

December 31, 2017

New Year's Eve Day, Morning Service: "Living with Science and Humanism", Bill Spence.

It's a real pleasure to spend time with you this morning here in beautiful San Miguel de Allende. Part of the Unitarian Universalist's seven guiding principles is to promote an individual's search for truth and meaning. This morning I'll give you an example of that process. Hopefully this will resonate with you!

PAUSE

Almost exactly three years ago, I was in a Denver Intensive Care Unit recovering from a life-threatening brain tumor. I was running a temperature of 104.5, had two misdiagnoses, and had been helicoptered from our Colorado mountain valley to Denver. Many people thought that I would not make it. My tumor turned out to be very large and was pressing hard on my pituitary gland and on nerves that controlled vision. While I appeared to be nearly lifeless, over the days my mind became super active. I was asking myself what scientists know about our Universe, how biological evolution on Earth led to Homo sapiens, and how our lives are given meaning.

/// Basically, I was asking "Who are we and what's it really all about?" Now, maybe such focus seems a bit too bold and over the top and I need to give you some context.

I grew up as the eldest son of a fundamentalist Baptist preacher. Our life then had a lot of rigidity and rules such as no dancing, no drinking, no smoking, remember the 'sabbath' in all ways to keep

it holy, and to always honor the triune God – that is: God the Father, God the Holy Ghost, and Jesus the Son of God. We attended gatherings of the faithful several times a week.

/// Even as a kid, I did not understand this fundamentalist attitude towards life, as I intuitively felt that relations among people were the most important parts of existence, rather than focusing on paying homage to some mysterious God.

My life in this fundamentalist environment now reminds me of the joke “Why do Southern Baptists view premarital sex as a sin?Because it might lead to dancing”. Yes, it all seemed a bit backwards.

You see, I was a natural humanist and over the years worked hard to fashion a life that fit this life view. Part of my search for finding my own truth led me into a career in scientific research, earning two degrees in physics, teaching high school science for two years, and later earning a Ph.D. in geophysics. My research career was concentrated on understanding great earthquakes and on tomographic studies of earth structure.

/// I authored many papers that were published in peer-reviewed journals. In one of them I was able to link the causes of great, subduction earthquakes to the primary forces that cause the tectonic plates to move.

I was filled with wonder at how our planet is tectonically active.

So, getting back to the story of my hospitalized self. With my background and life path, maybe it’s not so surprising that my

feverish brain was focused on how Homo sapiens arose on this planet and on how life is given meaning.

A very savvy and experienced neurosurgeon said that under their hospital's very controlled environment, there was no advantage to immediately operate on me and to wait a few days, somehow suspecting a chance that I might be a lucky one – one of those rare cases out of three to four hundred where the tumor would resolve **itself**. And indeed, it turned out that my greatly enlarged tumor cut off its own blood supply, died off, and is now a small bit of scar tissue. My 80-year old body is very thankful.

Now, what follows is **my personal interpretation** of the meaning of human life. This talk is based on a memoir that I'm writing -- a project that was triggered by my experience in intensive care.

Running parallel to my career, I had serious interests in comparative religions, how contemporary religions came onto the scene, and how natural evolutionary processes have led to modern Homo sapiens.

Scientists understand how life began on Earth about four billion years ago and evolved from a simple single cell bacterium to complex organisms. **Our** species, Homo sapiens, emerged in western Africa about 300,000 years ago.

/// Then, about 70,000 years ago small bands of Homo sapiens migrated "**out of Africa**" and our dark-skinned ancestors spread rapidly over Europe and Asia. That was about 3000 generations ago.

Much evolution within modern man of the past 10,000 years is understood, such as differences in hair color and texture, skin color, eye color, lactose tolerance, and so on.

So, we understand much of who we are as humans.

Future human evolution may become **directed** with gene editing approaches, using technologies like **crispr**, where a defective gene is replaced by a desired gene. Who knows what the future holds but I think that human evolution may become less random and much more controlled.

PAUSE

Now, I want to look A BIT DEEPER into the tendency of many humans to embrace a religious practice. I needed to understand how I was programmed by the religious fundamentalism of my youth. I was basically asking “What are the theological and neurological underpinnings of religious practice?”

In my journey, I checked out various religious groups, such as attending services at a wide variety of Christian churches and even talking my way into a very unusual and proprietary Mormon service in Chevy Chase, Maryland, where various members stood in place and gave emotional and highly personal confessions of misdeeds to the assembled several hundred.

In my travels throughout South America and in visiting temples throughout the Far East, I watched various types of religious expression with great interest and an analytical eye.

My goal was to leave behind the constraints of religious fundamentalism.

My skepticism continually deepened regarding the legitimacy of the claims of any highly organized religion.

I was intrigued by the creativity and achievements of modern humans who operated without religion. I wanted to become my own person and I sought out various human activities in which I saw real excellence.

/// I roamed art museums and soaked up plays and concerts of all kinds. **I appreciated how literature, live theater, music, and art ALL serve to illuminate and tell us about human nature.**

I felt that I was on the right track. But because I had left behind the religious models of personal interaction, I had to create new models for building relationships. I had to learn how to relate deeply to persons outside of fundamentalism, a process that continued for decades. This process was surprisingly disorienting and very painful. But totally worth it.

Part of my personal growth included challenging many of the stories and beliefs in religious fundamentalism. You know many of them, such as the virgin birth, Jonah and the whale, life after death, heaven, hell, transubstantiation, and so on.

I had **been taught that God was all powerful, all knowing, always present -- the teachers using big words like omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent to give the concepts greater impact**. I clearly remember the time, over 50 years ago saying “OK, if you’re this huge presence I challenge you to strike me **dead** NOW with a bolt of lightning”. That was a risky thing to

do for me as a young man, and of course I was relieved and maybe a bit surprised that nothing happened.

After grad school, my friends mostly were artists and theater folks. I liked people who had a creative mindset and were open-minded to the possibilities that life afforded.

I came to view the Bible, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, the writings of Buddha and Confucius, and similar religious texts NOT as embodying absolute or divine truths but as forms of **religious literature**.

My first wife was an artist, who was killed in a mountain climbing accident at age 31, and I met my present wife of 33 years, Sue Edelstein, in Denver at an opening night of the opera "Tales of Hoffman". With each marriage, I learned about the remarkable depths of marital love, which for me continues to deepen every year.

I kept touch with my parents and was puzzled at each visit home that I would develop a splitting headache. It was years before that symptom disappeared. My Scottish father found religion early, and as a late teen preached on street corners of his native Edinburgh. Over the years, he became increasingly liberal, religiously, and we always could talk. On one visit home when he was about 80 years old, he said "Bill, I've reconsidered the issue of alcohol", and astonishing me, he reached to a high shelf, pulled down a bottle of scotch and poured us each a drink. I'm sure that this man, who was a Biblical scholar, had searched the Bible and found nothing there to discourage this act. So he shifted from his old **belief** system. I think that what steered him to this was

reading in health food magazines that an occasional drink is good for one's health.

PAUSE

To understand more of my thinking about religions, let's take a brief look at religion's deep historical roots. Imagine early members of our species, being much like us, traveling in small hunter-gatherer bands. They must have marvelled at the brilliance of starry night skies, and at all manner of natural phenomena. They must have had questions regarding the nature of earthly events, the heavens, and the nature of their own lives and those persons emotionally close.

Lacking the findings of science they had no clue about the real nature of the heavens, the incredible size and deep time of the universe, the complexity of the planet they roamed, and the biological connections they had with other living things.

The primary religious practice of early humans is thought to be animistic – the belief that objects, places, and creatures each possess a distinct spiritual essence. **I think that such beliefs originated from humans themselves.** Early burial practices and cave art, dating to over 40,000 years ago, are thought by some to reflect spiritual feelings and these practices are some of the beginnings of behavioral modernity.

Of the prominent religions today, we have, chronologically for example, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. **The origin of each of these religions is a fascinating area of study and it seems to me**

that each of these practices originated with humans themselves.

Four to five billion humans profess to believe in a divine God and in divine revelations. **Adherents often are asked, as a matter of faith, to believe all manner of assertions. Regarding our existence, I prefer to rely more on evidence and see what logic and reason can tell us.**

Religious practice is highly personal and how it is observed is **all over the board**. To me, some practices are reasonable and others are not.

On the positive side, many religious practices emphasize community, are inclusive, and respect adherents of other beliefs. Great, sometimes astonishing achievements in music, art, architecture, philosophy, law, liturgy, and ceremony, have resulted from deep observance of religious beliefs.

Religious practices often provide mechanisms to appreciate other humans, to wonder about and appreciate the natural world, and to quiet a busy mind -- often through various meditative practices.

I think that many problems within religion arise when it becomes fundamentalist and thereby rigid. Such religion acts to deprive individuals of the freedom to find their own truth. In the earlier Roman Catholic Church, we are familiar with the injustices from the Spanish Inquisition and the complicated results from the Crusades. Continuing through today, religious differences sometimes lead to dramatic confrontations, such as in Myanmar with the Buddhist persecution of the Islamic Rohingas (I thought

that Buddhists were gentle!), or the terrorist acts promoted by Wahhabist fundamentalists.

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The number of religious practices has exploded and today the number of different religions and spiritual practices in the world is estimated to be at least 4,000. To me, it seems very unlikely that **any one** of these possesses absolute truth regarding the nature and purpose of the Universe, or of the existence of a supreme being or GOD that oversees everything, including our lives.

Consider that modern **religions** have existed for only about one percent of the time that modern **humans** have peopled the Earth. One has to ask that if a single supreme being exists then why was this revealed so late in the time of humanity's existence?

Some choose to characterize God as the energy and mysterious complexity of the Universe. /// I view this argument as unnecessary as it ignores that science is providing answers to a great many questions, including those posed by religion and by philosophers.

While being religious may be comforting, as a scientist and as an honest man I have chosen to live with what has been **proven** to be close to the truth, rather than hinge my beliefs on concepts that I am fairly certain to be false.

How has religion become such a driving force with much of humanity? I think that the answer lies with the human brain itself. Research on brain function is a hot topic today in medicine. The

human brain contains over one hundred billion neurons and each neuron averages about seven thousand connections with other

Much research is ongoing on exactly how the brain functions. It is remarkable that evolution has gifted us with brains that are extremely complex and yet stable and able to focus on problem-solving at many levels. **Likewise, it is unsurprising that the human brain would be capable of conceiving the concepts of God and other such entities.**

PAUSE

OK, I've talked long enough about my personal views of science and religion. You've already figured out that I'm a passionate humanist, a passionate scientist, a passionate non-believer, and care deeply about the nature of human relationships and the functioning of human societies.

Here's my "credo".

- I believe that we're part of a continuing evolutionary process in the development of hominids that began with natural processes on Earth about 4 billion years ago.
- I think that the concepts of various deities and of a divine God have arisen completely from the human mind, and that there is no proof of the existence of divine entities.
- I think that all we exist through the miracle of evolution.

As I lay in a near comatose state some three years ago, my mind worked hard to answer the questions of **"who are we and what's it really all about?"** I've tried to bring together modern information on how Homo sapiens has evolved from simple life beginnings, and how religion has had various meanings.

To realize our maximum human potential, I think that we must accept that human evolution has led us to care about and love one another, to compete with one another, and to exhibit other characteristics of tribal behavior.

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My conclusions are not to say that life is nihilistic or existential but rather, that we have the **wonderful opportunity to create an existence** that maximizes our self-worth, as members of the human community. With the increased knowledge of who and what we are as humans, of our Earth, and of the cosmological Universe, we can view the whole panoply **with the greatest of wonder and appreciation.**

Recognizing that having all the answers is impossible, I simply accept life as a great gift and try each day to find true pleasure with my wife, with friends, Googling some new information, taking a walk in the park, and marveling about the exquisite complexity of humans and of our Universe.

We have each other, we have our community, we have our planet, and we have the ability to explore the divinity and collective spirit of the human community and of our Universe,

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Now, AS we move into the New Year 2018, may we take up the challenge as mature humans, to seek and to share the values that elevate our being human and help us to improve our community.

We UUs have principles that can serve as one guide to a good, fulfilling, and happy life. Let us be thankful for and contribute to

whatever community we might call home, including this very successful bicultural community of San Miguel de Allende.

PAUSE

In closing, here's an optimistic sentiment from George Bernard Shaw: **“Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”**

HAPPY NEW YEAR!