

Fundamentalism (December 28, 2003)

Call to Worship (Jimmy):

“Thirty spokes converge upon a single hub;
It is on the hole in the center that the use of the cart hinges.
We make a vessel from a lump of clay;
It is the empty space within the vessel that makes it useful.
We make doors and windows for a room;
But it is these empty spaces that make the room livable.
Thus, while the tangible has advantages, it is the intangible that makes it useful.”
-Tao Teh Ching

Chalice Lighting (Jimmy): (Hans Kung)

“No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.
No peace among religions without dialogue between the religions.
No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions.”

Opening Hymn: Happy Xmas (War is Over) – John Lennon

Reading (Jimmy): (Roberta Finkelstein)

“Fundamentalism ... is ‘a global response to modern culture.’ It is a militant kind of piety that has emerged in every major world religion – not just the 3 mainstream monotheistic religions, but in Hinduism and other Eastern religions as well. It crosses continents, cultures, religions, [and] economic class. It is growing in influence and numbers. It stands for everything that we stand opposed to; it seeks to impose itself on those who do not wish to deal with it. And still I believe that it is imperative that we come to understand fundamentalism, and even develop empathy for those who embrace it.

Looking at the manifestations of fundamentalism, it is easy to become frightened and harden into a resolve that ‘these people must be stopped.’ After all, fundamentalists have flown airplanes into buildings in the name of Allah, shot and killed medical doctors and beaten homosexuals to death in the name of Christ, and assassinated Yitzak Rabin in the name of Yahweh. Their children frighten our children with their talk of hell and damnation, their youth threaten our youth with their talk of sexuality as sin. So we are afraid of fundamentalism, and with good reason.

It is also easy to become frustrated with fundamentalism, and to harden into a resolve that ‘there is no point in talking to these people.’ It is, after all, absolutely impossible to win an argument with them; they know more bible verses than we do, and they are undeterred by what we think of as logical and rational evidence of our senses that supports our world view. This makes it easy for us to dismiss with contempt their rhetoric and actions, and hard to develop those qualities of compassion and empathy that we know are the basis for our faith commitment to tolerance.

Speaking of tolerance, darn it, those pesky fundamentalists tend to come across as intolerant and rigid, and without compassion themselves for the suffering they cause by their righteousness. Worse yet, they reject as evil the very things that we hold most dear: the use of reason, the results of science, the embrace of progress, the worth of the individual, the value of freedom, and the celebration of personal choice; in short, the philosophical breakthroughs of the Enlightenment plus all the changes for the better wrought by human hands and minds in the 20th century.

So for us, it will be a pretty hefty spiritual stretch to take it as our obligation to look at fundamentalism with understanding and compassion.”

Hymn: Imagine – John Lennon

Reading (Kevin): (John Paul Lederach)

“The first and most important question to ask ourselves is, How do people reach this level of anger, hatred, and frustration? ... It is important to understand the worldview that accompanies such anger because our responses to the terrorist attacks may reinforce that anger. We may provide the soil, seeds, and nutrients for future cycles of revenge and violence. We should be careful to heed one and only one strategic plan: Don't do what the terrorists expect.

What they expect is the lashing out of the giant against the weak, the many against the few... But unless we are careful we will end up reinforcing the myth they carefully seek to sustain: that they are under threat, fighting an irrational and mad system that has never taken them seriously and wishes to destroy them and their people. What we need to destroy is their myth, not their people...

We need a new metaphor... The image of a virus comes to mind because a virus enters unperceived, flows with a system, and harms it from within. The genius of people like Osama bin Laden is that they understand the power of our free and open system and use it to their benefit. The enemy is not located in a territory. It has entered our system.

You do not fight this kind of virus-enemy by shooting at it. You respond by strengthening the system's immunity to the virus... We must change metaphors and move beyond the reaction that we can duke it out with the bad guy, or we run the very serious risk of creating the environment that sustains and reproduces the virus.”

Prayer (Jimmy):

Now let us enter into a time of prayer and silent meditation:

“Now

You are the eternal, the timeless.

You would have us dance and sing in celebration of the present moment, but we can't see your smile or hear your song.

But how will we find you if we don't look where you are?

We search the past -- through its dusty libraries, its darkened ruins, its blood-soaked battlefields, but you are not there. We find only idols -- and people bowing down to them. Of you there is but a whisper -- "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

We search the future, straining our eyes to find you. But we see nothing -- only our own mirages and maybes reflected back on fearful, hopeful faces. And we hear a whisper -- "Do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself."

You are now -- in us, with us: the present is your dwelling place.

Call us out from bondage, touch us with eternity; free us from the drag of the past, the pull of the future. May we know you, love you, serve you -- not yesterday, not tomorrow -- but now, in this timeless moment.

Amen.”

Offertory (Jimmy): Across the Universe - John Lennon

Readings (Jimmy):

Sayyid Qutb lived from 1906 - 1966. He was an Egyptian Muslim and one of the members of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is a reading from his tome "Milestones" in which he separated the world into two halves: the truly Islamic and the barbaric.

"There are many practical obstacles in establishing God's rule on earth, such as the power of the state, the social system and traditions and, in general, the whole human environment. Islam uses force only to remove these obstacles so that there may not remain any wall between Islam and individual human beings, and so that it may address their hearts and minds after releasing them from these material obstacles, and then leave them free to choose to accept or reject it."

Mark Thomas was the one-time leader of the Aryan Nation in Pennsylvania and helped to found the "Christian Identity" movement. Here is a quote from one of his sermons:

"We are going to build the Kingdom of *our* God on this continent if we have to turn it into a Bosnia first! Death may find you in front of your one-eyed church of Satan or in the filthy bingo parlors where you worship your devil god, but be sure that you will not escape the consuming fire that is the real baptism of the Holy Ghost, The God of Racial Israel."

Rabbi Shlomo Aviner is a prominent Jewish author with strong religious Zionist leanings. Here he speaks about the acquisition of land in Israel:

"We must settle the whole Land of Israel, and over all of it establish our rule. In the words of [Nachmanides]: "Do not abandon the land to any other nation." If that is possible by peaceful means, wonderful, and if not, we are commanded to make war to accomplish it."

Sermon:

KEVIN:

"I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good...Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a biblical duty, we are called by God, to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism"

"Intolerance is a beautiful thing...There are people that are politically correct that want to say the cardinal sin of the hour is intolerance and I think that is a bunch of junk."

Randall Terry, Operation Rescue

Karen Armstrong, in a new preface for her best-selling book, "The Battle For God", presents her reaction to the attack on the Twin Towers in New York City:

"September 11, 2001 will go down in history as a day that changed the world. It was an act that had clearly been designed for television. The blazing towers of the World Trade Center and their subsequent spectacular collapse will likely become icons of the twenty-first century. For the first time ever, the people of the United States were attacked by a foreign enemy on their own soil; not by a nation-state, and not by a nuclear missile, but by religious extremists brandishing only penknives and box cutters. It was an attack against the United States, but it was a warning to all of us in the First World. We felt a new nakedness, a raw vulnerability ... and it is still not clear exactly how this will affect our behavior in this transformed world. But one thing is already certain: nothing will ever be the same again. The affairs and

concerns that preoccupied us before September 11 now seem irrelevant. We are facing a period of frightening, disturbing change.

The dynamic of fundamentalism, however, has not changed. Nobody could have predicted the details of this attack, because they were inconceivable. But this was simply the latest and most ferocious offensive conducted by fundamentalists in their ongoing battle for God. ...for almost a century, Christians, Jews, and Muslims have been developing a militant form of piety whose objective is to drag God and religion from the sidelines, to which they have been relegated in modern secular culture, and bring them back to center stage. These "fundamentalists," as they are called, are convinced that they are fighting for the survival of their faith in a world that is inherently hostile to religion. They are conducting a war against secular modernity, and in the course of their struggle, they have achieved notable results. In the middle of the twentieth century, it was generally assumed by pundits and commentators that secularism was the coming ideology and that religion would never again become a force in international affairs. But the fundamentalists have reversed this trend and gradually, in both the United States and the Muslim world, religion has become a force that every government has been forced to take seriously." End quote.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, fundamentalism is a fairly modern religious phenomenon. As you might suspect, Fundamentalism tends to occur when followers of a particular faith become fearful that they may lose the spirituality that is their source of hope and strength, as the world around them becomes more secular and less dependent on faith.

Another characteristic of Fundamentalism is that the adherents are typically found in economically-depressed segments of a society. When members of a faith suffer economically for generations, and associate this suffering with economically comfortable groups in an increasingly secular society, a common reaction is a desperate appeal to faith, the one constant for many people. The foot soldiers of many fundamentalist movements are often recruited from a group that society has not provided with an adequate understanding of science, math, economics, philosophy, or a fair accounting of tenets of other faiths. This dangerous combination leads to hopelessness and desperation and a willingness to take part in irrational religious and political movements.

So, now we arrive at the real purpose of this sermon: to propose how we, as liberal religious folk can become part of a positive and constructive response to religious fundamentalism.

Karen Armstrong's recent study of the rise of fundamentalism is a great place to start in our attempt to understand this distinctly modern trend. She says in part:

"First, it is important to recognize that these theologies and ideologies are rooted in fear. The desire to define doctrines, erect barriers, establish borders, and segregate the faithful in a sacred enclave, where the law is stringently observed, springs from that terror of extinction which has made all fundamentalists, at one time or another, believe that the secularists were about to wipe them out. The modern world, which seems exciting to a liberal, seems Godless, drained of meaning, and even satanic to a fundamentalist.

Secondly, it is important to realize that these movements are not an archaic throwback to the past; they are modern, innovative, and *modernizing* . . . (Though) in various ways, fundamentalists have rejected the separations of modernity (between church and state, secular and profane) and tried to re-create a lost wholeness . . . Religious Zionists and fundamentalist Christians and Muslims all insisted on the need

for dynamic and revolutionary transformation in keeping with the forward thrust and pragmatic drive of modern society.” End quote.

It appears that fundamentalism isn't an irrational outgrowth of conservative thought, but rather a reaction to the idea that life without the spiritual is somehow preferable to life steeped in spirit. The desire to return to a more spiritual life helps to explain the appeal of religious fundamentalism for many. Regarding this point, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins thinks that science, as powerful as it is, is not capable of meeting all of societies needs. Dawkins states:

“There are things that science wasn't meant to explain and doesn't try to, such as what is morally right or wrong. There are things that science can't yet explain but is working on, like the origin of life. And there may be things that science would like to explain but never can. It is a simple (but distressingly common) fallacy to presume that if something is beyond science, it is not beyond religion, too.” End quote.

Abandoning religion for science would seem to violate a classic tenet that one shouldn't “toss one's baby out with the bathwater.” The smarter course of action would be to acknowledge that science and religion are mutual cohabitants of the human psyche. Let's take this a step further. Can there be a role for science in the search for ultimate truth? The study of the interface between science and faith and the requisite relationship between science and faith may offer important insight.

Author K. C. Cole describes the science and faith relationship:

“There is a hole in the universe.

It is not like a hole in a wall where a mouse slips through, solid and crisp and leading from somewhere to someplace. It is rather like a hole in the heart, an amorphous and edgeless void. It is a heartfelt absence, a blank space where something is missing, a large and obvious blind spot in our understanding of the universe.

That missing something, strange to say, is a grasp of nothing itself. Understanding nothing matters, because nothing is the all-important background upon which everything else happens.” End Quote.

Science can make that hole in the universe smaller, but as it gets smaller, the hole becomes more significant. Great thinkers throughout human history have noted that the human psyche is made up of 2 halves. Some say it is the male and female halves – the yin and the yang. The ancient Greeks understood that two equally powerful forces drive humanity: logos and mythos. As Armstrong explains:

“We tend to assume that the people of the past were (more or less) like us, but in fact their spiritual lives were rather different. In particular, they evolved two ways of thinking, speaking, and acquiring knowledge, which scholars have called mythos and logos. Both were essential; they were regarded as complementary ways of arriving at truth, and each had its special areas of competence.

In the premodern world, both mythos and logos were regarded as indispensable. Each would be impoverished without the other. Yet the two were essentially distinct, and it was held dangerous to confuse mythical and rational discourse. They had separate jobs to do. Myth was not reasonable; its narratives were not supposed to be demonstrated empirically. It provided the context of meaning that made our practical activities worthwhile. You were not supposed to make mythos the basis of pragmatic policy. If you did so, the results could be disastrous, because what worked well in the inner world of the psyche was not readily applicable to the affairs of the external world.

Logos had its limitations too. It could not assuage human pain or sorrow. Rational arguments could make no sense of tragedy. Logos could not answer questions about the ultimate value of human life. A scientist could make things work more efficiently and discover wonderful new facts about the physical universe, but he could not explain the meaning of life. That was the preserve of myth and cult.

By the eighteenth century, however, the people of Europe and America had achieved such astonishing success in science and technology that they began to think that logos was the only means to truth and began to discount mythos as false and superstitious. Our religious experience in the modern world has changed . . .”

JIMMY:

As our world has become more secular, there is still a powerful human need to fill the spiritual void. It is as if humanity instinctively seeks the sacred. People continue to make room for the mythical in their lives. Why? Is it because we are not whole without mythos *and* logos? Sigmund Freud recognized an inherent human need for religion in society. Author Huston Smith, in his recent book, said:

“Seen through the eyes of faith, religion's future is secure. As long as there are human beings, there will be religion for the sufficient reason that ... all human beings have a God-shaped vacuum built into their hearts. Since nature abhors a vacuum, people keep trying to fill the one inside them. Searching for an image of the divine that will fit, they paw over various options as if they were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, matching them successively to the gaping hole at the puzzle's center.... They keep doing this until the right "piece" is found. When it slips into place, life's jigsaw puzzle is solved.

How so? Because the sight of the picture that then emerges is so commanding that it swings attention from the self who is viewing the picture to the picture itself. This epiphany, with its attendant ego-reduction, is *salvation* in the West and *enlightenment* in the East.“ End quote.

If you take the idea that humans have two separate ways of seeing the world – mythos and logos – and you add to it the increasing power that logos has held over mythos over the last century, it becomes easier to understand how these strange fundamentalist religious views came to be. In almost every case, a fundamentalist group uses, as a theological basis, thoughts that directly violate what the late Stephen Jay Gould called the NOMA principle. Stephen Jay Gould was an outspoken opponent of bad religion, especially when it came to the controversial issue of teaching evolution in the classroom.

To Gould, this was a clear mixing together of logos – the idea that humans evolved from other animals, and mythos – the idea that God created humanity. Unlike many other secular thinkers, Gould gave religion equal standing with science. According to Gould, both views can be correct, but not in the same context. He offered the NOMA principle as a way to provide “respectful noninterference” between these views. NOMA or Non Overlapping Magisteria, is a term that Gould created to represent where rationalism has authority and where religion has authority. He borrowed the term Magisteria from the Catholic Church where it is used to distinguish between major areas of religious teachings. Gould's principle of NOMA uses the term magisteria to describe the two grand realms of religion and science.

When we look at the fundamentalist attempt to give religion authority over science, we see a violation of the NOMA principle. Because, they have “overlapped” logos and mythos. Why do

religious fundamentalists make this mistake? Because over the centuries religious language has become rife with violations of NOMA. Again Gould says:

“The fallacies of such fundamentalist extremism can be easily identified, but what about a more subtle violation of NOMA commonly encountered among people whose concept of God demands a loving deity, personally concerned with the lives of all his creatures – and not just an invisible and imperious clockwinder? Such people often take a further step by insisting that their God mark his existence (and his care) by particular factual imprints upon nature that may run contrary to the findings of science. Now, science has no quarrel whatever with anyone’s need or belief in such a personalized concept of divine power, but NOMA does preclude the additional claim that such a God must arrange the facts of nature in a certain set and predetermined way. For example, if you believe an adequately loving God must show his hand by peppering nature with palpable miracles, or that such a God could only allow evolution to work in a manner contrary to facts of the fossil record, then a particular, partisan (and minority) view of religion has transgressed into the magisterium of science by dictating conclusions that must remain open to empirical test and potential rejection.” End quote.

In other words, science casts a wide net as it seeks to find answers to questions, but religious fundamentalists start with the answers from which they derive their questions.

There are key moments in history where we see violations of NOMA. One ancient milestone incident that also created a well-known Christian schism that exists today is the first council of Nicea. This was the original meeting of all the Christian bishops of influence and power. Before this time, Christians were persecuted and tortured for their faith. The Roman Emperor Constantine called this meeting to bring the Christians together and hopefully create one Church that would be decidedly Roman.

The controversy over the divinity of Jesus was one of the major theological sticking points. Ultimately, although not all the bishops signed the document, the new Roman Church had its unifying creed – the Nicene Creed. At this and other subsequent ecumenical councils, important theological questions were answered, such as, given the large volume of writing about Jesus, what works should make up the New Testament and what works should be discarded.

Historically, it appears that the bishops and Emperors of this period decided what to leave out and what to put in. This was a book that has evolved over the period just after the death of Jesus on through today. Putting all of this into perspective, it makes it hard to understand the idea of biblical inerrancy given that the bishops voted on these questions. The losers were cast out and sometimes branded as criminals. Apparently, “consensus” was not on the menu. Clearly, if humans decided through academic study what parts were right and what parts were not, we see the beginnings of habitual historical violations of the NOMA principle by the church.

In antiquity, well before the time of Jesus, cultures were known for building upon their older traditions. During the period called the “Axial Age”, there was a shift away from agrarian tribal religion. During this shift prophets emerged that created faith systems that promoted compassion and a personal, usually internalized spirituality that transformed societies all over the globe. Those religious movements: monotheism, Taoism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and the European rationalism have dominated the evolution of cultures all over the planet even into our modern times.

The “Enlightenment” period in Europe marked the beginning of another shift that we are living through today. The shift was one driven by change and technology. The western culture became one that was forward looking and needed to be ever evolving to sustain itself – especially when it comes to the economic needs of a society that, every generation, has transformed itself with the creation of better and more capable technology.

It became possible to understand the natural world and even our own minds in ways that humans of the “Axial Age” could not have predicted or even imagined. So when you put yourself in the modern shoes of a religious person that has seen rationalism gobble up the areas of life that used to belong to religion, it can seem as if religion were under attack and more importantly, that religion is losing - and badly.

In the modern tradition of revolutionary change, rather than simply retreating and shrinking away from the battle to, as they see it, annihilate religion, the fundamentalists seek to take back what has been stolen from them. To recreate a society that worked better in their eyes. They wish to revive the God that rationalists seem so keen to remove from the picture altogether.

The fact is this modern religious movement we call fundamentalism hasn't grown up in a vacuum. What we are witnessing is “bad religion” as the catalyst for a series of political movements grounded in one theology or another. The Zionists and radical Orthodox Jews have centuries of oppression and utter homelessness that have shaped their modern theology. The writings and attitudes of Qutb and others that grew up in the era of painful modernization ushered in during the twentieth century have shaped much of the fundamentalism seen in Islamic groups. And the fusing of biblical literalism with western rationalism has led to uniquely western Christian fundamentalism.

If, in fact, the case for fundamentalism is built upon a religious foundation, then that is where the work must be done to counter fundamentalism. “Sojourners” is a modern Christian group dedicated to social justice. Jim Wallis, editor and chief of their publication, recently spoke out about fundamentalism. He had this to say:

“Fundamentalism, it is often said, is taking religion too seriously. The answer, in this view, is to take it less seriously. That conventional wisdom is wrong. The best response to fundamentalism is to take faith *more* seriously than fundamentalism sometimes does. The best response is to critique by faith the accommodations of fundamentalism to theocracy and violence and power and to assert the vital religious commitments that fundamentalists often leave out—namely compassion, social justice, peacemaking, religious pluralism, and I would say democracy as a religious commitment. . .

Conventional wisdom suggests that the antidote to religious fundamentalism is more secularism. That's a very big mistake. The best response to bad religion is better religion, not secularism. The traditions we are looking at are religions of the book, and the key question is, how do we interpret the book? In Christian faith, we have the interpretation of Martin Luther King Jr. and also that of the Ku Klux Klan. Better interpretation of the book, in my view, is a better response to fundamentalism than throwing the book away. . .

Some will say that after Sept. 11 we must keep religion safely relegated to the private sphere. That again is a mistake. The question is not whether religious and spiritual values should inform public discourse, but how...” End quote.

But what can we as Unitarian Universalists do to counter religious fundamentalism in our local, national, and global communities? It isn't helpful to simply reject fundamentalism

as a religious and political force. In fact, modernity will likely win out. But, we can make the transition not so bloody. Davidson Loehr, the minister at First UU Church in Austin wrote a very timely piece that can found in the January 2004 issue of the UU World. In that article Dr. Loehr suggests that liberal religious people are the key to addressing the problem of religious fundamentalism. He states:

“Maintaining both stability and civility, humane content and enduring form, in human societies is an unending dance between the conservative and the liberal impulses in human nature. The fundamentalist role in this dance is quite easy: All you have to do is cling tightly to a few simplistic teachings too small to do justice to the complex demands of the real world. You just have to cling to these, and then pretend that what you have done is honest and noble.

But the task of liberals is much, much harder. To be a liberal, to be an awake, responsive, and responsible liberal—that can take, and that can make, a whole life.”
End quote.

Unitarian Universalists are in the unique position to act as mediators – as a bridge. Before we can move into that kind of role, UUs must not take the arrogant stance that we have the best answer. We must actually practice what we preach. We must really respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Because if we are to draw on the strengths of the modern Unitarian Universalist church, for our mediation tool set, we must learn to appreciate our fundamentalist brothers and sisters. Tolerance is not enough – It is a copout. And it does not appear anywhere in the 7 UU principles. As UU minister Roberta Finkelstein says:

“We are also called to move past contempt and a sense of superiority. One of the basic assumptions of modernity is that progress is essentially linear and uni-directional, and that what comes after is always better than what came before. We tout the advancements of science and technology without taking adequate note of the destruction of the natural environment. We claim the practice of capitalism as a tenet of faith, without taking adequate note of the ways in which the voracious appetite of the first world has degraded the economy of much of the third world.”
End quote.

Today it seems many UU congregations are in conflict over so-called “God talk”. Many UUs remember the protestant Christian roots of our faith. They identify with Arius and his belief in the humanity of Jesus. Still others have come to be UUs because of the humanist movement. And now today we see an influx of alternative spiritual viewpoints that really demonstrate the concept of religious pluralism.

It is easy to understand the conflict we face in our congregations by remembering the logos and mythos of humanity. The science and technology our culture has come to depend on has developed in the environment of the very successful rationalism of western culture. But the effect of this forward-looking, progressive school of thought has been to push our mythos to the sidelines of our psyches. Our culture’s secularization has led to the modern rise of religious fundamentalism. So what we appear to need is not a return to fundamentals in religion, but rather a creative tension between logos and mythos.

That is where Unitarian Universalists come in. We are learning how to take our many members’ beliefs and make them work together. It isn’t just tolerance, but understanding and compassion. Strangely the most resistance to the reintroduction of mythos may be from secular humanists. Those that want more of the mythos simply ask for us all to recognize the “God shaped-hole” we have in our society. What we use to fill that void comes from many places. Many of us have felt the need to reclaim the sacred.

On a personal level, I like to describe myself as a religious humanist. I want very much to be a part of the religious conversation, both in my UU congregation and in society at

large. To me the “God shaped-hole” is filled with humans and human interaction, while for others it may be completely different. The acknowledgement that the sacred – our mythos – has a place in our lives is important. The sacred is a source of awe and has healing power for humanity. It shouldn’t interfere with our logos. Facts and absolutes belong in the realm of the logos and not the mythos. So it will be a constant struggle to keep them in balance. That is our charge. Keep the balance. Help others to find that balance. Where the mythos of religion finds its way into the logos of life, we must strive to keep them from overlapping, but we mustn’t ever again let the mythos be treated as less important than the logos.

KEVIN:

One easy way to include more religious language in our UU world is for us to embrace the Bible, the Torah, and Quran and other religious works as metaphorical and cultural tools. After all, much of the political rhetoric of today, not to mention much of modern culture, has been directly influenced by these religious tomes and their sometimes too-literal interpretation. I often point out to other parents that “If they don’t provide a religious experience for their kids, then the neighbors kids will do it for them.” But this applies to everyone in society - In the words of John Buehrens “if we don’t interpret the Bible, someone will do it for us.” What that means, even for humanists and secularists, is more Biblical literacy. A recent UU World Essay by Buehrens put it this way:

“The influence of the Bible remains pervasive in our culture. It not only functions as authoritative scripture for our largest religious communities, both Christian and Jewish, but its language and stories also still resonate throughout our literature and public rhetoric. Many contentious political debates in our public life—over issues of sexuality, economics, even foreign policy—disguise sharply divergent interpretations of the Bible.

We religious liberals and progressive people too often simply cede our power to opponents when we leave interpretation of our religious heritage—or the meaning of our nation, or authentic “family values”—to the reactionaries, the chauvinists, and the bigots. Biblical fundamentalism and literalism are not authentic faith, but disguised fear, reactions against modernity that violate the Bible’s own spirit, “for the letter kills, while spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6).

All understandings of the Bible are interpretations. But some interpretations are better informed. Some are more useful, edifying, inspirational, or enduring. Some are clearly oppressive, and some are empowering. I say the Bible must be read to liberate—to liberate people, and to liberate the wisdom within the scriptures themselves.”

End quote.

Biblical literacy isn’t just academic study of the Bible, but also an appreciation for the metaphor and symbolism inherent in Biblical stories. Again from John Buehrens:

“I have sometimes used a simple phrase to describe my overarching perspective on life. It’s shaped, I say, by a “biblical humanism.” In using the term “humanist” I am not refusing to think about God or to search for transcendence. I am identifying with a great tradition of critical thinking about the scriptures, going back to the scholars of the Renaissance and Reformation. They approached the Bible as one would any other human text. What they were interested in was uncovering—revealing—the human experience of the Holy, of God, of enduring truth and wisdom lying behind the veil of the ancient texts.

I am not interested in using my critical skills to tear apart or dismiss the religious experience of others in the name of my supposed “scientific” superiority or

cultural modernity. No, I take the term “biblical humanist” from the German Jewish sage Martin Buber. When the Nazi SS came into the home of this great scholar and professor of comparative religion, he was at work on his new translation of the Hebrew Bible into German—the standard one by Luther having contributed to German anti-Semitism. The Nazis demanded that he surrender all his “subversive literature.” Buber handed them his Hebrew text of the Bible. “Here,” he said, “is the most subversive book in the house”. End quote.

There is a direct correlation between learning about, and truly appreciating, other religions, and the richness of our interconnected web of existence. So where do we go from here? Davidson Loehr put it this way:

“When liberal visions work, it's because they have kept one foot solidly in our deep territorial impulses with the other foot free to push the margin, to expand the definition of those who belong in “our” territory.

When liberal visions fail, it is often because they fail to achieve just this kind of balance between our conservative impulses and our liberal needs.

Over the past half century, many of our liberal visions have been too narrow, too self-absorbed, too unbalanced. This imbalance has been a key factor in triggering recent fundamentalist uprisings. When liberals don't lead well, others don't follow. And when society doesn't follow liberal visions, liberals haven't led.” End quote.

We must recognize the modern influence of religious fundamentalism while understanding its historical and cultural underpinnings. We must do this so that we as a religious community can represent a way to remain connected to our western logos while showing that mythos can be a healing tool when we properly embrace it. Nourishing both essential halves of our psyche and keeping them in balance is our challenge. A church without mythos has its own God-shaped hole. Don't be afraid to be religious – both here and outside the church walls. It is a difficult thing to ask for many UU's. We all have our own religious strengths and weaknesses. But to be an effective response to religious fundamentalism, we need to embark on a religious journey. And I can think of no better spiritual community in which to embark on such a journey.

Closing Hymn: Let It Be – Beatles (Insert to Order of Service)

Closing words (Kevin):

Our closing words today are from a piece called “Soul Medicine” by Suzanne Meyer

“Some people think that religion is like a warm bath. It's supposed to “make you feel comfortable and good all over all the time—“Calgon, take me away!” But in fact, authentic religion is often more like a cold shower or a wake-up call to the soul. Sometimes it is necessary for your religious community to disturb you, shake you up, or prick your conscience. Part of a congregation's ministry is prophetic. The prophetic ministry reminds us that we don't always live up to our best ideals. The church exists not to make us comfortable, but to teach us how to comfort. The church exists not to maintain the status quo, but to transform lives and institutions.”