

Cedars UU Church Special Guest Speaker - April 2, 2017



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Humanist Discussion - Cedars UU Church

Good morning, everyone. It's good to be back and to see your bright, shining, intelligent, curious, kind and thoughtful faces, ready for our service and waiting patiently for whatever I've chosen to say later this morning. You'll be listening attentively, assessing whether you agree with me or not (much as we approach music lyrics in the hymnal) and determining whether what I say should affect your view of your life and the lives around you.

It's what we do together every Sunday morning and it's a beautiful thing. It's also incredibly rare within our national population. Unlike most of this nation **we** come together like this as an ordinary event, with open hearts and minds, letting our reason and our emotion and our memories be touched by someone we recognize only as one of us. As a congregation we grant no special dispensation, and no intrinsically greater authority, unless we think it's been earned by dint of effort or accomplishment.

The humanist tradition we'll discuss this morning - thousands of years of lighting a candle in the dark - is, I think, worth talking about, and I'm very glad you've given me a few minutes to describe why. Thank you for coming today, and welcome back to our community of gentle, **thoughtful**, people.

Good morning! You may have heard me mention last year that I've been a Jesuit-trained atheist since I was about 12. Demi argues a better label is "humanist" and she may be right. A **positive** label instead of a negation but both are true. Like many people in this room I have zero interest in anything labeled "god". I'm not agnostic. I'm not unsure. I'm of the opinion that **extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence** and I've not seen any, and I've not met anyone else who's seen any either. And after 18 deployments to global disasters and having been wounded in two of my four wars, I've seen a very great deal of evidence that religion is, at root, profoundly destructive, and that there seems to be no help from anywhere else when truly horrible tragedies are unfolding. It's only us.

As one example, there are currently four famines declared by the United Nations - South Sudan, Yemen, Ethiopia, and northern Nigeria. As you might guess, religion is a significantly complicating factor in each of those four famines.

I'm pretty convinced that no manna is going to drop from heaven to save those innocent people. A quarter-million died in our last declared famine just six years ago, so a belief system that says a god is going to care for us seems to be not working. Looking at religion from a different perspective, I am also pretty impatient with any system of belief designed to enslave, humiliate, alienate, intimidate, frighten or shame my fellow humans, and I have real issues with lying to children, insulting women, crushing curiosity, instilling false hope in those who are suffering, or worse, instilling false blame.

On the other hand, I'm a pretty big fan of courageous and articulate people of all stripes, but especially including humanists like Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Bill Nye, Neil deGrasse Tyson, and Carl Sagan in the modern world, and Robert Ingersoll, Mark Twain, Bertrand Russell, Leo Tolstoy and Voltaire a few years in the past. Each of those older writers was willing to suffer significant indignities to champion the voice of reason, and yet now, a hundred and more years later, President Bush 41 could still state in public that rational atheists, like me, cannot be true citizens of the United States and should not be responsible for the nation's defense. Despite my 25 years as a Navy officer, my four wars, my injuries, my seven rows of ribbons, and the fact that the Assistant Secretary of Defense was my Retirement Speaker, the President considered people who think like me unworthy to serve. Interestingly, our current Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, in his confirmation hearings last month, echoed that opinion.

This is a Unitarian Universalist congregation and we encompass many points of view on the subject so to perseverate would be impolite. I would rather invite your attention to the satisfaction found in our caring for our fellow humans and the planet we inhabit. No system of faith-based rules has shown me anything that is not merely a gloss on the care we **already** know how to take with each other simply through the ethical recognition of our common humanity.

Many of us here in the room may not recognize that the humanist tradition, the tradition that declares that the gods are irrelevant in human affairs, dates from some of the earliest thinking on record. In the play *Sisyphus* written about 420 BC the Greek author Critias - a close friend of Socrates - wrote that the gods are a fiction created by a frightened humanity. He continues on to say that god stories have been enhanced and expanded by **political** authorities to ensure a compliant citizenry.

The philosopher **Epicurus**, a hundred years later, declared the gods of no importance to mankind. He was subsequently declared an atheist and exiled and his detractors ever after have painted him as a worthless hedonist advocating wanton self-indulgence. What we know of his works, mostly through the Roman poet Lucretius, shows he was nothing like that. Lucretius said that Epicurus believed that **the simple enjoyment of nature and friendship is the surest route to a rewarding life**. Lucretius himself, on the other hand, was a bit more pointed on the place of religion in human affairs. He said: "All religions are equally sublime to the ignorant, useful to the politician, and ridiculous to the philosopher."

Three hundred years later, around 335 AD, the Roman Emperor Constantine **converted** to the Christian religion that had appeared in the midst of many other religions. By his proclamation, the Roman Empire left the worship of Jupiter and Venus and Minerva to follow a single god, Yahweh, said to have been made flesh in Jesus Christ. Fifty years later the *Edict of Thessalonica* was issued that made Christianity the state religion of the Roman

Empire. That mandate led to an all-encompassing catechism, and helped Western civilization lose its curiosity. We entered a thousand years of god-sanctioned persecution, brutality, celibacy, misogyny, and self-satisfied ignorance.

Eventually, those thousand years passed, and the **Renaissance** gave rise to Christopher Marlowe, a playwright and friend of Shakespeare's, who wrote, with great courage, "I count religion but a childish toy". He also wrote that religion is "unpleasant, harsh, contemptible, and vile".

A hundred years later the **Enlightenment** appeared with minds like the philosopher Baruch Spinoza - who was expelled from Judaism for his writings. Spinoza argued that god is not personal, or even conscious, but is, rather, the underlying substance of nature. He went on to say that religious believers "when they cannot explain a thing, run back to declare the thing "the will of god". He went on to say "This is truly a ridiculous way of expressing ignorance."

Shortly after Spinoza, in the early 1700s, appeared Voltaire, described by historian Will Durant as "**that consuming fire Voltaire**". From Voltaire came what we now revere as "human rights" and the concept of a workable democracy. In a sense, he was the first civil rights activist. Like me, he was trained by Jesuits, but he had a sense of indignation that, when he let loose, could peel the paint off the walls. He wrote more than 20,000 letters and many of them were to Church notables. He often wrote when he was infuriated by some cruel or callous mixing of church and state. His letters, for example, led to the release of Jean Espinas. Espinas had spent 23 years on a prison ship because he gave lodging to a Protestant minister for one night.

Voltaire once wrote a letter to Frederick the Great, King of Prussia and his friend of 50 years that "Christianity is the most absurd and bloody religion that has ever infected the world." He was the first to refer to clergy as "parasites", and he coined the phrase "*The first priest was the first rogue who met the first fool*".

Voltaire is probably best known for the adage that I had for years as my email signature and is exceptionally pertinent after our most recent election. He said "*Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you perform atrocities.*"

The atheist humanist Robert Ingersoll, speaking of Voltaire a hundred years after his death, said "*he did more for the cause of human liberty than any man who ever lived*".

I want to skip over the subsequent 250 years since Voltaire because we have actually gone **backwards** from the Enlightenment. Churches are exempt from US taxes, Religious clergy have again become authorities, and are still parasites, and are still among the **least** educated of our professional classes globally, and yet a disproportionate share of our US population accepts them as the most reliable voice on almost any topic. I find that appalling, but undeniable.

But all is not lost. In fact, far from it, and I'm going to choose just one of many examples to bring to your attention. I did a lot of very enjoyable reading for this morning and it turns out I could talk to you about any of several interesting things:

For example, global secular humanist movements have formed to reduce oppression,

improve governance, and provide a safe and meaningful life to every human. The Humanist Manifesto - first written in 1933, then expanded on its 40th Anniversary in 1973, and refined again 1999, is one example of that movement.

The last paragraph of the 1999 Humanist Manifesto states this: *Humanists are concerned for the well-being of all, are committed to diversity, and respect those of differing **yet humane** views. We work to uphold the equal enjoyment of human rights and civil liberties in an open, secular society and maintain it is a **civic duty** to participate in the democratic process and a **planetary duty** to protect nature's integrity, diversity, and beauty in a secure, sustainable manner.*

Another topic I could have addressed is the clear evidence that we're living in the most peaceful time in human history. It turns out that the less religion in society, the better the governance, and the happier the citizens. Take a close look at Norway and Denmark. Then read Stephen Pinker on the topic.

Or we could have talked about the secular advances in science and engineering and legislation and policy that have helped drop the global absolute poverty rate by half inside a decade. It made the cover of the Economist in 2012. The New Testament in Mark 12:8 says "the poor shall be always with you" - now we see it's entirely possible that statement is wrong.

We could have discussed any of a dozen similar topics that help demonstrate that rationality and compassion and ethics and experience have shown that the religious basis for casual brutality, for arrogant ignorance, and for slavery, cannot stand when questions are encouraged, and when evidence is demanded, and when the church is not allowed to interfere in the workings of the State.

But Demi reminded me it would be more helpful, **and less shrill**, to show some **positive** understanding of what **elevated religious feeling** is striving toward.

Many of those who describe themselves as spiritual and outside of organized religion are seeking **that**. That expression of ecstatic joy, and that feeling of unity - of oneness with all things. It turns out there are a few perhaps unexpected ways to get there. So that's where we'll spend three minutes.

There is a new discovery in the world, and it took a constellation of efforts in several scientific disciplines to make it real. It's called "**neurotheology**". It's a remarkable attempt to understand that joyous religious experience of oneness with the Universe that appears in virtually every religious tradition.

Neurotheology is one topic in a new book called "**Stealing Fire**" by Stephen Cotler and Jamie Wheal. The authors look closely at the ancient Greek word "**ecstasis**", the root of our word ecstasy, but the original meaning was the striving for a feeling of flow, of focus, of intense capability, of unity with the effort you're engaged in performing. In the original Greek the word literally meant "stepping beyond oneself". Plato, 2,500 years ago, described *ecstasis* as an altered state where our normal waking consciousness vanishes completely, replaced by an intense euphoria and sense of a powerful connection to a greater intelligence. There are thousands of examples where people who have experienced it

describe it as more profoundly real than their daily reality. Dr. Andy Newberg is one of those who have felt it.

Dr. Newberg is an unusual man. He's a physician and neuroscientist, Board Certified in Internal Medicine and Nuclear Medicine, and he's a professor of emergency medicine and radiology at the University of Pennsylvania where he also teaches in the Department of Religious Studies. Over the past 25 years he's explored the biochemical basis for spirituality and his findings have been truly remarkable.

Newberg has helped bridge one of the gaps between science and religion. He's discovered, studied, and reproduced over and over again, in a wide range of personalities, that feeling we describe as a *mystical experience*. As he put it, mystical experiences are not divine intervention, nor are they mental illness. They're just the byproduct of normal brain function under very special conditions and those special conditions have now been reproduced, and their impact visualized, using new imaging techniques that allow us to track, in very precise ways, the cellular metabolism of brain cells under the influence of various combinations of the six most common biochemical neurotransmitters that all of us have working inside us every day.

He's been able to see identical brain metabolism changes in the caudate nucleus and the pre-frontal cortex of the brain during meditation, chanting, singing, doing higher mathematics, prayer, high-skill video gaming, and base-jumping off skyscrapers. But he's ALSO seeing exactly the same brain images when patients describe their mystical feelings on the neuromodulators psilocybin, LSD, and MDMA. We can now stimulate, in minutes, using neuropharmacology, a change in brain flow - and a described set of feelings - very similar to the ecstatic states described by Tibetan monks who have practiced meditation for 30 years.

Out of that neurotransmitter research has come the discovery that the most powerful single therapy we've discovered for the reduction of PTSD symptoms in combat veterans is a SINGLE DOSE of psilocybin. Magic mushrooms. In a study of ten veterans with severely disabling PTSD, four of the ten stated that the mushrooms gave them the most deeply meaningful experience of their lives. And eight of the ten had a significant reduction in their symptoms, after a single dose, that lasted *more than a year*. None of them have committed suicide when all of them had been at significant statistical risk. And all of them used religious imagery when describing what they experienced.

Let me wrap up.

This morning I've spent a few minutes describing that I'm opposed to religion, that I've been an atheist from a very formative age, that I've had excellent models for my non-theistic behavior and that I've not needed any god-concept to scare me into behaving decently toward my fellow humans. I've also mentioned a few of the many courageous humanists that have shaped western civilization over the past three thousand years.

I've also made clear, I hope, that avoiding any magical thinking about rescue and grace and forgiveness and an afterlife has allowed me, and many others, to concentrate on fixing the here and now however we can. And that's been productive. Because, fortunately, fixing the here and now is a rewarding and necessary set of tasks and there's a lot to do.

We've also learned that people like Dr. Andrew Newberg are discovering how we can, with intent and understanding, recreate our intense, and highly desirable, mystical experiences using techniques that make it clear there is nothing supernatural about an ecstatic vision or achieving Enlightenment - that the capacity is always within us, and does not depend on belief systems that violate everything we know about how the Universe works. It's **biochemistry, Interesting** biochemistry, but just biochemistry. Such ecstasy is a profoundly desirable feeling, but there are ways to get there outside of an escapist religion that keep us responsible for each other. That keep us caring for each other. That keep us feeling a kinship with all life on earth. That keep us creating a bit more security for every human, gaining a little mutual resilience from each other, and preparing much more effectively, together, for whatever is to come.

For two thousand years we in the West have believed in received dogma based on iron age mythology built on an oral tradition by illiterate pastoralists and subsequently shaped by political engineering. Curiosity has been discouraged, discoveries suppressed, women burned at the stake for witchcraft, and unbelievers tortured to death.

Some of us have now moved past that mythology and faced the world as it is, recognizing we are each just, as Carl Sagan says, **gravitationally coagulated stardust, with billions of precise and successful chemical reactions happening in each one of us every second.** The fact that we now can know and reproducibly demonstrate the truth of that statement is a stunning achievement for our species.

Humanist atheism, contrary to **religious** opinions often expressed about us, is deeply inspiring. As the Australian writer and engineer Lynne Kelly said:

“Some believers accuse atheists like me of having nothing left but a dull, cold, scientific world. Well, it's partially true - I'm left with only art, music, literature, theater, the magnificence of nature, of mathematics, of the human spirit, sex, the cosmos, friendship, history, science, curiosity, imagination, the oceans, the mountains, dreams, love, and the wonder of birth.”

“Actually, that'll do for me.”

Thank you for listening.

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