

ATHEISM IS ALWAYS RIGHT AND ALWAYS WRONG

By Rev. Jaco B. ten Hove, co-minister, Cedars Unitarian Universalist Church
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In What Do We Trust? — A READING for two voices

(adapted from Walter Royal Jones, First Days Record, 11/00)

In What Do We Trust? Deep-rooted convention would reply:

“In God We Trust.”

But when people ask:

“Do you believe in God?”

They usually mean:

“Do you believe in MY God?”

If we are truthful, as often as not, the only candid reply must be, “Probably not.”

Whatever “God” may or may not be, our human conjectures are only that: conjectures.

In What Do We Trust? Here’s a clue:

In early Hebrew text, the holy Name was rendered JHVH, without vowels, and it would not be spoken out loud, a posture of humility before the inexpressible Mystery. JHVH also appears to derive from the verb TO BE.

So the mystery of God (whatever the name) seems inseparable from the mysterious IS-ness of Being.

Perhaps, then, know it or not, our deepest trust lies in the inexplicable but indisputable fact that we are here...

...here in a universe which contains us in the very moment we are imaging it.

So the atheist is always right: the gods are creatures of our imaging. No matter how strenuously we strive to capture the inexpressible, mystery bursts free of the net.

And yet, in a paradoxical way, the atheist is also always wrong. The inexpressible has escaped; but it has not disappeared.

The mystery of being remains. And in the deep-breathing mystery:

—not merely emptiness [inhale], but fullness [exhale];

—not merely death, but life;

—not merely noise, but tranquility;

—not merely silence, but a song;

—not merely fear, but courage;

—not merely fault, but forgiveness;

—not merely pain, but ecstasy;

—not merely selfhood, but companionship...

In what do we trust?

In the mystery that holds these possibilities, for which our tangible lives stand witness. In what do we trust?

In the inner dialogue of choosing which set of possibilities to serve: those that build or those that destroy. In what do we trust?

In what Howard Thurman once called “The Sound of the Authentic”: the call to care for one another and for our many companions here on this Earth;

We trust in the rightness of honoring those who have made choices like this before us;

And in the grace of blessing those yet to come.

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HYMN #194: *Faith is a Forest*

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Atheism is Always Right, Always Wrong — JBtH

Yes, our Unitarian Universalist faith is a forest—and ideally a rich, diverse, healthy forest, full of interdependent variety—although of course if we carry this metaphor farther, we have to notice that some parts of the woodsy forest *eat* other parts of it. Such is the drama of planetary and perhaps even community evolution.

In the evolution of Unitarian Universalism we have learned to thrive amid the sometimes dramatic dynamics of a religion in which everyone must and can *only* speak for themselves about theology. One way ministers deal with this is by occasionally stepping out on that limb—in the forest, remember—where we express some of what our current credo looks like.

“Credo” is Latin for “I believe,” and I say “*current* credo” because it just wouldn’t do to etch one in stone for all time. No, we grow until we die, hopefully, and while indeed portions of our belief system are always with us like deepening roots, other perspectives and understandings of the universe grow and change with us, like bark and branches.

As UUs, we are called to be articulate about what we believe, because we can’t point to a single shared belief statement or creed that does the work for us. This makes for some demanding but fertile ground, and last Sunday my co-minister spouse Barbara offered her theological perspective in a delicious sermon called “God is Not God’s Name.”

Today, with the sustenance of our metaphorical forest all around me, let me take a turn and get into the gist of my credo. At times Barbara and I overlap, and our general visions are thoroughly aligned, but there are some significant differences, too. And while we might locate ourselves theologically in these particular directions, we are both very open to engaging with

various other spiritual postures, as happens regularly here.

Personally, I don't relish the label of "atheist," but I can't fully reject it, either. I have some harsh associations with atheism and other atheists, who can too often bring a kind of dogmatism to their stance that doesn't feel familiar or fair to me. And I'm not comfortable being lumped in with those who trumpet their atheism with smug superiority. That can be a stance that attempts to assume more authority than it deserves.

A trio of contemporary authors have provocatively stirred the pot in recent years, as some of you may know. Hitchens, Harris and Dawkins deserve some credit for illuminating primarily atheistic angles that many folks wouldn't otherwise consider, although their writing can at times be infuriatingly immoderate, perhaps by design. (I find their presence in interviews to be generally less strident, though.)

I will not review their considerable arguments today, other than to note one helpful point made by Sam Harris, who said (in an interview), "I think atheism and secularism are names that ultimately we don't need. We don't need a name for disbelief in astrology. I don't think we need anything other than rationality and reason and intellectual honesty."¹

I also agree with a leader in an earlier generation, the founder of American Atheists, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, that "nothing exists but *natural* phenomena. There are no supernatural forces or entities, nor can there be any. Nature simply exists."² But I part company with her advocacy of an Atheistic Materialism that declares us humans to be "capable of mastering the forces of nature and making them serve (us)."³ That kind of hubris I don't appreciate.

So I tend not to use the label of atheist when self-describing. I dislike labels in general. I am a UU, inclusively. But today I've taken on the challenge of drawing some distinctions about atheism. So climb out with me onto this limb here...

...where the view initially looks very familiar to UUs, because it includes a lot of negations. "I reject this; I deny that; I'm not comfortable with such-and-such; I don't use this-or-that," etc. The name Atheism is itself a negation. The single-letter Greek prefix "a-" means "without."

We can really be a bunch of deniers, can't we? Many of you, I suspect, of all theological stripe, have had to say a pretty substantial "no" to some other religious path in order to get to where you are today, so it may be an important piece of your personal spiritual history, to reject certain ideas and religious philosophies.

And that's okay—necessary, even. You're in good company. Many other rather famous people are or were atheistic, such as this small portion of a much larger list:

Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Edison,

Margaret Sanger and Clarence Darrow

Stephen Jay Gould and Stephen Hawking,

Sartre and Camus,

Carl Sagan, Oliver Sacks, and Linus Pauling (Unitarian),
 Noam Chomsky and Bertrand Russell,
Cloris Leachman and Dame Helen Mirren,
 Doug Adams, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein & H.G. Wells,
James Cameron, Stanley Kubrick, and John Huston,
 Che Guevara and Dave Barry,
Charlie Chaplin and Larry King,
 Joyce Carol Oates and Theodor Herzl,
Bruce Lee and Lance Armstrong
 Brian Eno, Béla Bartók, Richard Rodgers & Reeshard Strauss
Marlene Dietrich and Katharine Hepburn,
 Steve Wozniak and Warren Buffett,
Brad Pitt and Daniel Radcliffe (as in Harry Potter),
 Robyn Williams and Gene Roddenberry (as in Star Trek),
*and Kurt Vonnegut, who said, "I am an atheist—or at best a Unitarian who winds
 up in churches quite a lot."*

About hundred years ago, our Unitarian ancestor, Susan B. Anthony was a courageous leader in affirming the rights of women. One posture of hers that doesn't usually get much attention, however, is her atheistic leaning, shared to a certain degree by her compatriot Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

It was a dangerous posture—for anyone in that era, perhaps especially women—and Susan B. did not wish to emphasize it. Even so, as the suffrage struggle unfolded, it included a wide range of religious positions, which sometimes made for uncomfortable confrontation.

When, for instance, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote a critical commentary on the chapters of the Bible that directly refer to women [*The Women's Bible*], in the Preface she made this statement: "...I do not believe that any man ever saw or talked to God..."

Immediately upon publication of Stanton's work, Susan B. Anthony heard of fears that their National American Suffrage Association would be injured by her friend's writing, so much so that official action was quickly demanded. The committee on resolutions then proposed a formal response that denounced any connection between Elizabeth Cady Stanton's commentary and the Suffrage Association. Susan B. Anthony rose to defend her colleague with these principled, inspirational words, which we shall quote at some length:

The one distinct feature of our association has been the right of individual opinion for every member. We have been beset at each step with the cry that somebody was injuring the cause by the expression of sentiments which differed from those held by the majority. The religious persecution of the ages has been carried on under what was claimed to be

the command of God. I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do, because I notice it always coincides with their own desires. All along the history of our movement there has been this same contest on account of religious theories...

“What you should say to outsiders is that a Christian has neither more nor less rights in our association than an atheist. When our platform becomes too narrow for people of all creeds and of no creeds, I myself cannot stand upon it. Many things have been said and done by our orthodox friends which I have felt to be extremely harmful to our cause; but I should no more consent to a resolution denouncing them than I shall consent to this.

The final vote, though, was 53–41 *for* the resolution *against* Stanton’s commentary. Susan B. Anthony called it “this miserable, narrow action.” And in a message to a friend she remarked further: “I don’t know what better one could expect when our ranks are now so filled with young women not yet out of bondage to the idea of the infallibility of that book,” meaning, of course, the Bible.

Unfortunately and historically—although sometimes courageously certainly, atheists can seem to be satisfied to rest on negation, without affirming much of what might be positively helpful. *Deconstruction* and condemnation too often dominate the atheist journey. If our path stops there and *settles* upon negation, without building new, creative associations that sparkle, then any of us might slip into dullness and even cynicism.

Atheism has to be true to its name and deny the existence of deity, but my main problem with it is that it sometimes gets inflated into a denial of mystery as well. And if anything, my deepest understanding is full of the humble, yet energizing awareness of mystery, which is just a word that, for me, begins to express the inexpressible, not unlike the dodgy word “God” (which is not God’s name). Mystery does not immobilize me in the least, and feels like an affirmation at once grounded and realistic, yet open and exciting.

I affirm that there is more to the universe than what meets my eye, satisfies my left brain, or fits into a wordy definition. In fact, I believe there is a magnificent largeness to life that reaches beyond what I will ever be able to see, conceive of, or explain. Hardcore atheists probably consider this fuzzy thinking, and if they won’t admit me into their club, well, fine; so be it. I just don’t think atheism and mystery are mutually exclusive.

I accept this ineffable dimension of my personal theology—and I do still use that word, “theology,” to mean one’s understanding of the universe, whether or not there is a god figure in it. This larger dimension of cosmic life urges me to recognize that—as Roy Jones put it in our reading earlier—the atheist is always right *and* always wrong.

Yes, there is only a natural universe operating around and within us, *and* no human imagination has the only and complete description of its fundamental mystery. Declaring the absence of any god-force is within reason, I think; denying the mystery is not.

I respect this Mystery, but find in myself no great need to categorize it or ascribe to it more power than it already has. I am curious about it, of course, but have no wish to name it further, let alone give it human qualities, let alone petition it for my own benefit. I don't "believe" in it; it simply is, undeniably. And I find no inclination to be overly prostrate before the Mystery, beyond a natural degree of awe that is woven into all our psyches.

I was raised UU in a very humanist congregation, and I'm as likely as anyone to fall into the trap of reliance upon negation. But the minister of my home congregation, in Ridgewood, NJ, who served there for 22 years beginning when I was a young pre-teen, was Kenneth Patton, a prolific writer of uplifting humanist prose and lyrics.

Patton's poetic proclamations often perform the acrobatic feat of being both staunchly rational and soaring into an appreciation for the natural world that borders on mysticism. His writings are found in many places in our grey hymnal [*Singing the Living Tradition*], including the song we'll sing after this sermon.

Ken Patton could easily be considered one of the most influential humanists of the 20th century, and I was formatively impacted by his philosophy of life. Even though his gruff exterior personality left me cold, the inner fire that animated his musical renderings of the universe burned an indelible mark on my soul.

What I learned from the work of Ken Patton was how to be a religious atheist in loving relationship with what is holy. He showed us how to both honor our intellect *and* inspire the natural degree of awe that is our human birthright as participants in the cosmic drama. This is the challenging dance of the atheist, as I see it: to be both rational *and* open to mystery; intellectual *and* intuitive; steady but not arrogant when right *and* humble but not diminished when wrong.

When it came time for my mid-life crisis, which, for me, happened in my late 20s around a divorce from my first spouse, I relied heavily—without even realizing it—on my background as a homebred UU humanist.

Looking back at this chapter, I can see that I had indeed integrated the intellectual humanism of my upbringing, so much so that I figured I could rationalize the pain out of anything, and I calmly set about doing just that, over and over again. But I couldn't see the effect that this was having on my personality, as I became numb to the fullness of life, which—with some regularity—*does* provide most of us with a measure of struggle and unpleasantness.

After my marriage painfully crumbled, I gradually hatched a new approach to life, one that more adequately included the reality of distress. I stumbled into a new awareness of how the universe works, and how it includes suffering and struggle.

I did a lot of driving in those years, and I recall vividly how on one particular solo cross-country trip, in the aftermath of my separation, as I spun my wheels both literally and

figuratively, one single word flashed on inside me as a guiding beacon, which has ever since added layers of meaning to my life. I came to see how this familiar word and the insights it brought me—still brings me—are directly connected to Ken Patton's portrayals of the universe. It was all of a piece.

The word is Balance.

I became witness to a universe that hinges on balance at every level of existence. From the way the heavenly bodies relate to each other to the way my own little problems emerged, it was all a function of balance—or in some cases, *imbalance*.

As I cruised along in my 1968 maroon and white VW microbus, I realized that I was a microcosm of the whole, connected to everything else in a kind of parallel. My life issues, including my body and its processes, could be seen as human momentum that was either in or out of balance, just like what went on among the galaxies, and everything in between.

Anything that felt wrong, anything that was represented by distress might well be an imbalanced aspect attempting to realign itself. Pain and struggle were natural actors in this art. The mysterious universe was nonetheless always balanced, although one might need to get some larger perspective in order to actually see and grasp the balance in its fullness. This became my faith.

From the moment of this vehicular epiphany onward, I found a new stability in my life, and have never looked back, really. Five years later I was headed to seminary, not without my own lingering self-doubts, mind you, but resting nonetheless in a reassuring awareness of how things worked. My training and further development, however, only made me want to be sure to *also* include the Mystery, which, I detect, is also always in ultimate balance, even though beyond my grasp.

What there *isn't*, for me, is any particular figurehead force guiding or creating this balance. It is simply a function of the way the universe works. How this ingenious balance began is a marvelous inquiry that our kind will probably always wonder about. And I can respect the variety of ways people might go about this wondering, and the stories that different cultures might use to depict their interpretations. However, I have trouble when the inquiry shifts toward demanding authority, when it stops inquiring and starts issuing forth dogma that dictates. *That* I resist and reject.

Happily, though, there are plenty of diverse affirmations about the universe that make religious dialogue a very stimulating place to be, the need for constant translation notwithstanding. These days there is certainly an ongoing imperative for greater inter-religious understanding and cooperation, and UUs of all theologies can make important contributions to such interaction, at both large and small levels.

For instance, a few of us participate in the monthly InterFaith Council gathering that brings together diverse and affectionate religionists from this immediate area. At such times, as

well as at international conferences and in *your* family or workplace, articulation of our affirming values may be a challenging task—and risky, even—but it also can model the general impulse to “Think globally and act locally.”

As the noted and controversial Catholic theologian, Hans Kung, put it at an international inter-religious conference I attended some years ago, “There will be no peace in the world until there is peace among the religions.” What *you* do, when embedded in any multi-religious context, matters. If you’re atheist, you may be severely tested, but your response to the universe is every bit as valid as anyone else’s.

It doesn’t take much foresight for me to predict that this new century and millennium will only demand of us even more authentic articulation across religious lines. So bone up, my friends!

While I was in seminary in the 1980s, the UU General Assembly adopted a new statement of Principles and Purposes. There are the Seven Principles themselves, but I want to close by drawing your attention to the first of what we call the “Sources,” the second section which follows the 7 principles.

“The living tradition we share draws from many sources,” it begins, and the first source named is: *Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.*

Now *that’s* a religiously positive and inclusive affirmation! It invites theist and atheist alike into relationship with creativity, which is the essence and embodiment of life.

Let the mystery be what it is, bursting free of any net we might throw at it. Let the transformations come as they may, inspiring not merely fear, but courage, even in the face of despair & challenge. And let us use powerfully positive words to build a path forward, choosing to care for one another and for our many companions here on this Earth. So may it be.

¹ “Why Religion Must End: Interview with Sam Harris”
Beliefnet Interview by Laura Sheahan, undated. Online at:
<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Secular-Philosophies/Why-Religion-Must-End-Interview-With-Sam-Harris.aspx?p=3>

² Madalyn Murray O’Hair, from “History of Atheism,” *an address given by the founder of American Atheists at the Eighth Annual Convention of the American Rationalist Federation, on 25 August 1962.*
Online at: http://www.atheists.org/atheism/history_of_atheism

³ Ibid.