

Just What Is Atheism?

I lead off today with a story by my friend and colleague in the UU ministry, Rev. Terry Sweetser:

“I was seven years old when I had my first encounter with theology. My mother made a batch of fudge, placed it in the refrigerator and decreed it could not be sampled until after supper. I was not pleased. I contrived every scheme I could imagine to sneak some, but someone always seemed to be lurking around the kitchen.

“At about four o’clock I got what seemed like an unbelievable break. My mother and my sister had to go to the store, leaving me alone for a little while. Mother must have been reading my mind because she gave me a warning on the way out. ‘Just because I’m not here,’ she said, ‘don’t think you’re alone with the fudge. God is watching you.’

“The word ‘theology’ means God study. As they drove off I was studying hard. It didn’t take me long to conclude that I was a seven year old atheist. Boy did that fudge taste good. Unfortunately, for me, mother counted the pieces, and the recount on her return showed a deficit of three. When asked how I could have brazenly taken the fudge in front of God, I said, ‘I don’t believe in God.’ My ever practical Unitarian mother responded while administering my first spanking, ‘It would be in your best interest to act as if God were there.’”

As I pointed out last Sunday in my sermon on prayer, I am pairing today’s sermon topic with the one from last Sunday. Those of you who were here will recall that I was taking on the question of whether or not one could pray if one did not believe in the existence of a Supreme Being. My answer—which some may have bought and some not—was, ‘yes, you can.’

Today I’m taking the next step and asking if one does not believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, and I do not, are there still ways in which the idea, if not the experience, of God can still be meaningful. Again, my answer is ‘yes.’ As a way of getting to my ‘yes’

I want to open with some thoughts on what I consider true atheism to be, and what it is not—which is the title of this sermon itself: “Just What is Atheism?” This sermon is also the one that went to high bidder at last spring’s Auction, who happened to be Wendy MacDougal. She asked if I’d do a sermon on atheism and this is it.

In a rejoinder to his fudge story, Rev. Sweetser has this to say: “The personal God who could legislate justice and control the universe died for me that day, but a passionate interest in what people mean by the idea of God was born. I sense it is a passion most of us share. Unitarian Universalists really get worked up about God. No matter what we believe about God, there is high emotion when we hear God talk. Whether God is there or not, the tension is.”

My own experience in the UU ministry bears out Terry’s observation. We UUs do tend to get a little exercised when it comes to God talk. This shouldn’t be too surprising since a certain number of members and friends come to UU congregations after having negative experiences of one kind or another in the faith in which they were raised; and even hearing the word “God” can bring back some of those experiences. I get that. But since we are, after all, a community of explorers and seekers then included in that exploring and seeking are looking at ways in which the idea of God may or may not be meaningful. Like Rev. Sweetser, I too have what he calls a “passionate interest in what people mean by the idea of God,” particularly since all of those meanings—especially in our UU congregations—are hardly the same. Hence, this sermon.

I’ll try not to make this sound too much like a theology lecture, although some of that will creep in. I’ve also found that then it comes to a God conversation theology and etymology get all mixed in together. Etymology—and I promise not to use that word again—has to do with the study of language and how and why certain words come to mean certain things, as well as how the meanings of words can change over time. “God” is actually a very malleable word, as I hope I can demonstrate.

OK then. I would say that most of what gets termed “atheism” is really nothing more than a rejection of Supernatural Theism, that is to say, God as a willful and intentional Supreme Being who can act in certain ways and cause certain things to happen or not happen. This is a God who personally cares about us and watches

over us and who can also hold us accountable for our misdeeds—like, say, stealing three pieces of fudge. When Terry Sweetser said he was a seven year old atheist he meant he was rejecting the God of Supernatural Theism.

Well, that's one form of atheism but it really doesn't go very far, or get one too far when it comes to theological explorations. In fact, it's a kind of atheism I find to be rather shallow. This is my argument with Richard Dawkins in his book *The God Delusion*. He defines God strictly in terms of Supernatural Theism and does not allow for any other explorations of what the term "God" might mean. He takes one particular understanding of God—granted, a very common one—puts it in a box, blows up the box, and says, in effect, well that's that. And while I agree with Dawkins that the God of Supernatural Theism is a delusion; recognizing that delusion—at least for me—is the beginning point of any kind of theological seeking and exploring and not the end, as Dawkins suggests.

There is, however, what I regard as an authentic and honest kind of atheism which I can fully respect, and even admire, even if I cannot fully embrace it. I find it in the writings of the French philosopher, novelist, and essayist Albert Camus. Indeed it was my first encounter with Camus, in a freshman English class—which was way back in the Paleolithic Age—that gave me an introduction this kind of atheism. I did not, however, recognize it as such at the time, since I was still pretty well entrenched in my very conservative Christianity. But reading Camus' novel *The Stranger* at the age of eighteen planted a seed in my mind which at a later point in my life came to fruition.

The Stranger was the third of three novels that were assigned in my freshman English class. It was preceded by *The Cather in the Rye* and *Lord of the Flies*. So after reading about Holden Caulfield's 16 year old angst ridden wanderings around New York City; and then about a bunch of British choir boys who get stranded on a Pacific Island and who—with a couple of exceptions—turn into a bunch of little savages, we came to the character of Meursault in *The Stranger*.

The Stranger is written in the first person as told by the narrator, Meursault. He tells his story as a flashback. Meursault is a Frenchman who has grown up in Algeria when it was under French rule, as was the case with Camus. In Meursault's case he is in an Algerian jail awaiting his execution for a murder that he more or less stumbled and bumbled into committing, but for which he has

been sentenced to death nonetheless. The novel, as noted, consists of Meursault's rather dispassionate recounting of the events that have led up to his current predicament.

On the last page of the book, with Meursault knowing his time is nearly up, he looks out through the bars over a window in his cell and says, "Gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe." Keep that phrase in mind: "The benign indifference of the universe."

Camus, through his fictional character, is describing here what I take to be an authentic form of atheism. As I said a couple of minutes ago, I did not recognize it as such when I first read the book. It took me a few more years to get it. Camus is saying that we are time bound creatures, living time bound lives which none of us get out of alive; and we live them in a universe that can only regard us with benign indifference. To get it down to brass tacks, this French philosopher is saying that we're just here, and there's nothing or nobody beyond our earthly lives and existence who gives two-hoots about us.

On a sheer literal level the phrase "benign indifference" may seem like oxymoron, since you cannot both show kindness (which is one definition of being benign means) and indifference at the same time. But the way in which Camus puts the two words together does work. He is saying that the universe we are in does not wish us any harm or has any evil intentions towards us—that's the benign part—it just does not care that we are here. And there is nothing, or nobody, within this universe who cares that we are here. We are completely on our own.

In his philosophical essays, moving away from the novel now, Camus calls this stance his principle of The Absurd. By that he means that there is no overarching Meaning (with a capital 'M') or overarching Purpose (with a capital 'P') to our lives. Ultimately we live in an absurd universe. To be sure, however, we can still find a lot of meaning and depth and purpose in our lives over the course of our lives: We find them in the relationships we cultivate, in the people we come to know and love and share our lives with, in the things that inspire us—like great works of art and music and literature, in the uplift we can feel at times from the beauty of nature, in the causes about things we care about and move us to action.

All these things give our lives meaning, deep meaning at times, within this time bound framework within which we have to live. And for Camus, and his adherents, there is no going beyond that and no need to go beyond that. As my personal explorations and my personal journey of meaning went forth I decided that, at least on one level, Camus was right. But I still could not, and cannot, go all the way with him. For what I also came to decide is that, for me, Camus' indifferent universe is a beginning point rather than an end when it comes to spiritual searching and discovery. For contained within this universe is something called Life; and the individual lives we are given to live out over a certain period of time are also part of a larger Flow of Life.

Within this Larger Life there is awe and mystery and wonder. There is the miracle of birth and growth along with the presence, if not the pain, of death. There are connections, both within us and beyond us, that give our personal lives joy and fulfillment; and there is loneliness—sometimes a cosmic loneliness—that brings us face to face with our finitude. This is the life—these are the lives—we all live whether we have any kind of a concept of someone or something called “God” or not.

So where, then, does anything or anyone called “God” come in—if at all? For me it does come down to whether or not Camus was right: Do we live in what is ultimately an empty universe within which we create the meanings that will get us meaningfully through our lives; or—in ways that are only be partially known to us—is there some Greater Meaning with a capital ‘M’ or Greater Purpose with a capital ‘P’ within which these time-bound and earth-bound lives of ours are ultimately grounded. Do we, like Meursault gaze out at an empty universe or are our lives finally anchored in what the theologian Paul Tillich called the “Ultimate Ground of Being.”?

THAT—I would submit—is the real God question. It's not about whether or not there is a Supreme Being who knows who we are and can catch us in our misdeeds—like, say, swiping fudge. It's about whether or not there is any Greater Meaning to our lives that both encompasses and lies beyond the earthly meanings we cultivate and nurture for ourselves.

To put it in personal terms, the reason I cannot go all-in with Camus' empty universe (as much as I respect and admire those who do); or with the Supreme

Being of Supernatural Theism, is because both of these stances—polarities that they are—each of them call for a level of certainty that I can't quite get to. And so I go instead to two other places.

One place is the sense of connection I feel with a Reality greater than myself even if I cannot fully grasp it or specifically identify or name it. Here I rely on the wisdom and insight of the late Rev. Forrest Church who, reflecting upon what I said earlier about the flexibility of God-language, said: "God is not God's name. It is my name for that which is Greater Than All and Present in All." I choose to live *as if* there is such a greater reality, in the absence of knowing for sure; or to use Terry Sweetser's words: "*As if* God were there."

My other, and closely related place, is my acceptance of mystery and a willingness to live within it. I go back to some words I cited last Sunday from yet another of my now deceased UU minister colleagues, the Rev. Gordon McKeeman. For Gordon, as well as for me, any kind of theological exploration takes one to the point of "addressing a Mystery." We address mystery in Rev. McKeeman's words by going to "the end of certainty, to the boundary of all we know, to the rim of uncertainty, to the perimeter of the unknown that surrounds us." This, too, is where I end up—not in Camus' empty universe or in the presence and under the watch of a Supreme Being, but rather at "the perimeter of the unknown that surrounds us." This is where I park my car; and that's good enough for me.

Well, after my references to Camus and Dawkins and Tillich and Terry Sweetser and Forrest Church and Gordon McKeeman—learned gentlemen all—my most appreciative take on this whole topic comes from a woman song writer and singer, Iris Dement and her song "Let the Mystery Be." Ms. Dement was raised in a Pentecostal Church and home in Arkansas. As the words to her song indicate, she's traveled a bit of a ways from there.

You do not want to hear me attempt to sing it, and I'm not about to try but I'll leave with some of its lines:

"Everybody's wonderin' what and where they all came from;
Everybody's worryin' 'bout where they're gonna go when the whole thing's done.
But no one knows for certain, and so it's all the same to me.
I think I'll just let the mystery be.

Some say once you're gone you're gone forever; And some say you're gonna come back.

Some say you'll rest in the arms of the Saviour if in sinful ways you lack.

Some say they're coming back in a garden—Bunch of carrots and little sweet peas.

I think I'll just let the mystery be.

Some say they're going to a place called Glory; and I ain't saying it ain't a fact.

But I've heard I'm on the road to purgatory, and I don't like the sound of that.

I believe in love, and I live my life accordingly;

But I choose to let the mystery be.

I think I'll just let the mystery be.”

Yeah, Iris, me too.

We bring our lives here to this wonderful community of seekers—this community of faith and hope and love. We offer a place for each and all of our life-long explorations, wherever they may take us.

However diverse our journeys of meaning and of the spirit may be, together we affirm the worthiness and the “gift-ness” of the lives we lead, and the lives we share.

This is what our closing hymn is about: “Life is the Greatest Gift of All.”

Stephen Edington

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