

PAINT BRANCH UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

E Pluribus Unum – Out of Many, One • July 13, 2008 • 10:00 am

“The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil.” God, Genesis 3: 22

PRELUDE	<i>Bear Dance</i>	B. Bartok
	David Chapman, <i>pianist and music director</i>	
WELCOME & ANNOUNCEMENTS	Pat Tompkins, <i>Worship Associate</i> **	
CALL TO WORSHIP	Michael Léger*	
SONG # 1051	<i>We Are</i>	
FLAMING CHALICE DEDICATION		
INTONATION	<i>Lament</i>	B. Bartok
PRESENTATION	<i>Human Incarnational Religion</i>	
	Michael Léger	
HYMN #184	<i>Be Ye Lamps Unto Yourselves</i>	
SHARING OF JOYS AND SORROWS		
HYMN # 1013	<i>Open My Heart</i>	Henry Flurry
OFFERTORY	<i>Bagpipes from Sonatina</i>	B. Bartok
CLOSING WORDS		
RESPONSE #123	<i>Spirit of Life</i>	
POSTLUDE	<i>Bagatelle #2, Op. 6</i>	B. Bartok

** Worship Associates are trained lay leaders of worship at PBUUC. They assist ministers and other presenters in developing and leading Sunday Morning Worship.

* Michael is a Worship Associate, Choir member, and member of the Men’s Fellowship at Paint Branch.

CALL TO WORSHIP:

I would like to call us into worship today with a quotation from T.S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

"Let us go then, you and I,

When the evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient **etherized upon a table;**

Let us go, **through certain half-deserted streets,**

The muttering retreats

Of restless nights in **one-night cheap hotels,**

And sawdust **restaurants with oyster-shells.**

Streets that follow like a **tedious argument**

Of insidious intent

To lead you to an overwhelming question...

Oh, do not ask, '**What is it?**'

Let us go and make our visit."

I invite you into worship today for the express purpose of asking, explicitly, the overwhelming questions.

HUMAN INCARNATIONAL RELIGION:

When I was a very young child, the world as I perceived it was initially divided into categories of either me or not me. This view—probably healthy as a means of distinguishing a self from the larger environment of infancy—carried over into my perception of everything in my young world. For example: because in my neighborhood I saw two different kinds of schools, Catholic and Public, I concluded that there were two religions: you guessed it—you were either a Catholic or you were a Public. So too when it came to my understanding of primary spiritual questions. Was there a god/ (either Yes? or No?). Where and what was he? (funny, it was never possible to think "she.") One thing was clear enough: the "me/not-me" binary certainly applied to the "what is god?" question.

My theological training—not to say, indoctrination—underscored this perception of "not-me" in some ways that feel pretty abusive, in retrospect. For one thing, I found that the God I was supposed to be worshipping was an awful lot like my father: authoritarian, judgmental, harsh, easily disappointed, unpredictable, filled with rage, terrifying. The difference was that my poor father had a lot more excuse for being the man he was than god had for being who he was, or who I had been taught he was. Also, god, being ubiquitous, was actually a lot MORE terrifying: he could see and know everything about me, and he held the threat of eternal torture over my head. If you've read the third chapter of "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," you've read what young Catholics are, or at least were, taught about why they should avoid pissing god off.

In my adolescence, largely, I believe, in a desperate attempt to keep myself from suiciding, I embraced a belief in the approachability, tenderness, and love of this same god—in the person of god-the-son, Jesus.

Particularly in the suffering of Jesus I was able to see his humanity, and so find someone with whom to identify, so that in a way one I believed was truly god was not quite “other” any more. This was an intensely comforting and liberating shift for me. Only much later did the purpose of that suffering—as the only available means of redeeming mankind—appear to me inconsistent with the character of a loving, tender, merciful, and still all-powerful Father-God.

My twenties found me descending, in spite of all that felt good and supportive in my spiritual perspective, into a hell of confusion created by the tension between my resignation that I was not going to become heterosexual and my intense awareness that no Christian perspective THEN on my radar screen would allow me to embrace my gay identity. The tension fueled my deepening alcoholism, and this in turn became the core of more and more guilt and shame, spiraling downward into self-destruction.

Happily for me, 12-step recovery allowed me a way out of this nightmare, allowed me to quit drinking and gain the capacity to reexamine all aspects of my life honestly. Now it is no arcane secret of 12-step recovery that it centers on the proposition that some power beyond that of the suffering addict is necessary for recovery to persist. For many people this means an external god, and for me that idea was neither foreign nor objectionable in my early recovery. Later, because I could not reconcile the reality of human suffering with the idea of a caring and all-powerful god, reliance upon a “personal” god (a god with personhood) became insupportable for me, and then my challenge became to find ways to connect my experience of recovery as an atheist with the experiences of other recovering people who remained theists, so that I could continue to support them in their ongoing recovery and find support from them in mine. Eventually I found my way into a church in which I find the same challenge, but within a framework of Principles and Sources that allows—theoretically at least—for such mutual nurture. Here I’ve found reminders of my spiritual evolution in various spiritual visions.

My process has moved me from theism to atheism through a long struggle with the “overwhelming questions” I believe Prufrock—the poem I from which I quoted in my Call to Worship—alludes to. Many people in this congregation and in our movement have asked the same questions: How can I/we feel more connected to others? What is the reason for acknowledging the longing for that connection? Is the impulse to connect derived from the existence of a higher being or of a higher will or purpose? Who, what, where is that being? Inside the self? Hovering above the physical world? Inside Nature? If a higher being or purpose exists, what is the nature of that being or purpose? If a higher being or purpose exists, what is the reason for the presence—nay, the omnipresence—of suffering in life and in the world?

Like a typical Academic, I pursued the answers to these questions by reading.

Because my background is Christian, I felt the need to examine that faith thoroughly to determine for myself what, if any, part of it still resonated with my experience of reality. So I immersed myself in the works of many Christian Theologians. I discovered that I could not find an all-powerful and all-loving god in the complicated combination of factors that made up the central doctrines of the Christian faith: original sin and redemption by blood sacrifice. Additionally, the idea of eternal damnation itself, and the fact that the best answer this tradition could apparently make to ongoing human suffering is that it somehow fits into a mysterious divine plan, struck me as repulsive. If THAT was god, I REFUSED to live my life within the will of such a creature. I could not stretch my mind or my imagination around the idea of the existence of such a being.

In his comedy routine entitled “Class Clown,” the late George Carlin proposes the following scenario: a loud-mouthed student pipes up during theology class and says: “Hey Father: if God is all-powerful, could he make a rock so big that even He couldn’t lift it?”

My process was a little like this; but I promise you that when faced with this question in its serious form, I was not amused. In fact, as I’ve said, the period I am describing is among the most painful of my life.

Turning away for the moment from my interrogation of Christian doctrine, I read histories of and introductions to other religions. I discovered that the Hindu religion, a faith older by far than Judaism and Christianity, in one form contains the idea that each being is related to each other being and is one with god, because each individual soul (atman) is ultimately the same as the Supreme Soul or Atman. Liberation or freedom is the realization of this oneness.

In texts on Buddhism, I learned that Buddhism believes that the awakened nature (the Buddha nature) is the original being of each person, an original nature rediscovered or reawakened through following the Eightfold Path.

I introduced myself to what is dismissively denominated “New Age Spirituality,” and discovered there very familiar precepts of—you guessed it: Hinduism and Buddhism.

I read Starhawk’s seminal (or since she is a woman, should that be ovumular?) text on Modern Witchcraft, “The Spiral Dance,” and learned that for her and others who follow her tradition of “The Craft,” every being is in fact the Goddess incarnate or the embodied emanation of the Goddess...

I discovered that in the middle east in the centuries centered on the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, spiritual seekers called “Gnostics,” proposed the notion that secret knowledge of truth was obtainable within, that certain human beings are in fact sparks of the True Divine, journeying back to their source, the Unknowable God. According to the recently discovered and translated “Gospel of Judas,” this group included Jesus and his followers.

Considering the historical person of Jesus, I learned that within the 200 years of theological conflict following his death, Jesus’ character was transformed by his

followers into a triumphant orthodox belief that he was the incarnate god, and the third person in the divine trinity.

I learned that the theological position known as “Liberation Theology,” is grounded in statements by Jesus, quoted in the Gospels, that Acts of Love and Mercy and Justice performed for/toward ones neighbor are Acts of Love/Mercy/Justice performed toward God godself—and the corollary that ignoring others’ suffering is the same as ignoring God.

I had long noted an early Christian formulation on the character of god, but little considered its logical implications. The First Letter of John (presumably the apostle John) asserts that “God is Love; and s/he who lives in Love lives in God, and God in that person.” Such a statement bypasses or at least moves into the background any necessity for holding onto a conception of god as “personal.” It also suggests a corollary, explicitly stated by the filmmaker who made a lovely film entitled “Resurrection,” starring Ellen Burstyn, almost thirty years ago: Love is God.

Courtesy of the prolific theologian, former Dominican priest, and founder of the University of Creation Spirituality, Matthew Fox, I learned that an entire parallel history exists alongside the History of Christian Orthodoxy. This tradition—Creation Spirituality—brings into the foreground of its understanding of the relationship of God and humankind the idea of Innate Goodness—of the inherent worth and dignity of EVERY human being and of ALL of creation—instead of the idea of Innate Depravity. Moreover, Fox argues that each and every human being is not only inherently blessed and good, but that every human being inherently contains the same creative energy of god that Jesus is identified with when, in the opening of the Gospel of John, Jesus is described as “The Word or Creative Force of God that was with God in the beginning and through whom everything that was made was made.” Fox in fact traces a history of Jewish/Christian Mysticism that asserts that the Divine Creative Energy survives in everything and Everyone, and that connection in/to God is the rule, the truth, the reality, while separation from God (in the sense of such complete separation that an atonement is necessary) is illusory. If you would like to read more I recommend “Original Blessing.” In a later work “One River; Many Wells,” Fox interweaves selections from the texts of many of the worlds religions as these comment on basic spiritual truths and values such as innate human worth, universal sibling-hood, love, honesty, peacemaking, justice-making, etc.

Lastly, I discovered, in a fascinating theological treatise, a reinterpretation of the life and message of Jesus that finally allowed me to put my most vexed questions to rest, even as this reinterpretation forced me to face and mourn the final loss of my belief in a personal, external, omnipotent, omniscient, ubiquitous, all-loving god.

In this work, “The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity,” Thomas Sheehan argues that the message of Jesus amounts to nothing more, nor less, than an announcement that the Kingdom of God is HERE. Jesus asserted, Sheehan believes, that God has disappeared into humanity so that any act of Love and Mercy

performed toward one's neighbor is performed not only TOWARD God, but in fact INCARNATES GOD godself.....

So in many sources I discovered the possibility of believing that god is everywhere and in all things, in human beings and in nature. I can perhaps call myself a panentheist or an a-theist with equal accuracy. I certainly do NOT believe in an external personal god, and so in that sense I must identify myself, literally, as an a-theist. I look to no cosmic power to take responsibility for the suffering I can see all around me if I dare to acknowledge it. I ALSO extend gratitude to no definitive entity for the beauty and the happiness and the love that I see all around me if I choose to look at THAT. I no longer look for the guidance of a god for my behavior and I fear no divine wrath if my behavior deviates from what I and others would consider "acceptable." I consider the Seven Principles of the UUA a comprehensive guide for my behavior.

AND, Consistent with the Seven Principles, (particularly of course the first and the last), I do try to look at everyone around me as inherently worthwhile, as inherently dignified, as worthy of reverence—even as DIVINE....I do not need to confess how frequently I fall short of that ideal, I am sure. How different I would be if I met that ideal even half the time....sigh! I believe it to be a worthwhile goal, however: to treat others as if they were god, and to treat my responsibility to alleviate suffering around me as if god were really, actually incarnated in such acts.....

In the words of Valentine Michael Smith in "A Stranger in a Strange Land" : "I grok: THOU art God."

Namaste!

Closing Words:

As we walk through half-deserted streets, pursued by overwhelming questions, may we open our hearts to all that we seek. May we be lamps unto ourselves as we follow the sometimes shadowy pathways leading us to realizations of who in fact we are. And may the Spirit of Life, to whom or to which we sing now in Hymn number 123, inspire us along the way.