

What About Original Sin?
December 27, 2008
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
David Pope, Presenter
Steve Hollingsworth, Worship Leader

Connections (10:45)

Ringling of the Chime (11:00)

Opening Hymn "Jesus, Our Brother" 243

Welcome – Board of Trustees representative, Donna Crompton

DONNA: Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. I'm Donna Crompton and I serve as secretary on your board of trustees. 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, your left. Now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode." Child care for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery. After the service today, please join us for coffee and conversation in the fellowship area.

If you have a particular joy or sorrow, or something you'd like added to the Prayer of the People, please write it clearly on an index card and drop it in the basket on the table at the rear. You may sign it, or not, as you wish.

A complete list of announcements is included in our bulletin and is available on our website. 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.

Marcia chose Dave Brubeck Nocturnes for music today. She begins with "Going to Sleep."

Prelude "Going to Sleep" Marcia Jenison

STEVE

Wendes Jones, will you please light our chalice?

Lighting the Chalice

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

STEVE: And now we have the story of the fourth Wise Man, told by Sylvia Pope. Sylvia is the daughter-in-law of our presenter; she is a Unitarian Universalist from Austin, Texas. Welcome, Sylvia.

For Children of All Ages, "The Fourth Wise Man" Sylvia Pope

STEVE: We have a song to send you to your classes. The words are in your bulletin.

Singing the Children out

*We hold you in our love as you go, as you go
May your heart be at peace as you go
To nurture the spark of your precious life
We hold you in our love as you go.*

STEVE: "These are my new shoes. They're good shoes. They won't make you rich like me, they won't make you rebound like me, they definitely won't make you handsome like me. They'll only make you have shoes like me. That's it." Those are the words of Charles Barkley, obviously an apologist for congregational polity. Who knew?

If we're being honest, we can't promise your support of our church community will lead you to your heart's desire or even give you whiter teeth and fresher breath. But we all know that what we give becomes what we are. If you have a payment toward an annual pledge, please be sure to mark it that way. As always, the Wood-Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of nonperishable food and household items; the collection basket for that is by the front door.

If you wish to light a silent candle of personal joy or sorrow, please come forward and Mary Hunter will assist you.

Offertory "Softly, William, Softly" Marcia Jenison

STEVE: Eternal Spirit of Life and Love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience every day. Would that we recognize what is truly valuable to us every day and be thankful for it. Christina, will you please lead us in our *Hymn of Thanksgiving*. The words are in your bulletin.

*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

Dona nobis pacem. Give us peace. *Dona nobis pacem.*

I'm proud to continue the tradition our minister Jeff Briere began to offer prayers every Sunday for those experiencing war and the fallout of war until all our troops are finally back home.

[process the cards and any other items given me]

Now I ask your indulgence of my own experience of this day of the year. My religion for years was Charles Kuralt on *CBS Sunday Morning*. And on this day he would say good-bye to those who died in the previous year. There were so many this year; here are some that especially connected with me:

- Sen. **Edward Moore Kennedy**, a flawed man who never gave up on anyone, including himself.
- Newsmen, **Walter Cronkite**, an honest man and conscience of a nation.
- and **Paul Harvey**, who told us the rest of the story.
- **Andrew Wyeth**, a fixture of American art in my lifetime.
- Writers **William Safire**, who annoyed me, but informed my own sense of expression
- and **John Updike**, who amused me and taught something about good death.
- **Farrak Fawcett**—her iconic poster and an original Charlie's Angel.
- **Les Paul**, electric guitarist without peer
- **Mary Travers**, without whom we'd remember Peter and Paul, the saints, but not the singers.
- **Chuck Daly**, the coach that finally made my downtrodden Pistons into a championship team.
- **Mark "The Bird" Fidrych**, the pitcher who talked to the ball. He had one magical 19-9 season for a mediocre Tiger team.

Nor can I forget the terrible losses in our church family: Christopher Lynn Henry and Nathan Botic, Ralph Yates, Evelyn Wood, Bob Kimbro, Joe Lewis, Bill Berry, and my father, Bruce Hollingsworth. As we put 2009 behind us, we remember with gratitude the lives they led and what they meant to us.

Thou who art everywhere,
Many are your names.
May thy presence be with us,
May thy wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul.
Lead us to forgive the mistakes of others
As we hope our mistakes will be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.
May we live purposefully and joyfully
In every moment
In every encounter
Now, and in the time to come.
Amen.

In these few moments of silence, let us hold near to our hearts all those who are suffering in this world, especially those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona nobis pacem. Give us peace. *Dona nobis pacem.*

[Gesture to pianist]

Musical 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.*

What About Original Sin? David J Pope

DAVID:

Good morning.

May the everlasting peace that is our elusive human destiny - - be strengthened and enhanced during our communion today.

The last time I was privileged to have a conversation with you I talked about the spirit driven life and its relationship to what we call - - - "moral behavior."

I also talked about the bottom line in our lives as human beings.

The issues surrounding our bottom line as human beings have always begged for fuller clarity, so I am all the more pleased to have another opportunity to share a few thoughts with you.

For this morning I have titled my talk "What About Original Sin?"

Original Sin is an ancient idea, and it morphed long ago with an even more ancient idea - - morality. Sort of a pillar of salt was formed by their union, and it seems that even in our modern American society we continue to view that formation with a bit of awe and a lot of dysfunction.

I'm going to review briefly some of what theology has to say about these two thoughts - - original sin and morality - - but I also want to summarize some of what we know historically about the evolution of them - - the literal evolution of them.

If I can do this well enough, I think you will begin to see why I feel that we have inadvertently created some powerful behavioral barriers to the achievement of our full maturity and destiny as human animals. I hope to describe for you - - or at least to suggest to you - - how a spirit-driven life is not just something we might enjoy after we're dead, but how it is actually our unique human proclivity - - the one very thing that sets us apart from other living animals.

And - - if I **do** this well enough, I think you will begin to see that our long-time habit of relying on morality as the primary means of ensuring an orderly or "good" society has actually restricted us to personal behaviors that are many, many thousands of years old - - behaviors that seem to be pointing - especially these days - more and more directly to a

premature extinction of the human species.

Now then, although it has been talked about and written about at great length by Christian scholars, “Original Sin” is not actually a concept that was a part of Christian scripture. In fact, it was probably not until the 2nd-century A.D. that the phrase was coined - by Tertullian - a prominent contemporary theologian. By the time of the Christian Reformation, Martin Luther and other reformers were putting a less apocalyptic spin on the idea, but the general view of original sin throughout time has revolved around structural, or evolutionary flaws in the human animal which create the behavioral propensity to do bad things. If we were putting it in a Darwinian context, we could say that early theologians viewed that flaw as a product of our genetic evolution, and later church leaders felt it was more nearly a result of our behavioral evolution. Of course in neither case could any theologian prior to the time of Darwin ever have UNDERSTOOD it as an evolutionary phenomenon – perhaps as a “natural” phenomenon – but, in the face of its poorly understood dynamics it became a supernatural one.

The major world religions accept that humans are capable of very bad behavior, and that we exercise that capability with regularity. On the other hand religions also suggest that we have a range of behaviors available to us that are altruistic and selfless.

Now when we put all of these behaviors on a single continuum - - from bad ones to good ones - we create a daunting challenge. In a practical way, just how do we push people away from the ugly end of this spectrum – from the ravages of Original Sin - and move them toward the wonderful end – toward some kind of transcendent Salvation?

Well, let’s review a discovery that was popularized a great long time ago.

Early in our civilized history we humans noticed a pre-conscious evolutionary component within ourselves. Over time we attached words to it, and then we quite mistakenly made a group decision that it was the route to our temporal salvation.

Moral Codes.

The final answer to bad behaviors.

Unfortunately, this group decision was a bad decision, and let’s see why.

The Sumerians were the first human society we know about that formally imposed specific moral codes as a regulatory mechanism for their culture. Their religious leaders played a peripheral role in enforcement, but with the Abrahamic religions, it was god himself who had dictated the codes.

What these early societies didn’t know, and simply could NOT have known, was that their very existence had depended on the evolution of some basic moral codes - - behavioral constraints - - in the illiterate societies before them and in the non-verbal societies that existed tens of thousands of years before that.

Animal scientists have known for a long time about patterns of socialization in subhuman animals, and some of them, like Frans deWaal, have pretty successfully argued their historical relationship to human moral codes.

We talked about this the last time I saw you, so I'll try to review this particular thread quickly. The point here is that our moral codes - - those ideals that we hold so dear as our principle humanizing force, are actually no more than an evolutionary residuum that rose to the foreground as pre-human groups that were actively and persistently "immoral" - - went extinct.

We survivors might have to stretch a bit to be able to wrap our arms around that thought. But when you think about it, in our distant past, killing farmers just wasn't cool - especially when we were living in a milieu where farm products were the primary means of our subsistence.

Well, if Original Sin drove the extinctions of "immoral" pre-human groups, then it is certainly a unique concept among world religions because it comes tantalizingly close to suggesting that our bad behaviors might have roots in some kind of evolutionary past. Unfortunately, that thought - as helpful as it could have been - was predictably short circuited in the early centuries A.D. because of ignorance of evolutionary science. So, Christianity fell back to the institutional position that god simply created us with a huge basic flaw.

Let me put one of my main objectives this morning in clear and simple terms. I hope to help you understand that moral behaviors and Spirit-driven behaviors are not on the same behavioral continuum.

I pointed out a few minutes ago that over time we have chosen to make moral behaviors and immoral behaviors the two end pieces of a single continuum, but whether we focus on the moral end or the immoral end we are still just talking about a continuum that is the extension of Original Sin.

More "sin" is surely bad, but less "sin" isn't necessarily good.

Enough of that. I want to move on to some discussion of a gift we all have been given that promises to lift us above the reach of our primal dark side. That gift was dropped in our laps by the architect of evolution, and we have not as yet expressed either our full acceptance of it or our appropriate gratitude for it.

2000 years ago, Christian admonitions had it that we can't get to "Heaven" just by trying to be good. There's actually a lot **in** that old caveat. First of all, it says there is a really, really good place that we CAN get to. - Heaven - Secondly, it tells us morality isn't going to get us there.

That seems pretty clear.

But the meat of the red-letter portions of the New Testament tells the story of a spiritual communion that IS available to us and that IS the path to realizing an enormous potential that the human animal has been given in its genetic makeup - - - - - by the architect of evolution.

I've mentioned this already, but let me reiterate a point of animal science. All animals, human and subhuman, go through a period of socialization after birth. The mechanisms

that are operative in that process are functions of both genetic and behavioral evolution.

We humans call our process acculturation and I suspect we decided to call it that because it's a bit uncomfortable for many of us to accept that we, just like our less advantaged cousins, are also socialized animals.

Be that as it may, it is the case that the general pattern of early infant nurture throughout the world today is very nearly the same as the pattern that existed in Sumerian society. And that is frighteningly reminiscent of what scientists today see in Apes and Bonobos.

Of course, today's human children are subjected to huge quantities of high-tech input after they reach an age where verbal communication is possible. But the underlying, basic, learned behavioral propensities of today's socialized humans seem to be virtually identical to those of our very earliest civilized ancestors.

Our learned constraints – the constraints that were inculcated in infancy and early childhood - - have protected us enough over time to have allowed the development of today's technologically advanced societies. But unfortunately, the behavioral effects of those constraints are not much more sophisticated now than they were 5,000 years ago.

That Jesus is reported in Christian scripture to have referred to us as sheep is not just allegorical. I believe that if we look beneath the spin, what he had to say suggests that he was fully aware that acculturation in humans was merely an extension of socialization in lower animals.

Some anthropological studies have suggested that pre-Columbian Native Americans demonstrated some awareness of this reality as well.

Be that as it may, Jesus was also telling us that living in a world where our social behaviors are driven and controlled by learned constraints doesn't work any better for us than it does for a group of sheep.

What any socialized animal is driven to do genetically will always trump what it is constrained **from** doing after it's born.

Let me repeat that.

What any socialized animal is driven to **do** genetically will always trump what it is **constrained** from doing.

You can spend years training a white tiger to perform tricks on a stage and to be “non-aggressive.” But when the tiger grabs you by the neck and drags you off the stage you will have come face to face - literally - with that simple, inescapable, natural truth.

Some of you may remember the incident I refer to - involving the Siegfried and Roy act.

So, when we try to operate simply under the aegis of morality we should not be too surprised at even the ugliest behaviors from ourselves or from our fellow human beings. The question that Dostoyevsky sidestepped when he wrote “Crime & Punishment” was why **SHOULDN'T** people commit heinous crimes. Just because we have taken the social

stance that heinous crimes should be labeled immoral???

There is nothing behaviorally proactive about morality.

Early Christian thinkers were wise enough to see our animalistic heritage playing out in human behavior, but they made some bad assumptions. Chief among them was the idea that the realization of our spiritual proclivities is unavailable to us until we die.

Those mystical proclivities that evolution has left us with, that not only mitigate but obviate our pre-human – animalistic - moral codes.

The church really put the cart before the horse.

Like, let's just wait until we are all dead to begin dealing with the spiritual communion of mankind.

Now I'm going to move away from talking so much about what **hasn't** worked so well for us and talk a bit about what we might do that will work. It's a model that has been encouraged by religions, and philosophies for millennia. Happily it can now be seen in an infant stage in an increasing number of secular world arenas.

Some of us would call it a spirit driven life. I like to call it nurtured synergism because that term pretty effectively decouples it from those age old assumptions that have held us back for so long. As we explore this unique behavioral framework we should bear in mind that our animal heritage will continue to require us to turn the other cheek when our fellow man offends us. Because he is going to offend us. And in the transition from where we are today to where we ought to be there will certainly be some big bumps, and they can only be softened by a communal awareness that we're all in it together - all 6.5 billion of us - and that we will be inspired to feel much more love and compassion and understanding for one another when we can accept each other as distinctive, spiritual beings.

The record shows pretty clearly – and we should frequently remind ourselves of it - that it's self-defeating to continue viewing ourselves just as smart animals playing a zero sum game.

As a world society we've talked a lot about spirituality over the centuries, but a great deal of it has ended up as selfish talk. "How can **I** become a fulfilled, spiritual being - spared from those evils that can beset my comrades?" I think this kind of inwardly focused thinking is one of the reasons that our spiritual proclivities have been so effectively kept in check over the last 5000 years.

Let's take a view from a different perspective. On a day to day level, many of us have had the experience of working with a really synergistic group of colleagues. Maybe it was a committee or some volunteer activity. Tons of work was accomplished in a short period, and the results exceeded your most hopeful expectations. There is a personal excitement in seeing that the results of two plus two can equal a lot more than four. There's also a sense of, "Wow!" that things can move along so smoothly and so positively.

But how many of us have looked deeply enough into the interpersonal dynamics that produced that kind of synergism to see - and to understand HOW - it was an underlying ATTRIBUTE of our individual behaviors that enabled the group result, not the brilliance of our individual inputs?

The QUALITY of our individual behaviors enabled the group result. Not how hard we'd tried, or how much we'd talked, or how intense we were.

Most of us wouldn't immediately ascribe that quality to a spiritual source, because we have been led to believe that "spirit" is an inner, personal, and static thing, not a dynamic - not a communal factor in the outcome of group behavior.

But it is precisely the communal property of Spirit that elicited those enhanced behaviors.

On the surface, this may not seem to rise to the level of what you expect of a "spiritual" experience, but let's revisit Jesus for a moment. If we excerpt the red-letter portions of the Christian New Testament and strip them of the most obvious and blatant expressions of the superstitions that were carried by their authors, we can see a pretty simple behavioral formula that promises synergisms that go light years beyond the most exciting board room meeting.

A "QuickStart" summary might look like this: First, go into a closet- in secret - and get your own self tuned in to your spiritual inner core. Don't "pray" for goodies, but don't take the passive route of simple "meditation," either.

That's an assignment that is already a bit more difficult than it might seem. And that's because you are looking for a functional result that is QUALITATIVE - not quantitative. And not just for a passive one - you're not looking for just a warm fuzzy "feeling" of spirituality. Because an emotional feeling that there's something "out there" doesn't constitute empirical reality. And you see, spirit is as real and palpable as mud and straw.

Having developed some pragmatic sense for your own spirituality, the second step is to share that experience with others who might have had a similar experience. Compare your experiences, talk about your perceptions, and try to get a handle on what's happening within you. Operate together with these others to "exercise" spirit-driven behaviors, and see what kinds of individual differences you find and what personal similarities you can identify.

You see, a significant source for the power in this paradigm accrues from releasing those energies that we habitually apply to our social or "moral" constraints. In a spirit driven environment these energies become fully available to truly pro-active goal attainment.

Under spirit driven behavior we also begin to realize the heavy burden that moral constraints cause us. As a societal aggregate we spend inconceivable amounts of personal and public resources in dysfunctional, controlling activities, and we do it with very little if any real understanding of why we do it, or whether or not there might be an alternative.

If insanity is constantly repeating the same action and expecting different results, the question becomes, "How insane is it that we have spent well over 5000 years beating that

old drum called morality when the most consistent results have been continuing anti-social behaviors, overcrowded prisons, and more and more wars?”

Lately, of course, the wars have been increasingly successful in accelerating our self destruction. And if you ponder the current situation in Juarez, Mexico, it appears that civil law enforcement is close behind.

For those of us who would like to feel that we are going to remain on this planet for a while, the most dynamic part of the spiritual formula that Jesus revealed to us is the third step. And that is modeling small group, spirit-driven, nurtured synergism for society at large. It will almost certainly be during the realization of this process that the chain-reaction of positive human energies – spiritually enhanced human energies - will begin to be plainly visible to others – and more importantly, will be highly attractive and desirable for those who might have chosen for one reason or another to remain on the periphery.

Now, the biblical formula sequenced from the individual, to the small group, and finally to larger world dimensions. But in 2009 we can find initiatives in world society that suggest that the sequence is not inviolable. In fact, it may not even be applicable today, because 2000 years ago Jesus and his immediate followers were applying the formula in the absence of a monolithic religious institution. Happily, in today’s world there are secular organizations out there demonstrating synergistic activities that look a lot like wider-scale models of what it was Jesus was originally suggesting.

Some of them are local or regional and there may be some that you are aware of personally. And there are also national and international efforts whose organizational structures are quite horizontal and whose results give the distinct appearance of being spirit-derived. They give us a practical picture of the huge potentials that reside within us. Potentials that have not been previously realized on any large scale, and mainly because of age old assumptions about “human nature.

A big player among the entrants in international development is the Grameen Bank, started years ago by Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel Prize winner whose germ idea was to provide a source of capital for people with no collateral whatsoever, but with a desire to provide for themselves and for their families. That effort has snowballed into joint-venture, social business organizations that include a number of multi-national corporations like Groupe Danone, (known in this country by their brand name Dannon).

The *social business model* which is being utilized in these efforts sets maximized social benefit as the business objective instead of maximized profit.

But -- they still make good money for shareholders. Imagine that! There is no way we can take the time here to detail the social business model, but these ventures are demonstrating the enormous social and economic value in nurturing the very poorest of the world’s poor. A little bit of nurture is leading to a whole lot of synergism.

We could go on for a day or two and still not satisfactorily detail everything that needs to be said here, but I will close for now by encouraging you to look for signs of spirit driven behaviors in yourself, and in your friends and families, and in your colleagues, and in our society at large.

And reflect on them.

I would also encourage you to engage those people you know who appear to be associated with spirit driven results, and have a nice long chat with them about what it all means. Not, “Let’s start a secret club.” But, “Hey, that was a really cool thing you did. Where did it come from?”

The drive to spiritual synergism begins immediately with the inclusion of just one other spirit driven person. Jesus is recorded as saying, “Where two or three are gathered together.....” and I believe he meant exactly that.

Thank you, and peace to all of us.

God breathed into us the “breath of life” and that was our “evolutionary” gift – not given to any other of God’s creatures.

STEVE: Reading David's words and planning this service, I felt a key part of his message is how uniquely Jesus captured in his ministry what we must strive for today. So, please stand, in body or in spirit, for our closing hymn, number 276 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, “O Young and Fearless Prophet.”

[Sing]

Benediction

I send you into the New Year with the words of Rev. Mark Belletini, minister of First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus, Ohio:

Go in peace. Live simply, gently, at home in yourselves.
Act justly. Speak justly.
Remember the depth of your own compassion.
Forget not your power in the days of your powerlessness.

Do not desire to be wealthier than your peers
And stint not your hand of charity.
Practice forbearance.
Speak the truth, or speak not.
Take care of yourselves as bodies, for you are a good gift.

Crave peace for all people in the world,
Beginning with yourselves,
And go as you go with the dream of that peace alive in your heart.

Wendes Jones, will you please extinguish our chalice?

Join with me in the words in your order of worship:

*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 “Joshua Redman” Marcia Jenison