

FAITH OF THE HEART

A Sermon Preached by Cheryl M. Walker
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York
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Last Sunday, October 22, the cover of the New York Times book review featured the latest entry in the God debate. Jim Holt reviewed *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, a professor at Oxford University, whose specialty is in the field of evolutionary biology. As you can surmise from the title, Professor Dawkins situates himself in the atheist camp; though he did say he would give himself only a six on a scale of one to seven, one being certain that God exists and seven being certain God does not exist. Even he acknowledges there can be no true certainty when it comes to the question of God's existence. Yet, that did not stop him from putting his two cents, or two shillings, into the ever growing, super powerball sized, cauldron of theological debate. Like many before him, he limited his discussion of God to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God of Abraham and then proceeded to give his arguments against that God. In the end, we end up at the same place we started. No definitive proof, no definitive disproof. For nothing short of a booming voice from the sky will convince the atheist there is a God and no arguments reasonable or otherwise will convince the believer there isn't a God. Belief or non-belief in God is not a matter of the head it is a matter of the heart. And the heart knows what the heart knows.

Arguments for or against the existence of God, have little or no effect on the listener, they are made for the benefit of the speaker. The speaker, most often, has thought or rather felt their believe, developed their arguments and then with a sense of great knowledge and wisdom put forth their position for all the world to see, and in the back of their minds, for all the world to agree with as well. The listener may be attentive and take some of the speakers arguments to refine their beliefs but in all probability they are just collecting more answers and questions to prove their already established beliefs. The fact of the matter remains that if the heart doesn't feel it, no amount of convincing, rational, arguments will change the heart. God, like faith, is for the heart alone to feel and the mind to first question and then accept the ruling of the heart.

So I will not stand here this morning and add to the debate, it would be a waste of my time and your time. If you believe there is something called God, so be it. If you don't believe there is something called God, so be it. If you believe in a transcendent God off in the distance or if you believe in an immanent God within and surrounding you, so be it. In the end it doesn't matter all that much. What matters is what is in your heart. What matters is that your faith, however you define it, gets out of your head and into your heart.

Does this mean that we relinquish all rational thought when it comes to matters of faith? No, for faith unexamined is a dangerous thing. It can lead to all sorts of conclusions and actions that do great harm to life and to the common good. Unquestioned, faith can and has lead to war, destruction, prejudice and all manner of things the loving heart can not abide. Just take a look at what happened when the Pope made reference to a fourteenth century theologian who said that Islam was evil. Or when a Danish paper published disparaging cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Churches were burned, a reporter was killed, riots erupted all over the globe. Unquestioned faith can be a dangerous thing.

Having said all that, I have to say I absolutely understand the ferocity of these reactions. I don't for a second condone them or believe them justified, but I cannot say that I don't understand it because I do. There is a special relationship every Muslim has with the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. There is a deep and abiding love for him and a deep and abiding love for the faith. Muslims, of course, are not alone in having a great love for their faith and the founder of their faith. If I were to stand up here and say that anyone who followed Jesus would never find salvation and in fact would find damnation because Jesus was a charlatan who got what he deserved when they crucified him, you can bet your bottom dollar there would be a whole lot of Christians knocking on this church's door ready to burn it down. Now, let me make myself perfectly clear -- I do NOT believe that Jesus was a charlatan or that he got what he deserved, so please don't anyone burn pictures of me in effigy or deface this church. I said IF I were to say that and I said it only to make a point.

Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, people of many faith traditions have a love for their leaders and their faith deep in their hearts and when you attack their faith or their leaders get angry. Its like talking about your mama or your children. If someone were to insult them we would feel angry and it is the rational part of us that stops us from turning violent. But that anger is there because of our love. We don't think about the merits of whatever was said about them. Our first reaction is to defend the ones we love. That is what love does to us. The question for us this morning -- is your faith something that you feel so deeply and strongly about that your first reaction to it being demeaned is not rational, of the head, but emotional, of the heart? Do you love this faith?

Is this faith something so strong that it grounds you in times of both joy and sorrow? Do you love this faith? Galen has pointed out our faith does not have the same attachment to persons as say the Christian or Muslim faith does. If, for instance, you were to tell me that Emerson, that great Unitarian thinker, was a racist pig, whom nobody save Thoreau seemed to like, was a lousy minister and hated his own minister, which is why he wrote that Harvard Divinity School address in the first place; I would probably say "yeah tell me something I don't already know." We don't have the same love, the same attachment for Emerson as a Buddhist has to the Buddha, if they have attachments at all.

And we don't have a book that has to rest in the highest place in your house or one that we hold so sacred that it cannot be questioned and even discarded if need be. But these are not the things that engender a faith of the heart. It is the ideas that these people and these books impart that create in us feelings which we hold dear and true to our living. What feelings do we hold dear and true that effect all that we do and the lens through which we see the world as it is and the world as it might be? These are the questions of faith. These are the questions we must each answer in our own way. But they are questions that we cannot afford to leave unanswered. To leave our faith unanswered is to risk having no faith at all when the time comes, as it surely will, when faith is the only thing we have left to hold on to. Each of us, in our way, will face a time when we must look deep within our hearts to find that one thing that keeps significance in our lives. That dream of the heart, of which Howard Thurman wrote. It is the well spring from which the living waters of our lives are fed and nourished.

We, Unitarian Universalists, have for so long held reason as the gold standard of our faith community and I am not going to ask you to set aside your reason, but as Martin Luther King Jr.

said "Reason, devoid of the purify power of faith can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations." Reason, reasoned itself into slavery. Reason reasoned itself into genocide. Reason can reason itself the unconscionable. We must be willing not to set aside our reason, but to hold it in tension with the purifying power of faith. We are quite accustomed to opening our hearts to our minds, but we're rather reluctant and even uncomfortable to opening our minds to our hearts. We don't want to let the heart dictate to the mind. Yet, if we walk outside there is a that says Open Hearts and Open Minds, its a two way communication. When we open them both we may build a faith of the heart and the mind.

Why are we so reluctant to allow our minds to be open to the wisdom of the heart? Are we are afraid of what may happen if we are willing to make faith our priority. We see the examples of radicals of all ilk who react with violence in the name of their faith. But not all people use their faith in this way. When the Amish children were viciously murdered by a madman, the reaction of that community of faith was astounding. As they prepared their children to be buried in their Sunday best, they also prepared meals to bring to the widow of the man who had murdered their children. Their faith demanded that they find forgiveness not revenge. So they sought to bring comfort to the family of the person who had devastated their community. Would we have done the same? Or would we look upon that family with an accusing eye - why didn't you know, why didn't you stop it? What would our faith call us to do in that situation? How would our hearts respond? For in the depth of a tragedy of that magnitude we would not be asking what our reason would call us to do, we would be asking what would our faith, what does our heart call us to do.

Faith of the heart is not just for the tragedies of our lives, it is also for the joys of our lives. When we are blessed with good fortune, our reason may tell us to invest in the future for the rainy day. Or it may say that we might share some of our good fortune as long as it is convenient. We may reason our way into sharing only a small portion of our wealth. Yet if gratitude is in our hearts, our inclination will be to share as much of our wealth as we can. Not as much as we reasonably can, but as much as we can. It may mean foregoing some of our luxuries in order that we might begin to eliminate poverty. It may mean that we not seek a second home but rather enjoy the blessing of having a home. It may mean that in gratitude for the blessings we have received we seek to share our blessings.

There's that word again...Gratitude. If you have been attending services in this church for the past few weeks you have heard that word used often. Galen suggested a radical change in our being when he proposed that gratitude be the cornerstone of Unitarian Universalism and I for one agree with him. But for it to be the cornerstone of our faith community it must be a gratitude of the heart not just an idea of gratitude. It must become so deeply etched in our hearts that every action we take stems from this beginning point. That would indeed be a radical change for our faith community.

In his sermon of two weeks ago Galen suggested some ways in which we might begin to bring gratitude into our lives. He spoke of a keeping gratitude journal, and saying a prayer of thanksgiving for the many things we have received. And this is a good start, but gratitude to really be the ground of being for our community, it must go beyond gratitude for what we have received. We must be grateful for all that we have to give. I believe that if gratitude is truly etched in our hearts this is it's natural conclusion - gratitude for what we have and gratitude for what we have to give. If it remains only a thought we will become subject to dangers of an

individualistic and selfish gratitude and that is not why we come together to worship, to pray and to be with one another.

But if our faith is in our hearts and our hearts are filled with gratitude we will seek to create a world where gratitude is known by everyone, for everyone will share in the blessings of this life.

Grateful for this community of faith we will spread the good news of Unitarian Universalism.

Grateful that our children have the opportunities to become their best selves we will demand that every child have the opportunity to seek their highest aspirations.

Grateful for the warmth of comfort of a home we will work, tirelessly, to see that every person have their basic needs be met, not just with the bare necessities but with dignity and grace.

Grateful that we have wealth beyond our needs we will insist that every worker be paid a living wage.

Grateful that we live in a country with the best medical care in the world we will demand access for the forty two million people in this country without health insurance.

Grateful for the life that we have been given we will seek always to share the best of ourselves with the world. That is gratitude of the heart.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism is a saving faith and we are called to be a light unto the world, and not just another religious shadow on the landscape of humanity. I am eternally grateful to my God, for the blessing of this family, where we may walk together un-agreed on the essential question of God itself. I am grateful for a community that cares about and cares for each other and seeks to give of itself to the community and to the world. In my heart there is a love for this faith and the gratitude it engenders in all that I do and all that I am. It is a faith of the mind and or the heart. May your hearts be filled with gratitude and may your faith be of the heart.

Amen and blessed be.