



*Pedestrians disappear into the Chattanooga Triangle,
on Market Street, near 4th Street.*

What's So Weird about Bigfoot?

*A Worship Service by the Rev. JEFF BRIERE
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
February 24, 2008*

HYMN 361, Enter Rejoice and Come In

Jeff. Good morning. Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere; I'm the minister of this congregation. Let's begin our service with Hymn 361, "Enter, Rejoice and Come In."

ANNOUNCEMENTS ⊕ GREETINGS

Nicole. Our worship service will begin shortly, but here are a couple important announcements: After the service today, please join us for a time of fellowship and conversation.

The men's group meets tomorrow night, **the choir** rehearses Thursday night, and **Wednesday Night Out** is at Taco Roc on Lee Highway.

The choir is hosting a **coffeehouse** on Sadie Hawkins Day—that's the last day of this month. It happens right here in the sanctuary on February 29th—that's Friday—beginning at 7 pm. Please dust off your kazoo, your bagpipes or your washtub bass and come out to this coffeehouse and entertain us with your unique talents. Or dust off your applause-makers (your hands) and support those who entertain you. Carl Hansen is taking names and arranging the event, so see him to register your act. Singers, poets, actors, jugglers, sketch artists, youngsters, oldsters—everyone is invited, no matter what your talent is. Whatever it is that you do that no one else can do, we want to see it. The theme of the evening is love—in all it glorious variety. This event is definitely family-friendly.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to receive weekly announcements via e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office. I invite you now to extend a hand of warmth to two or three people near you. And make a special effort to find someone you don't know and make that person feel welcome. So please rise now and greet your neighbors. *[Meet & Greet]*

[Chime] Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted.

- Please note the emergency exit over here to my right,
- now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode,"
- childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery,
- and the arm chairs here in the Sanctuary are for those who need a little support when standing.

- If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

For a prelude, Marcia chose a piece by George Shearing that he composed in honor of Antonio Carlos Jobim.

PRELUDE: To Antonio Carlos Jobim

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

STORY: Three Questions

Minister. There was once a woman named Helen who had a hard time with three questions. She could never decide when to do what she needed to do; she could never decide who to work with and even if she decided when and who, she could never decide what was the most important thing to do, the item that should be at the top of her list.

Her friends said that she ought to get a Franklin Day Planner, a Blackberry, a Treo, an Ipod, a satellite telephone and connect it all with Bluetooth, and everything would be fine. She would be organized and in control. With all that equipment, Helen wouldn't need anyone else and she would always know what to do and when to do it.

But it didn't work out exactly like that. Thinking mostly about how to push tiny little buttons and tap screens and sign on and sign off and read her e-mail, she became more unorganized, more remote and fell

hopelessly behind in all her tasks. Then the batteries in each of her toys died. Even the pen that came with the Day Planner ran out of ink.

After several nights of reflection, Helen resolved to visit a very wise woman named Marge. Marge lived on the mountain and was said to be a very enlightened woman. Helen would ask her to sort it all out so that she could get back to being productive and happy.

Reaching Marge's house, Helen found her digging a garden. When Marge saw the stranger, she nodded her head in greeting and continued to dig. The labor was obviously hard for her. She was a small woman and it took all her strength to thrust her spade into the ground to turn the earth. Helen approached her respectfully.

Helen. I have come here to ask your help with three questions: When is the best time to do something? Who are the people I should work with? What is the most important thing to do at all times?

Minister. Marge listened attentively but only patted Helen on the shoulder and continued digging.

Helen. You must be tired. Here let me give you a hand with that.

Marge. Well, thank you. Here's the shovel. I'll just sit right here and take a rest.

Minister. After she had dug two rows, Helen stopped and turned to Marge and repeated his three questions. Marge still did not answer his questions, but she was rested.

Marge. Why don't you rest now? I can take over again.

Minister. But Helen continued to dig. One hour passed then two. Finally the sun began to set behind the mountain. Finally, Helen put down the spade.

Helen. I came here to ask if you could answer my three questions. But if you can't give me any answer please let me know so that I can be on my way.

Minister. Marge lifted her head and was about to speak when they both saw a man with a long white beard emerge from the woods. He looked like half of ZZ Top. He ran wildly, pressing his hands against a bloody wound in his stomach. The man ran toward Helen and fell to the ground, where he lay groaning. Opening the man's clothing, Helen and Marge saw that the man had received a deep gash. Helen cleaned the wound thoroughly and then used her own shirt to bandage it, but the blood completely soaked it within minutes. She rinsed the shirt out and bandaged the wound a second time and continued to do so until the flow of blood had stopped.

At last the wounded man regained consciousness and asked for a drink of water. Helen ran down to the stream and brought back a jug of fresh water. Meanwhile, the sun had disappeared and the night air had begun to turn cold. Marge helped Helen to carry the man into the hut where they laid him down on Marge's bed. The man closed his eyes and lay quietly.

Helen was worn out from a long day of climbing the mountain and digging the garden. Leaning against the doorway, she fell asleep. When she rose, she forgot where she was and what she was doing there. She looked over to the bed and saw the wounded man also looking around him in confusion. When he saw Helen, he stared at her intently and then said in a faint whisper, "Thank you."

It was then that Helen first looked at the wounded man and recognized an old friend, someone she had not seen in many years. Helen was very happy to see her old friend again and she set about helping her friend return to his home. Once Helen got the man safe in bed in his own home, she arranged for a physician and nurse to care for the man until he was completely healed.

And then Helen returned to see Marge. Before concluding that her long trip to Marge's mountain was a waste of his time, she wanted to ask her three questions one last time. She found Marge sowing seeds in the earth they had dug the day before.

Marge. Your questions have already been answered.

Helen. How's that?

Marge. Yesterday, if you had not taken pity on my age and helped me dig these beds, you would have never met your old friend. Therefore the most important time was the time you were digging in the beds, the most important person was myself, and the most important pursuit was to help me.

Later, when your friend ran up here, the most important time was the time you spent dressing his wound, for if you had not cared for him, he would have died and you would have lost the chance to be reconciled with him. Likewise, he was the most important person, and the most important thing right then was taking care of his wound.

Remember that there is only one important time and that is now. The present moment is the only time we can control. The most important person is always the person right before you, for you may never see anyone else. And the most important thing to do is help that person, the one standing at your side, to be happy and fulfilled. In doing this, you will be happy and fulfilled yourself.

Minister. So remember that the time is now, whoever is with you is the person and making that person happy is what you should do.

OFFERTORY: Andante

Once a month, this congregation donates the entire Sunday offering, less annual pledge payments, to an outside agency working to make

the world a better place. Today, at the suggestion of Mike Bascom, Marge Pasch, Nancy Anderson, Pat O'Brien and others, we will share the plate today with the library at Howard High School.

Because of low budgets and building renovations, the library at Howard has suffered in the last couple years. Many of the books and other resources are out of date or irrelevant. A fund drive to address the need for current resources was begun before Christmas, and continues today. It may sound counter-intuitive, but today, with all the data of the Internet easily at hand, there is still a need for old-fashioned books, periodicals and journals. Such resources are not cheap and you can help the students at Howard with your contribution this morning.

In addition to the funds collected today, you are more than welcome to donate books or other materials to Howard that might be useful. One way you can do that is to take your books, tapes, DVDs and CDs to McKay's on Lee Highway and take the store credit option, not the cash. Then send the vouchers to Anita Campbell, the librarian at Howard. She can also tell you what they need and how you can help.

We'll collect the morning offering now, for the support of the library at the Howard School of Academics and Technology. And the children may give their offering now. As always, the Dolores Wood-Louis Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items, and the collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a candle of personal joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary will assist you.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings

we experience everyday. Would that we recognize what is truly valuable to us every day and be thankful for it. Marcia, please lead us in our hymn of thanksgiving. The words are in your program.

Oh, we give thanks for this precious day,
For those gathered here and those far away,
For this time we share with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks for this precious day.

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

Even though we are horrified by the mayhem and violence at Northern Illinois University, we are glad to know that Mary Hunter's son-in-law was not present on campus last week when a student with a gun ended several lives too soon. The community in DeKalb, Illinois is still in shock, though, and your prayers for them would be gratefully accepted.

When someone suffers profound depression or has a psychotic episode and also has access to a firearm, it's likely that a tragedy will occur. And in the aftermath, we hear a predictable chorus: Some will advocate for restricting guns. Some will insist on better mental health care. Some will argue that everyone should be armed.

Adding my own voice to that chorus this morning, I pray that I live long enough to see the American pandemic of gun violence cured so that our children and their teachers can attend school unafraid of each other. I am not optimistic, however. I am more cynical than hopeful about this, and for that I am sorry, for I consider myself an optimist. For me, the glass is more than half full. Balancing that, I rarely disregard my common sense.

In these moments of silence, let us hold close to our hearts all those

who suffer in this world, especially those who suffer because guns are just too easily obtained by disturbed and deranged people and those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

HYMN 211 & 212, Jacob's Ladder & Sarah's Circle

1st two verses of 211 and verses 1 & 5 of 212

SERMON: What's So Weird about Bigfoot?

OK, put away your books and notes, everybody. We'll begin this sermon with a pop quiz.

Raise your hand if you believe—and by that I mean accept as true any part of the term—raise your hand if you believe that

water witches or dowsing can find water underground

ships and planes inexplicably disappear in the Bermuda Triangle

biorhythms dictate when you should do certain activities

animate or inanimate bodies can levitate, that is, defy gravity

you can “channel” the spirit of people who died 10,000 years ago

you can determine personality and predict future events through astrological charts

ghosts appear occasionally on earth

UFOs are alien spacecraft

plants can feel emotions

there is life after death

you can prepare a psychological profile of a person by examining handwriting

There are more than five human senses

people can contact the dead, the spirits of non-corporeal entities, angels, and/or nature spirits.

pyramid power, that is, the power of the ancient Egyptian pyramids and scale models thereof to act as “an effective resonator of randomly polarized microwave signals which can be converted into electrical energy.”

aliens landed in Roswell, New Mexico

faith healing, that is, that praying can make a sick person well

that Big Foot or Yeti or the Loch Ness monster lives

astrological birth control

Are you surprised that most of us rejected these items as unbelievable? I'm not. I think Matt Hoyt scored 100%.

However, many people believe. I mean **believe**. *Know what I mean?*

Belief in these phenomena is not limited to a quirky handful on the lunatic fringe. It is more pervasive than you would think, and I am proof of that. Sort of. When I read through that list, I slowed down over a few of them because I had some belief—perhaps it is wistful belief—I have some belief in ESP and UFOs. I've been to an anti-gravity spot in South Dakota. And Kate swears that her father

hired a dowser who found water under the ground on her family farm. I thought, “I watch *Medium*. What’s so weird about that? Or faith healing? Or Bigfoot?”

I say *some* belief, because if you put thumbscrews on me and asked if I *really* believed, I would recant right away. And it’s not the prospect of pain. It is that I have carved out of my other-wise rational brain a space where a belief in weird things can comfortably co-exist with reality. I don’t *really* believe, but I believe. Truly, my half-belief in these items is curious considering what we have learned about the universe since the Middle Ages. Shouldn’t I know by now that no direct connection exists between prayer and a person’s recovery from illness? Shouldn’t I know by now that ghosts cannot exist under the current rules of life and death? What is it that tempts me to accept the possibility that such weird things may be real?

I got on this topic by reading this book, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, by Michael Shermer. Shermer is the founder and publisher of *Skeptic* magazine and director of the Skeptics Society. He classifies a thing as weird if the claim is unaccepted by most people in that field of study; a claim that is logically impossible or highly unlikely; a claim for which the evidence is anecdotal or uncorroborated.

Now his terms pretty well define his boundaries: “Field of study” “logically” “evidence” “anecdotes” and “corroboration” are terms that scientists use and which have certain limits. For instance, the limits of logic and evidence do not allow Shermer and other scientists to guess or infer or to feel; or to take as true second-hand accounts; or to assume that one demonstration is proof enough.

I say this so that you understand that all the people who believe that aliens live among us, that we can channel our ancestors and levitate at will—all those people have different boundaries than scientists do. And I truly have the same boundaries. I’m a pretty level-headed guy.

I don’t get excited about Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. I don’t even like to put on a costume for a Halloween party. If you had asked me yesterday about the Loch Ness monster, I would have said, “Doesn’t exist. A good story and good for the tourist trade.” And I would have quietly said to myself, “But wouldn’t it be cool if it did exist? Wouldn’t that be great?”

Who believes weird things? Obviously many people do. Some are right here in this room. And their numbers are growing. And these are not provincial, unsophisticated rubes. These people live next door to you. During the ten years we call the 90’s, the number of people believing in haunted houses, ghosts, witches, communicating with the dead, psychic healing, that aliens visit earth, and clairvoyance—belief in all that increased significantly.

Women are slightly more likely than men to believe in ghosts and that people can communicate with the dead. Men are more likely to believe that extraterrestrials have visited earth at some point in the past.

Americans younger than 30 are much more likely to believe in haunted houses, in witches, in ghosts, that extraterrestrials have visited earth, and in clairvoyance. Those 30 and older are somewhat more likely to believe in possession by the devil.

Americans with the highest levels of education are more likely than others to believe in the power of the mind to heal the body. As the educational level of the respondent goes down, belief in possession by the devil, astrology and haunted houses goes up.

Half of us believe—well, perhaps not *us*, per se, but “us” meaning those who participated in the survey and then statistically extrapolated to the general population—half of us believe that ESP is the real deal, 41% that Mephistopheles himself gets under your skin, 38% that ghosts roam the streets, 33% that aliens are knocking on the door, 28%, that your dear departed Aunt Edna is calling you

from beyond, 25% that we lived past lives, and 15% that you can channel Zarathustra.

One of Shermer's favorite targets is creationism, the idea that God created the universe and everything in it. He faces a stiff challenge if he intends to debunk God as a myth: 45% believe that God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so. 37% believe that human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided the process and only 12% accept that human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, and God had no part in this process.

I am—or have thought I was—a being moved by rational thought and not tainted by superstition and pseudo-science. I don't have a rabbit's foot and when I cook tomato sauce, I don't throw salt over my shoulder like Rachel Ray. But Shermer is telling me in this book, that I ain't the scientist I thought I was. He says I'm pretty much realistic, but I have these suspicious feelings and thoughts.

Ten years ago, I would have told you that I was more comfortable with a certainty than with a mystery. I wanted everything black and white—no gray areas. I don't feel that way today, as my interest in the Loch Ness monster reveals. I would truly like Nessie to surface one fine morning this summer for a photo opportunity. I would be thrilled if Sasquatch walked out of a forest in Saskatchewan to sit down for an interview with the media. When the last Japanese soldier surrendered in the Phillipines a few years ago, I was agog. Same for that stone-age tribe living deep in the jungles of South America. I have now officially become one who *likes* a mystery. But I am not a mark. I do not—I cannot—believe some things. To understand how and why I live primarily a rational life and still am attracted to some obviously irrational things, I learn this from Shermer:

There are two types of thinking, causal thinking and magical

thinking. He says we have evolved to be skilled, pattern-seeking, causal-finding creatures. Those who were best at finding patterns (standing upwind of game animals is bad for the hunt, cow manure is good for the crops) left behind the most offspring. We are their descendants. The problem in seeking and finding patterns is knowing which ones are meaningful and which ones are not.

Unfortunately our brains are not always good at determining the difference. The reason is that discovering a meaningless pattern (painting animals on a cave wall before a hunt) usually does no harm and may even do some good in reducing anxiety in uncertain situations. So that sort of belief is incorporated into the ones that are proven worthwhile, like cow manure makes bigger green beans.

This makes it possible to think erroneously and believe nothing is amiss. This, he calls magical thinking. Thus we have causal thinking and magical thinking, causal thinking providing benefits and magical thinking providing perceived benefits. It's analogous to planting zinnias. You'd like to think that every seed in the packet will germinate. Truth is, some won't. But that's no reason not to plant zinnias. Sometimes you get a big pretty flower and sometimes not. No harm done if you get a funky flower. You just keep trying.

We have a brain that can usually identify good patterns, but sometimes is fooled with no adverse effects. Shermer says we think magically because we have to think causally. We have magical thinking and superstitions because we need critical thinking and pattern-finding. The two cannot be separated. Magical thinking is a necessary by-product of the evolved mechanism of causal thinking. Humans are not perfect thinkers nor perfect pattern-finders.

Now where you get into trouble, is when you begin to rely too much on magical thinking, to the exclusion of common sense. Fear can drive magical thinking. You can't be so skeptical that revolutionary ideas pass you by and you can't be so credulous that flim-flam artists take you in. You've got to find some balance between your causal

thinking and your magical thinking.

To help us find that balance, I want to examine the ways our thinking can go wrong and then show that we need magical thinking. And the first thing we should know is Hume's maxim: We should reject the occurrence of supernatural events unless denying them is even more unacceptable than believing them. In other words, when confronted with a miraculous claim, we should believe it if the consequences of rejecting it are greater than the consequences of believing it.

People believe weird things because thinking goes wrong in many ways. Critical thinking does not come naturally. It takes training, experience, and effort, as Alfred Mander explained in his *Logic for the Millions*:

Thinking is skilled work. We are not naturally endowed with the ability to think clearly and logically without learning how, or without practicing. People with untrained minds should no more expect to think clearly and logically than people who have never learned and never practiced can expect to be good carpenters, golfers, bridge players, or pianists.

Here are some errors in scientific thinking:

Your hypothesis influences your observations. Your mere presence changes the experiment and influences results. Your equipment confines the results to what it can measure.

Here are some pseudo-scientific thinking problems:

Anecdotes do not prove anything; scientific language does not make anything scientific; bold statements are just that; heresy does not equal correctness; the burden of proof rests with the claimant, not the defender; rumors do not equal reality; unexplained is not inexplicable; correlation does not mean causation; rationalizing failures does not make them successes; coincidence is not significant; and it's too easy to forget insignificant things and recall only that which supports your claim.

Here are some logical thinking problems:

Emotive words can easily overcome rationality. This is also known as "hype," and I must confess that I am guilty of this at times. Lack of evidence does not prove the negative; character assassination prove nothing; a hasty generalization, that is, prejudice, can easily influence your ideas; an over-reliance on authority can lead you astray; and an "either-or" hypothesis eliminates a third possibility.

Here are two psychological thinking problems:

We have a need for control, which may influence our actions. We can have an ideological immunity to new ideas which do not fit well with our old ones.

So even after exposing some twenty types of thinking errors, why do people *still* believe weird things? More to the point, why do otherwise intelligent people believe weird things?

People believe weird things because they want to. To use a religious example, despite nearly ten thousand years of experience indicating it's impossible, many people believe that a virgin gave birth. As far as Catholic doctrine is concerned, some people may believe it because the Pope told them so—which is a deference to authority—and that's one of the things that drove me from the Catholic Church.

People also believe weird things because they want immediate gratification, as the prevalence of psychic hotlines shows. Who wouldn't fork over \$3.50 a minute to learn the future or speak to Aunt Edna or know when to do the laundry? Well, I wouldn't.

People believe weird things because they seek simplicity. This world is an extremely complex thing. Living on earth is fraught with peril. A black & white world is easier to understand, easier to get around in, easier to live in. When you can categorize your experiences, you

can understand them. And if there's no category for what you experience, you can just ignore it or reject its existence.

I don't mean to criticize sincere and well-meaning people, but it seems to me that devout conservatives who believe that homosexuality is a choice are trying to simplify an ever more complicated world. Their only category for sexuality is "hetero" and so anything else, by definition, cannot be inherent in human beings. Categorizing your experiences is a way to simplify them and make it easier to live in a world not to your liking.

In a way, this one got me. Not about sexuality, but about experiences in general. For years, I put every experience in its own little box in my brain. I loved quarter-pounders, but I didn't consider livestock slaughtering and meat-packing practices, because I couldn't get them to co-exist in my brain. My taste buds made me ignore my ethics.

I was all for locking up killers and throwing away the key, but I never considered the quality of life in prison because those two thoughts could not co-exist in my brain. And so my need for security made me ignore my humanitarian impulses.

Today, I no longer live only a black-or-white life; I am proud to be a recovering two-toner. I love gray! I have learned to live in the gray areas; have learned to accept—if not love—a mystery.

People believe weird things because of morality and tradition and culture. For instance, male circumcision has not been shown to have any beneficial effect and female circumcision has been shown to have terrible consequences. Yet each is still practiced.

Finally, people believe weird things because it's fun. By this I mean that human beings love a challenge. More than that, I believe they *need* a challenge. And if one is not readily at hand, they will invent one. If George Washington were resurrected—*magical thinking*—if George came back, he would be dumbstruck at how much we have

discovered, unearthed, explored, mapped and explained.

And we show no signs of slowing down nor admit there may be boundaries. We blithely go out to the edges of our telescopes and in to the edges of our microscopes.

Imagine that we have mapped every square inch of the world, noted every specie, explained every occurrence, plumbed the depths of the Mariana Trench and built an escalator to the top of Mount Everest. We have colonized the moon and every planet in the solar system. Do you think we'd stop there? Is there a limit to curiosity?

A colleague of mine once said something I never forgot. He said that once we achieve perfection, we have nowhere to go but down. To paraphrase him, once we know it all, it's game over. And I believe we lost.

And this is where weird things and spirituality come together. Some of what I believe is weird—that we'll all respect the interdependent web of existence, that the democratic method is good for society, that we will achieve a world community with peace and justice—some things I believe are truly weird.

To inoculate myself against weird beliefs, I can weave myself an intellectual safety net. I can accept nothing but what can be demonstrated or proven real. Absolutely no magical thinking. No spiritual anything. I think I might become bored. It doesn't sound human to not *believe*. *Know what I mean?*

Alexander Pope said it better:

Hope humbly then; with trembling pinions soar;
Wait the great teacher death, and God adore.
What future bliss, he gives not thee to know,
But gives that hope to be thy blessing now.
Hope springs eternal in the human breast:

Man never *is* but always *to be* blest:
The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home,
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.

Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutor'd mind
Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind;
His soul, proud science never taught to stray
Far as the solar walk, or milky way;
Yet simple nature to his hope has giv'n,
Behind the cloud-topt hill, an humbler heav'n;
Some safer world in depth of woods embrac'd,
Some happier island in the wat'ry waste,
Where slaves once more their native land behold,
No fiends torment, no Christians thirst for gold.
To Be, contents his natural desire,
He asks no angel's wing, no seraph's fire;
But thinks admitted to that equal sky,
His faithful dog shall bear him company.

Hymn 313, O, What A Piece of Work Are We

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of its truth
the warmth of this community
nor the fire of our commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
and share with all the world.

POSTLUDE: Allegro