

Is the World Really Divided Between Unbelievers and Believers?

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Opening Words

We are here

after a surprisingly chilly week in early autumn,
to worship, to bring mind and heart to bear
in the service of deeper questions, deeper answers,
all that we might learn to love each other better.

So, Mindful that we share a common world,

**but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by
kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we
become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply
embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.**

Sequence

Here we are, gathered together at a holy well.

Here, now, we can bring up living water for our refreshment. Lower the bucket
without any preconceived notions about the taste or temperature of the water.

Lower the bucket. Just know it's going to bring up pure water; after all, it comes from
very deeps.

Lower the bucket, even though you know what it brings up will quench your thirst just
for a while.

Lower the bucket now. Let the bucket sink on past the surface into the deeps.

Let it sink past the great philosophers and their arguments, sink deeper than the prophets,
who challenged the misuse of authority, sink deeper than the poets, who surprised and
healed us, sink deeper even than the days of our earliest ancestors who looked up at the
sky, but without any names they could hang upon the stars.

Let it go deeper, past the eras of developing life, past the boiling seas and molten moon,
into the vast Abyss itself, which, billions of years ago, flooded with that improbable light
which flashed out only to concentrate into stars, galaxies, emptiness and us.

Bring the bucket up now. Take the cup that is your heart and dip it into the living water,
and bring the clear refreshment with you to set upon the common table.

Silently, silently, with your whole life behind you, and your whole life ahead of you,
lift your cup to your silent lips, and drink, and be satisfied....

silence

So many gather around the table of life.

Notice you are not alone. The living and the dead share this silence, connected by our memory and our love. May we now give voice to the love and support that brought us to this moment by naming those whom, sharing the table with us, we especially notice right now. These we name in silence or aloud as we choose.

naming

Out of the deep well of life and time we come,
generation after generation, to sit at the
common table while we learn to share
the other gifts of the well: silence, word,
autumn, trust, beauty, longing and music:

The First Reading comes from the book *Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life* by Rabbi Irwin Kula 3 years ago.

The word *God* so often trips us up. For many of us the notion of a personal God seems anachronistic, something that comforted our parents or grandparents but is irrelevant to us. We've rejected those patriarchal and punitive images we were taught in religious school, or church, or temple. Others hold on for dear life to a traditional image of an Almighty who keeps score. Still others have internalized the idea: God is within, not outside. God is us. Or perhaps there is no God at all. Everyone has a truth about God or no God, and typically, we're uncomfortable with each other.

But I say: to deny or to affirm...both can be holy. There is a wonderful passage in the Talmud describing one of the steps in the process of being ordained a rabbi. Every rabbinical student must make an argument for the purity of a specific food, offering 49 reasons justifying the position taken, and 49 reasons justifying the position *not* taken. The point is, one cannot understand the reasons for a decision unless one understands the other side. Why 49? The implication is that every decision unfolds worlds of possibilities. Every decision creates as many uncertainties as certainties.

But yet, we must act in the world. And how much easier will it be to act if we understand we don't have to strive for 100% certainty? Isn't it more authentic to be 51% sure instead? This way, even as we become clearer, we are still engaged in the questions. The other 49 percent remains alive in us.

The Second Reading comes from a wise, intelligent and insightful text by the Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg, called *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*, written seven years ago.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha arose from his place under the tree, and set out walking along the road. The first person he encountered was struck by the power of his presence, and asked, "Who are you?"

The Buddha replied, "I am awakened." The man just said, "Well, maybe," and walked away. Had he shown curiosity, taken the time to follow up on his doubt by asking questions, he might have discovered some-thing profoundly transforming. This kind of walk-away doubt manifests as cynicism, which is actually a self-protective mechanism. A cynical stance allows us to feel smart and unthreatened without really being involved. We can look sophisticated, remain safe, aloof, at a distance. But habitual suspicion belittles all dreams of change until they simply fade and we no longer believe change to be possible. We feel impervious and confident, knowing we are not gullible, not going to be swayed.

Of course, sometimes doubt seems to be sincere questioning, but underneath, endless abstraction leaves the questioner uninvolved. Thus, the tendency to fixate on big, unanswerable questions like "Is there a God?" or "Was there a beginning to the universe?" was characterized by the Buddha as "a desert, a jungle, a puppet show, an entanglement of speculation." Instead, he urged everyone to find answers for themselves *in a way* that would help them resolve suffering in their life.

Sermon

I didn't make a precise list or anything, but I reckon almost 25 of you kindly took the time to tell me about Garrison Keillor's little radio skit which you heard on *Prairie Home Companion* two weeks back. If the rest of you didn't hear it, you can still find the script on line when you put in Keillor's name and the name of our religious movement: the Unitarian Universalists. You see, the skit talks about... us. It tells the story of a football game between the deeply democratic Unitarian Universalists of United University and some angry Baptists from Gethsemane Seminary and Seminar Center. The Baptists *really* want to win to prove their view of things. The Unitarian Universalists don't care if they lose, and even bet their entire endowment that they *will* lose. Of course, as they're about to do just that, clouds gather, a wind blows strong and hard, and the Baptists were all knocked to the ground, allowing the Unitarian Universalists to score the winning touchdown.

Now it seems to me that Mr. Keillor is *always* mentioning Unitarian Universalists on his show. And he also mentions the Lutherans, the Catholics, the Jews, and the Episcopalians. As far as I can tell, each of these religious groups gets a pretty even satirical treatment, including his own chosen denomination, the Episcopal Church.

Funny thing is, whereas many Unitarian Universalists outside Minnesota *love* his gentle jabs at our foibles (and even though some people have actually found us *because* they first heard about us *on* his show), I know a number of our sisters and brothers in Minnesota who see things differently. They think Mr. Keillor really doesn't like us much. They think his caricatures are distorted depictions, and that his ridicule is real.

Frankly, I have no way of knowing what he thinks of us. But it's clear to me that Unitarian Universalists can hold radically different opinions from each other about something as unimportant as a radio personality's opinion of us. And, here I must add,

they disagree about his motives *without* offering a shred of concrete evidence to back up either of these opinions. They just interpret their own feelings about it, and proclaim it a fact.

All of this reminds me of an event I've mentioned before from this pulpit, when a student at my seminary out in California wanted to celebrate the memory of Miguel Serveto (or Michael Servetus), the great Spanish heretic of the 16th century who set the radical Reformation in motion with his questions and jibes. The suggestion of the organizer, namely, that we celebrate him by hosting a Michael Servetus Memorial Barbeque, raised the temperatures of about half the student population past the boiling-point. "That cruel theologian John Calvin burnt this man at the stake, for godsake! The stake! Do you know how awful death by fire is? How can you even think of using his name and the word 'barbeque' in the same sentence! Are you a monster?" The organizer's friends thought it was just "playful," and scolded their fellow students for having "no sense of humor or irony."

Well, the event did take place... but it tore an emotional rift in the student body that lasted for years.

Rabbi Kula, in the first readings, suggests that the same disagreements are true about deep, complex words like God. "Everyone has a truth about God... or no God," he says, "and typically, we're uncomfortable with each other."

It's that discomfort I want to look at right now.

First, I want to lift up the title of this sermon: "Is the world really divided between believers and un-believers?" I'll give my answer to that question right now.

No.

Second, I want you to know I worded my title that way to make a point. Both the words "believer" and "unbeliever" are not our usual Unitarian Universalist words. Oh, they ARE commonly used in some of workplaces, in some of our family gatherings, and certainly in the press. Just not around the church. I think of when the *Columbus Dispatch* reported on how our congregation dealt with the horrible shooting in our Knoxville, Tennessee church. The article's byline said of our church, "All believers are welcome here." A number of folks told me they were very upset about that word, "believer," being used in a phrase that described our "open-mindedness," a word that she also used, by the way. But because "believer" is simply not one of our commonly used words, I can understand why it rubbed some of us the wrong way. Because I DO know that both words ARE used by many rather conservative Christian denominations. I'm thinking of phrases like "believers' baptism" or "believers' voice of victory." And "unbelievers" are often castigated from behind the Plexiglas pulpits of many large mega-churches, both on television and around here. Thus, these words ARE indeed favored by one of the more articulate and media savvy cultures in the US today, namely, conservative Evangelical religion. Thus, the either/or contrast of *belief/unbelief* seems to be associated with the

theological approach of a specifically Protestant movement which self-describes as Evangelical. Jews, Catholics, and Buddhists hardly ever use such language, avoiding the word “non-believer,” and opting instead for words like “unobservant,” “non-practicing,” “lapsed” or even, at the harsher end, “apostate.” But most certainly, “believer” is just not a word used around here. So at the very least, the *Dispatch* article was not an accurate presentation of our way of speaking, although, as I said, the rest of the article represented us fairly.

So, in other words, any worldview that divides the world into *believers* and *unbelievers* doesn't really have much to do with Unitarian Universalism.

The trouble is, the conservative Evangelicals have indeed decided, as Garrison Keillor suggests in his skit, on *winning* at this game. Not football, but the *language* game. And we, apparently, have decided to *lose* it, and bet our whole spiritual endowment on it. What I mean is this: I often talk with Unitarian Universalists who have decided that words like “faith” and “God” and “creation” are words we have to either *believe* or *un-believe*; to use, or not use, in some absolute division of the world into *those guys* and *us skeptics*. In other words, I often find that we just *give away wholesale* the authority to define religion, religious language, religious metaphors etc. for ourselves. And we give it away to whom? To the very theological rhetoric that many Unitarian Universalists find exasperating, namely, ultra-conservative Evangelical Christianity with its vocabulary of hell and heaven, the saved and the “left behind.” It's as if we need to be on the defensive against them, and jerk and flop around on their puppet strings, instead of rising up ourselves and articulating what's meaningful to ourselves, in our own language, and without apology for refusing to split the world into *this and that, those people and us skeptics*.

Now I really want you to hear me carefully when I use the word “Evangelical.” I am always using the word “right-wing” or “conservative” in front of it. The word Evangelical by itself, however, can fairly be used by a large number of churches, churches that run the gamut from traditional to radical, from creedless to creedal; from those churches with rock bands and pop music to churches like the Crystal Cathedral with a pipe organ and pews. The recent upwelling...and I do mean recent...in the last 75 years, I mean...of a loud and frequently televised *right-wing* Evangelical voice in our nation *is indeed* something new. As the terrifying “prosperity gospel” theology *is* new. As even television itself is new. But Evangelicalism itself, without modifiers, is old. And various in form. It's really not defined once and for all by your Cousin Betty or Uncle Joe slipping scripture-packed pamphlets into your coat pocket at the family reunion in order to save you. Listen, the Evangelical movement in the United States embraces Methodists and Baptists as well as idiosyncratic non-denominational mega-Churches like World Harvest down in Canal Winchester. And despite this new trend of some Evangelicals to link themselves with the right-wing politics of our day, Evangelicals in the last century were different. They were the ones, in fact, who spoke out loudest against slavery, loudest on behalf of women's rights and education. Remember, Oberlin College here in Ohio has an Evangelical origin, and it was among the first schools in the US to admit both women and persons of color into their educational system. And even in this century,

among some progressive evangelical congregations, you'll find these words of affirmation: *Finding a home in God's wilderness, □ we seek to savor God □ and magnify the longings of Jesus. □ We dare to be uncertain. □ Practicing compassion and awakening conscience, □ we bear hope for a suffering world. □ In this Spirit, we honor one another □ in beloved community.* (Seeker Statement, First Congregational, Berkeley CA)

Is that a statement of belief? Or a confession of unbelief? Or is it a poem that is not served at all by *either* of those two words? I answer that second question with a resounding *yes!* Poetry is not a creed!

I find myself amused and aggravated at the same time - a very odd feeling - when a Unitarian Universalist in some church where I am guest preaching comes up and rudely questions me because I favorably quoted the Gospel of Luke in the sermon. "You're not one of those Christians, are you?" I answer as patiently as I can, but, on my better days (and I do have them now and then), I do the right thing, and always try to move my questioner *away* from talk of Jesus and *toward* a conversation about his or her actual life. I almost always find out that Jesus is not really the issue, just a symbol used to stop any real conversation. The issue is really about this whole confusion of symbolic words with the individual stories of real human lives. It's about how we are *always* going to see things from different vantages (and probably will till the end of time), and that unity of thought and image will never arrive. But sometimes, we pretend that's not true, and that disdaining someone else's metaphors matters more than our actual lives.

Maybe all this is best represented by the famous line drawing on the cover, a so-called "optical illusion"...looking at it, some will see an elderly woman, others a young woman..., but the thing is, these inky lines will always remain a reality that invites different responses *which cannot be seen at the same time.*

Mr. Yellow's point of view, or Mr. Pink's point of view? the story asks this morning. Now please, in no way is this story putting Darwinian evolution on the same shelf as the maddening Six-Day creation story offered by the Creation Museum down in Cincinnati. Please don't imagine this story is saying that every philosophical theory is the same, and all you need do is throw a dart and pick one, and that we don't have to go deeper and sift out the meaningful from the merely comforting (even though we probably need *both* meaning *and* comfort in our lives). No, this story was written by its author to help children think about philosophy, and the questions that philosophers raise, about God, or about creation/ evolution. But please note that, in the end, both Pink and Yellow are so caught up in their abstract thinking and logical questions neither of them can make sense of their *actual* reality...that they are both just wooden puppets. Neither God, nor happenstance...something entirely different and unexpected...a mystery they really cannot fathom. And that ending tugs at me deeply... because for me, faith is not a list of "I believes and I don't believes"--- that's totally another religious way of interpreting the world. For me, faith is this: trusting myself to be open to what is different and unexpected, combined with a deep conviction that I can usually grow wiser from an encounter with the different and unexpected.

Sharon Salzberg agrees. She says she prefers to be more than merely cynical, always doubting every thing. “Habitual suspicion,” she affirms, “belittles all dreams of change until they simply fade, and we no longer believe change to be possible.” She says that being *only* doubtful without also finding a way to be faithful is merely a way of staying “safe, aloof” and “uninvolved.” But then she cautions something more: “Sometimes,” she says, “doubt *seems* to be sincere questioning, but underneath, endless abstraction leaves the questioner uninvolved. Thus, the tendency to fixate on big, unanswerable questions like ‘Is there a God?’ or ‘Was there a beginning to the universe?’ was characterized by the Buddha according to one of the Buddhist scriptures as ‘a desert, a jungle, a puppet show, an entanglement of speculation.’ “Instead,” writes Salzberg, “Buddha urged everyone to find answers for themselves *in a way* that would help them resolve suffering in their life.”

That’s a beautiful idea. Finding answers for ourselves *in a way* that will help us resolve suffering in our very real lives. She’s saying that the concepts of belief, trust and faith can be purposeful, and not merely be imposed on us by authoritarian figures. We can own our own faith, instead of rejecting someone else’s faith. We do not say at any Unitarian Universalist congregation that our faith is a fixed tradition to be handed down to our children, once and for all...no we want their voice to help create that tradition. And, like Buddha, we say that our beliefs, whatever they may be, need to be in the service of resolving the real injustices, pains, tragedies and suffering in the world, including in our own lives. And we’ve said this, mind you, for hundreds of years.

Trying to understand how your cousin or uncle with the tracts thinks and reasons might actually be worth a bit of your time now and again. Maybe they are not just tract stuffers. Maybe they are actually whole people. OK, maybe *you* don’t need to do that, or maybe you tried that but had not issue, but God knows I need to. When I take a little time to talk with such folks, instead of saying a simple “No thanks” to their pamphlets, I almost always find that their so-called “belief” is not 100% either. Not as low as 51% like Rabbi Kula suggests, but not an *either/or* hundred percent either. And I find out that they might be lonely, like I feel lonely sometimes; or they have conflicting needs, like I have; or they are deeply grieving, like I am, forever and ever amen. Now, don’t get me wrong. I still, of course, will need to draw a good boundary when someone who calls him or herself a “believer” tries to argue with me that I am a mere “unbeliever” and don’t know a damn thing until I submit to their preferred vocabulary. The kindest response I can make to such aggression is simply “Go away.”

But if I attend a neighbor’s funeral, and his family asks me to sing with them the old hymn “Nearer My God to Thee” (written by the English Unitarian Sarah Flower Adams, by the way), I am not outlining my belief system in some geography of God’s nearness. I am singing an ancient human song of grief and comfort that has little to do with either belief or unbelief. Sometimes a song is just a song.

So I say, let Garrison Kieller have his fun with us. Let him joke about a great wind coming out of Heaven to blow the Baptists down on that football field. It’s really is kind of a funny image. And frankly, I don’t know how he *really* sees us. All I know is that my

whole being responds to the way our Unitarian Universalist heritage invites us to live our lives...not by making little lists of beliefs and unbeliefs, not by ridiculing faith as mere credulity, or converting the sacred privilege of doubt into perpetual cynicism. But by committing ourselves to being open to all the possibilities that we don't now expect, and to remain open to learning from them, and being transformed for the better by them. At least, that's how I see things this morning.

Offering

Only the free gifts of the members and friends of this congregation keep it strong. There are no outside sources, no hidden resources, no denominational assets to draw on. To be an independent congregation, as all Unitarian Universalist congregations are, means to bear the full responsibility for everything ourselves, the cost and privilege of our freedom to decide for ourselves. The opportunity to give gifts this way, instead of electronically, is here.

Litany of the Table (*with Sarah Weigand, representing the Religious Education aspect of our community.*)

We're gonna build up a welcome table.
We're gonna sit at the welcome table.
We're gonna set out some great big dishes.
We're gonna sit at the welcome table.
We're gonna set up the toasting glasses.
We're gonna sit at the welcome table.
We're gonna bring out the food we'd planted.
We're gonna sit at the welcome table.
We're gonna set forth the harvest plenty.
We're gonna sit at the welcome table.
We're gonna do it with love and patience.
We're gonna sit at the welcome table.
We're gonna bless both feast and the feasters.
We're gonna sit at the welcome table.