

Sermon: “The Reverent Skeptic” August 9, 2009
The Rev. Martha Hodges

“Nothing is too wonderful to be true,” said the 19th century physicist Michael Faraday. And that is astonishment. But everything wonderful need not be true, and that is skepticism. The thoughtful person will try to walk the line between drop-jawed amazement at the wonder of creation, and cautious skepticism about the correctness or finality of our knowledge.”

“Science is founded on [these] twin cornerstones of skepticism and astonishment,” writes Chet Raymo, teacher and science writer for the *Boston Globe*.^{*} What he claims for science, we could equally claim for ourselves as Unitarian Universalists. Our inquiry, our responsible search for truth and meaning, is also founded on the twin cornerstones of skepticism and astonishment. “Skepticism,” Raymo goes on, “is a critical reluctance to take anything as absolute truth, even one’s own most cherished beliefs. Astonishment is the ability to be dazzled by the commonplace. At first glance these two qualities might seem opposed; the Skeptic is often thought to lack passionate commitment. The easily astonished person is sometimes thought of as gullible. In fact, reasoned skepticism does not preclude passionate belief, and astonishment is enhanced by knowledge.”

Not that this balance between belief and skepticism is easy to maintain. If you doubt this, ask yourself what belief you hold with passion. Are you capable of revising or abandoning that belief if it were to be disproved through objective inquiry? Easier said than done, for most of us. We become attached to our beliefs. They make us comfortable in the world, comfortable with ourselves. They become part of us. They help us to make sense out of the chaotic flood of information and misinformation that assaults us in the modern, hyper-connected world. If you are a “come-outer,” that is, someone who comes to Unitarian Universalism out of a more mainstream religion, one that offers absolute truths taken on faith, you may know first-hand how hard it can be to rebuild a system of beliefs on the wreckage of the old.

For others of us, products of an era of rational detachment, it may be hard to even identify a belief we hold passionately. Some of us feel like floaters, unanchored by any absolute, moving easily from premise to premise, free of intellectual or spiritual commitment. We floaters may be skeptics, or simply commitment-phobic. But here’s an irony: We long to be able to commit to a belief, to hold convictions, at the same time that we pride ourselves on our open minds. Because we need the experience of reverence. We yearn to give ourselves to an idea, to transcend our doubts, even briefly. I would guess that that yearning is what brings many of you to church this morning. The yearning to experience the sacred, the mystery – even while holding on to your right to change your mind, to question and investigate and evaluate.

Can we have it both ways? Raymo, in his book, *Skeptics and True Believers*, insists that not only can we; we must. Skepticism without reverence, or, as he calls it, the yearning to be part of something larger than the self, lacks heart and beauty and fails to

answer our most deeply felt needs. Taken to its extreme, skepticism becomes cynicism, a strategy of self-protection that leaves us closed off from surprise, trust and genuine feeling.

Mere yearning, without benefit of scientific inquiry, on the other hand, leaves us prey to superstition; it makes us suckers for the latest faddish promise of happiness and fulfillment – consumers of the superficial, the recycled cliché, the dogmatic and the merely preposterous.

We see these two approaches to truth all around us in our culture. At this moment in history, it seems that the latter – the appeal of the unexamined and unscientific – holds sway. New Age beliefs in angels and crystals or fundamentalist convictions of the literal and inerrant word of God as revealed in scripture – both of these seemingly unrelated approaches to truth appeal, in the eyes of the skeptic, to the gullible and require a willing suspension of reason and common sense. Both approaches to truth – New Age and religious fundamentalism – are flights from the possibility (the probability) that the universe is indifferent to our individual fates. Whether it is our guardian angel, our stars, or our personal savior Jesus Christ, someone or something is looking out for us. We are not alone in this cold and dangerous world. We matter. We matter enough that our good deeds are rewarded in this life or the next; even punishment for our sins, in the form of hell or bad karma, is affirmation, is proof that we matter in the larger scheme of things. That this life is not all there is.

This observation that belief in the supernatural or the occult is dominant in our culture is supported by polls that show that 77% of Americans believe that God may intervene in our lives in the form of a miracle cure for our illnesses; 2% of us believe that we have been abducted by aliens; 75% of us believe in angels and 90% of us believe in Heaven – all according to Gallup polls.

I think of the hospital patient I met who believed that his illness was punishment for marrying a divorced woman. “Because the Bible says that divorce is wrong, doesn’t it?” he appealed to me. Or the other patient who believed that his girlfriend had been killed in a motorcycle accident to punish him for his drinking. What could I say? I wanted to say, “Do you really believe that the purpose of your girlfriend’s life was merely to teach you a lesson? That that was why God put her here and that her own life was so insignificant or your life so significant, that her existence would be wiped out just in order to get you to quit drinking?” Of course, I said no such thing. Although in retrospect, I think this was due more to cowardice than to kindness. In retrospect, I think a gentler version of this incredulous response would have been more compassionate and ethical than the noncommittal one I imagine I offered.

But that’s the danger for us skeptics. We tend to keep our mouths shut when it comes to our own convictions, in the belief that what we hold to be true matters to no one but ourselves. This is a mistake. In our attempt to be tolerant and respectful of others, we cringe from asserting that our view is the correct one – even when we know in our secret hearts that it is. When my friend tells me that if my left ankle is injured, it means

my feminine aspect is inflexible, I say, “Hmmm.” After all, it’s none of my business if she thinks that and if it makes sense to her, so what? And, come to think of it, maybe my feminine aspect could use a little work.

Be that as it may, silence this may be a mistake because superstition and dogmatism and irrationality can carry real consequences in the real world. And so I take the risk this morning of offending some of you who may take comfort and meaning from beliefs not supported by empirical evidence. If you are a believer in ghosts, angels or other supernatural beings and forces, please just bear with me.

When a president makes decisions based on his astrological chart or chooses a foreign policy based on his understanding of the Book of Revelation, it has consequences. When we believe that truth is absolute and that we have discovered what it is, that has consequences. We dismiss or suppress those we believe to be in error. When we believe that god cares if our team wins, that has consequences. It demonizes that other team – or the other country. When we believe that illness is a test of faith, people die. When we believe that God tells us to accept our suffering as god’s will, women allow themselves to be abused. When we believe that our fate is in the hands of God, or that everything happens for a reason, we abdicate personal responsibility – responsibility to change or to protect ourselves, to protest or to fight back.

Last month, I offered a sermon on the sin of Pride. The conventional orthodox belief is that it is pride or hubris to challenge the will of God. But isn’t it equally hubris to believe that God or Fate or the stars have enough interest in us to mess with our lives? When my friend tells me not to voice a worry out loud because the universe may hear and make it come true, I want to say, the Universe doesn’t give a rat’s behind.

So, if this is where we stand, that the Universe is indifferent, that we are specks in the totality of existence, past, present and future, where does that leave our need for reverence?

Last week, you heard Lucy and Stephan talk about the experience of the transcendent. We need not sacrifice this yearning for the transcendent experience just because we are realists, rationalists or skeptics. For we are also more than those. We are also intuitive. We are makers of metaphor and lovers of beauty. We are also creatures of emotion, capable of passion and exaltation. It is the dogmatic and superstitious that are incurious. Skepticism goes hand in hand with wonder and amazement.

For wonder, awe, the sense of our littleness and our grandness, respect for the sacred – the stuff of reverence – are not diminished by a questioning mind. Indeed, they are enhanced by understanding when the objects of our inquiry are the facts of science, of nature, of the universe. Who needs pseudoscience to spark wonder and reverence, when we have science?

Chet Raymo illustrates this for us in his descriptions of DNA, of comets and eclipses, the workings of the brain and the instincts of a little bird called the red knot. He writes:

The red knot is a sandpiper that twice each year visits the eastern shores of the United States. Every year, these tough little travelers wing more than 18,000 miles, from the southern tip of South America to the arctic islands of northern Canada and back again, stopping briefly along the way on the beaches of Delaware bay and Cape Cod.

During our northern winter, red knots feed on the sunny beaches of Tierra del Fuego... Their flight equipment is in top condition when, in February, they lift off in flocks of hundreds or thousands for the journey north.... They know exactly where to find food, returning each year to the same stretches of sand or marsh.... In the Canadian archipelago north of Hudson bay.... they eat and breed, each female red knot laying four speckled eggs.... By mid-July, the female adults abandon their new offspring and head south; male adults follow a few weeks later. The juveniles fend for themselves until late August, when they too commence the 9,000 mile journey to Tierra del Fuego.

Now here is the astonishing thing. The young red knots, by the thousands and without adult guides or prior experience, find their way along the ancient migration routes.... arriving precisely at those feeding grounds along the way where they are sure to find food. At last they join their parents and others of their species for the southern summer.

How do they do it? How do the young birds make their way along a route they have never traveled to a destination they have never seen? How do they unerringly navigate the long stretch of their journey over featureless sea?....

This much is certain: A map for the journey and the instrumental knowledge to follow it are part of the red knot's genetic inheritance. Each bird begins life as a single fertilized cell. Already, that microscopic cell contains the biological equivalent of a set of charts, a compass, a sextant, and maybe even something akin to a satellite navigation system....

How can a map of the globe and the skill to follow it be contained within a cell too small to be seen with the naked eye? The red knot's map and navigational manual are written in the chemical language [of its DNA.].... Somewhere along the red knot's double helix... is a code for constructing those parts of the red knot's brain that contain the map of the migration route and the skills to follow it.

Nothing I learned in my religious training is more wondrous to me than the flight of the juvenile red knot.... As the British writer Tim Robinson observed: Miracles are explainable; it is the explanations that are miraculous.”

Being linked to such wonders in an interdependent web of being is all the significance we need. DNA, the red knot's and our own, in miracle enough. Our birth out of the stars, our return to the elements to star stuff, and our knowledge of our place in the universe is our immortality. Raymo concludes: "No theory conceived by the human mind will ever be final. The universe is vast, marvelous, and deep beyond our knowing; its horizons will always recede before our advance.

Wonders will never cease. And for that we may be truly grateful.

* All quotations and references are from Raymo, Chet. *Skeptics and True Believers: The Exhilarating Connection between Science and Religion*, NY: Walker and Co., 1998