

THE CHURCH OF WHAT WE KNOW

Peter Mayer, 2017

I was recently at a UU Coming of Age service, where many quotes were read from the 9th grade boys and girls who were in this program and making statements about what they believe. One of the quotes was something to the effect of “as far as what the truth is about different religions, I guess I just don't know. And not knowing seems to be what UUism is all about.”

I thought a lot about this. We UU's are indeed famous for not being quite sure about what we believe. There are jokes you may have heard about what happens when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with a UU, and the answer is that you get a person who goes around knocking on doors for no apparent reason.

I've puzzled a lot about what exactly it is that UUism represents. When I first discovered it, it seemed so different from the Roman Catholicism I grew up with. It contained no central mythology, no creed or statement of belief in any kind of supernatural order. It offered no God. It guaranteed no afterlife. I wondered....was this even a religion? And what was holding it together? It seemed to struggle with what it was exactly, and how to describe itself to a curious stranger on a 30 second elevator ride.

I would like to suggest that perhaps what UUs are about lies not so much in WHAT WE DON'T KNOW but rather in WHAT WE DO KNOW. Let me explain what I mean.

Throughout our history, UU's have always had a sort of cranky empiricism. There is another joke about us—that we often read ahead in the hymnal so we can determine whether or not we can in good conscience sing the lyrics that are coming up. We are very serious about the Truth of things. And here's something most of us seem to agree on—if something can't be shown to be true based on good evidence, then we shouldn't try to build a religion on it. Let me say this again--if something can't be shown to be true based on good evidence, then we shouldn't try to build a religion on it. So...if we can't have all of the beliefs and promises that many religions have, then what is left for us? Well...what we DO KNOW is what is left, and this is, I think, one of the defining traits of Uuism. We build on what we know to be true---not on what we don't. Some religions favor their beliefs over and even against empirical knowledge. But not Uuism. It seems to me that what we KNOW comes first, and everything follows from that. And whatever follows—whatever beliefs or rituals or spiritual practices we embrace—must not contradict common knowledge, but rather flow out of it and hearken back to it.

Does this sound like a religion without mysticism and inspiration--without the transcendent experiences that so many of us hope for in a religious practice? I would like to suggest just the opposite—that what we now know to be true about the world is so vast and mysterious in it's scope—from the subtle intricacies and inner workings of a single living cell, to the unimaginable immensity and age of the universe—that every effort we make to learn about it can only lead to a sense of reverence, awe and wonder. Astronomer Chet Raymo writes “Nothing I had been taught in my religious education seemed adequate to encompass the grandeur and mystery of what I learned in science.”

So.....what DO we know? Well.....we know that we are alive! Perhaps this is our best good news. And we know that being alive and awake in the universe is an astonishing thing. We also know that we are blood relatives with every other living thing on earth--every plant, animal, bacterium and fungus--and that every living thing descended from the same microscopic organisms that were alive on Earth 4 billion years ago. We didn't always know this, and most of our religions were created long before we discovered it. And even though this truth is incredibly profound with all sorts of implications about who and what we are, still so many of our religions do not include it in their understanding of the world, nor acknowledge or celebrate it in their liturgies and doctrines. We also know that evolution is the process by which all life is related, and yet some religions today deny evolution altogether-- even though there is as much evidence for it as there is for the theory of gravity. To deny evidence is a curious and sometimes troubling capacity that we humans have. Look at global warming for example....although it enjoys the weight of scientific consensus, still many of us simply choose not to believe it. Ignoring facts like this creates a very distorted and dangerous map by which to navigate our future. And it points to the need for a religion that starts first and foremost with what we can say is true to the best of our knowledge.

What else do we know? We know that each one of us is a community of a trillion living organisms (many of whom still resemble their ancient ancestors) cooperating in complicated ways to make you and me. And we are learning that even though evolution has given us the drive to compete, it has also perhaps even more powerfully given us the desire to cooperate and nurture and love, and live in community with others. We are learning that humans love not in spite of our genetic inheritance, but

BECAUSE of it. Nature itself has taught us to love and to practice empathy. Because we need each other to live and to thrive.

What else do we know? We know that we are on a planet. We didn't always know this, and most of our religions were created long before we discovered it. Catholic Nun and theologian Ilia Delio basically says forget evolution—we religious people still have to come to grips with the fact that the sun actually ISN'T going around the earth...and that we are not the center of everything. She argues that many of our religions are still operating out of the old medieval paradigm which sees the earth as the center of the cosmos and the human as the center of the earth. Then of course God and the Angels above that and the whole point of life is to get there from here. But now we know we are actually on a planet and the universe isn't turning around us....WE are doing the turning. Turning around our axis at 900 miles and hour, and around the sun at 67,000 miles an hour. And we are all together turning around the center of our Milky Way galaxy at a whopping 483,000 miles an hour! A galaxy which, by the way, we now know isn't the ONLY galaxy—we know there are hundreds of billions of them, and they are all moving and expanding apart from one another. Indeed, everything is in motion. From the very smallest particle in the atoms of our bodies, to the immense universe itself.

And we know that all is changing as well—not static and eternal as the old model suggested (even Einstein didn't believe this at first). The universe is 13.8 thousand million years old, and began as a speck smaller than an atom into which all of us were squished in our primordial form, and which at some point exploded and expanded with unimaginable force and speed. In time gravity gathered gas clouds into galaxies of stars. Some of those stars exploded and created new kinds of

matter which was then gathered up again into new stars, rocks and planets and eventually into us. We are made of star stuff. We didn't always know this astonishing truth, and most religions still don't regard it as central to their beliefs and practices. Perhaps they think it's beside the point. But isn't beside the point....it is the sacred story of our lives.

And so we know that our existence is dependent on all that has preceded us....all that has happened leading up to now, and that our lives are brief events in the immense scope of things. One difficult thing we know is that life needs death in order to make itself anew, which does not bode well for our prospects for personal immortality, but it does mean that we have the opportunity to be alive at all, because without death, none of us would be here. We know that we are not really “better” than anything else in creation. BUT it is possible to see that we have a special role—a role of discovering and giving names to things, of piecing together the story of creation....and CELEBRATING it. We can say that the universe becomes awake and aware of itself through us. We have the role of loving each other, trying to make life fair and equitable for all, and caring for the earth. And now with our capacity to destroy, we have the planet in our hands and so have the very important role of striving to protect and preserve its life systems.

And here is a great truth that we know, which is expressed in all the other things we have learned. We are profoundly interconnected—we are indeed one--with each another and with everything around us... IN WAYS THAT ARE VERY IMPORTANT BUT NOT ALWAYS VERY APPARENT. And here is where religion comes in. Religions have always told a particular story about the world, and of what it means to be human. Who and what are we? How should we live? What does life mean? And whatever that sacred, central story is—it is committed to

heart by those who follow that faith, told and retold, studied and discussed endlessly. Why? Because it is of utmost importance, and it's not something you just tend to know intuitively. If you grow up Christian or Muslim, you don't automatically know the story of Jesus or Muhammed---you must learn it—and then ideally--study it the rest of your life in order to live more fully out of it.

And so it is with what we know. The fact that we are on a planet is not an intuitive thing. We don't feel it moving....and so we have to remind ourselves of this if we are to live more deeply out of it. We must use our imaginations to try and grasp what is real. It is the same with many other of these aspects of our existence--we must learn about evolution and the oneness of life, about deep time and the forces that brought us here, and then try to live out of those ideas and let them sink more deeply into us—by way of ritual and meditation, poetry and metaphor, art and drama, discussion and support in a community of faith. This is the way we create a GOOD AND ACCURATE map of reality by which to navigate the future, and make the right choices so that life will flourish.

When I grew up, every year at Easter time my family attended the most important liturgy of the whole year....the Easter Vigil. It happened at midnight and the whole church at one point became completely dark. This is big stuff for a kid in the pews.....sitting in a full church at midnight in silence with the lights out. Then the pascal fire—the light of Christ-- was dramatically lit at the back of the church and it's light slowly grew as the flame was passed candle to candle to each person until the whole sanctuary glowed. I'll never forget that magical feeling—that great light appearing in the darkness and then spreading to each one of us—so that each of us were a part of it. The over 2-hour liturgy featured readings and songs from our whole history, going back to

Genesis, Abraham, Moses, and finally Jesus Christ...this was our entire salvation story. But given how my own beliefs have changed since then, where do I go now with my own children...so that they can feel the magic of their own story? Where do I go to light a great fire in the dark that represents the big bang, or the first time that life invented an eye to see? Or the first time that our human ancestors appeared in Africa?

This is our sacred story. To know it is to feel at home in the world—to feel like we belong here—to feel connected to everything around us (the word religion after all means “to reconnect”), to find happiness and meaning in our lives. I believe it has the power, like any great sacred story, to comfort and inspire us, to give us strength in living, to help us love one another and grow our circle of compassion and empathy, and to act with wisdom.

I believe that our UU religion has a very unique and powerful capacity to help people do just that. To help develop a kind of spiritual “vocabulary” for the many intellectual things that we are learning....and help orient our hearts and our actions to them. To create rituals, liturgies and spiritual practices that celebrate what we know, and bring it alive in our imaginations.

Here is another quote from Chet Raymo: “If the prodigious energy of the new scientific story of creation is to flow into religion, the story will need to be translated from the language of scientific discovery into the language of celebration.... Only when we are emotionally at home in the universe of the galaxies and the DNA will the new story invigorate our spiritual lives and be cause for authentic celebration.”

Statistics show that church going is on the decline in the West. Maybe this is because people are finding a sense of community in places like facebook instead. And/or maybe it is a problem of content—maybe people feel that the reality of the world that they are living in is not reflected in the church they attend each Sunday.

Carl Sagan said that “A religion, old or new, 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 conventional faiths. Sooner or later such a religion will emerge.”

I believe that Unitarian Universalism can be that religion.