

THE MARRIAGE OF REASON AND FAITH**Gary Stricharz****May 5, 2019****UU Area Church at First Parish in Sherborn**

Have you ever been on a walk in the woods when you had to cross a stream on uneven rocks or wobbly logs? You lean one way to place the first foot down, then shift your weight to place the other, wavering side to side, always uncertain about keeping your balance and fearing a spill and wet shoes, or worse. It's not an experience that we seek out, but we need to pass it to cross the stream and continue our journey.

This situation may be a metaphor for our Unitarian Universalist struggle to find the balance between reason and faith. Reason is marked by the intellectual exercise of understanding and conceptualizing our experiences of the world. It's how our brains operate to insure our survival. Faith, on the other hand, is the expression of our spiritual relationship to ourselves, others and the Universe. Faith is a different way of finding meaning.

There is a widespread notion that intellectual understanding is incompatible with holding faith. As Archie Bunker declared, "Faith is believing what any damn fool knows ain't so." Our Puritan forbearers (and many present-day religious Fundamentalists) taught that all truth was revealed in the Bible. Reason was an exercise in human hubris, a trick of the devil devised to lead people to sin and away from salvation. Since human beings were inherently depraved, due to Adam's Original Sin, except for a very few of the "Elect", public piety, including a church "confession" that included an experience of revelation with Christ, was essential in order to prove to the community of Puritans that one was not among the damned. (At Sherborn we no longer have that requirement.) The progressive shift away from that unquestioning Biblical faith and towards a rational approach that embraced science and Reason, and that questioned every assumption, was one hallmark of Liberal Religion, particularly Unitarianism, through the late 18th through the nineteenth century. As a reaction to the expressive emotionality of several

Great Awakenings, led by itinerant ministers who re-ignited the Calvinist doctrine of human depravity, Unitarian ministers fled to the extremes with rational thinking. So much so that one of our leading ministers, Henry Whitney Bellows, preached, in *The Suspense of Faith*, that we had fallen prey to the god of the intellect and lost the animating passion that is essential for a viable religion. And he was not the only or the last to observe that Unitarianism was often based more on an exercise of the mind than a passion of the heart.

But the pendulum seems to be swinging back towards a recognition, indeed, a yearning for spirituality in our worship. Yet I think we are still struggling to find the balance between Reason and Faith. We uphold the principle of a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning in our lives, without being tied to any creed- we are free to think of truth, and faith, as broadly as we dare. And we also recognize the mystery that Creation holds. So how can we find ways to connect the two?

This morning I’m going to share with you my path to faith that leads directly through reason, grounded in a scientific understanding of the world and ourselves.

Some of you may know that I am a scientist – I study the nervous system and pain- and I’m also a chaplain, primarily to inpatient cancer patients and their families. My neuroscientist colleagues ask “Gary, how can you be a rational scientist and also practice religion, be a person of faith?” My answer is an emphatic “How can I not?”

Albert Einstein, probably the best-known scientist of the past century, said that there are only two ways of apprehending the Universe: *either everything is a mystery, or nothing is a mystery*. Einstein opted for the “everything is mystery” choice. And so do I. And here’s my heartfelt reasoning, and my message to share with you today.

Mechanistic, reductionist science describes our mental functions – perception, memory, emotion- all the aspects that identify our conscious (and sub-conscious) selves, as resulting from neurochemical activity. (And, honestly, this is the only “lecture” part of the sermon.) Electrical impulses and synaptic communication in our bodies and brain account for the basic *experience of knowing and being*. There’s solid, reproducible

evidence that supports this broad idea, and the more we learn about these mechanisms the better we understand *how* we think and feel.

But maybe you're thinking, "there must be more than that, that you and I are more than a system of electro-chemical reactions." And I believe you are right. The scientific, mechanistic understanding of one's self is necessary, but not sufficient to know our full identity, our complete selves. There must be more to *being* a person.

I want to share a story about my own struggle between "science" and "faith". One evening, in the first weeks of my first chaplaincy internship, I was visiting a young mother, and she was sitting up in her bed, in a very pretty nightgown, not one of those hospital johnnie gowns, and not looking like your average sick patient. She told me she was awaiting test results that would show the type of cancer that she had; one form was treatable, and the other was not. She shared that she had two little boys at home, and that she was worried that her husband would not care for them as well as she did, with patience and love. We talked about her emotional and spiritual resources, her church community and her family, conducting the prescribed "spiritual assessment". Towards the end of the visit I asked if there was anything I could do for her, and, as often happens, she asked me to pray for her. *And then I totally bungled it.* First, I couldn't remember her name, and had to ask her to remind me. So she lost any confidence and hope of getting help from God through me. Next, I could not chase her medical options out of my mind, and I was *saying* a prayer for her but my scientist mind was *thinking*, "if she has X type of cancer then her chances of surviving are close to zero, and how can an objective scientist like me honestly pray for a good outcome when it is so unlikely?". And I knew right then and there that I was not praying, I was thinking. I left the room feeling like a failure and a fraud.

Later that night I was driving home on the Mass Pike, in the rain, and just as I reached the Natick exit, suddenly I began to shake, to tremble, and I began to weep, and I cried out, cried out to God to help this young woman. I called out, to wherever and everywhere that God is, and to whatever God is – without caring anything about definitions- called out not for some medical miracle but for love, and strength, and trust and all those powers that might help ease her suffering, in whatever plight she found

herself. And then I **knew**, *not through my head but in my heart*, that *God is that experience of **faith** that is the source of love*, for and with us and between us. And I trusted that God would use me well as a chaplain.

And I have felt blessed to be so used. To be in relationship. To care for others and my self, together. This is a gift that is offered to each of us, to *understand* ourselves and others with our minds, using our intuition and our emotional intelligence, and guiding our minds with the love that empathy draws from our hearts. This way is what I feel is the pathway of our faith.

But then, what does “faith” mean to us? Certainly not the unquestioning acceptance of Scripture, sermon or prayer. Can we Unitarian Universalists find an element in our religious identity that supports what we’d accept as calling “Faith”? Is there something that we feel, that we know in our hearts, that we carry as an “article of faith” and that supports the meaning of our existence? The Puritans taught that humans were inherently depraved (due to Adam’s Original Sin); the only way to show the Community of Saints that one was freed of this depravity and “naturally” sinful. Both Unitarians and Universalists rejected this view of human nature. The oft repeated line is that Unitarians believed that humans were too good to be damned and the Universalists believed that a loving God was too good to condemn human sinners. And I think that our Principles contain the statements that support those faith statements; *we affirm the worth and dignity of every person; we promote the right of conscience and use of the democratic process* (everyone has an equal vote in decisions that affect the Community), *we support the free search for truth and meaning*, that is, REASON- conducted with love. If we distill all this down to one belief, it is that we humans are largely good and that by taking responsibility for seeking truth and actively advancing our Principles we will make the world a better place to live in. For everyone.

A favorite ritual of mine in chaplaincy is the blessing of stem cells just before they are transplanted into a cancer patient. I serve on a cancer ward at my request, because it allows me enough visits to establish relationship, with patients who are in a challenging time of life. I meet with the patient before the transfusion to learn about her

journey to this time and place, her families, his deep hopes and worst fears. Her religious beliefs and the source of her faith. Patients usually share this generously and trustingly. The nurse brings the bag of cells into the room, and I place it in the patient's hands, inviting all present to reach in and touch the bag, to lay their hands on this miracle of medicine. Of new beginning. Of hope for ending disease and restoring life fully. Blessing stem cells is a marriage ceremony between faith and science; the medical miracle is accompanied by words, thoughts, touches, that move the heart of the patient, the family present, the nurse, and certainly, of me.

My friends, we are not separate individuals, but are always in relationship. Our Unitarian Universalist Principles are a *covenant that guides us about how to be in relationship*, as congregations and, by inference, as individuals. So, don't we need to include how relationship affects who we are at any time, how relationship shaped how we have become who we are, and how our anticipation of future relationship influences how we think and behave in the present? And, I've wondered if our evolution as a species has always been influenced by relationship. From the very Beginning.

The Biblical creation story, and those creation stories of other ancient and Native American cultures, describe a creator, or creative force, that brings order out of chaos. That establishes relationships. Modern physics looks at the structure of matter and identifies relationships, forces and energy among elementary particles and celestial bodies. And we are all built from these. Every**thing** we know, even as elaborate as our neurochemical "selves", is fundamentally in relationship.

And what I find miraculous is that we express this essence of relationship in our very being. In how we are with the world and with each other. We can choose to view it from a scientific explanation standpoint, AND we can apprehend it with the awe of mystery, that we care about each other, that we act together, in community, with an embrace of belonging that continues to grow and evolve.

And so, my friends, to me it seems *impossible* to know only with our brains how the world is constructed and operates. Impossible to know how life evolved and how we think and feel, without encountering a deeper realization of our essential inter-

connectedness. As Mary Oliver says, in this morning's reading (Bone), "Though I play at the edges of knowing, truly I know our part is not knowing, but looking, and touching, and loving, which is the way I walk on, softly, through the pale-pink morning light." May we walk out into the world this morning, lightened by the knowledge and faith in the goodness of our being and the rightness of our love.

Amen and may it be.