

Towson Unitarian Universalist Church  
Rev. Clare L. Petersberger  
April 11, 2010  
*The Spirituality of an Atheist*

### **WELCOME**

Good morning and welcome to The Towson Unitarian Universalist Church. We are the church of the open minds, the loving hearts, and the helping hands. So whether you entered on little feet, or walked in briskly, or ambled or rolled in, you are welcome here. Let us take a moment to intentionally greet old and new friends around us.

For those of you who do not know me, my name is Clare Petersberger and I extend a special welcome to visitors, this morning. Do we have visitors to introduce or who would like to introduce themselves?

We look forward to getting to know you and to having you get to know us. To this end, members of our Green Sanctuary Committee invite you to remain for conversation and a cup of Zeke's coffee following worship.

This past week, there was a memorial service for long time TUUC member, Kitty Thomlason who exemplified gracious hospitality. AND, less than two weeks after Ali Harper's wedding, her father died, unexpectedly. So, as we gather, let us hold in our hearts the Harrison, Harper, and Strauss families.

And we hold in our hearts the TUUC mother who signed our Tree Of Life Book that her daughter appears to be losing her battle with drug addiction.

As a community of free-thinkers, we believe that each of us has to find our own purpose and meaning in life. We gather to support one another in this search.

With this in mind, please join in a responsive reading of words printed in your order of service with which to light the symbol of our free faith.

### **CHALICE LIGHTING** (read responsively)

*Cutting Loose* by William Stafford

Sometimes from sorrow, for no reason, you sing.

FOR NO REASON, YOU ACCEPT

THE WAY OF BEING LOST, CUTTING LOOSE

FROM ALL ELSE AND ELECTING A WORLD

WHERE YOU GO WHERE YOU WANT TO.

Arbitrary, a sound comes, a reminder that a steady center is holding all else.

IF YOU LISTEN, THAT SOUND

WILL TELL YOU WHERE IT IS AND YOU

CAN SLIDE YOUR WAY PAST TROUBLE.

Certain twisted monsters always bar the path – but that's when you get going best, glad to be lost, learning how real it is here on earth, again and again.

### **PRELUDE**

To remind ourselves how real it is here on earth, you're invited to come forward to light a candle for a significant joy or sorrow as we offer our Prelude.

9:30 -"Russian Dance" by Alexander Goedicke; Abby Mahoney and Joseph Gascho, piano

11:15 -"My Earth" -Kyra Mahoney, voice; Lelah Mahoney, piano

STORY Different Points Of View Mary Ann Moore

Thank you for your beautiful music!

This morning, I'd like to share a story about Different Points Of View.

This is a story about children that begins with, once upon a time.... So it invites to the child within each of us to get in touch with wonder...

Once upon a time children were at the beach playing in the sand. They were digging and patting and talking...making special places. They talked about all kinds of things. They talked about what their special places were like. They talked about what they might have for lunch. They talked about where the sand came from.

Where does sand come from? Where DOES the sand come from? What are your ideas?

One child said, "The sand came from bigger rocks. The waves kept bumping into the rocks and the rocks got smaller and pretty soon they were sand."

Another child said, "Yes, but God put all those rocks there in the first place. God made the sand."

Another child said, "I don't think it was God. I think a long, long time ago, there was a great big explosion in space and everything blew out from it."

The children went on and on telling each other what their different ideas were.

Then one child said, "I don't know what to think. I wonder who is right?"  
"Yeah," the other children agreed. "Who is right?"

Just then, they looked up and saw someone coming onto the beach. The woman, who looked like a magician, was carrying bags with mysterious objects poking out of them. The woman came over near where the children were playing and set down her bags. She took the objects out of the bags and began to set them up. They looked sort of like telescopes, but she pointed them at the sand not the sky. Then she said, "These are my Pointing Viewers. Would you like to look through them?"

YES! YES! The children were excited! The woman said, "Notice, the Pointing Viewers are pointed at the same place in the sand. Look through each one and remember what you see."

Each child looked through each viewer. The magician asked them, "Well, what did you see?"

The children said, "In this one, we saw US making special places in the sand." "In that one, we saw the rocks and waves bumping into each other and tiny pieces of sand breaking off." "In that one, over there, we saw God making the sand." "And in this other one, we saw a big explosion, shooting out the earth and rocks and sand."

One of the children asked, "How could we see something different from each of the viewers? We were always looking at the same thing."

"That's the magic of the Pointing Viewers," said the magician. "You were looking at the same thing, but what you really saw depended on which viewer you looked through. Do you know that your minds are a lot like my Pointing Viewers? You can use your minds to see things like the sand in different ways. Here's the best part! It doesn't mean that one way is right and the other is wrong. Depending on which Pointing Viewer you use, the sand can be made by waves, or God, or a big explosion and all of those views can be right."

"We're ALL right!" the children yelled. "We're ALL right." And the children ran back to their sand creations... digging and patting and sharing their different points of view.

Today we're thinking about the view of the world and universe through the Pointer Viewer of Atheists, those who think the origins of the sand were in a big explosion that led to the creation of this planet which, in turn, led to the formation of sand. The atheists in our congregation help us to see, how real it is here on earth – that, living beneath the great Big Dipper, we can worship this ground we walk on, cherishing the beings that we live beside.

In affirmation of this, let us sing a favorite song of one TUUC atheist, *Swimming To The Other Side*. On the final verse, which begins “when we get there we’ll discover,” students and teachers are invited to gather to leave for Sunday school classes to see what THEY will discover!

**HYMN**

*Swimming to yhe Other Side*  
by Pat Humphries

*I'm alone and I am searching  
Hungering for answers in my time  
I am balanced at the brink of wisdom  
I'm impatient to see the sign*

*I move forward with my senses open  
Imperfection, it be my crime  
In humility, I will listen  
We're all swimming to the other side*

*Chorus: We are living 'neath the great big dipper  
We are washed by the very same rain  
We are swimming in the stream together  
Some in power and some in pain*

*We can worship this ground we walk on  
Cherishing the beings that we live beside  
Loving spirits will live forever  
We're all swimming to the other side*

*On this journey through thoughts and feelings  
Finding intuition my head, my heart  
I am gathering the tools together  
I'm preparing to do my part*

*All of those will come before me  
Band together and be my guide  
Loving lessons that I will follow  
We are all swimming to the other side*

*Chorus*

*When we get there we'll discover  
All the gifts we've been given to share  
have been with us since life's beginning  
And we never noticed they were there  
We can balance at the brink of wisdom*

Never recognizing that we've arrived  
Loving spirits will live forever  
We're all swimming to the other side

Chorus

### **PRAYER/MEDITATION**

Our meditation, this morning, comes from *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* by Andre Comte-Sponville, a French philosopher, and will be followed by moments of silence.

Some friends and I had gone out for a walk in the forest in the North of France we liked so much. Night had fallen. We were walking. Gradually, our laughter faded and the conversation died down. Nothing remained but our friendship, our mutual trust and shared presence, the mildness of the night air and of everything around us.

My mind empty of thought, I was simply registering the world around me – the darkness of the underbrush, the incredible luminosity of the sky, the faint sounds of the forest (branches snapping, an occasional animal call, our own muffled steps) only making the silence more palpable.

And then, all of a sudden... What? Nothing: everything! No words, no questions, only – a surprise. Only – this. A seemingly infinite happiness. A seemingly eternal sense of peace. Above me, the starry sky was immense, luminous, and unfathomable, and within me there was nothing but the sky, of which I was a part, and the silence, and the light, like a warm hum, and a sense of joy with neither subject nor object (no object other than everything, no subject other than itself.)

Yes, in the darkness of that night, I contained only the dazzling presence of the All. Peace. Infinite peace! Silence. Harmony. It was as if a perfect chord, once played, had been indefinitely prolonged, and that chord was the world.

I can scarcely even say that I was walking – the walk was there, and the forest, and the trees and our group of friends.... ...no more separation or representation, only the silent presentation of everything. No more value judgments; only reality. No more time; only the present. No more nothingness; only being. No more frustration, hatred, fear, anger, or anxiety; only joy and peace.

No more make-believe, illusions, lies; only the truth, which I did not contain but which contained me. I had a sense of detachment, freedom and necessity, as if the universe had been restored to itself at long last. Was it finite or infinite? That was not the question. There WERE no more questions.

There was only self-evidence. And silence. And the truth – but without words. And the world – but without signification or purpose. And immanence – but without its opposite. And reality – but without otherness.

There was only everything – the beauty, truth and presence of everything. This was enough. It was far more than enough. What was death? Nothing. What was life? Only this palpitation of being within me. What was salvation? Only a word, or else this state itself.

“This is what Spinoza meant by eternity,” I said to myself – and, naturally, that put an end to it, or expelled me from it. Words returned, and thought, and the ego, and separation.

But it didn't matter; the Universe was still there, and I was there with it, or within it. How can you fall out of the All?

[A minute of silence]

### **MUSICAL INTERLUDE**

*God* by John Lennon

John Gaccek, vocals and guitar

*God is a Concept by which  
we measure our pain*

*I'll say it again*

*God is a Concept by which  
we measure our pain*

*I don't believe in magic  
I don't believe in I-ching  
I don't believe in Bible  
I don't believe in Tarot  
I don't believe in Hitler  
I don't believe in Jesus  
I don't believe in Kennedy  
I don't believe in Buddha  
I don't believe in Mantra  
I don't believe in Gita  
I don't believe in Yoga  
I don't believe in Kings  
I don't believe in Elvis  
I don't believe in Zimmerman  
I don't believe in Beatles  
I just believe in me...and that reality*

*The dream is over  
What can I say?  
the Dream is Over*

*Yesterday*

*I was the Dreamweaver  
But now I'm reborn  
I was the Walrus  
But now I'm John*

*and so dear friends  
you'll just have to carry on  
The Dream is over*

### **READING**

Our reading by a Unitarian Universalist lay person, Herb Silverman, a self identified atheist. It is from his article *How I Found Religion(s) Through Atheist Activism*. Herb wrote,

*I became an atheist in the 1950s and then entered synagogues or churches only for weddings, funerals, or sightseeing. During most of the 1960s and 70s I rarely thought about religion, and I assumed that most of my friends and colleagues were also atheists.*

*The notable exceptions I knew were fellow members of a religious and secular alliance actively protesting the Vietnam War. In 1990, I learned that the South Carolina Constitution prohibited atheists from holding public office. Thus began my seven year battle to change that unconstitutional clause. It started with a personal run for Governor (unsuccessful) and ended in a South Carolina Supreme Court victory declaring that provision illegal.*

*Thus also began my path to "religion." During my campaign for Governor, the Unitarian Churches in South Carolina were the only ones that invited me to speak. Subsequently, when a few friends and I formed the Secular Humanists of the Low country in 1994, several UU church members were among the founders of our group. We held our monthly meetings in a building owned by the local UU church.*

*Though I did not join the church, I was on friendly terms with a number of its members and was invited to speak at several church forums. Last year, I gave a Sunday sermon on "Positive Atheism" at the Unitarian Church of Charleston.*

*Following a couple of weeks of unprayerful contemplation, I went back to a church service and at the "Joys and Concerns" portion stood up and announced that I was joining the church. I called it both a joy and a concern. I said there were few sure things in life, and I had thought my never joining a church would be one of them. Nobody had proselytized me, but members seemed generally pleased that such an outspoken atheist had joined. In one Unitarian forum, I was asked to opine about the future of religion in the 21st century.*

*I began by saying I would be somewhat vague in my early prophecies, but would become very specific starting with June 14, 2092 because nobody in the room would be alive to point out my errors. (It would also be the 150th anniversary of my birth.)*

*My final prophecy was about who, on December 31, 2099, would be voted the most influential philosopher of the 20th Century. I asked a member of the Congregation to open the envelope and read the name of the winner. It was John Lennon! I then closed by leading the audience in the singing of Imagine, with a special emphasis on “no religion.”*

*Do I hear an, “Amen?!”*

## **OFFERTORY**

*Imagine* by John Lennon  
John Gaccek, vocals and guitar

As John Gaccek sings *Imagine*, our morning offering will be given and received to sustain and deepen the life of this free-thinking congregation and to realize the possibilities for what we imagine – feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, healing the addicted, and sharing a love of reading in the wider community.

## **SERMON**

*The Spirituality Of An Atheist*

When I spoke to the Renaissance class about Unitarian Universalism over a week ago, I was seeking to explain that what binds us together as a faith community is a covenant, an agreement about how we are going to walk together in the ways of truth, known or to be made known to us. As an example that we are not bound by a set of beliefs, or dogmas, I shared that we have self-identified atheists, agnostics, theists, pantheists, panentheists, and Humanists worshipping side-by-side on a Sunday morning.

This raised a question that I’ve heard more than once in twenty years of ministry: “Why would an atheist come to church?” If atheism is the rejection of a supernatural being or beings, why would atheists seek out a religious community?

In our reading, Herb Silverman offered his personal reason for joining a community where we need not think alike to love alike. Unitarian Universalist congregations gave him a free pulpit to speak as an atheist challenging an unconstitutional state law in South Carolina. But these Unitarian Universalists did more than offer a podium and microphone. They welcomed him with open minds and arms and loving hearts. They said, “We share your concerns, value you as a member of our community, appreciate your courage, and want to learn from, and with, you.” They joined his Secular Humanist group!

Andre Comte-Sponville offers more general reasons why an Atheist might join a free-thinking religious tradition. The first is that when Nature is emptied of God or gods and “nothing remains...but the emptiness of the desert and the formidable, all-present absence,” then the human need to commune, to share, with other humans, without dividing, becomes all the more important.

When confronted with the impersonal forces of droughts, floods, hurricanes, tidal waves, and earthquakes; when confronted with the randomness of diseases; when confronted with a world where the just do not prosper and the wicked do not suffer; we need one another, and a trustworthy community, all the more.

Atheism is a rejection of a supernatural being. It is not a rejection of fidelity to core human values. Andre Compte-Sponville writes: "In my adolescence, the person who taught me the most about ethics – more than any priest and for a long time more than any philosopher – was the singer Georges Brassens. Everyone knew that he did not believe in God, yet his ethics... bore the imprint of the Gospels ....with neither obligation nor punishment. Perhaps the songs of Joan Baez, Woody Guthrie, or the Beatles played a similar role in the English-speaking world."

Universalists affirmed, hundreds of years ago, that we do not freely choose the right and good out of fear of eternal damnation, but out of respect for our own human dignity, out of listening to the still, small voice of conscience, and out of freely choosing to be human and humane toward others! Whether or not we see the origins of sand in the waves, or the universe, or both, we all need to love and be loved.

A final reason an Atheist might join a free-thinking religious community is to nurture his or her spiritual life. Andre Compte-Sponville is sometimes asked, "What? You, an atheist, take an interest in spiritual life?" He answers, "Of course I do. Not believing in God does not prevent me from having a spirit, nor does it exempt me from having to use it."

But what is the spirit? Andre Compte-Sponville begins with Descartes definition: The spirit is "a thing that thinks, that is to say, that doubts, affirms, denies, that knows a few things, that is ignorant of many, that wills, that desires, that also imagines and perceives."

To this definition, Andre Compte-Sponville adds, "a thing that loves, that does not love, that contemplates, that remembers, that mocks or jokes...." He concludes, "Little does it matter whether the thing in question is the brain, as I believe it to be, or an immaterial substance, as was Descartes conviction. Whatever it is, we use it to think, to want, and to imagine. It is the power to think, insofar as it gives us access to truth, universality or laughter."

The understanding of spirituality that flows from this definition is NOT simply an intellectual exercise. Because what this spirit perceives is the totality of reality in nature. Confronted with the power and grandeur of the natural world, and what science is telling us about our place in it, we experience awe, wonder, reverence, and gratitude.

I was reminded of this, Thursday night. I was at the Science Center Planetarium, to learn how to identify the constellations. As I looked at the outlines of figures from Greek mythology on the dome, I realized that I did not know all the stories of the humans challenging the Gods or the Gods meddling in human life for which they were named. This was going to make it more difficult to find them in the actual night sky!

But I couldn't worry about that for too long because I was writing, in the dark, that Andromeda, which we would be able to identify because it looks like a cotton ball in the night sky is actually a galaxy, 2.2 million light years away, with a diameter of 165,000 light-years, containing at least 200 billion stars. That's when I stopped writing and just looked.

The light we were seeing reflected, on that night...represented the light from before there WERE human beings. And then the person at the controls in the Planetarium fast forwarded... to show what the night sky will look like in 3 months, which planets will align? We oohed and ahed when four seemed to come together. And then, as the vision of the future rotated in front of our eyes, in silence there was just wonder and the dazzling presence of the All – and harmony and peace.

Until someone said, "When is THIS? How far forward have we gone?" and was met with the answer, "How many moons have gone by?" We were expelled from "the eternal present," and soon, thereafter, from the Planetarium.

But as I left, I thought of this definition of the universe: "The universe creates us, preserves us, and destroys us. It is deep and old beyond our ability to reach with our senses. It is beautiful beyond our ability to describe in words. It is complex beyond our ability to fully grasp in science." This definition of the universe comes from *The World Pantheism* website.

It describes the universe NOT in terms of the ancient understanding – spirits that dwell in nature, but in terms of how human spirituality connects us to something larger and grander, the Universe: source of all that exists. This is the spirituality described not only by Andre Compte-Sponville in our meditation, but also by self-described TUUC atheists with whom I spoke this week. One shared that I MUST go see the new documentary of images from the Hubble, in 3-D at the Science Center.

Another spoke of how going for walks was not merely physical exercise, but also spiritual. To be immersed in nature of which we are a part – whether looking at stars just above the trees or walking in the rain – was an experience of connecting to Being itself.

The person from whom *Swimming To The Other Side* is a favorite song wrote about how poetry and music connect her with the truth of existence. Another spoke of how the practice of Buddhist meditation frees him from "habits, frustrations, refusals, fears, hopes, judgments, and attachments." One shared, "We humans are in this together and if we don't support one another, we'll kill one another."

This was echoed in a recent New York Times article about Dale McGowan. To preserve family harmony with his mother-in-law, and to give his children "religious literacy," Mr. McGowan went with his family to St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Minneapolis on "a skeptic's field trip." He left the church with a mission. His mission was not to promote a dogmatic faith... but to create an opportunity for atheist's to tithe.

Why would an atheist tithe? Not to save his or her soul... but to provide refugee aid, advance public health, and protect the environment. Mr. McGowan set up a nonprofit foundation, on-line, that solicits donations from atheists. So far, 316 donors contribute \$5-\$250 per month in order to put the value of compassion in action in a conscious, deliberate way.

Generosity and service are also part of an atheist's spirituality. Andre Comte-Sponville's little book of atheist spirituality traces his journey from a Catholic upbringing, as a child, to a statement he wrote as a teenager: "Either God exists, in which case nothing matters, or else God does not exist, in which case nothing matters;" to what he has concluded as an adult philosopher: "Either God exists, in which case everything matters, or God does not exist, in which case everything matters."

He wrote this, tongue-in-cheek, as an atheist, as a preface to his credo – that to which he gives his mind, heart, and hands. Andre Comte-Sponville's credo is: "Love, not hope, is what helps us live. Truth, not faith, is what sets us free. We are already in the kingdom. Eternity is now." In our new member orientation sessions, we share our religious odysseys – how our world view has changed, the experiences which have shaped us the people who have led us in a new direction.

I imagine many people here resonate with, or at least understand, Comte-Sponville's spiritual search. I do, even though I do not choose the theological identity of atheist. In my world view, there is room for the word "God" as a metaphor that points us to "the ground of being," to the mystery that elicits our wonder and awe, to the force of life, so much larger than ourselves, that creates, sustains, heals, and renews, with which we co-create as we seek understand and choose all that is lovely, good, true, and courageous, and with which we seek union and communion in our relationships.

But given that the word "God" is more often used to invoke a literal, supernatural force acting in human history and to justify morally outrageous claims – from a higher purpose for the death of a child – to punishment of an entire nation in the form of an earthquake, I can understand why some choose to reject the word all together.

And not just "some." Many who subscribe to the Eastern world religions do not use the word God in their spiritual practices. But even in the west, an increasing number of people are rejecting the word. In France, 50% of the population self-identifies as "atheist." However, in this country, in 2007, 53% of Americans would not vote for a candidate for President, if that person were an atheist.

So our congregation's mission – to be a beacon of free-thinking religion where we need not think alike to love alike and where atheists, agnostics, and theists can worship together, side-by-side, nurturing our spirits through education, fellowship, and service – is important and vital!

Carl Sagan once wrote "A religion that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern

science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths.” An atheist spirituality does just this by reminding us that this is enough; what we wonder about with our minds, the love we give and receive, connecting us to one another and to the natural world; the meaning that we create through our living is enough. We can never fall out of the All.

### **HYMN**

In affirmation of the spirituality of an atheist let us join in singing hymn #1064, *Blue Boat Home*

### **CLOSING WORDS**

by Rev. Carl Seaburg

*Between the dawn and dusk of our being, let us be brave and loving.*

**GO NOW IN PEACE.**

