

UNCOUPLING: OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

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Rembert Stokes

I have noticed that this congregation loves affirmations. As soon as someone starts an affirmation, the congregation gets very quiet and attentive. Like a spiritual Peeping-Tom. So I decided to prepare these remarks like a greatly expanded affirmation to see how long I can hold your attention.

I was born in Greenville, South Carolina in 1930. At that time and place, you would almost assuredly be born Baptist. And I was. There were Baptist churches everywhere: the First Baptist Church, the Second Baptist Church, the Third Baptist Church. None wanted to be the 19th Baptist Church so they named them after streets. We attended the Earle Street Baptist Church. I think I learned to count from these church names. I thought the numbers were 1, 2, 3, Earle., Westside, Main, and so forth.

Going to church was part of my family's Sunday ritual. It came just before the fried chicken dinner. I was enrolled in Sunday school and collected a chest full of perfect attendance bars that I wore like a proud little soldier.

But I don't remember much of what was taught. It didn't make a lasting impression on me either positively or negatively. What I do know is that it was not strong enough to hold me in the Baptist Church.

When I was in my teens, my Episcopalian friends needed another basketball player on their team for the citywide Church Boys League. So I jumped ship with no regrets. I learned that the Episcopalian Church had an ingenuous way of making teenage boys feel important. They made them acolytes and let them participate in the Sunday morning service.

And yes, I became an acolyte. Not just an acolyte, but a super-acolyte. I would arrive at church early, set out the vestments, shape the candle-wicks, lead the procession with the cross, light the candles, and kneel on a tile altar until I ruined my knees. I thought the church could not run without me. And believe it or not, I actually thought of going into the ministry. Of course, I didn't. The way I figure, I saved many souls by NOT going into the ministry.

What spared me was doubt. Skepticism. Intellectual integrity. I was having serious doubts about the creedal statements. I was moving my lips but not saying the words. Slowly, more and more things made less and less sense and I was moving away from the theology of the church.

Other people did not seem to be disturbed. The very people I loved, trusted, and depended on the most seemed to believe in the church doctrine: my mother and father, my aunts and uncles, the parents of my friends. Everywhere in my hometown there were

churches. There were more churches than all the schools, hospitals and parks put together. Surely this meant something. But it just didn't make sense to my young, questioning mind. Could I be the only one doubting this established institution?

Later I learned that many of these people were giving lip-service to the church. They too had doubts but continued attending church out of cultural respectability.

It was in my freshman year of college that an Episcopalian minister told me that none of the creed was rational. That it all had to be accepted on faith.

This happened about the same time that my engineering professors were telling me the opposite. They said that my chosen profession – mechanical engineering – was about designing products that could jeopardize people's lives. There was no room for intuition, hunches or second-guessing. It was a rational business. Calculations had to be made to three decimal places and then a safety factor had to be added for extra protection.

These two worlds simply could not co-exist for me. Personal integrity would not let me embrace the natural laws of science at work and then suspend the same natural laws in a faith-based creed on Sunday. Something had to go. And I had to make a living. I put eating ahead of praying, and left the church completely for the duration of my undergraduate experience.

Decoupling was not nearly as easy as it sounds. The intellectual part was easy. But as many of you know, the emotional part was difficult. How could it be that an institution based on these precepts could have lasted so majestically through the centuries? How could it attract so much devotion? How could it inspire so much art and music? There was always the lingering suspicion that maybe – just maybe – these notions of heaven and hell, of judgment and life-after-death were true. Did others know something I didn't? Who was I to challenge such a pillar of Western Civilization?

It was not until my first year of employment at Bell Telephone Laboratories that I found the Unitarian Church. It was like a breath of fresh air. It encouraged questioning. There were others like me I knew I was home. That was 57 years ago.

Intellectually and emotionally I knew that rejecting a theology should not be done arbitrarily. It should be based on some meaningful criteria. For me, that came with the distinction between a belief system and a religion.

A belief system is a systematic set of answers that is offered to provide comfort and gain loyalty to an authority or a proposition. The answers pretend to have knowledge they do not have. Belief systems are strident and hostile to others who do not accept them. They are closed and have boundaries, drawing a line where thinking stops. As such, they lack mystery and do not invoke a creative response in their followers. And they occur in all walks of life, not just theology.

True religion, by contrast, is open ended. It provides a sense of wonder in the contemplation of mystery. Through unbounded religion, "we may begin to acquire the art

of seeing the unknown everywhere, especially at the heart of our most emphatic certainties. We may enter into a new mode of being.”

In his recent book entitled *The Religious Case Against Belief*, James Carse half jokingly said, “God doesn’t move us by telling us the facts. He moves us by pain and contradictions. He’s given me a lack of understanding. Not answers, but questions – an invitation to marvel. The challenge is not to make religion intelligible, but to use knowledge religiously.” James Carse has directed the New York University’s Religious Studies Program for the last thirty years.

For me, true religion is never fixed. In the Hebrew faith, rabbis to this day debate the meaning of the Torah. In the first three centuries of Christianity, there were no less than 154 different sects that believed they had the true meaning of Jesus’ teachings. Early Christianity was fluid, probing...questioning.

It was not until 325 AD – about 300 years after Jesus’ death, longer than the entire history of the United States -- that the Emperor Constantine declared that there was only one Roman Empire with one Emperor and there should be only one Christianity. He forced 218 church Bishops to meet at Nicene – just southeast of his capital at Constantinople -- and hammer out one theology; to politically reduce their living religion into a belief system known today as the Nicene Creed. It was debated for months and resolved by a majority vote that was fiercely opposed by the minority.

One of the opposition groups, the Montanist sect, was so distraught that they went into their church and burnt the building down with themselves inside before they would accept such a Creed. And you thought I was unhappy!

The majority of the dissenters were followers of Arius of Alexandria who believed that Jesus had a natural birth, lived a natural ethical life, preached a profound message of love, sharing and compassion, was executed by the Romans to avoid a political uprising during Passover, suffered as a man and died as a man – no resurrection, no ascension, no salvation, no victory over death. Jesus simply encouraged his followers to shift from a concern for self to a concern for others. And the resulting belief system turned this upside down by making personal salvation the ultimate self- concern. The Arians migrated into central Europe and are associated with the rise of Unitarianism.

The Nicene Creed or any creed, is static, unchanging and unchangeable when presented as divine revelation. By contrast, knowledge is dynamic and expansive. Over time knowledge grows and will undermine all of yesterday’s dogma. Yesterday, virgin birth was an honor extended not only to Jesus, but also to Dionysus and Attis and Alexander the Great, among others. Today, with our knowledge of reproduction, virgin birth is a myth. With Mendel’s Laws of Heredity, only genetic traits, like eye color, can be inherited; acquired behaviors, like the sins of Adam and Eve, cannot be passed from generation to generation. With Pasteur’s Theory of Germs, we know that illness is caused primarily by bacteria, not by being possessed by demons. I strongly recommend anti-biotics over exorcisms.

I believe that the Nicene Creed was created by the fourth-century church fathers in good faith based on the knowledge of their time. . But over time it ends up being a myth that generates fear and guilt in believers and doubters alike and is retained because it provides power and authority for the church. I believe we have moved from a mythical consciousness to a rational, reflective consciousness, still living in mystery, wonder and awe but willing to suspend easy answers.

Learning makes history the graveyard for all gods. Look, there is the tombstone for Zeus, the mightiest of all the Greek gods. And, next to him, appropriately, is his god wife Hera and his god brother Poseidon. And there is Hades, Apollo and Demeter. Look: Bacchus' tombstone is carved with grapes on it. Nice! Over in the Roman section, there lies Mithras, the mighty god of the great 10th Roman Legion. Notice that his birthday is carved in: December 25th. Interesting. And over there are the grave markers for mighty Jupiter, Neptune, Pluto, Mars, Mercury, Cupid and Venus. In the Egyptian section are Aton and Isis and Obiris, the gods of the pharaohs who built great pyramids. All dead! All dead!

And still, look at all the empty burial plots: waiting, just waiting. Let us say a final prayer for all the gods who were once believed in and worshipped. Bless them; they were killed – one and all -- by the sharp sword of knowledge.

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But discarding a belief system doesn't gain you anything. It only returns you to neutral. You are back where you started. You still have the imposing task of finding what you do believe.

Well, in my opinion, it is not enough to simply say I agreed with the Principles and Purposes of the Unitarian-Universalist faith. I do, of course, but there should be more that expresses one's life's journey. So now for the hard work.

First, I believe that we are conditioned to belittle ourselves. We have been conditioned to respect authority: first our parents and elders, then our teachers, our bosses, even a remote and judgmental god with arbitrary rules. We are portrayed as lost sheep needing a Sheppard to lead us. We are told that we are not worthy to pick up the crumbs under the Master's table. I believe that such conditioning has a very dark shadow side that we must address to embrace our strengths and our spirituality.

In Western Philosophy there was the concept of the Great Chain of Being, later associated with the Doctrine of the Divine Rights of Kings. It was a hierarchal structure that put God at the top, followed by the archangels, the angles, then kings, noblemen, then us, the animals and, finally, inanimate objects. We were pretty low on the totem pole.

But things have changed. The divine rights of kings came to an abrupt end when King Charles I in England was beheaded in 1649, followed by the beheading of King Louis XVI in France in 1793. Next, nobility was removed from the Great Chain of Being in the United States when our Constitution forbids any citizen to have a title. And finally, modern

science makes the concept of god, archangels and angles increasingly questionable. And Voila! That brings us to the top of the Great Chain of Being. And now I think we should act that way.

Second, I see people seeking meaning in the wrong places. They seek it in their mates, their children, their grandchildren, their church, their jobs, in sports, in politics. They seek it everywhere but within themselves. Tell me: "Where is the source of your love, your loyalty, your courage, your generosity, your compassion, your inspiration and all your other values?" They don't come from your membership in the P.T.A. or the bowling league or even this church. They come from within you. Tell me: "Can you think of a time when the advice that your conscience gave you was wrong?" As Nelson Mandela said, "Who are we to belittle ourselves?"

When traditional religious people learn that our faith does not have a creed, they always ask, "But to whom do you pray?" Can you see the sub-servant role they have assigned for themselves? In a playful way I would like to say to them: "In a world governed by natural laws, it makes no sense to pray to natural laws. They are not going to change for my benefit." But I don't. And then they say, "What do you believe in?" Now I can and do say, "I believe in life-sustaining principles, not in the supernatural.

I believe in seeking the truth at all costs. The world is far too large, too complex and too dynamic for any one person or any one organization to comprehend all of it. I am all too aware that the truth I hold is limited and spelled with a small letter "t". Yet I cherish the pursuit of truth. I thrill in the excitement of exploration, of questioning, of learning. Because of this, I cannot accept any thesis – whether social, political or religious – that claims to have the final truth. For me, that ranks with the highest level of arrogance and a total lack of humility. Neither do I respect anyone who has given up the excitement of the search in exchange for the comfort of an imagined truth. I firmly agree with Emerson that, "Nothing is at last sacred except the integrity of your own mind." The ultimate dishonesty is lying to one's self.

I believe in acceptance. I try to accept people as they are and the world as it is. I believe that the greatest human need is for acceptance and the greatest human fear is rejection. Each of us needs to have our life validated. We no longer live in a small, tribal community of uniformity. We live in an increasingly complex world of rich diversity. It is my world and I want to enjoy and celebrate that diversity. Therefore, I try to engage the inner person regardless of color, race, gender, nationality, social or political philosophy. I try to meet people constructively where they are and learn from them.

When I asked a friend who had practiced psychiatry for 25 year if he could sum up his understanding of human nature in one sentence, he said, "We all need to be accepted but we are so judgmental."

I believe in achievement. My time on this earth is limited. I do not intend to waste it in the hope of a future life. If I am wrong, I will win twice. Therefore, I am a doer. I get involved. I invest myself in many causes that compliment my values. I enjoy the challenge whether it be studying, inventing, construction, teaching or music. I thrive on seeing

something done well, whether it is someone else's art or architecture, or my own modest achievements. I really don't like idle time, except for that all-important centering process for integrating thoughts into meaningful ideas.

I believe in generosity. I believe that selfishness is a natural instinct and that generosity is an unnatural behavior that has to be learned and reinforced. But we know that the world is a better place where generosity exists. Therefore I try to be generous with my time, my ideas, my help and my resources. It would please me to think I have made a difference in someone's life and leave the world a better place than I inherited. The word that characterizes our lives is abundance, not scarcity. The least I can do is to share the richness and fullness with others.

I believe in freedom; the right to have options. I have come to understand and appreciate the role of spiritual mysticism in the lives of my ancestors who sought answers to life-confronting questions in their pre-scientific era. As time has passed, accumulated knowledge has stripped those beliefs of their vitality. The organized church has become a powerful industry that sustains those mysticisms, and superstitions as a basis of their survival, diverting both energy and resources from the real issues of the day. I believe that I am essentially free of pre-modern theological constraints.

These are my beliefs, but not necessarily yours. I think it is a spiritual mistake for religion to seek a common goal. We have a fetish for wanting to share a universal truth. It is not the conclusion that is religious; it is the pursuit. As James Carse reminds us, "Religion is the living community that is engaged and moved to wonder by a set of mysteries."

If there is anything we have learned from the slow changes in church, state, economics and philosophy, it is this. They all started with top-down, authoritarian orientations with presumed answers. And all these disciplines have been forced to change and improved by the application of liberty, freedom and experimentation. The genius is in having the right process, not the right answers. Answers come and are always superseded. But the availability of liberty, freedom and experimentation is at the heart of all progress. It is the process we should hold sacred, not the temporary results.

So I say to you, do not rush for common answers. There just may be as many religious answers as there are people. Be proud that ours is a faith that has embraced freedom and questioning with tolerance and acceptance. And above all, live in the mystery and enjoy the journey.

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