

Sermon: The Ultimate Theme Park

-----Chalice Lighting-----

A wax candle,
wax distilled from oil
oil recovered from deep within the earth.
Oil, a product of life that flourished millions
of years ago.

A match of phosphorous ignited by friction.

(Light the candle)

A chemical reaction between
The residue life that existed
millions of years ago
and oxygen created by the green leaf
and the plankton of today.

What an improbable event.

We Unitarian Universalists
choose to invest this improbable flame
with the aspirations of our faith.

We choose to give this flame meaning,
the warmth of compassion,
our deepest faith in reason, diversity and freedom.

And when the time comes to extinguish this candle flame, consider this.

The ideals of compassion, reason diversity and freedom
that this improbable candle flame has symbolized
are more real than the candle itself
and they will endure long after the chemical reaction
that was the flame has ceased.

When I first met Helen, she was dying and she knew it. Helen was in her late eighties. She had lived a full life with the thrills and disappointments that that entails. She cherished memories of her eccentric parents and a childhood in Paris France before the Second World War. I was thrilled just to sit and listen to the stories of her experience of life.

During one of my visits in her home, when the time was right, she looked directly into my eyes, fixing her gaze so that she would catch any evasion on my part. Norm, she asked, “What do you think happens to you after you die?”

I began my response by mumbling something about how I really didn’t know for sure. That was a rookie mistake! Helen cut me off: “Of course you don’t know! No one knows! We all understand that! I am asking, what is your working hypothesis?” Since that day I have come to see my religious faith as a Working Hypothesis. I don’t claim to have the answers to life’s persistent questions. But I am developing my hypothesis.

Scientists tell us, and I believe that everything in the visible universe developed at the moment of Creation from an infinitely dense mass of pure energy that expanded, cooled and condensed into hydrogen and helium gas. At the General Assembly this year I heard Nick Page speaking about the beauty of music. He said:

“An agnostic is a person who believes that if you leave hydrogen gas alone long enough, it will eventually write great symphonies.”

At one time, that was my working hypothesis. But the more I learned from the scientists the more incredible the explanation of chance seemed to be. Let me give you one example, the famous picture taken by the Hubble Telescope, known as “The Hubble Ultra Deep Field.” It is an image of a tiny patch of sky, the size of a grain of sand held out at arm’s length. That particular patch of sky was chosen for study because it appeared to be completely empty space. Scientists pointed the 8 foot diameter light collecting mirror of Hubble at this apparently empty piece of sky and took a 12 day time exposure.

And in that tiny black piece of the sky a fantastic image emerged: ten thousand galaxies *each* of which contains billions of stars. The most distant of these galaxies is at the very edge of the “visible universe.”

For reasons I will not get into here, there are physical limits on how far we can see into the universe, and the Hubble Telescope comes very close to that limit. That limit is the Cosmic Horizon. Let me be clear. I am not saying that our knowledge of what lies further out in space is limited by our technology. Rather it is limited by the nature of the universe and the laws which govern it. The universe was created with limits on what can be know. We can never see what lies beyond the Cosmic Horizon.

What analogy, what metaphor might provide a handle on this bewildering and improbable experience that is consciousness in this cosmos? This afternoon, I invite you to imagine the Universe as the Ultimate Theme Park.

The Ultimate Theme Park presents a paradox. On one hand, the awesome beauty and consistency of the universe calls on our emotions and demands an explanation beyond mere chance. While on the other hand, the best rational explanation, the only scientific explanation for it all, is chance. We can find no proof of God's existence even when we scan the heavens to the very edge of the universe and the beginning of time. The universe is self consistent with no apparent need for any reality beyond the borders of the park. What I am striving for is a working hypothesis that allows me to explain the apparent absence of God in the midst of a creation that speaks to me of the reality of God.

I believe that the universe is created in a way that makes it impossible to prove the existence of God and that this is what we should expect from God. If I wanted to ruin the theme park experience for a 5 year old, I could go around exposing the man made illusions. I could pull the plastic head off of Mickey Mouse, exposing the very human aspiring actor within. I could even ruin the child's experience of a hot dog by showing him or her where the meat came from.

But a fundamental aspect that distinguishes the Ultimate Theme Park is that I can never expose God working behind the scenes. If we could, then the magic of the park, maybe even the purpose of the park, would be destroyed.

Octavius Brooks Frothingham, a Unitarian minister in the 19th century got it right when he spoke of "The Hidden God" of our experience. Frothingham wrote: this Hidden God, this inaccessibility of God, is actually a positive spur to human nature. Such a conception of God 'strengthens because, while it kindles the imagination and exalts sentiment, it leaves will and endeavor free.' Unburdened by the present God of Christian tradition, a person is thus able 'to do his or her own work, without interference from specters. The intruding God mars God's own best creation.'

Helen's question; "Norm what happens to you after you die?" is asking, "What lies beyond the boundary of the Ultimate Theme Park?" We are forbidden by the laws of nature from ever knowing that information. Helen had a vision of life after death. She expected to meet her old friends and she expected to be able to continue to watch what was happening here on earth. That isn't my expectation, but my working hypothesis would not rule it out for God's creation is infinite. While we live, our scientific knowledge is limited to the bounds of the Park, however, there is infinite room for mystery in an infinite universe.

I am left to live out my days in the Ultimate Theme Park forever denied any scientific proof of a creator or of a transcendent meaning for the experience, other than the meaning that I choose to give it. And so I end each of my days with a prayer. A prayer that goes something like this.

"May I rest tonight secure in my faith

in the beauty of God's creation.

And, may I rise tomorrow and live the day
with the excitement of a child in the greatest
of all possible theme parks.

And, may my faith in the creator of that Theme Park sustain
me for whatever fortune may come my way.

May it be so,
Amen