

Secular Heresy
November 2, 2014
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Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,
across the threshold of the time change,
in the midst of autumn's high color,
to worship, to go deeper, stretch higher,
and encounter not so much the timely
as the timeless, that we might choose wisely.

And so, in this common house of life and love, may we lead lives of welcome, wisdom and kindness. Bestowing ourselves bountifully to the common good, let gratitude and question displace any easy assumption. Knowing that we are within this hurting, amazing world, not outside it, we approach our earth and social equity mindfully. Let each day express our amen.

Singing 363 Alleluia Sang Stars

Ingathering

A long, long time ago, people tried to figure out how the world came to be. All of this...the windows, the ceiling, me and you, the purple chairs, the skylight, the trees outside and the sky and sun and moon and stars.

Some of the ancient people called the Greeks came up with this story. They said a long, long time ago, there was nothing. And then two things which were not really things, namely, Time and Need, popped into being, and they held each other close, so close that they rolled up into a great egg. And when that egg eventually cracked, out came the universe that is all around us.

The Phoenician people said that at first there was nothing but Darkness. And then, within that Darkness, a feeling very much like desire, or "wanting something," arose like a flower rises from a small seed planted in the dark earth. And that desire

molded part of the darkness into an egg that also opened up into the universe we see all around us.

Some Hebrew storytellers said that before time began, everything was *tohu wa bohu* – that is their word – which is a kind of funny sounding way to say "a great swirl of dust." And then, after a series of time periods, the world as we know it now slowly, step by step, came to be, by the power of what the Hebrews called Elohim, which means "the divinities," but which is now translated as God.

The ancient Romans said that originally, there was Chaos, which in English we might translate "a great big mess." It was dark, and it made no sense. But suddenly, for reasons they could not explain, the Chaos broke open like an egg, and out came Mother Gaia. She was pregnant, and she gave birth to The Sky. And then she gave birth to Giants, and then one of the Giants made people like us out of dust.

Almost 90 years ago, a man named George, from the country of Belgium, wrote about his ideas for how everything came to be. He said that billions of years ago, there was nothing – no space, no time – only a small thing, smaller than a grain of sand in what we would call complete darkness. He called the tiny point the First Atom, but later he called it the Cosmic Egg. He said it suddenly exploded, and the universe we see around us slowly came to be, over billions of years. Just as the Romans couldn't really explain why Chaos broke open, George could not explain how the Atom, or Cosmic egg, exploded.

But however it happened, everyone seems to agree on one thing – long ago, everything we see here – each other, the roof, the floor, the purple chairs – all of it, somehow came out of something much smaller. Everyone agrees that darkness was first and light second. Everyone agrees that we are all here. And for the time being at least, that is enough.

Thanks for listening. Off to your classes now. Have a good time. Remember that we love you, and always will.

Welcoming

Affirming "What makes night within us may leave stars." *Victor Hugo*
1874

Singing 54 Now Light Is Less
Communing

Light is less now, yes, and what light there is
now slings itself lower in the south.

My shadows grow longer now,
and stretch away farther than I can reach.

Love, let me be content with all I can't reach.

Tutor me in how to embrace my limits as gifts.

Let the earlier entrance of night shroud my sunnier expectations of how things
ought to be, so that I can see things as they are, and begin there. Always there.

And I know that the clouds of Ohio's November will build a slate wall against the
stars as it always does, but I just as surely know that the stars will still be there,
waltzing around with the dark folds of night I cannot see, steady, reliable. May I
not fear that which eludes my sight, nor expect a day will come when the blanket
of clouds vanishes forever.

Love, the rich autumn is here, and I am here too, and so are all the people in this
building and in the classrooms...both the golden season, and the people in this
place, *equally* the offspring of that original flash of power billions of years ago, the
flash that first burst forth into a silence even deeper than this one.

The Great Silence

Yet the heart can reach what the outstretched hand cannot. And so, whether they
are near or far, we are free here to reach for the images of those we love, those who
love us, those whom we miss terribly, and those whose abiding memory is one
with the beat of our aching hearts. Each of these images goes with a name, which
we are free to say in our hearts, or aloud into our common house of life and love.

The Naming

Now take me to the world of music, whether the clouds or the sun are overhead, no
matter; take me to the world where my grief and my joy can join hands with others,
a world where the song can still be sung.

Anthems

Reading 1. *The first reading comes from the amazing writings of a Reformation era genius, now almost forgotten, Sebastian Castellio. His books on Reason and his critique of both Swiss Reformer John Calvin's theology and actions can dazzle even modern minds. From two sources: first, from his Four Dialogues 1578. He was commenting on the terrible cruelty of John Calvin in burning Miguel Serveto as a heretic, just because he questioned the then 1100 year old doctrine of the*

Trinity. To burn someone is not to protect a doctrine, it is to kill someone.

In his On the Art of Doubting and Believing, On Knowing and Not Knowing written in 1563, he wrote:

Because sacred writings are obscure in controversial matters, and often give probable support to both sides, it has proved impossible down the ages to put an end to dispute merely by quoting scriptures. Hence, it is necessary to see something in which truth is made so clear and universally acknowledged that it cannot be destroyed by any force, or even any probability that suggests the contrary. What is this agent of truth I am talking about? It is our sensory experience and reflective understanding. Since these are the source of our judgments in every day life, there should be little doubt as to their reliability. But there are those who want us to believe with our eyes closed, and put our trust in things which contradict our experience. They are impertinent to try and persuade us to put aside our own judgment of the matter, and accept their own, as if we could not see, and they can, and that we should follow them regardless of the pits of absurdity into which they stumble.

2. Joy Atkinson, my colleague from California, wrote these words, The Womb of the Stars, in 1992

The womb of stars embraces us; remnants of their fiery furnaces pulse through our veins. We are of the stars, the dust of explosions cast across space. We are of the earth: we breathe and live in the breath of ancient plants and beasts. Their cells nourish the soil; we build our communities on their harvest of gifts. Our fingers trace the curves carved in clay and stone by forebears unknown to us. We are a part of the great circle of humanity gathered around the fire, the hearth, the altar. We gather anew this day to celebrate our common heritage. May we recall in gratitude all that has given us birth.

Preaching

Most every morning save Sundays, I go to have my social cup of coffee at One Line Coffee on High St. in the Short North. They have most excellent fair-trade brews from specific estates around the world, many of which one of the owners, David, has visited to inspect himself. The baristas there are remarkable; Mick, who supervises the place, openly understands himself as the "spiritual leader" of the staff; and indeed, the feeling of warm friendship between the people behind the café counter, and with those who just come to get their morning cup, like me, is vivid, transformative, and welcoming.

On Friday this week, I was talking with Nate, one of the baristas. Somehow we ended up speaking about each of our trips to Mexico. He spoke fondly of his time learning Spanish in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and then we compared our visits to Mexico City's *Zona Rosa*, a lively neighborhood in that vast city.

Eventually I heard him say some things which helped me to reflect more deeply on what I am talking about this morning. And I will use that part of the conversation to conclude my words this morning.

Each of us in this room, I think it's safe to say, grew up in different cultures, different families, different geographies and distinct traditions. We may use the very same words, sometimes, but have an entirely different history with them.

Take the word "secular" for example. Today, there are folks who describe themselves as "secular humanists," both in the world around us, and in this congregation. I suppose most of us know something of what that phrase means.

But I grew up with several different meanings associated with the word *secular*. I heard the word "secular" in its original Latin form every day when I was a child, back in the 50s of the last century. This is because I attended a Roman Catholic grammar school. We attended mass every morning before school, and remember, the Latin language had not been deposed from the Mass. Several times each day, at the morning service we were required to attend, the priest would say or chant "per omnia saecula seculorum," which, translated literally, means, "in all of the centuries of the centuries," since the word *secula* only means "century"...a hundred year period. The phrase I just chanted is a colloquial Latin phrase which only means "a *really* long time."

And, that same basic Latin word *saecula* was used in its English form too...the priests in the church of my upbringing were called "secular priests," which only meant they were not part of some order, like the Franciscans, the Dominicans, or the Jesuits.

But over the years, the Latin word *secula*, which, as I said, only meant "century," came to refer to the difference between religiously ruled nations, and nations which chose to remove clergy from political influence, and replace them with people who were working on the issues of *this* world, not the next world. It didn't mean that a

person in government had to avoid religious activities personally, only that theology was not to be the main focus of governance. People's ordinary daily lives, in *this* life, in the present world, were to be the focus. Because of this, quite a few self-anointed fundamentalist or conservative religious authorities have declared that "the secular world" itself is a heresy.

Heresy. Another ancient word. This time from Greek not Latin. αἵρεσις -*Hairesis* - means a *choice*. That's all. A choice. Something chosen.

But obviously, if my choice for coffee in the morning at One Line is the one grown in Honduras as opposed to the one grown in Mexico, there is nobody in the wings with a pile of wood and a match ready to burn me alive at the stake for such a choice, such a heresy.

This is because, like everything else I can think of, meanings always change over the centuries, over the *saecula saeculorum*. And the word heresy came to mean something more serious than which coffee a person drinks – it meant stubborn non-conformity, or deliberately choosing the decidedly wrong party or theology. And people took these intellectual choices so seriously, they killed people just because they dared to decide for themselves what was right.

The 16th century Swiss fellow whose writings you heard this morning, Sebastian Castellio, actually saw people killed for heresy with his own eyes. He saw a whole group of people who believed differently than the majority burned at the stake. This event sickened him to the depth of his soul. He had hoped that the Protestant revolution in Europe would change all that. The famous reformer John Calvin of Geneva even became a friend. Castellio had noted that when Calvin was young, he had written that people need to be able to think and question freely.

However, as more and more power fell into his hands, Calvin's theology changed; when a physician who also happened to be a theologian, Miguel Serveto of Saragossa, Spain, boldly questioned the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Calvin threatened to kill him; you know, "Just wait to see what happens if I get my hands on you..." And true to his promise, when he actually got his hands on him, he actually did exactly what he intended. Had him at the stake outside the walls of Geneva. When Castellio heard what his friend had done, he was horrified in the extreme. He sat down and wrote a book (under a false name to be safe, of course) criticizing Calvin boldly and cleanly. As you may remember, he wrote the perfect sentence: "To burn someone is not to protect a doctrine, it is to kill someone."

Those words offer one of the truly most profound insights out of that whole era. These words actually planted the seed for the Enlightenment two hundred years later. Castellio was saying, "Let's look at this in a secular, not theological way. A theological idea is just that, an idea. A living human body is just that, a living human body. To kill a body is not to kill an idea, it's to murder someone."

In the next passage you heard, Castellio attempts to split off truth from mere authority. "Things are not true," he was saying, "just because *you* say so. I have a capacity for understanding myself. I can read and experience the world too. If I choose to regard my own experience as the source of my truth, you can have no claim over me." Or, if you prefer, use the more concise phrase of the Quaker genius Lucretia Mott several centuries later: "Truth for authority, not authority for truth."

Sadly, Calvin, a true scoundrel, paid no attention to his former friend's criticism, but did everything he could to keep Castellio and his family in poverty till the end of his life.

And sadly, Serveto was not the last heretic to burn in fire. When a non-secular priest, a Dominican monk named Giordano Bruno, publicly asserted things that today sound like astronomy and not theology, he was also burned alive at the stake – at the Plaza of the Flowers, in Rome. All he had said was that the universe is impossibly vast, and that many stars that make up that universe are also suns like our own, and that living on the planets that go around those suns may be forms of intelligent life not much different than ours.

Of course, as the late and great polymath Isaac Asimov made patently clear, heresy is not just a religious term. Even in the world of secular science, there are heretics. Stakes and fire don't greet them, assuredly, but they do spark hot outrage. Folks like Immanuel Velikovski, who wrote that the planet Venus was ejected from the planet Jupiter just a few thousand years ago, caused many astronomers to steam at the ears.

And even more infamously, Erich Von Danikin, a Swiss author who wrote *Chariots of the Gods*, (and other books), and who spent several years in prison for financial fraud while writing his tracts, tried to reinterpret every single archeological and historical understanding of the last 100 years by saying that the alien beings on other planets, which Bruno thought *might* be possible, were undeniably there, and involved in every single aspect of human history, human beings being mere fools who can't do anything themselves. Every single thing he

has asserted in his many books has been soundly and totally disproved by actual astronomers and archeologists, yet his books still sell by the millions.

But while the heretic Bruno turned out to be right about the universe's size, about life out there among the other planets, we're still waiting. And Von Danikin has crisply proven to be wrong *on every single count*, no exceptions. As was Velikovsky. Some heretics indeed prove to be wrong in what they assert.

But in modern times, because the killing of people whose choices are novel or unorthodox has faded here in the West, the story of Bruno provides the best example of how heresy more often turns out to be the truth.

For example, when Georges Lamâitre, a secular priest and professor of physics at Louvain, first suggested that the universe started from an extremely small "first atom" or "cosmic egg," he was criticized by almost everyone at first. Even the usually gentle Albert Einstein scolded him. "I can't argue with your calculations, but your physics is terrible," he said. And astronomer Fred Hoyle, who taught that the universe has always existed, and will always exist, in a steady state, without any big explosion at the beginning, made fun of Lamaitre's idea by satirically renaming it "The Big Bang" on a radio show one day. Strangely, it's the word still used today about what he said, not "Cosmic Egg," (perhaps because such a poetic term echoes all the mythical creation tales I mentioned earlier when our children were here). Lamaitre's first term, First Atom, is not used either, since that is confusing, everything being made of atoms and all. So Hoyle's "The Big Bang" insult stuck.

Yet today, despite Hoyle's criticism leveled against the very idea of an expanding universe being caused by an explosion, the Big Bang idea of this Belgian secular priest is almost universally accepted. Hoyle went to his deathbed repudiating it, but that appears to have been more stubbornness on his part than scientific evidence, which he was not able to muster. Hoyle also suggested that the only reason that the Big Bang theory later made sense to most cosmologists is that they were all in the thrall of the Book of Genesis. He was sure that no religious person could even be a scientist. He was suspicious that they were trying to sneak God in by the back door, and as an atheist, he made clear, he would have none of it. His theory about religion and science, in the case of Georges Lamâitre, at least, proved to be totally false. When the pope at the time tried to publicly suggest that Lamâitre's Cosmic Egg theory was somehow a "proof of God," Lamâitre not only repudiated the pope, but actually got him to stop asserting such a fool thing as a "proof of God," no easy political task, I assure you. Lamâitre, a priest, found the word God was useful for

his own spiritual life, but was not going to play the silly game of "proofs," as if religion was a science experiment. I agree, frankly.

But now, Georges Lamâitre's "heresy" is everywhere the accepted notion. It's so well known that Hoyle's mocking term for Lamaitre's idea has even made it onto television, as the title of a many-season comedy, *The Big Bang Theory*.

More to the point, writings like my colleague Joy Atkinson's, rooted in Lamâitre's theory, are used in churches and synagogues now, offering many people an invitation to what Einstein called "the feeling of the mysterious."

"The womb of stars embraces us;" she writes, "remnants of their fiery furnaces pulse through our veins. We are of the stars, the dust of explosions cast across space." Lovely words. For many these days, this origin story of the cosmos supplants all the ones that came before it; and yet, as you heard earlier, in many ways, it echoes them. After all, I agree completely with Carl Sagan, who in his criticism of Von Daniken, proclaimed forcefully that the ancients, our ancestors, were *not dummies*.

Heresy, choice, was once fraught with fear and death. Think and say the wrong thing, die a cruel death. But in our own day, in our own secular world, with the stakes left aside, *what we choose*, as an old Unitarian hymn puts it, *is what we are*. Our choices, our heresies if you will, are what define us, and help shape our identity. And once again, I'm not talking about the humdrum choices, like whether I drink Honduran or Mexican coffee at One Line. But I'm talking about the deeper choices based on the deeper questions... how do I want to live my life? Who decides how I live my life? Other people? How do I know how to live? Because various orthodoxies both secular and religious, tell me how to live? Because I uncritically accept assumptions made around me? Because I want to? Because I need to?

And this is where I return to Nate, my articulate barista at One Line. As I talked with him that day, I started to realize I was witnessing a person living his life by his own thoughtfully chosen choices. Listening to the music he likes, even though it's not current, wearing the clothes he likes, even though they may be dated; making choices about the meaning of his life spiritually that he confidently owns, because he, like Castellio suggested, uses his understanding and reflective experience (*sensus et intellectus* if you like Latin) to frame his life, not authorities outside of him. As we talked the other day, I also realized that Nate is a refreshingly clear heretic – that is, a person of decision and choice – because he

reflects on his life through the lens of gratitude, not complaint. He is glad to be who he is, and does not want to be anyone else. He is thankful he was raised by parents who care about him. He doesn't fall for the consumerist hype of our age, thinking you have to buy everything before you yourself have any value. He is thoughtfully aware of the privileges and gifts he has, and yet he does not complain that he does not have others. He has chosen to find happiness not in striving for it, but in becoming who he is, day by day. I had no sense of him trying to become perfect according to someone else's chart, but to actually live his life without wasting his time comparing himself to others positively *or* negatively. As Nate and I were speaking, he used the word "choice" several times, and I mentioned that to him, and I told him it kept me thinking about what I might say here this morning about this word heresy, which simply means *choice*.

And so, after all the history and stories and myths and science, I come back to something very simple and personal – in regard to our whole Unitarian Universalist tradition over the years, our own *saecula saeculorum*, *really long time*, emblazoned as you heard this morning with the lives and deaths of heretics – namely, I conclude that we are here to lift up the vision of a world where everyone – regardless of things like gender and ethnic background and ability and health and sexual orientation and economic status etc. – can live out their deep hopes and visions as they choose, after thoughtful reflection on their experiences. The reason we speak so much about the word justice around here has to do with just that. We know, as Nate well knows, that there are those who are not as privileged as he is. or as we are, people for whom the whole idea of choice, heresy, is still a terrifying barrier to living a free and decisive life. Our historic history of heresy says only this: that no one should be cut off from the privilege of living an honest, loving, compelling and healthy life. No matter how else we word it, this, I think, is our mission, for ourselves and the world outside these doors.

Offering

Returning

Autumn Reverie

Oh slowly, slowly, they return to me in the darkening of the year;
the memories of jumping into piles of crisp golden leaves
that fell from the weeping white birch next door,
the homegrown purple figs my grandmother handed me in a paper bag,
the spicy scent of orange chrysanthemums, the wonder of that first time in the fall
when you can see your own breath unfurling in the air.
Bless me, you experiences without belief or unbelief.
Bless me, you experiences without either faith or doubt.

Bless me, light and dark of the season; let me experience you for what you are, and not what you symbolize. Cleanse me of argument and fear of uncertainty. Trees of the season, continue to dazzle me, and let my need to be right fall from me as your leaves fall away from you. O moment of season and song, bless me.

Singing: 342 O Slowly, Slowly, They Return

Blessing