympathy toward them and toward justice. Personally, I answer the questions about love and tenderness differently. But just because I don't like the answers that some other people give to such questions does not invalidate those questions for me. The questions are still deeply and beautifully religious.

Akhenaten created a god many modern progressive people would understand. A god of the senses...a god you can see and test. A god you don't have to imagine, but one you can observe. I only believe in what I can see, and hear and taste and touch, many moderns say. Angels, ghosts, gods and devils? All imaginary. Not subject to the majesty of scientific scrutiny. Well, sure. Of course.

But lately, I've come to think there is a terrible temptation that flirts with folks who are so certain about their beliefs, and that's the temptation to totalitarianism. The temptation to say, "Because I am utterly right, you are wrong. In fact, you shouldn't be you. You should be me."

It's easy to find examples of this on the religious right end of things. The aforementioned Texas Pastor Hagee for one, or James Dobson perpetually pouting on the radio. But since this is a liberal congregation, a progressive church, I want to take a look at us, not the religious right.

Nefertiti and Akhenaten thought they alone knew the truth. They alone could see and feel reality. They accused the priests of foisting imaginary gods on the people. And they outlawed the old religion, and said that to worship Thoth or Isis or Ptah was simply wrong. Criminal. Perverted. Stupid.

But some folks back then, as now, were not asking "cause and effect" questions about God. They were not asking questions about omnipotence and authority. Instead, they were asking questions about the source of honest love, honest healing for their hurt, honest compassion for their condition, honest justice in an unjust world.

They were asking different questions, in other words. Questions for which Nefertiti and Akhenaten didn't have any answers, since their god Aten was not a loving or kind god, just a bright one. They were the children of their bright god. But they died and their bright religion did not survive them.

I just read a book this week called *Irreligion* by the excellent thinker and writer, John Allen Paulos. The subtitle of the book "A Mathematician explains why the arguments for God just don't add up" pretty much explains the thesis of his essay. He does a good job too, knocking down all the traditional and non-traditional arguments for God.

But I ended up thinking “So what?” I wonder if anyone really thinks that divinity has to do with arguments of the logical kind, or mathematical proof? I know many progressives who are not impressed by such things. I think of a former parishioner in Hayward, named Doug, as progressive as anyone in this congregation. He said to me once, “You know, I’ve read all the arguments made by philosophers about why the proofs of God offered by people like Thomas Aquinas are just foolishness. I’ve read Bertrand Russell’s critiques etc. I agree with them all. But they are answering a question I simply do not ask. At the supper table every night my wife and kids and I begin our supper with “‘Dear God, this is what our lives looked like today.’ Then we talk about our days, our ups and downs. God for me is that which holds them all together, holds them all in an embrace of understanding and love. God is the empty bowl into which I pour my life day after day, week after week.”

And this is why, I think, in order to be honest about theology, whether it be the theology of an honest atheist, an honest agnostic, an honest theist, an honest skeptic, an honest mystic, you have to acknowledge that totalitarian arrogance is too much of a risk and danger to imagine that one answer responds to all questions. It does not. No answer does. No answer even can.

Can I be critical of theologies I do not share? Sure. Watch me. I think Pastor Hagee is wrong about almost everything. But before I begin my critique, I had better be sure that my critique isn’t responding to a question I have never asked. Because, such a response is neither a critique nor a communication of any honest sort. Just arrogance and self-congratulation.

Nefertiti and Akhetaten were remarkable, certainly, in many ways. But they were not the first Unitarians by any means, as we sometimes used to teach in our Sunday Schools. They were brilliant, but they were totalitarian. I would hope religious liberals are not that. And their god, the sun? As the children’s story said this morning... it’s lovely... it shines on puppies and frogs. But it is not in any way a god, or ultimacy. And that’s honest enough theology for me.

Offering

We are a congregation of different people.

Scientists, artists, teachers, factory workers. secretaries, people retired from every kind of work imaginable. We are the unemployed, the writers, the computer experts and the singers.

We believe, we doubt, we question and sometimes like or don’t like the answers.

But we do it together. We support this our common home together. We breath together.

We congratulate each other together. And

thus we cultivate the love and honesty and joy

that brings meaning to each of our lives.

The morning offering will now be given and received.

Prayer

Where are You, Truth?

In the light of the sun? Sometimes, I guess.

It sure is beautiful in any case.

In the light of the ballot box come Tuesday morning? Absolutely, when the ballot box spills over with the brilliance of justice.

In the light of red flowers, green candles,
yellow papyrus, blue oceans, black crows?

Of course.

In my struggles and doubts, my tears and
worries. Naturally.

In the gnarled hands of the 90-year-old
held in the grip of a baby's perfect fingers? Sure.

In songs and stories, and in psalms like this one?

When they accomplish what they intend to do, I'd say.

O Truth, you are found everywhere,
both hidden and in plain sight.

But come now and hold us,

for sometimes, oh yes, sometimes, we just need to be held. Thanks. Amen.