

Reclaiming the “A-Word”
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia
Rev. Jeff Liebmann
August 27, 2017

Opening Words

Without creed or common theology, what binds us together?
Without a shared cosmology, what ties connect us?
This time is one answer; this place is one answer.
Let us come together now in this time and place in a spirit of worship,
Sharing our inquiring minds, our free spirits, our loving hearts.

Reflection Reading

As a long-time resident of the City of Champions, I celebrate work of playwright August Wilson, whose “Pittsburgh Cycle” depicts the African American experience throughout each decade of the 20th century. A number of the central figures in Wilson's plays have abandoned the traditional church for secular ideologies bordering on atheism. For instance, Troy Maxson in *Fences*, uses the game of baseball as his relevant metaphor for life. For Troy Maxson, the rules of the game are the basis for his ethical code.

Early in the second act, Troy tells his wife Rose that he has had an affair with another woman, who is pregnant with his child.



Rose, I done tried all my life to live decent...to live a clean...hard... useful life. I tried to be a good husband to you. In every way I knew how. Maybe I come into the world backwards, I don't know. But...you born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate. You got to guard it closely...always looking for the curve ball on the outside corner. You can't afford to let none get past you. You can't afford a call strike. If you going down...you going down swinging. Everything lined up against you. What you gonna do. I fooled them, Rose. I bunted.

When I found you and Cory and a halfway decent job...I was safe. Couldn't nothing touch me. I wasn't gonna strike out no more. I wasn't going back to the penitentiary. I wasn't gonna lay in the streets with a bottle of wine. I was safe. I had me a family. A job. I wasn't gonna get

that last strike. I was on first looking for one of them boys to knock me in. To get me home.

Then when I saw that gal...she firmed up my backbone. And I got to thinking that if I tried...I just might be able to steal second. Do you understand after eighteen years I wanted to steal second.

Message – Reclaiming the “A-Word”



While in elementary school, my family lived in a rural area south of Akron, Ohio. My best friend lived catty-corner across the road from my house. His name, very ironically as you will see in a moment, was Leslie Ashley. Very few kids lived in the area – just me, Leslie and his older brother Denny. My brothers were much older, so the three of us had to be pretty creative making up games. One favorite was Indian Ball, a form of baseball that only requires two players, but can accommodate as many players as the

field holds. I suppose kids call the game something else nowadays, at the risk of being politically incorrect. Of course, at seven years old, the ethnocentric ramifications of our words did not bear heavily on our minds.

However, at age seven, the gender ramifications of words did matter. One day, taking a rest after a rousing game of Indian Ball, Leslie and Denny and I sat in their front yard talking about...stuff. For some reason, we began talking about our mother's maiden names. When I told them my mother's maiden name, Denny guffawed loudly in that derisive tone that children know all too well as ritualistic condescension. Leslie and I obviously lacked the wisdom of this 10-year-old sage, so were not privy to the gaffe I had obviously committed. You see, my mother's maiden name was B-o-n-a-r, Bonar.

Now, some of you define a boner as a verbal misstep worthy of mild ridicule. But, to young boys in 1964 (and today as well), a boner meant only one thing. And, unfortunately, I learned the hard way that my mother's family shared its name with (please excuse the indelicacy) male genitalia in excited state.

As you might imagine, I was mortified and immediately engaged in verbal repartee meant to reclaim a small piece of my shattered dignity. Fortunately, my best friend shared the small shame of lacking the knowledge of the meaning of an important tidbit of sexual slang. And, after a day or two of ribbing, Denny turned his torturous attentions to some other nameless victim among the rabble. But, the event stuck with me, as these potent exchanges can with young people. I remember exactly where we sat in Leslie and Denny's yard during the exchange, but I honestly cannot remember whether I asked my mother and father about the matter afterwards.

Years later, as a teenager living now in Pittsburgh, a distant cousin of my mother's wrote a lengthy genealogy of her family. My father and I became fascinated

and we began further explorations into our family's lineage. While we could only take my father's family back a few generations, my mother's went back to Scotch-Irish immigrants to America in the 1720's, and even earlier. We even succeeded in the laborious process of gaining approval of my mother's application to the Daughters of the American Revolution. When I learned of my mother's family connections with the Lees of Virginia and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, I never again felt any twinge of embarrassment about being a Bonar. Little did I know then the enormous significance those connections would have for me decades later.

This valuable lesson instilled in me pride in my heritage, but also taught me to challenge the preconceptions people form about certain words. As a teenager, I wrestled with another word that carried a good deal of negative baggage. After many years of reflection, I rejected various alternate terms and embraced this label as partly describing my theology. That word is "atheist."

Ironically, I saw acceptance of the label of atheist as strictly a matter of reason and conviction. Not until I decided to pursue Unitarian Universalist ministry did my belief regarding the non-existence of any supernatural being bring to the forefront of my attention societal attitudes regarding atheists. For instance, in 2006, researchers in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota published the results of a survey of over 2,000 Americans. Their conclusion begins with the following statement:

The core point of this article can be stated concisely. Atheists are at the top of the list of groups that Americans find problematic in both public and private life, and the gap between acceptance of atheists and acceptance of other racial and religious minorities is large and persistent.

Distrust of Muslims spiked after September 11, 2001. And the possible legalization of same-sex marriage sends many Americans screaming to their legislators. But, this survey revealed that Americans distrust atheists 51% more than Muslims and 75% more than homosexuals. Almost half of the respondents indicated that they would disapprove of their child marrying an atheist. I have spent much of my life analyzing statistics

and conducting analyses of data. These findings, quite frankly, shocked me. In the past few years, a number of books from a new crop of atheists drew considerable attention. The ensuing conversation raised yet again what I consider a series of commonly held misconceptions about atheists. Let me address four of these specific assertions.



1. *Atheists are frustrated, angry, rude, uncaring, untrustworthy anarchists.*

While I imagine that one may find atheists who exhibit any, or even all, of these traits, I do not believe that atheists deserve their stereotype any more than does any other group of people. In fact, one can outline many unique forms of atheistic thought.

- *agnosticism* (which comes from the Greek *gnosis*, meaning knowledge, modified by the negative prefix *a-*), asserts that we can never determine whether or not god exists; for me agnosticism was the gateway to atheism;
- *nontheism* is a term found in humanist literature, which attempts to soften what might appear to be a dogmatic stance (I don't believe in *your* god and you are wrong to believe in him, too) to an absence of a belief in deities; the argument can be made that Theravadan Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism are nontheistic religions;
- *monists* assert that all of reality is homogenous and indivisible and, therefore, reject the concept of a personal entity that transcends reality; deists and pantheists could be classified as monist atheists; and
- I reveal my pride in my German heritage by singling out Ludwig Feuerbach and others in the field of the philosophy of religion, who argued that god is a human invention, created to fulfill various psychological and emotional wants or needs. Marx and Engels applied this idea in the *Communist Manifesto*, stating that god is used by those in power to oppress the working class.

This brings us to the second commonly-held belief about atheists.

2. *Atheists are amoral.*



As if having Marx and Engels (not to mention Trotsky, Lenin, and Stalin) on our side was not a sufficient liability in promoting American atheism, there is another variety of atheism that has been historically associated with hedonism by its detractors. Practical atheism, or *apatheism*, asserts that the existence or nonexistence of god is of no consequence in explaining natural phenomena or in providing motivation or purpose to life. Unfortunately, the absence of a religious motivation for morality leads many people, who equate godlessness with amorality, to the conclusion that atheists lack *any* basis for ethical living.

One response to such an assumption lies in the observation that many religious creeds, central to the moral codes espoused by some churches, are themselves illogical and contrary to human experience. One can argue that the policies and practices of almost any denomination provide evidence of exclusivism and discrimination, coercion, and close-mindedness. Of course, one does not have to be an historian of our legacy of hatred and war to question whether a belief in god uniquely qualifies societies to determine moral behavior.

One might argue quite the opposite point. One could assert that a belief in a supernatural being only lends credence to the species-centric opinion that the world was created for the sole benefit of humankind. Any moral code based on the existence of an intelligent designer whose primary interest lies in the well-being of humanity likely suffers from a narrow world view and over-heightened self-interest. This point leads us to the third commonly-held assumption about atheists.

3. *Atheists are not religious.*

As a Unitarian Universalist minister, one might imagine that this myth concerns me tremendously. A few years ago, I listened to a podcast of the Institute for Humanist Studies' Network News. Noteworthy were several brief interviews with the notable "New Atheists," such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris.

The broadcast focused on comments made by Sam Harris at the recent Atheist Alliance International annual conference, where he told the crowd that they should not identify with the atheist label. His rationale was perfectly logical (and frankly not a new argument), and reflected my own thoughts about the term for many years.

The word "atheist" carries an immensely negative connotation, and is really not a particularly valuable label. As Harris pointed out, atheism is not a world view, as is a belief in rationality, for instance. Atheism is simply a rejection of an unsubstantiated notion. What troubled me, however, was not the comments made in response to this argument, but rather a question asked of all three figures and their answers. The interviewer asked whether atheists should pursue the *reform* of religion or its destruction.

My visceral reaction was offense at the simple mindedness and nastiness of the question. Contemplating the destruction of organized religion is a waste of time, given that billions of people support the concept and many are willing to kill themselves and others to defend it. Also, simply discussing the desire to eliminate organized religion as a "yes/no" question ignores the many positive contributions of religion. One might just as logically argue for the elimination of all governments because some politicians are corrupt, all families because of instances of abuse or divorce, and all other forms of human interaction and organization because they produce some negative as well as positive outcomes.

More importantly, the question assumes that atheism and organized religion are mutually exclusive (an assumption which all three of the speakers appeared to share). I find this assumption unwarranted. For example, there are at least hundreds of thousands of American atheists (many Unitarian Universalists, for instance) who belong to and participate regularly in churches, fellowships, congregations, societies, etc. Religious communities can provide a number of valuable contributions to society, and atheists can appreciate these contributions. But, to me, this raises the most important myth of all.

4. *Atheists are not spiritual.*

A common stereotype of atheists portrays atheists as coldly rational, approaching life as an objectively clinical experience. I reject this assumption. While "spiritual" may

engender endless debate among Unitarian Universalists as one of those “language of reverence” words, I employ the term freely. For who among us, no matter how rational our world view, can deny the power of ecstatic moments in our lives? Even if we explain spiritual experience as the activity of neurons flashing across synaptic spaces, who among us is incapable of feeling the joy emitted from human community or the inspiration derived from spoken words of wisdom?

The presumption that atheists cannot be spiritual also errs if we open ourselves to new quantum views of the universe; if we acknowledge that many fields and forces, perhaps other dimensions and even universes, exist that we do not yet understand, cannot yet quantify, and may never perceive.

Such elements of space and time may exert wide ranging effects on our lives in biological and perhaps spiritual ways (however one chooses to define the term). I may not believe in a god-like being, but I cannot presume to understand the full nature of existence, nor can I explain every experience in my life based on our current knowledge.



So, in some ways, Troy Maxson’s baseball metaphor works for me. When I look back over my life, I remember my family moving to Pittsburgh when I was 10 years old. My parents stopped going to church, which was like reaching first base. I no longer had to pretend that I believed everything I heard, recited, and sang anymore. In high school, I stole second base when I learned about the concept of agnosticism. I had a theological label I could agree to, but which did not commit me to anything beyond my own personal philosophy. At age 30, I discovered Unitarian Universalism, the epiphany of third base. Where had these people been all my life?

But, what brought me home and comfortable with the ambiguities of life was a gradual evolution of my personal theology – I became an atheist. And while I have since gone in the direction Sam Harris suggested, replacing the nonbelief of atheism with a positive belief that I call omnitheism, I remain comfortable with the label. And I continue to assert that atheists are not only capable of being kind and compassionate people, but also moral, religious, and spiritual.

Prayerful Reflection

Spirit of life and love that we know by many names, be with us as we enter an attitude of reflection, meditation, and prayer.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that goodness is innate in humankind. Whatever one believes regarding our origins or the source of the energy that powers the universe, we know that the motivation to live ethically, to lead selflessly, and to love unreservedly exists within us all. So, whatever our personal theological labels, let us find common ground upon which to create understanding. May our united commitment

to reason provide us the wisdom to avoid dogmatic adherence to any form of lifeless creed. And through the power of Love, may we find ways to be rational and respectful, correct and compassionate, scientific and spiritual.

Blessed by, Amen, and Let it be so.

Closing Words

If you came here without a god, may you leave with a religion.

If you came here without roots, may you leave with a church.

If you came here without solace, may you leave with hope.

And when you return, may it be with love.

Go in peace, return with love.

