

EVERYWHERE TO GO

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Most of you already know about the latest kerfuffle in the world of high-energy physics. Over the past few years, physicists at the European Center for Particle Physics—known as CERN—have clocked some 15,000 neutrinos exceeding the speed of light. For more than a century, physicists have viewed the speed of light as the universal speed limit: nothing can travel faster than 186,000 miles per second. The number itself forms the bedrock constant upon which Einstein's theory of special relativity stands.

Granted, the neutrinos didn't exceed the speed limit by much. It took them 60 billionths of a second less time to travel 450 miles than it should have. Nonetheless, since the speed of light is as foundational to physics as a sun-centered solar system is to cosmology, the physicists decided to spread the word that something is wrong—with either their experiment or our basic understanding of the universe.

Here's the problem. In 1887, two scientists named Albert Michelson and Edward Morley established that the speed of light is constant. Building upon this foundational insight, Albert Einstein developed the now-famous equation $E=mc^2$: the amount of energy something contains is equal to its mass times c (the speed of light) squared. Since the speed of light squared is a very large number, a tiny bit of mass can be converted into a huge amount of energy. In the wake of this formulation, Einstein was given credit for the insight that led to the atom bomb.

The speed of light also plays a key role in Einstein's special theory of relativity, which states that time and space are not absolutes but instead are affected by motion. As objects increase their speed relative to each other, time slows down. At the speed of light, time stops.

Einstein's insights into the universe in its largest dimensions eventually led to a bewildering new picture of reality called quantum mechanics, which attempts to explain the universe in its smallest dimensions. The physicist Brian Greene explains that quantum theory portrays reality as a haze of possibilities, especially at the subatomic level. "When we make a measurement or perform an observation," Greene says, "we force the myriad possibilities to snap out of the haze and settle on a single outcome. But between observations—when we're not looking—reality consists entirely of jostling possibilities."

What does this mean for neutrinos caught speeding? The most intriguing possible explanation of this faster-than-light phenomenon comes from string theory, which attempts to reconcile the theory of relativity and its explanation of large interactions (among gravity, light, planets, and so on) with quantum mechanics and its explanation of small interactions (among photons, neutrinos, quarks, and the like). String theory suggests that, in addition to the four dimensions of space and time we know well—length, breadth, depth, and time—the universe contains up to seven other dimensions that we haven't discovered yet.

Here's the intriguing possibility: maybe the super-speedy neutrinos aren't traveling through space and time. Maybe they are taking a shortcut through one of the other dimensions.

Wow. Wow! Isn't the universe fabulous?

The super-speedy neutrinos challenge our most basic assumptions about ourselves and our world. They remind me of a poem by the contemporary American poet Gary Snyder. It is titled "The Trail Is Not a Trail." He writes:

I drove down the Freeway
And turned off at an exit
And went along a highway
Til it came to a sideroad
Drove up the sideroad
Til it turned to a dirt road
Full of bumps, and stopped.
Walked up a trail
But the trail got rough
And it faded away—
Out in the open,
Everywhere to go.

Once in a while, if we are very fortunate, life invites us to leave the highway of our established routines and turn onto a side road leading to new places and new possibilities. Often the road gets bumpy. Sometimes we're forced to a complete stop. But if we keep going, scrambling up the trail as best we can, we eventually find ourselves out in the open with everywhere to go.

Many of you know what it's like when, by necessity or by choice, you leave the highway and have to scramble to find your way. A foreclosure notice, a grim diagnosis, an unfaithful spouse or a wayward child, an untimely restructuring or an unworkable reassignment: the trail gets rough and then fades away. But somehow you muster the courage and garner the strength to keep going. And eventually you find yourself out in the open once again, with everywhere to go.

The same dynamic holds true for religions and congregations. Here on the cusp of the Jewish New Year, at the outset of a new church year, I'd like to say why I think we as a congregation have everywhere to go.

The religious equivalent of the speed of light—the cornerstone constant upon which the architecture of faith has been built over the past 3,000 years—is the presence and power of a supernatural God. The religions of the West—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, along with their various permutations—are based on the belief that God exists above and beyond the realm of nature. God commands and controls: not only can God create the universe, God can impregnate a virgin, heal a favored believer, and resurrect the dead.

As we've studied the universe, however, we've come to the inescapable conclusion that the universe isn't set up this way. The laws of nature are not subject to change without notice. The idea of a supernatural God, like the idea of an Earth-centered universe, takes us down a dead-end road.

Some people today, including many leading scientists, argue that religion is therefore unnecessary. If God isn't supernatural, they insist, then the idea of God and the role of religion are obsolete. This is sloppy logic.

In fact, if God isn't supernatural, then religion becomes even more important, not less. With a supernatural God, who makes all the rules and hands them down to humanity, religion is merely obedience in fancy clothes. If God is not supernatural, then religion has a serious role to play. Religion is the process of taking everything we know about the universe into account and creating a life of meaning and purpose within it.

As for God, God is not a person like the Pope or an object like an apple, but rather an experience, like the experience of beauty. We use the term God to describe certain kinds of human experience. Relativity theory tells us that the past and future don't actually exist. Yet we need to account for our sense that they do. Our use of the term God points toward our sense that the past doesn't vanish and the future is possible. Our experience of God is the experience of being connected, ultimately, to everything. Bolstered by faith in this experience of God, we have everywhere to go.

What do these insights mean for Unitarian Universalism? This past June at our denomination's General Assembly in Charlotte, I spoke to a standing-room audience about the challenge of being religious in the modern world. I spoke about my conviction that Unitarian Universalism has the potential to become the church of the new millennium. In order to do so, however, we need to take ourselves far more seriously as a religious tradition, which means defining ourselves by the theological commitments we have in common rather than by the many ways in which we differ.

What might our common commitments be? You can find a brief description of them inside the front cover of your order of service. Grounded in a belief in the necessity of religion and the importance of religious community, they include a commitment to worship as our foundational spiritual practice, to being personally accountable for our own beliefs and actions, as well as to developing a discipline and an ethic of gratitude.

Why gratitude? For Jews, the defining discipline of faith is obedience: to be a faithful Jew is to obey the commands of God. For Christians, the defining discipline is love: to be a faithful Christian is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. For Muslims, the defining discipline is submission: to be a faithful Muslim is to submit to the will of Allah. In the same way, I believe the defining discipline of Unitarian Universalism should be gratitude, which isn't merely a matter of saying "thank you" all the time. Rather, gratitude is the discipline of acknowledging our utter dependence upon the people and world around us, and the ethic of fulfilling our obligation to other people and to the natural world in return. Impelled by a religious sense of dependence and obligation, we have everywhere to go.

And what of us as a congregation? For eighteen years, I walked through the All Souls garden each morning, climbed the stairs to the second floor, and turned left. Beginning a couple of weeks ago, I began taking a new path to a different office.

My new office is the one Forrest occupied for more than 30 years. Five years ago this month, Forrest was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. Two years ago tomorrow, we gathered in this sanctuary to commemorate his death and celebrate his life. Along the way, we also dealt with economic downturns and financial deficits, conducted a broad-based congregational assessment and adopted a strategic plan, and grappled with the unsettling reality that our staff is too small and our financial resources too meager to achieve the strategic goals we have set for ourselves.

I miss Forrest. When I sit in the office, I still feel comforted by his lingering presence. I also feel saddened by his persistent absence. I miss his company and his counsel. Especially when I'm in the office alone, I feel the full weight of this mantle of ministry. Even so, the move to a new office symbolizes, for me at least, that the rough trail and bumpy path lie mostly in the past. In my heart, I feel the future lies open before us.

What do people do when the road gets bumpy and the path becomes unclear? Either they retreat in defeat or they forge ahead until they break out into the open. As a congregation, we've done the latter. I believe we have everywhere to go.

Make no mistake: we're not there yet—and we don't even know exactly where there is. There are dimensions of our life as a congregation that we haven't discovered yet. We have everywhere to go.

So let's talk—in my new office. I need your company and your counsel. One of my goals this year is to speak with as many of you as possible—as individuals or couples—about your sense of where we are and where we're going. I want to hear what you love about All Souls and what isn't working. I want to hear what you'd like to receive from this congregation that you're not getting and what you can offer that you're not giving. Stay tuned for an invitation. If you'd like to jump-start the process, send me or Blamo a note.

I see other signs that we've emerged into the open as a congregation. In our strategic assessment, we identified a widespread longing for a deeper sense of community and connection among the members and friends of All Souls. Our Small Group Ministry initiative, which you can read about in your October Bulletin and in today's order of service, has been designed to meet this need. Led by a wonderful cadre of trained facilitators, these groups will not only enrich the lives of their members, but over time I believe they will transform the character of our congregation. Find out more and sign up today at coffee hour. We're out in the open, with everywhere to go.

Susan Lambiase begins work tomorrow as our Executive Director here at All Souls. She will sit in my old office. A lawyer by training, Susan has been the principle architect of building an organization called Children's Rights from a fledgling staff of five to a robust organization of 50 over the past twelve years. Taryn Strauss, our new Director of Religious Education, is known across our denomination for her expertise not only in the religious education of children and youth, but also in the spiritual formation of people who come to Unitarian Universalism as adults. The Rev. Lissa Gundlach brings a deep passion for social justice and a deft knowledge of pastoral leadership to her new role as an assistant minister. Susan, Taryn, and Lissa join a staff team of dedicated professionals that I'm honored to count as colleagues and friends. All of these, and all of you, and everything else we do: we're out in the open, with everywhere to go.

Wow. Wow! Isn't All Souls fabulous? And I didn't even mention annual giving, which is newly led by Stuart Goldblatt and will kick off on October 23. What you'll discover is that we've been listening—both to your compliments and your complaints. In the weeks to come, you'll hear more about annual giving in some ways and less in others. We're out in the open, with everywhere to go.

For my part, I can't wait to see what the super-speed neutrinos will teach us about the universe. And I can't wait to see how our shared ministry as a congregation will forge the church of the new millennium. It's been a rough ride for the past few years. But we're on the move.

When the road of life gets bumpy, keep going. When the path ahead gets indistinct, keep going. Eventually, you'll come out into the open. And then you'll have everywhere to go.