

Inspiration from Religion and Science

R. Karl Dieter

Sermon at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson

July 14, 2013

Good Morning! I've been a member of this Fellowship for nearly 25-years coming of age during our lay led period of which I have fond memories. Perhaps I am a voice from the past, although I hope that my message continues the muscular Unitarianism of Ralph Waldo Emerson that will reverberate into the future of our denomination. Today I wish to examine the nature of inspiration as experienced by religious and scientific sensibilities.

Inspiration as a tool lies in animating, motivating, and encouraging people to act in particular ways and for me is pregnant with negative connotations revolving around manipulation and deception. Advertising and marketing employ hyperbole and distortion to manipulate fears and desires in order to sell goods and services for the purpose of making money. Inspiration as epiphany lies in the thrill of discovery, the ecstasy of understanding, and the pleasure of seeing the world in a new way. The tool is amoral and can be employed in the service of any human activity, ideology, or political agenda and epiphanies can be oppositional. Barack Obama and Sarah Palin are inspirational political figures inspiring passionate support and opposition.

The understanding of the physical world provided by science is inspiring irrespective of whether the portrait is comforting or horrifying to the human gaze and despite the questions of science being unconcerned with where the story may lead. In the inspiring words of Charles Darwin, "But we are not here concerned with hopes or fears, only with the truth as far as our reason permits us to discover it ..."

Telling us how to respond to the world, religion is often employed as a tool to control and sway human behavior and this psychological power can be used for both good and ill. Human memory and consciousness magnifies the horrors of pain, suffering, and death. Seeking solace from the terrors of life, religion offers consolation, meaning, and encouragement. Religion also celebrates epiphanies that promote the joys and pleasures of living and sharing.

Science seeks truths about how the world operates, while religion pursues truths about our subjective relationship to the world. The scientific method roots out error by reproducible experiments, while religious experimentation leads to a diversity of answers. The Christian psychologist Scott Peck posits that psychologically and spiritually healthy lives require "[lives] of total dedication to the truth" embracing "continuous and never-ending stringent self examination".

We tell the truth for reasons of integrity, self-image, prudence, and to wound others. While the latter is immoral when the desire to hurt is deliberate, why is compassion considered a greater virtue than truth? We live in a world of relentless lies ranging from advertising, marketing, political spin, and the public relations of government and industry to the lies we tell ourselves to avoid psychological pain and the consequences of our actions. When someone says they are "pro-life" they lie by omission and careless language, if they also support capital punishment or are unconcerned with the negative effects

of human population growth on other species of life. It is a lie to say that humans are kind, loving, cooperative or that they are cruel, hateful and competitive in the absence of the conjunction and.

When people do bad and nasty things, they are often called animals despite the fact that human behaviors range from acts of loving kindness, compassion, mercy, altruism and generosity to murder, rape, physical assault, torture, and genocide. The extent to which these behaviors appear in other animals pales in comparison to their intensity and ubiquity in the human mammal. We lie and engage in intellectual dishonesty by transferring some characteristically human behaviors to other animals and we do so because we instinctively understand that we do not extend moral consideration and privileges to non-human life. We use this dishonest sleigh of phrase to renounce our moral obligations to humans we consider bad. We are also moved to exclude and harm those whose emotional response to the world differs from own in smaller ways. Perhaps the most horrifying tale in all of literature is Albert Camus' the Stranger where a man is condemned to death by a jury not because he killed another man but because he did not cry at his mother's funeral. I could not cry at my mother's viewing after she was shot and killed when I was eleven. Standing before her open casket, I marveled at the whiteness of the flesh devoid of coursing blood, imagined the ridged crater marking the bullet's entry, and was awed by the still living hair, while pondering the irreversibility of death and its finality. Enmeshed in these clinical observations and philosophical musings, I like the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane could not maintain my Vigil and soon returned to the magazine I was reading. This insistent demand that others respond emotionally to the world as we do and our desire to hurt them when they do not is the peculiar pathology of social animals.

For me, there is nothing more inspiring than the physical reality of the universe glimpsed by science, which includes its emerging portraits of human behavior. Consider the exquisite and immensely beautiful illustrations on the insert in your bulletin. Every feeling and emotional experience is a chemically induced response to the world. Adrenalin primes us for flight or fight; testosterone nurtures the elixir of aggression and sexual desire in both men and women, while oxytocin elicits bonding and nurture and whose increased production during birth and nursing ensures bonding of mother and child. Only after making love, do oxytocin levels in males approach female levels. Human behavior is a complex interplay of genetics, personal experience and history, and the biochemistry of small organic molecules and receptors in the brain. There are no simple answers to human behavior, which is a deterministic outcome of a chaotically complex interplay of nature, nurture, and biochemistry. Although choices may exist, Free Will unconstrained by biology and biochemistry does not.

Sentinels of our sovereign being, emotions provide us with situational awareness and motivate us to action. Fear alerts us to danger and threats, anger to the possibility that others are treating us unfairly, envy and jealousy to things and attributes that others possess which we lack and value, empathy to the needs of others, and love to the people and things we hold dear. Our prejudicial division of fear, anger, jealousy, envy, love, and empathy derived compassion, pity and mercy into good and bad emotions belies their common origin in the binding of small organic molecules to receptors in the brain and their adaptive value forged in mammalian evolution.

Love was a prerequisite for the emergence of the mammals and its expression in care for the young varies widely among this class of animals. Mr. Bear comes to know Mrs. Bear and then leaves her to raise the cubs alone for two years, while among wolves the alpha male and female mate and the pack helps to raise the pups. Human child rearing lies somewhere in between and the continuous sexual arousal of the male and continuous receptivity of the female, unique among the mammals, is

nature's solution to keeping dad around to help care for the young over an enormously long period of time. Nature's solution, I suspect, is more effective than the pleas of the church or the coercion of government.

I would argue that love as feeling is an inherently unfair response to the world and we cannot freely choose who and what we love. So how can we implement the religious exhortation to reach out and love others? In the throes of sexual desire, I feel empathy, compassion, and generosity of spirit toward humanity that I often do not feel in its absence where all that is left is a misanthropic disdain for the human species. The pathway for others may be through love for their children, deep friendships, or a genetic and biochemical proclivity that may be greater in some individuals. To ask me to love humanity and strangers and then insist that I should not embrace the biological and physiological mechanisms that lead me in that direction is absurd and counterproductive. It is the pathological human demand that others should experience the world and respond to it as we do. So love as a response to human need is capricious and unreliable and an informed religious exhortation would be a request to respond to humanity as if we loved them. I generally respond to people's need out of a sense of duty, responsibility, and obligation even when I do not emotionally love them and resent the burdens I incur by responding to their needs. Scott Peck claims that my response is real love and so we see no agreement of what real or true love is. I am often amused that those who preach love and compassion to me are unable to practice what they preach when I share inconvenient truths or intellectual analysis. This is unsurprising since emotive love is conditional and I am well aware that I have greater love for the cat that sits upon my lap and purrs than I do for the one that comes home only for food

The great joy of doing science lies in having a view of the world, doing an experiment, and discovering that your view is wrong and in the process gaining new insight into physical reality. This joy in hypothesis, experiment, and discovery through endless error stands in stark contrast to the insistent demands of conformity and certainty in the arenas of politics, business and institutional religion. The immense beauty of facts and scientific understanding is that they are independent of human hopes, dreams, needs and the pathology of the human condition and from this experience a religious sensibility may emerge. Long before the sun consumes its hydrogen and earth becomes a scorched cinder, the human species will become extinct. There is beauty and consolation in this vision of a physical universe, beyond our self-absorption, that is indifferent to human existence. These realities are the source of my religious inspiration.

Facts, the physical world, scientific understanding, and reality accessible to exploration and experimentation inspire me and I am violated by any effort to give humanity any special consideration or status. The stars in the night sky and the moon playing hide-and seek among the clouds fill me with awe and a sense of beauty arising from the fact that they are unconscious of my existence and will survive long after my death. Part of the sheer beauty and contentment of waterfalls and ocean surf pounding against rocky cliffs lies in the realization that these forces would indiscriminately pound me or any other animal into oblivion if we wandered into their paths. I love this physical world and its mighty forces that are indifferent to my existence more than I could ever love humanity. I love this world that is, both kind and cruel, more than I could ever love any image of what it should or ought to be.

The DNA in our bodies provides forensic evidence for our familial relationship to other animals and our mutual parentage from a common ancestor. The scientific tale of life's history on earth is so awe-inspiring that a morally sensitive creature might experience a sacred connection to the

living world. Perhaps the most ecumenical event in human history was the arrival of the first images of earth seen from moon orbit as photographed by the Apollo 8 astronauts. Rising above the moon's horizon, the brilliant blue sphere floating in the vast darkness of space that is inhospitable to life, reminded people around the world that they were brothers and sisters and kin to all other life forms sharing spaceship Earth. I feel a kinship to every bird and flower, every creature both great and small, every weed and pathogen because we share the nucleic acid blueprints and the improbable journey from atoms and molecules to living things. I feel a sorrow for the 99.9% of life that became extinct, and a love for the 0.1% that still struggles to survive.

So what is the moral of this story that I have told? It is that we cannot freely choose our emotions, which are determined by genetics, brain wiring influenced by personal history, and the biochemistry of small organic molecules and brain receptors. The religious rituals of prayer, singing, chanting and meditation work, to the extent they do, by facilitating the production and release of molecules that promote empathy, contentment, and generosity. The outcome is mixed since the chalice lighting, hymns, responsive readings, and conversation promote a generosity of spirit in some and annoyance in others. We are inspired by that which affirms our individual proclivities but can be open to epiphanies. Love is not a panacea for the world's ills and its inherent unfairness can be seen in the tendency to place religious and spiritual leaders who tell us fables about being children of God and worthy of love on a pedestal, while scientists, engineers, garbage collectors and others who create and maintain our complex technological society that is far more conducive to our health and physical well-being are ignored and taken for granted.

My religious perspective is based upon a search for knowledge and understanding. I have six theses, smaller than Martin Luther's 95, that I would tack onto the door of any religious building. For me:

I have no need of a religion that denies the truths discovered by science!

I have no need of a religion that enforces theology or tenets of faith through ecclesiastical authority and institutional creeds.

I have no need of a religion that elevates emotional comfort and security by restricting and censoring knowledge and its public expression.

I have no need of a religion that sacrifices the individual upon the altar of community.

I have no need of a religion that exalts the human animal at the expense of all other life forms.

I have no need of a religion that insists it is the Truth and there is no need for continual examination of its most sacred beliefs and values.

I need a religion that is open to experimentation, exploration, and discovery. I need a religion that embraces the central religious experience as the evolving relationship between Thou and I where thou includes the physical world and every living thing. I need a religion that has faith in me and against all odds throws the dice in trusting me. I need a religion that recognizes that my religious needs and your religious needs may vary greatly and has the capacity to respond to this diversity. For many of us, Unitarian Universalism has been that religion, a safe haven to which we flee before the storms of life secure in its embrace of both tested and tentative knowledge and its affirmation of individual faith and religious expression.

After Reverend Balof's installation, I asked the Baptist minister if the churches had any need of those who have no need of God? His answer was wise and generous paraphrasing the Catholic theologian Michael Novak who wrote,

“Nontheist and theist in our society need one another. The theist tells the stories in whose light the values by which even the nontheist lives are dramatically illuminated. The nontheist chastens with his skepticism the luxuriant proclivities of the theist for idolatry and dogmatism. Three generations hence, our children’s children will be poorer if either the symbols or the skepticism are lost. Each of us chooses how much of both he will labor to transmit”.

When we oppose the occasional presence in the pulpit of someone presenting provocative thoughts and language, we circumscribe an engagement that may provide new opportunities for practicing our shared religious values in the larger world. If as a religious community we wish to make the world a better place, we will not do it by preaching to the choir or presenting strangers and dissidents with an insistent list of “oughts”, “shoulds” and proscribed thoughts. Living our values and openly engaging others with contrary views are more likely to effect positive change. We cannot understand our own values and positions unless we understand those that stand in opposition.

To Descartes “I think, therefore I am”, Albert Camus replied, "I rebel, therefore we are", which is the gift I seek to give. We are. We are together through our individual, iconoclastic, and eccentric personalities giving meaning to the world. Young and old, male and female, gay and straight, optimist and pessimist, theist and atheist, diplomat and provocateur we are in our togetherness. We stand against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune joining hands against the fearful night. Although a rebel at heart, I have no desire to destroy the communities that sustain me but rather to inspire them to engage in critical self-examination.

I invite you to participate in the Unitarian Universalist sacrament of conversation after the service. This is the communion that drinks of dialogue, offers you the opportunity to criticize the sermon, provide your own perspectives and secure the bonds of honest and passionate engagement. This is the sacrament that binds us one to another and to this community.

Closing Words: Let us celebrate our personal strengths, revel in our individuality, and embrace one another’s weaknesses. In the harmony and dissonances of our voices, the songs of our faith, threads of truth will emerge and hold at bay idolatry and dogma. Let us open our arms to the world in all its gore and glory and show compassion in word and deed to all living things and to a universe that gives them life and a home. Go and revel in your being, disturb the universe with your questions and give it meaning with your heart and mind.