



*“Do you think of yourself as a spiritual person?”*

## *Is This Church Too Spiritual?*

*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE*

*Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga*

*September 21, 2008*

**Diane.** Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Diane Davison, I’m the Treasurer of this congregation. We begin each Sunday at this time with Connections. This is a time of community and contemplation, where we share the joys and the sorrows going on in our lives. This is not a time for announcements, political statements or expressions of personal anger, but a time of deep sharing, where we are reminded that we are all human beings and we’re all in this together.

Enjoy the experience of sitting in restorative silence until you are moved to speak. Please allow a breath of silence after each person speaks, so that we may focus our attention on what has been said.

Let us pause to dwell inward. Spirit of Life, please meet us where we are, in the struggles we choose for ourselves; in the ways we move forward in our lives, and bring our world forward with us. It is right that we pause to remember those who need love and support; who are ill or in pain, either in body or in spirit; who are lonely or have been wronged. Let us open our minds and hearts to a place of quiet, to a silent prayer for the healing of pain, and the soft, gentle coming of love. In this time of silence let our thoughts be with those who have spoken or been spoken about this morning. Amen and Blessed Be.

I ask you now to rise and greet your neighbors at the door. Please welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

**Diane.** Twice a year, the Sun crosses the equator, and the day and night are of approximately equal length. It’s the Autumnal Equinox and it will happen tomorrow morning about 15 minutes before noon. To mark that occasion, please rise and join me in singing Hymn 73, “Chant for the Seasons.” We’ll sing only the verse marked “Autumn,” and remember that we sing the first part twice.

*HYMN 73, Chant for the Seasons [Autumn]*

**David.** I'm David Reed and I serve on the Board of Trustees. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. Our minister, the Rev. Jeff Briere, is laid up with a summertime cold and cannot speak today. But he did create the service and with the help of Diane Davison and Kate Briere, I think we'll manage all right.

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. After the service today, please join us for a potluck lunch. You are all invited—member, friend or visitor. 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.

In your order of service, you'll see a short announcement from the religious education department. It's important, so we drew a box around it. Please see April Waggener or Jamie Sullivan for more information. 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 sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

For a prelude, the choir prepared a song that will open the door.

*PRELUDE*  
*Open the Door*

*LIGHTING THE CHALICE*

**David.** I ask Jesse Blue to light our chalice this morning. Please join

me in the unison reading that accompanies the lighting of the chalice.

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

*THREE KITTY KATZ GRUFF*

**Diane.** Once upon a time there were three kitty cats. One was a little kitty cat, one was a middle-sized kitty cat, and one was so big that she didn't even fit on the scale in the vet's office. The smallest kitty cat was named Samson, and the medium-sized one was named Delilah. And, through some unfortunate twist of fate, the biggest kitty cat was called Tiny.

Everyone in the village teased Tiny. They called her names and made fun of her rolls of fat. As a result, Tiny had very low self-esteem. Most of the time she stared at the ground when she walked because she was so embarrassed. And of course, as you know, when you watch the ground as you walk, you tend to be quite klutzy.

The kitty cats all belonged to a family named Gruff, and they were known as the Kitty Cats Gruff.

One sunny day, the three Kitty Cats Gruff were out in a field lying in the sun. Suddenly Samson said, "Let's go over that bridge and explore." Delilah was all for the idea, but Tiny hesitated.

You see, like many cats Tiny had a sixth sense about things. And right now her sixth sense was telling her that crossing the bridge was dangerous. Besides, Tiny remembered hearing someone once say that "Curiosity killed the cat."

So she said, "I think we should just stay here and be happy with what we've got." Samson and Delilah started toward the bridge. Tiny decided to go along too. She didn't like to be alone.

Samson got to the bridge first, and he started to cross. Now under the bridge lived a huge, ugly troll with an attitude problem. You know what a troll is, don't you? Have you ever seen the movie *Shreck*? Shreck is an ogre, a very big troll; a troll is kinda like a junior ogre. The troll was very unhappy about his unmanageable green hair. It went every whichaway. So you can see why he would be in a foul mood most of the time.

Samson got halfway across the bridge and stood looking out at the water below. Suddenly there was a loud sneeze from under the bridge. Then another. And another. It was the troll. He was allergic to cats. And allergies did nothing to improve his foul mood.

“Who's that up on the bridge?” he roared. “I'm hungry and I'm coming up there to gobble you up!” After all, he had a big belly to feed.

“Oh, no. Don't do that,” cried Samson. “I am the littlest Kitty Cat. Wait until my sister comes across the bridge. She's much bigger than I am.” Samson had absolutely no family loyalty.

“Okay,” grumbled the troll. “I'll wait.” Samson crossed the bridge and went on to explore the other side. Then Delilah started across the bridge, and just when she had gotten halfway, there was loud sneezing from below.

“Not again!” wheezed the troll, whose eyes were now red and teary. “Who's up on that bridge? I'm hungry and I am going to gobble you up!”

“Do you really want to do that?” asked Delilah. “How do you think eating me will make you feel?” Delilah had been reading some books on psychology.

The troll responded, “It will make me feel full. And it will stop this blasted allergy attack.” So he started up toward the bridge.

And Delilah said, “Why don't you wait just a few minutes? My sister is right behind me and she's huge!” Again with the family loyalty.

Once again the troll decided to wait. And Delilah went over the hill to explore.

Tiny came to the bridge and hesitated because, you see, Tiny was scared of heights, and the bridge was very high. Besides, she really had no desire to go see what was on the other side. So she sat down in the field and watched the butterflies instead.

Meanwhile, the troll was feeling really mean and hungry. He finally realized that there was no huge cat coming by to satisfy his growling stomach. So he decided to go after Samson and Delilah.

He bolted up the hillside and chased down Samson and Delilah, which wasn't very hard at all because what they had found on the other side of the bridge was nothing—no trees, no tall grass, no butterflies, no catnip, no cat chow, no mice, no sofa to shred—nothing. So there was nowhere for them to hide.

“You lied to me!” hollered the troll. “You said there was a really big cat coming and that I should wait. Well, I waited, and guess what? No cat! Now I'm good and hungry, and you are on my menu!”

Samson and Delilah began to cry. Louder and louder. They yelled for Tiny, “Help!”

Tiny looked up from her butterfly watching and saw some kind of commotion on the other side. So, tentatively, she crossed the bridge.

Meanwhile, Samson and Delilah were running as fast as they could. And they ran right into the river under the bridge. This was a big problem because they couldn't swim. “Help, we're drowning,” they cried to Tiny, who had just reached the other side.

So Tiny dove into the water and cat-paddled out to her siblings. She had very little trouble because as huge as she was, she floated. Samson and Delilah climbed aboard, and they paddled to the other shore.

“Boy, are we lucky,” said Samson. “Yeah, if you hadn’t been so fat, we couldn’t have floated to safety,” said Delilah. Then they both did something they had never done before. They thanked Tiny.

Meanwhile, the troll reconsidered his options. He could cross the bridge and begin the chase again, but he wasn’t sure cats would make such a good meal after all. For one thing, they were hairy. And the troll really didn’t want to know what it felt like to have a hair ball. So he changed his mind and decided to have fish instead. And he got out his rod & reel and went fishing.

When Samson and Delilah and Tiny got home, they were wet and tired. But Tiny walked with her head held high because she was a heroine.

And even though Tiny had warned her siblings not to cross the bridge, she never, ever said “I told you so!” And they never made fun of her weight again.

And as you go to your classes, here’s your offering plate. Please join me in singing the children out.

*OFFERTORY*  
*O Mio Babbino Caro*

**David.** Good news! Last week, we raised \$362 for double the plate. And since our generous friend doubled everything up to \$300, we made out pretty well. Thank you all very much.

I’ll bet everyone here knows who Andrew Carnegie was. He lived

from 1835 to 1919 and he made a lot of money making steel. He gave much of his fortune away to local libraries and schools. He considered that people with means—the rich—had a responsibility toward society. And he may have been the inventor of the challenge grant, whereby the donor only gives the money when the beneficiary has raised a certain amount from other donors. This is the same thing as “Double the Plate.”

Andrew Carnegie was a generous supporter of the New York Philharmonic Society, underwriting its deficits in the early years. One year the society’s secretary came as usual to Carnegie’s mansion, this time requesting a grant of \$60,000. Carnegie was just about to sign the check when he paused and said, “No, I’ve changed my mind. Surely there are other people who like music enough to help with their own money.” He then told the secretary to go out and raise half the necessary amount, promising to match it with the other half when this had been done.

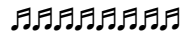
The following day the secretary was back at the Carnegie mansion, announcing that he had raised the requisite money. Carnegie commended the man’s enterprise and wrote out and signed his check for \$30,000. As he handed it over he said, “Would you mind telling me who gave you the other half?”

“Not at all,” he said. “Mrs. Carnegie.”

We’ll collect the offering now, for the support and ministry of this church. I regret that Mrs. Carnegie cannot match your gift this week, so please be generous. If you have a check for your annual pledge, please mark it that way. As always, the Wood-Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step

up here and I will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and be thankful for them. Kate, please lead us in our *Hymn of Thanksgiving*. The words are in your program.

*HYMN OF THANKSGIVING*

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

*ORISON*

*David. Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Most often our prayers are for people in need, people in crisis or those enduring tragedy. Today, we'll begin with something that is fun.

Jeff Styles is a friend of the church and he writes to us that he's using his 48<sup>th</sup> birthday as an excuse to have a gathering of friends at a place most folks have never heard of. It's Point Laurel Park on top of Raccoon Mountain. Any time today, he says bring the whole clan to this park and help him celebrate. If you want to go, check with me after the service for directions.

And Miranda Cagle wrote us a nice note the other day. She says, "I very much enjoyed the Interlude on Wednesday. Being a long term non-churchgoer, I was surprised at how excited I was to see mention of a midweek service in the bulletin two weeks ago. It was much

more meditative than I expected, but it was precisely what I needed at that moment. I have spread the word to friends inviting them to come and meditate with me.

I believe my excitement at the idea of heading to the church midweek was also greatly inspired by the welcome I have felt at the church lately. The day I came to church heartbroken and apparently noticeably so, I was approached by four people who knew me. I'm too personal to speak much when I'm upset, but I was very touched by the care that was shown, and that feeling continued through the day when I received a phone call from Jeff.

I've always wondered why someone would join a church—it seemed a secular notion unnecessary in a spiritual setting—but I joined the church as an attempt to have more community ties. And two weekends ago, I felt a strong kinship with some members of the church that I hadn't felt before, and I felt like it was MY church. I just wanted to say that it has been a blessing to me lately and I'm grateful for it.

That note from Miranda Cagle.

We have word from Harold Linn of an 8-year-old girl in Chatsworth, GA, named Cheyenne Beck. Cheyenne has a spinal tumor that is spreading to her brain stem. Her life expectancy is 2 years. Her mother and father travel from Chatsworth to Atlanta everyday for Cheyenne's treatments. There are five children in this family.

Cheyenne's school, Woodlawn Elementary School, is accepting donations to assist the Beck's. If you care to donate food, clothing or money, see me after the service and I'll give you the contact information.

When tragic news comes to us from Iraq, it seems to come in bunches. Late this week, we learned that a US helicopter crashed on a routine supply mission, and that all seven soldiers aboard were

killed. On the same day, we learned that an American soldier was arrested in the shooting deaths of two other American soldiers last Sunday.

A partial tally of the mayhem in Iraq this week shows that seven National Guard soldiers died in another copter crash, four soldiers died of non-combat related conditions, twenty-five people were injured by roadside bombs, a woman was shot in her house, six bodies were found, two high-profile government workers were assassinated, a US air strike killed eight family members, gunmen killed a couple and wounded four more and a woman's body was found in the street riddled with hundreds of bullet wounds. 4,168 American military personnel have died in Iraq since the start of this ill-advised venture. The mission is not accomplished.

In these few moments of silence, let us pray for hostilities to cease and let us hold close to our hearts all those who suffer the fallout of war.

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

*RESPONSE*

When our heart is in a holy place  
When our heart is in a holy place  
We are blessed with love and amazing grace  
When our heart is in a holy place

*SERMON: Is This Church Too Spiritual?*

**Kate.** On Tuesday, Jeff mentioned that he felt he had a sore throat and thought he was catching a cold. He was right. By Friday, he was in bed more than he was out of it. He did manage to finish this sermon, although he says, it's not exactly what he wanted. So as you hear this, know that these are his words; I'm only the mouthpiece.

Is this church too spiritual? What do you think? Do we over-balance our church life on the spiritual side to the exclusion of non-spiritual activities? Do I preach too often about spiritual issues and topics and rarely about corruption in city hall?

This might be a sermon with more questions than answers. Here's another: What is the opposite of spiritual? Corporeal?

And why am I preaching on this topic in the first place? A while ago, I was preaching on some topic and evidently used the word "God" more often than a long time member could tolerate and he walked out, grumbling that it was too spiritual in the sanctuary. So that's what prompted this sermon.

But there is more to it than just the grumbings of a parishioner. And why would anyone grumble about spiritual matters, anyway. It's a matter of religious culture. For many years, the religious culture of Unitarians had little room for concepts of the spirit or spirituality. They were grounded in the here and now.

And why was that? It began in 1893, at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. One part of the exposition was the World's Parliament of Religions. It marked the first formal gathering of representatives of eastern and western spiritual traditions. Today it is recognized as the first occasion of formal interreligious dialogue worldwide. At this world's fair, many Americans got their first exposure to a religion besides Christianity or Judaism. Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Jains spoke and made presentations about their culture and religion. The reality of other religions captured the attention of the Unitarians, who called themselves liberal Christians at that time.

Forty years later, in 1933—in Chicago again—34 philosophers, ministers, lawyers and scientists published something called *A Humanist Manifesto*. It proposed a new religion, Humanism, based in this world to transcend and replace other religions, which were based on supernatural revelation. The document outlines a

fifteen-point belief system, and here is the edited version of those points:

1. The universe is self-existing and not created.
2. Mankind is a part of nature and has emerged as a result of a continuous process.
3. The traditional dualism of mind and body must be rejected.
4. Our religious culture and civilization are the product of a gradual development due to interaction with the natural environment and with our social heritage.
5. The nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values. Religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method.
6. The time has passed for theism, deism and modernism.
7. Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. It includes labor, art, science, philosophy, love, friendship, recreation. The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained.
8. The complete realization of human personality is the end of our life and its development and fulfillment in the here and now.
9. In the place of the old attitudes involved in worship and prayer the humanist finds his religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.
10. It follows that there will be no uniquely religious emotions and attitudes of the kind hitherto associated with belief in the

supernatural.

11. We will face the crises of life in terms of our knowledge of their naturalness and probability. Humanism will take the path of social and mental hygiene and discourage sentimental and unreal hopes and wishful thinking.
12. Believing that religion must work increasingly for joy in living, religious humanists aim to foster the creative impulse and encourage achievements that add to the satisfactions of life.
13. All associations and institutions exist for the fulfillment of human life. Religious institutions, their ritualistic forms, ecclesiastical methods, and communal activities must be reconstituted in order to function effectively in the modern world.
14. The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world.
15. Humanism affirms life rather than denies it; seeks to elicit the possibilities of life, rather than fleeing from them; and endeavors to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely for the few.

Here's why I took you through those fifteen points. The *Humanist Manifesto* so greatly influenced Unitarian thought for the next fifty years, that other more traditional theologies were ignored or abandoned. Notice I say Unitarian. The manifesto did not so much intrude into Universalist circles. But Unitarians adopted much of the philosophy and theology in the manifesto.

This church was founded as a Unitarian fellowship in the middle of that fifty-year-period, by people who had both feet firmly in the humanist camp. Much of that culture survives in our church today. For nearly all its life, this church espoused a largely humanistic

theology. Knowing this, you might understand how the long-time member groused about “too much spirituality” in the sanctuary.

*The Humanist Manifesto* was updated in 1973. It begins with a statement that world war had made the first manifesto seem too optimistic, and a more realistic approach is evident in its seventeen points. Nevertheless, much of the optimism of the first remained, with hopes that war would become obsolete and poverty would be eliminated.

Many of the proposals in the document, such as opposition to racism and weapons of mass destruction and support of human rights, are fairly uncontroversial, and its prescriptions that divorce and birth control should be legal are widely accepted today. However, it still rejects anything supernatural, and advocates for controversial issues, notably the right to abortion.

Among the lines from the 1973 Manifesto are, “No deity will save us; we must save ourselves,” and “We are responsible for what we are and for what we will be,” both of which present serious difficulties for anyone who believes in a doctrine of submission to the will of an almighty God.

The latest version was published in 2003 and is deliberately much shorter, listing six primary beliefs, which echo themes from its predecessors:

- Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis.
- Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change.
- Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.

- Life’s fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals.
- Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships.
- Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness.

As far as I’m concerned, there’s really nothing outrageous in any of the three manifestos. I like what they say. The problem for me is what they do not say.

I was a humanist for most of my life. Ten years ago this month, I entered seminary in Chicago, and at that time, I would have described myself as a humanist. And I didn’t change my mind about that during my time in theological school. I was, however, introduced to what I call the gray areas.

I entered seminary living a life in which everything was black or white. This is true, that’s false. This is good, that’s bad. This is real, that is smoke-and-mirrors. I had categories for everything, and in truth, that’s an easy way to get through life. A place for everything and everything in it’s place. More than a humanist, I was a *flat-earth humanist*, unwilling to admit to anything beyond the horizon. And I still maintain much of that theology today.

*However.*

Since then, I have encountered people, events, experiences and things for which I have no place. I can’t name them right now, but I refer to them as the gray areas of life, those things that are not all black and not completely white. The bottom line is that I slowly realized, over the course of several years, that humanism ultimately, was disappointing. All the experiences of life could not be adequately explained by humanism.

A theology, a philosophy, that measures all of existence against the scale of human beings—humanism—cannot adequately explain to me the nature of transcendent experiences and why people have them. In short, I think there's more to life than what we see or hear or feel or taste or smell. I can't prove that, but I believe it. You know belief, don't you? That's knowledge without evidence.

*However.*

Merely because I encountered something for which I have no category nor explanation, I am not ready to run to the opposite extreme and ascribe to God all the unexplained phenomena of this life. But I am not satisfied with a purely humanistic outlook anymore. You might say I am a mystical humanist; both feet firmly on the earth, yet looking if not straight up, then with eyes elevated enough to see beyond the horizon. I am ready to admit a mystery.

For some years now, sociologists have noticed that many young Americans are intrigued with spiritual experience. They have concluded that there is something bigger to life than human beings. Some go to church or temple or mosque or synagogue to explore their beliefs.

Others are comfortable with "New Age" philosophies and practices. New Age practices don't exactly float my boat. I'm inclined to think, "woo-woo" when I encounter Reiki, aura photos, runes, pyramid power, tarot cards, channeling, crystals, the harmonic convergence and the red rocks at Sedona. All that may work for someone, but not me. Humanist philosophy and theology still runs strong through me, because I think much of the New Age culture can be explained in human terms.

And yet, what New Agers are aiming for is not beyond the pale. According to Wikipedia, the New Age Movement is a social and collective phenomenon and a spiritual nature movement that seeks universal truth through the Oneness of Humanity.

That's not "woo-woo." It's the Spirit of Life. And that's one of our favorite hymns around here. And you know why? Because it's all about the spiritual aspects of life, yet it's expressed in humanistic terms. Roots, wings, justice, compassion, the wind, the sea, hand, heart.

So why do I preach on spiritual topics? Two reasons, and they both flow from the purposes of a sermon. A sermon is something the congregation needs to hear or something the preacher needs to hear or something that needs to be said. So in a big way, when I preach about spiritual issues, if I use the word God, if it gets too spiritual in here, that's because I am saying something I need to hear.

The other reason I preach on spiritual topics is those young people I mentioned a moment ago. They come into this church with the same needs as other young people who go to Brainerd Baptist, Mizpah Temple or a New Age harmonic convergence.

They are looking for a community, like Miranda Cagle, or they are looking for spiritual development, like Dez Papendorp and everyone's looking to understand what life is all about. And for me, some part of life is about its spiritual component.

Do human beings have a spiritual component? I believe we do. If I am deluded in this belief, it's a delusion that does me more good than harm.

Is this church too spiritual? Looking at its 56-year-history, I'd say no. But for some folks, maybe it is; for others, maybe not enough.

Where are we headed? I'd like to strike a balance between the flat-earth perspective and "woo-woo." We can explain, in human terms, 98% of life on earth. But the other 2% is a mystery, but it has as much weight as the other 98, thus providing the balance. If you argue that the 2% is irrelevant, doesn't count and ought to be dismissed, then you're left with no mystery. No mystery.

And what would life be without mystery? It would be black and white. And boring. I have come to like mysteries.

Please join the choir now in singing a spiritual—Ain't that appropriate?—and ignore what's printed in your bulletin. This is a time to sing without hymnal. But you've sung this before, and I know you'll remember it.

*HYMN: When the Spirit Says Do*

*EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE*

**David.** Please remain standing as we extinguish our chalice. Jesse Blue, would you extinguish our chalice? And as the flame is covered, please join me in the unison reading in your bulletin.

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*

*Donna non Vidi Mai*