

THROUGH THE WORLD TO THE SACRED
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[Expanded version for those interested]

This morning's sermon will attempt to weave together pieces of my spiritual autobiography and a development of or argument for my current faith. Although appearing initially self-indulgent, I hope to trace a path that will already be familiar to some listeners as similar to their own paths and to others as at least illuminating the range of UU beliefs. The principal signposts for this development will be, first, secular and then religious Humanism; second, a metaphorical understanding and application of basic Christian theology; and third, my current conviction that life and the universe are sacred, in and of themselves and not because some Divine Power created them. In fact, I shall argue that the words "sacred" and "holy", not only do not depend on God, but are concepts in fact more fundamental than that of "God".

The humanist phase came first and remains basic. My parents both left Protestantism as a result of meeting Darwin's theory of evolution in a university biology class; unfortunately, it took them another fifteen years to find UUism. My first R.E. experience was a grade-four text entitled *How Miracles Abound*; our teachers were scientists, doctors and engineers, and we looked through microscopes and telescopes, studied stones and crystals, and on blotters planted watercress that germinated in just one week. Our minister in Minnesota, the Rev. George Lapointe (whose son Justin was also to enter the UU ministry), had moved from the Department of Philosophy at Tufts University (near Boston) to a Universalist pulpit. Although a man of great personal warmth and strong, progressive political views, he seemed more comfortable presenting rational, factual argument than any spiritual dimension of faith. On the other hand, the church had a brilliant organist/composer, Orval Ross, and regularly delivered all forms of serious music, on various voices and instruments, of the highest quality.

Throughout my adolescence and first university degree, passed in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where I seconded my parents in founding a Unitarian Fellowship, I was more a non-believer in the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection than I was a believer in anything else at all. As soon as I became capable of religious self-examination, I was bothered by the apparent absence of any positive belief within my UU faith, a concern that I must say has been much alleviated in recent years. So I remained primarily a non-Christian, someone proud of grounding his values and even understanding of ultimate concerns in secular reason.

After ten more years, three countries and two graduate degrees, we found ourselves in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where the Rev. Norman Naylor helped me think in terms of "religious humanism". But I remained dissatisfied at some deeper level, both intellectually and spiritually. I had long ago come up with the mantra that, while Humanism was a great — indeed, the essential — place to start, it was a hell of a place to finish! I asked myself such questions as: if my faith were really just a philosophy, why did I go to church? if earth-bound science and human-based ethics were all there were, what was the point or purpose of life? was there meaning to life if no higher power gave

it any? if intelligent, well-educated and ethical people, in overwhelming numbers over two and a half millennia, believed in a supernatural force and in revealed sacred texts, who was I — who were we Humanists — so impertinently to diverge from their paths? Somehow, something significant and valuable had to be buried underneath the literal words of sacred texts.

But I could not give up my faith in science and reason. Recent converts to UUism in the 1950s through '70s frequently confessed that the intellectual criticism of their religion came early but the leap of faith into Humanism was so frightening and momentous that it took several more years. Learning to live without God, or at least without Christ, intimidated them; surely they'd end up in Hell! I eventually came to realize that the leap of faith in the opposite direction — that is, from Humanism back into religious belief — was just as frightening as from faith to disbelief. I found many Humanists actually afraid to depart from or add to science, to trust hardly even our emotional feelings, let alone something one might call the spirit, and to add a non-rational, non-secular or non-material apprehension to our lives. It wasn't a question of abandoning reason, but of attempting, rather, to supplement it.

Today, I still cannot abandon reason, criticism and science. Not only do I feel great confidence in their certainties and even in their questions and ambiguities, but I thrill with pride at UUism's determination to hold nothing so sacred that it's beyond criticism or satire and to treat all matters as both earnest and hilarious. Our seven principles have taught me, among other things, that the process of religious search is essential, that the manner of seeking understanding must be secular and critical, not at all dependant on some other-worldly revelation, even if a sense of the spirit remains active. The failure of most religions is just as much about how the beliefs are reached and discussed as about what those beliefs are.

But at the end of all our solid and careful processes, what have we Humanists learnt about ultimate questions, what do we know, in what of form and substance do we believe? At least we know that the Universe does not require a Creator and that human destiny is in earth-bound hands, and these are great truths. But is this enough if one wishes fully to understand the human predicament? And if it's enough, why is Humanist self-doubt so often shown by our intolerance of opinions originating in the spirit and of those who speak of God, even if these spiritualists and deists or theists belong to our church? After all, our 16th-century Unitarian beginnings were solidly based on biblical theism and remained so for many of us well into the 20th century.

My next step in this spiritual search was challenging, fascinating and sometimes exhilarating, but I am glad to have eventually (and recently) left it behind. Christians assert, among other things, that they see God through Christ Jesus, that the Divine Father sent His Divine Son, not only to atone for human sins, but also to help humans find and know their Lord. Christianity is the only religion to claim that, in Jesus Christ, a wholly divine being became a wholly historical individual. While I could never accept these claims as literal truth, I began to discern in the minds of many who remained "Christian" — and I began myself to consider — that, as metaphors, such ideas seemed to offer significant help towards understanding human nature, the miracles of the natural world, the process of history, and the apprehension of the ultimate mysteries of existence. Twenty-five hundred years of theological study should not be written off as completely mistaken! So I devoted the middle years of my life to searching out the

analysis and interpretation that might lie underneath the surface literalism. I am certainly not the first observer to regret the biblical fundamentalism of many of my fellow humanists, who feel they must interpret the Bible literally so that they can the more easily reject it!

For starters, the Jewish faith believes that God guides, indeed acts through, history. As well, I found intellectually intriguing the notion that God became Human and so revealed Himself as something historically tangible. If we used this idea as a metaphor, would it help us understand ourselves and our place in the Universe? Life itself and all human affairs are divine because they act out God's intentions, and if they are studied with care and reverence, we can gradually reach an essential understanding of our earthly predicament, not to mention of the nature of God. God's becoming a palpable historical datum indicates, even without the additional issue of atonement and redemption, how deeply we should treasure our existence. As a professional historian, I was of course flattered to think that the study of history could be considered an essential undertaking, since capital "H" History was one of God's three ways of revealing Herself and Her intentions — the Bible and the scientifically accessible Natural World being the other two.

On the other hand, I saw immediately how Christianity also betrayed important Jewish insights, in at least two ways. One was this very assertion that a human prophet was God Himself. By making God closer and more palpable through this manifestation in human form, Christians broke the second Commandment, the one about graven images. The invisible and transcendent Deity, never seen and who would answer probing questions by the hardly useful statement "I am that I am", was now presented, not only as an image in people's minds, but as an icon on crucifixes and in painting and sculpture. The intellectual challenge to understand and the spiritual challenge to love this invisible and intangible God, which Moslem theology was to reassert, suddenly became, through Christian doctrine, deceptively easier. The leap of faith was thereby narrowed (even as it was in another sense widened — namely, by the counter-scientific aspect of this same doctrine of Incarnation).

The second betrayal was also ironic. The doctrine that God had become incarnate in History and Nature seemed to reaffirm the unity of all reality — in fact, transcendence and immanence were intimately brought together, — whereas Christianity, admittedly with the help of Greek philosophy, actually drove a dualistic wedge between this world and the other, faith and science, flesh and spirit, good and evil, reason and feeling, male and female, etc., etc. Like most religions, Judaism believed in the wholeness of the world (a position which to my knowledge Islam did not reassert), but Christianity effectively divided it.

While I am here, may I also point to another uniqueness of Christianity, another doctrine shattering wholeness? This is the belief in the sexual innocence of Jesus. No other religious leader is held to have denied himself sexual pleasure and long-term commitment to a beloved other, one of the central ambiguities of all human experience. Ironically, no other religious founder has been so overtly a feminist, but Christ's virginity — unfortunately claimed to be a virtue — drove a wedge between males and females, and gave Christianity a uniquely neurotic attitude towards sex and the erotic!

I have spent hours trying to unpack this God/Human doctrine and even a few studying the Bible. Thereby, I have come to believe that, if more people actually read

the Bible, fewer people would believe in it. Nonetheless, I'm convinced that one of the most important potential contributions of UUism to the religious understanding of today's world would be a biblical criticism drawing on our particular perspectives. The Bible is basic to three world-wide religions (the Qu'ran being largely derived from it) and is thereby fundamental to almost all Western, African and Southeast Asian cultures. Furthermore, its appeal continues to bind many potential UUs to their Jewish or Christian heritage. Is there any religious group that undertakes a Biblical criticism, not only employing scientific and historical principles (which the best Christian scholars have long done), but also applying secular or humanist presuppositions? I'm not aware of any.

Although I continued not believing in God, I found that using the word "God" filled many gaps in conception and communication that no other word or phrase could fill so easily. This does not require any of the previous definitions of God, whether anthropomorphically literal, abstractly philosophical, or nebulously spiritual. It requires merely reflective distance, the recognition of mystery, and the humility of embracing the sacred. Perhaps, it's accepting God as a process rather than as an entity, as a verb rather than a noun. I have no trouble defining unexpected and gratuitous occasions for happiness as among "God's blessings", not because I believe that some actual Divinity deliberately favoured me or one of my friends, but because I know of no better way to recognize how rare, precious and unearned such blessings are. I'm equally willing to speak of disasters or bereavement as "the will of, or an act of, God" — though never as "God's wrath or judgement".

If one turned to various biblical stories, one might find that the story of Adam and Eve, properly interpreted, helps us understand human drive and the human predicament. Moses teaches us about vision and determination, as well as the founding of new societies; David and Bathsheba, about temptation, seduction and treachery; Ruth, about immigration and assimilation; Isaiah, about peace, love and co-operation as social ideals; the disagreement between the epistles of Paul and James over faith and predestination vs. good works and free will, how fundamental to all questions of morality such a divergence is. Often, the stories and their messages are no better, or no worse, than the Greek myths or the Grimms' fairy tales. Sometimes, they're only useful as analogies and metaphors, but almost always (like poetry or art), they are a way of knowing, a way of understanding, that is irreplaceable.

Contrary to popular belief, the Bible is not worth much as an ethical teacher. Of course, its moral ambiguity helps the thoughtful reader explore ethical issues and formulate moral questions, just as so much other great literature also does. But most people take away from the Bible the ethical judgements they initially brought to it. Is God judgmental and even wrathful, or is She merciful and compassionate? Is the Hammurabi injunction about eyes and teeth an upper limit of punishment not to be exceeded, or is it a minimum requirement definitely to be enforced? Are we really supposed to love our enemies, which is actually the only unique moral injunction in Christianity, or are we to smite them with unrelenting force, such as other passages even in the Christian Testament exhort? What is really meant by the statement that God helps those who help themselves? When I finally read the Christian Testament from end to end, not many summers ago, I was deeply shocked by its strident and persistent anti-Judaism, its hostility to females and disrespect for the family (which in

context went way beyond what I had formerly realized), and its frequent exhortations to harsh revenge and stern punishments. I now regret having so strongly advised all my students to read it!

Furthermore, I finally discerned that unnecessary, logically inconsistent and violent propositions lay at the core of Christian doctrine. My argument unfolds after this fashion: First, I ask why Adam and Eve's disobedience was such a grave sin? Theological discussion has focussed on the immoral inclinations and insubordinate psychology of human beings, but I think we should demand an account of a God who would be as deeply offended as is usually depicted. Even if we emphasize the disobedience (rather than the curiosity — my personal preference), God's responding anger seems wholly out of proportion to the crime; it suggests very little divine ego-strength. Had they not gained possession of the knowledge of good and evil, our putative progenitors would never have been "made in the image of God", since such knowledge is central both to any sophisticated concept of a Deity and to an earthly, human existence of freedom and responsibility. Furthermore, such knowledge is essential for any worship by one being of another if we are to presume they can understand one another's central concerns, while our possessing this knowledge neither challenges nor diminishes the authority, power or dignity of God. God's injunction would be better seen as a test of Adam and Eve's potential to be humans of spunk and curiosity, lest they be unworthy of "His" creation.

Second, regardless of how grave this Original Sin was held to be, the Bible allots God several centuries, perhaps millennia, to figure out an appropriate atonement. That the Crucifixion episode was the best atonement He could come up with demonstrates rather dramatically that He possesses less imagination and more brutality than are the lot of most human beings.

Third, the terrible violence of the Crucifixion (not merely the normal, historical, Roman form of execution, but the extra suffering and critical significance of the Passion with which Christian theology invests the story) launches Christianity onto its historical path with a vengefulness, a brutal violence, and an uncompromising notion of justice (or, here, of justification) that are strikingly at odds with the Saviour's message, and the Church's doctrine, of love, compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation. The Passion and Crucifixion cast grave doubts on the claim that God so LOVED the world that He gave his only begotten son so that we may have eternal life. Is it any wonder that the history of Christianity has been as characterized by dogmatism, intolerance, revenge, punishment, hatred and violence as it has been by openness, liberty of conscience, tolerance, charity, forgiveness, reconciliation and love?

This line of argument led me to the conclusion that the average Christian so often comes up morally short, not because the Sermon on the Mount and related injunctions are idealistic and unachievable, but because these injunctions are transmitted to us through a story of Divine violence and vengefulness that appear to justify less edifying attitudes and activities. Put in Christian terms but opposed to Christian assertion, the New Testament is as brutal as the Old. Furthermore, the Truth and Significance of the theological assertions have historically led to egregious rationalizations of all sorts, most of which reduce to some form of arguing that the end justifies the means. (Remember, "to justify" means "to make right with God"!) Everything from lying and fraud to murder and war have been justified through such

rationalizations, whereas the straight-forward moral calculations that an atheist or humanist would have to make usually lead to more ethical conclusions and actions.

It is for these reasons I suggest that Jesus obscures (or is made to obscure) our religious quest rather than illuminates it and that even the God of this or any other institutional religion is not much more helpful. Both the concrete apparatus of church liturgy and morality's need for divine sanction come between human beings and our search for the sacred and the ethical. If we need to imagine what we worship, an abstract God may be useful, but too tangible a God merely imposes a distracting and impeding layer. If our worship, however, aims to apprehend directly that which is sacred and holy, then let's go directly to Life and the Creation that sustains it.

I find Jesus, even considered only as a prophet, not always an asset in critiquing socio-political activities and in formulating personal morality, not because some of his exhortations as recorded in the Bible are immoral and unwise (though some are!), but because even the virtuous and judicious injunctions, especially as filtered through the historical Church, get in the way of thinking for ourselves. Humans we are told are free, but we should also be responsible; actions are not right or wrong because Jesus or some church said so, but because they are helpful and appropriate or unhelpful and inappropriate in a given circumstance, as compared with similar circumstances in other times and places. (Ironically, Jesus himself pointed this way when he reduced all the commandments to just two.)

Any humanist can, and often does, reject Jesus on grounds of scientific incredulity, sometimes because of the uncertainties surrounding the biblical record, but the rejection is solely secular, sometimes smart-ass and often superficial — at least it was in my case. That is, Jesus is written off before his story and message have been thoroughly, critically and empathetically investigated. Without such an effort we miss what the prophet Jesus of Nazareth has to offer us during his life, not by his death. In short, I am suggesting that Jesus as the Christ should be rejected on religious grounds. Indeed, my objections to Christianity in general have become religious and ethical and are no longer merely grounded in the scientific objections of my youth.

That experience was one of the factors leading me to my present position and third signpost. In sharp contrast to the Christian claim that the Incarnation and Resurrection help lead us to God, I now believe that Christ obstructs our view of God and gets in the way of any properly religious worship or ethics. In contrast to the general Occidental religious view that God must be worshipped as the Creator for us to develop the true notion of the sacred and a proper attitude towards worship, I now believe that even the notion of a Deity can obstruct our view and hamper our efforts. But these are very recent insights, and before I try to develop or apply them, I should go back to earlier changes in my personal theology.

I'd like to say that this apprehension of the sacred began with childhood wonder about butterflies, cats, x-ray machines and avalanches. And I suppose it did, though if we stop there, we're left with only curiosity, feelings and aesthetics as potentially religious urges. Increasingly significant for me was the passage, read earlier in the service, that I had found not long after Bernie Loomer wrote it in 1987. Let me reproduce it here:

Why deify this interconnected web of existence by calling it "God"? Why not simply refer to the world and to the processes of life? ... The world is God because it is the source

and preserver of meaning; because the creative advance of the world in its adventures is the supreme cause to be served; because even in our desecration of our space and time within it, the world is holy ground; and because it contains and yet enshrouds the ultimate mystery inherent in life itself.

“The Size of God,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* (1987): 41-42

This passage has become the most important series of words in the mature formation of my religious understanding. It is not attempting to define religion or the causes of religion (e.g, awe before the world, the joy and surprise of living, and fear of dying) — that is, some institutional undertaking created and controlled by humans yet claiming to be driven by God’s Word. It is not getting at some actual “God”, but at the essence of Meaning, something more important than a Deity, even while only the word “God” serves to name it. One of the creators of what is called Process Theology, Loomer does not separate the Creator from the Creation; he sees them as the same thing: as the Creation evolves, it serves as its own Creator.

Bernard Loomer brings together the physical universe and the evolving processes of life; a grasp of both the ultimate meaning and the purpose of existence; the recognition that we waste, pollute and destroy that which should be most precious; and the assertion that the mystery of it all is to be found only here, in the world and its evolution, both obscured by mists. There is some tautological reasoning, some circularity, in Loomer’s presentation, but it rises above those criticisms by its clarity, poetry, and energy.

Nonetheless, the intellectual strength of his words for at least ten years remained at the level of reason and metaphor — I have no idea why: the Humanist’s fear of both letting go and committing to? or some profundity in the words greater than my ability to absorb them? Only recently have I grasped with great force the notion that “sacred-talk” was more important than “God-talk” and that, as a Humanist, I was as uncomfortable initially with one term as I was with the other. The sheer majesty of the world and its workings is too overwhelming to be merely described, or even just wondered at; in some sense, we have to let ourselves be conquered by the magnitude of its bulk, power and mystery. The meaning of life is not to be found in some existentialist proposition that it’s simply whatever each of us makes of it; somehow, we have to accept and affirm that life has meaning in its very existence, in its collectivity of all sentient beings, and that it has meaning for the tautological reason that, outside of life, there is no meaning: that is, life and meaning are one and the same. Our adventure takes place on holy ground, in sacred time, amidst mysteriously divine circumstances.

In recent years, the following things came together for me: the correspondence between Loomer’s passage and our seven UU principles and, in addition, the overwhelming reality of the importance of life within transitory time and space. At the same time, the following thoughts became clear and striking: that the traditional assertions of institutional religion usually come between human beings, on the one hand, and both the sacred and the moral, on the other (that is, ironically, given the word’s etymology, even liturgy can create a wall rather than a path); and that Jesus as Christ is an obstacle to, not a vehicle for, reaching an adequate apprehension of the sacred.

The reason my current conception is so powerful for me is that it came after

years of wrestling with the Christian doctrine and its biblical text in the belief that important insights lay behind or beneath words that I found literally incredulous or absurd. After all, some UUs call themselves Christians, and many more regard Jesus as an ethical prophet of uniquely special status; many UUs would exalt other spiritual and ethical exemplars to the same level. While all of these individuals should be admired, they all have their faults, and none of them should displace our own responsibility to think for ourselves.

In summary, the world is sacred, I submit, because no description of Nature and Life is adequate that refuses to admit the words “holy” and “sacred” into its vocabulary. The processes at play in our universe are larger than rational comprehension and always will be. Meaning is already within the basic reality of existence, and morality must be discerned directly from the context of action examined within our previous experience. All science, history and literature (even so-called sacred literature) may be invoked to challenge our minds and to give resonance to our tentative thoughts, but the enterprise and the stage on which it is enacted are too sacred for any vicarious atonement to substitute for and wipe away our own responsibility and too sacred to be apprehended from either a wholly secular or a so-called revealed description. Its holiness is in our own hands.