

Seeking the Bottom Line
December 28, 2008
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
David Pope, Presenter
Steve Hollingsworth, Worship Leader

CONNECTIONS

STEVE: Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. I'm Steve Hollingsworth, a member of this congregation and your worship leader today. 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.

On the last show of the year CBS Sunday Morning remembers those who have died during the year. In the years that Charles Kurlalt did the show, watching it was my one mandatory religious observance. I cannot imagine a better farewell than his saying good-bye.

2008 so many people special to me now belong to the ages. In our church family we lost Bill Keiss, my colleague in our Readers' Theater.

And a few celebrities I've felt some special connection to

- *Odetta, mother to the folk song army that ended the Vietnam war*
- *Herb Score, who, for 25 years, off and on, I heard broadcast the Cleveland Indians on WWWE.*
- *Michael Crichton, Andromeda Strain author and scientific contrarian*
- *Studs Terkel, a fixture on my Chicago landscape and America's storyteller*
- *George Carlin, comedian and mirror to America's hypocritical taboos*
- *Robert Rauschenberg, artist whose original artwork I remember from a private apartment*
- *Mildred Loving, winner of Loving v Virginia, ending US anti-miscegenation laws*
- *Arthur C. Clarke, Sci-Fi author and futurist.*
- *William F. Buckley, one voice I could respect from the conservative side*
- *Bobby Fischer, chess champion and bad boy, still playing in my mind on the stage in Reykjavik*

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 offer the hand of fellowship as you welcome them into the sanctuary.

Ringing of the Chime (11:00)

Opening Hymn "Wake Now My Sense" 298

Welcome – Board of Trustees representative, April Waggener

Prelude Holiday Medley Marcia Jenison

Sylvia Pope 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 a story, told by Rich Dwyer, our resident year-round Santa. He found the perfect tale to tell after the Order of Worship went to press.

For Children of All Ages, "A Lesson From Santa" Rich Dwyer

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: Wandering the Internet, as I am wont to do, I came upon these words by

horror novelist Stephen King, “A couple of years ago I found out what ‘you can't take it with you’ means. I found out while I was lying in a ditch at the side of a country road, covered with mud and blood and with the tibia of my right leg poking out the side of my jeans like a branch of a tree taken down in a thunderstorm. I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you're lying in a ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard.”

Suddenly, I had a little more respect for a man who could be as dispassionate about his own misfortune as he could in conjuring the misfortune of others.

We don't accept MasterCard either but we will now receive the morning offering for the support and ministry of this church. 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 Holiday Medley 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. Marcia, 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.*

[process the cards and any other items given me]

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 our troops are back home.

This week, while we see lowered levels of violence in Iraq, we see Pakistan and India, two nuclear powers, squaring off again. In Gaza, the asymmetrical warfare between Hamas and the Israeli armed forces once again leaves both sides with new unforgivable injuries—a conflict that will never end until both sides learn to forgive the unforgivable.

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 hearts are in a holy place
When our hearts are in a holy place
We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our hearts are in a holy place.*

Seeking the Bottom Line David J Pope

DAVID: Good morning. May that elusive peace that surpasses our current understanding be with all of us.

When Steve Hollingsworth called to invite me to this conversation I was sitting in my car in a car wash. Ann & I had just returned from a trip to Austin, TX, where we visited our son & his family, and I was getting rid of the Texas dust that had accumulated on our intrepid automobile.

On the Sunday before we had left for home we attended a worship service at the Austin Unitarian Universalist church. Davidson Loehr, the pastor there, had given a sermon that was of special interest to me.

It had struck a chord of consonance with my own understanding of the historical relationship between religious icons and spirit driven behaviors.

Pastor Loehr had centered his talk on Ralph Waldo Emerson and that 19th century period in our history, and in the history of American religion . e pointed out the enormous shift that had been taking place in our society -- and in the world in general -- as we were moving away from the darkness of superstitious behaviors and recognizing the brightness that that period of enlightenment had been creating. Ancient mysteries were being illuminated on all sides and bushels full of primal fears were being dumped into a trash bin that could have been labeled “discarded ignorance.”

During the course of his talk, Loehr spun out the story of Emerson’s growing recognition of the power of spirit in our lives, and the degree to which it was becoming a substitute - - and alternative - - to many ancient and even primal religious practices.

There are things – powerful things -- that we do not fully understand, but our lack of understanding doesn’t mean they are magical.

As he went on, though, I found myself having a bit of a problem with his sermon. Davidson never quite seemed to me to get to his bottom line. He seemed to dance around it and just above it. Where was it - - his bottom line?

So I went to the Austin UU website and downloaded his sermon. I studied it because I wanted to try to identify the source of my discomfort, and what I have to say to you here this morning is an attempt to articulate what I found.

If we travel back in time to a period just prior to our emergence as a thinking, talking species of animal, we would see around us an animal kingdom resplendent in variety and color.

Lots and lots of creatures roamed around, and some of them we wouldn’t even recognize today. However, the primates that were part of that kaleidoscope looked and behaved surprisingly like we would be looking and behaving a few million years down the road.

Those primates lived in extended families that we would call “tribes” if they had been a bit more “human.” There was an identifiable social milieu - and it was based on a hierarchical scheme - - with an Alpha male at the top - - .

They nurtured their newborn for a few years and then sent them out to fend for themselves. During that period of parental nurture the behavioral accommodations that were going to be necessary for the developing offspring to get along in the tribe were inculcated through imitation by the offspring and were reinforced through parental admonitions. You had to know that when the Alpha male spoke (or female in the case of bonobos), you didn’t argue.....

Animal scientists call this process “socialization.” And the social activities that result

from it sometimes look very much like our own human activities. In our arrogance, though, we like to think that those apes we see in the zoo are behaving a bit like us humans, when we should be accepting the humbling reality that it is **we** who are sometimes behaving like the apes. After all, they were doing it before we were.

At any rate, when we leap ahead to the early Mesopotamian human societies we can see many of the same elements of socialization taking place between parents and offspring, and between offspring and the immediate society around them.

Since we humans felt far superior to those lower animals we preferred to call our version of this process “acculturation.” However, we continued that pre-human practice of teaching our offspring what they needed to know in order to get along in life, and we still kicked the kids out when the generally accepted period of nurture was over.

Quite unfortunately, and in spite of our being human, after we sent them out into the world we also sometimes killed them if they strayed too far from the norms we had established for ourselves.

When a statement like that is stripped of our usual euphemisms it sounds rather stark, no? (Repeat it) after we send our children out into the world we sometimes kill them if they stray too far from the norms we have established for ourselves.

It’s fascinating, and it should be humbling **also**, to read noted animal scientists like Frans de Waal and see that apes and bonobos do the same thing with their unacceptable colleagues.

Of course the issues in human societies are far more complex than in other primate societies. They started to get that way during the period of our pre-history when we had come down out of the trees and were becoming a farming species. An extended timeline for planning was becoming considerably more critical for our survival during that time. So - - not robbing or killing your neighbor was no longer just a singular, casual thing. It could well be a fatal thing for the perpetrator, if the victim happened to be the only member of the group that knew where the seed was for the next year’s crop.

So **much** more complex were human issues of interaction that over time we were forced - - by the severity of natural events - - to create mechanisms and institutions to support them. By the time we humans had developed our speech communication skills we were calling these devices “moral codes” and we enforced them through a wide variety of societal constraints. The earliest Sumerians used loosely accepted civil rules and religious admonitions.

The Abrahamic religions tightened up on that and claimed that these moral constraints were direct orders from their supernatural god. ---- And if that god didn’t whack you for disobedience, by golly the human agents of god would.

Well, we have survived for 5 or 6 thousand years under this behavioral paradigm. But we all seem to be generally a bit discontent with the quality of this “survival.”

Perhaps that is because we can intuit that morality – that thing we count on to keep ourselves “good” - - might not actually be a proactive thing in our repertoire of human behaviors. And in fact - - morality is a learned constraint. --- “Thou shalt not....”

But any animal, man or monkey, can and will defer to their genetically driven behaviors under stress, or even sometimes under just casual influences.

And taking a peek at a different expression of morality, our habit of killing someone because they've killed someone is a demonstrably ineffective tool for advancing either our safety, or our comfort, in this world. We've been doing this kind of thing as a civilized, talking species for thousands of years. It still hasn't produced the results we'd like to see, - - BUT WE JUST KEEP ON DOING IT! Lexicographically, of course, this kind of behavior is defined as superstitious behavior. That is, continuing a ritualistic action in the hopes it will produce a causal result - which it never does.

To put it even more pointedly Einstein once said, ”Insanity - - is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results.”

Is there a better paradigm? Well, Davidson Loehr spoke to it, and he has reminded his congregation that years before Emerson had spoken to it. Davidson talked at length about the role of spirit in our lives, and he talked enthusiastically of the spirit driven life.

Where I found that Pastor Loehr might have run off the track was when he suggested, --- perhaps -- inadvertently, that the spirit driven life would **result** in moral behaviors.

Well, folks, that rather puts the cart before the horse, because moral behaviors aren't very good behavior. They might look good in the short run, but they are just deferred behavior, so they offer us no protection whatsoever in the long run. We have certainly constructed mechanisms of socialization that restrain – a little bit – our undesirable, genetically driven animal behaviors, but that doesn't alter the fact that those underlying behaviors are still lurking in the background of each of our psyches. Some of us might be imbued with higher levels of restraint than others might be, but that doesn't make us better or worse than one another, just better able to hold off our genetic proclivities a bit longer,

When early Christian theologians spoke to this dilemma they called it - - - “Original Sin.”

At the recent rate of development of our weapons of self-destruction I don't think there is very much chance of our surviving as a species for another 5 or 6 thousand years without a quantum leap forward in our behavioral habits. We practice a very dangerous kind of self-deceit when we pride ourselves on the world institutions we

have developed to advance a humane humanity....because we call on these very institutions to support the killing of large numbers of our fellow humans.

Remember, during the 20th century we killed hundreds of millions of ourselves. And a lot of that killing was when the world population was only about 2 billion. -- That's not an encouraging ratio.

The killing of 20 million Russians – or 6 million Jews – is a thought that our nervous systems aren't even properly wired by nature to internalize.

The loss of a parent, or a child, or a friend is something we can all relate to and we can feel very strongly about. But 20 million – or 6 million – that thought just remains a group of words for our human minds.

The German nation that was central to the two tragedies I just mentioned was a Christian nation, and was perhaps the most socially and intellectually sophisticated nation in the world at the time. Now there's a scary thought! But we only have to consider the tens of thousands of dead and the millions of displaced in Iraq to see a contemporary iteration of the same kind of primal behavior from our fellow human beings.

Our natural instinct immediately drives us to say, “Yes, but – there is this or that good reason for **OUR** pathological behavior – “ Yes, **but.**” “Yes **BUT.**” We really **must** - - learn that we need to stop talking – right after the, “Yes.” - - - and perhaps start doing a bit more thinking.....

OK. Enough of this stuff! By now, given two thousand years and innumerable re-translations of its scriptures, Christianity has done a pretty good job of cloaking Jesus in iconic and superstitious garb - - and obscuring that thing some people call the Christ event.

It has also institutionalized the myth of morality, and has perpetuated the atavistic rites of passage that we have seen throughout the rest of the animal world - - 1st communion, Confirmation, etc.....and before that, - - Bar Mitzvah.

But it is my belief - - that Jesus - - whether or not he would be accepted as a Christian in today's world, (and there's a topic for another whole discussion) - - Jesus saw very clearly that moral codes – what he referred to as “The Law” -- were not serving us very well.

I believe that Jesus also saw that our truncated period of nurture served us no differently than the truncated period of nurture practiced by bonobos and apes.

And he did address that reality for us head on.

Just think about this.....if we replaced the word “love” in the Christian bible with the

word “nurture,” we would have Jesus telling us, - - and telling us repeatedly, to nurture one another - - nurture one another. Not just until Bar Mitzvah, but throughout our lives together.

What a **wonderful** idea! Why don't we just try it? Maybe impractical? Too expensive, maybe?? Well, as an example, just look at the Grameen Bank and the nurturing paradigm it introduced to the world through micro lending. Its default rate and the default rate in general for micro credit is something under 3%. Citibank would have loved that, but apparently they were too afraid – or maybe too greedy - to try it.

You'll want to know about this kind of activity, if you don't already. It is directed to the poorest of the poor, but in providing nurture and support for this huge part of our world population there is reward for all of us. A poor mother in Zambia can borrow a few dollars to buy a sewing machine so she can make a little money mending clothes for her neighborhood. A young man in Honduras with no other opportunity can borrow a little to purchase inventory for neighborhood cosmetic sales. And you and I can participate in this kind of worldwide activity through Internet organizations like Kiva.

The 2 examples I mentioned were people I have helped in this way, and in 3 or 4 years of doing this for dozens of people - - I have not had a single default.

Beyond this, though, is the problem of somehow making a basic change in “human nature.”

Well - - we 1st have to realize -- and have to be able to accept generally that human nature is not a fixed thing. We are unique, -- you and I, -- because human nature is a **choice** - - for us human animals.

We struggled to launch it in Sumeria thousands of years ago, and we just haven't chosen to improve it- - at its roots since then.

*Now, if we can begin to look at Jesus as a portent of the spirit driven life - - instead of as the incarnation of a spook - - we can begin to see the hard core **reality** of our enormous potential as a special entry in the animal world.*

Jesus asked us to turn our backs on those animalistic constraints that we so euphemistically call morality. He used the word “reborn” to describe our lives as spirit driven beings.

I need to back up here for just a moment to tell you that the word “spirit” has caused me a great deal of frustration. It has so many meanings for so many people that it is very difficult to define yet one more “subtlety.” On the other hand if I just coin a substitute it can sound like I'm just promoting another New Age idea.

But, spirit TAKES shape and BECOMES meaningful in the **dynamic** of human interaction. - - - - One doesn't talk about spirit, - - one has to *do it*.

As Jesus described it, the communion of mankind in spirit driven behaviors is the *obviation of morality*. He didn't mean just contemplating our individual, personal spiritual realizations - - and of course encouragement for that kind of activity has been common throughout world religions. Jesus was pointing to the powerful synergisms that derive from a group of spirit driven people operating in consort with other groups of spirit driven people.

The promise was that those energies -- -- and those resources that we otherwise waste in trying to be "moral" -- and even worse - - trying to ensure that our fellow man is "moral" - - will be re-focused, enhanced, and amplified through the positive dynamics of an unencumbered nurtured synergism.

This is a unique idea - - **truly** -- and it seems to have been lost to Christianity very early in the game. Christians seem to have decided that they are supposed to be dutiful, and to suffer together through mankind's inhumanity to man - - - - always praying for salvation. Then their lives will become magically and eternally comfortable - - - of course that's after they're dead.

Well, it may seem harsh for me to have put it this way, but there's a great perversity in that promise.

After all, our inhumanity to one another is **entirely** of our own doing. Our practice of shifting the blame to some benign intangible like "Evil" has become a shameful and unforgivable cop-out for all of us.

And it could soon become a fatal one. It won't be evil that kills us in a nuclear holocaust or a biological tragedy, it'll be our own technologies applied **by** ourselves **to** ourselves.

We'll want to start to move toward a worldwide nurtured synergism in little incremental steps, but we have to start sooner than later or we may go extinct before we achieve our destiny.

Greater attention to the ongoing nurture of one another in our daily lives is a key element in the approach to our spiritual communion, and it doesn't mean establishing "communes" or other such ideological constructs. I think we can do this within the institutions and social infrastructures that already exist.

That's not an original thought, either. The record suggests that in 29 or 30 A.D. Jesus was saying the same kind of thing within his milieu. And in spite of what some of our evangelical brothers and sisters would like to believe, he certainly was **not** suggesting a "Christian"- - **subculture**.

Think about this modern alternative to the age old mantra of charity: If the efforts of some of the NGO's and foundations that are operating throughout the world today, like the Bill And Melinda Gates Foundation or the Clinton Foundation, and the tremendous economic and social leverage that would be created if their work and the availability of capital from nurture-oriented micro lending agencies could really be focused – and focused **aggressively**, it could bring economic viability to the billions of our fellow humans who haven't been able to buy their 1st refrigerator yet.

The business model today has been directed toward selling a 3rd SUV to a family that is already maxed out on their credit. Wouldn't it be far better business and wouldn't it also encourage far more human synergism to raise a Honduran or a Zambian to an economic level where they could buy their 1st certified pre-owned car – if they wanted to? After all, the poor represent a much, much larger potential market than do the rich.

One hopeful possibility resulting from the current world financial debacle might be the realization of the need to pay some attention to alternative paradigms. Perhaps even a paradigm where we six and a half billion humans are ALL in it together - -in actuality, and not just the minority of us who become concerned when our comfortable lifestyles are threatened.

In closing, that period in between the supremacy of lower primates and the emergence of the human animal is a fascinating chapter in our evolution but it has yet to be fleshed out. Animal scientists can tell us a lot about the behavioral characteristics of their subjects. Neuroscientists can tell us a lot about our advanced human brains. But it is in that little understood window of time in between the animal and the human that can reveal the most vital mysteries for us...and that is where the religions of the world seem to have sensed their foundational bases.

For Judeo Christianity that base was “the breath of life.” God breathed “the breath of life” - - - into the animal - - - and it became human.

We still aren't sure yet what that means in its practical detail. But I would guess that Jesus understood it fully and was filled with it himself. Those of our species who lived at that time, and who were fortunate enough to have been directly exposed to that “breath” - - to that “Spirit” - - could carry it with them in their lives and in their relationships. According to the biblical writers those people were empowered and transformed by it. In 2009 our return to that paradigm is going to be difficult because of the enormous weight of history.

And in **OUR** time, there appears to be a frightening movement in this country of ours back to the superstitious practices that Ralph Waldo Emerson so decried in **HIS** time.

But let's put our fears aside and walk together into the light of the “Christ event” - - which is that heaven on earth that has been promised by the coming together of all humanity in full spiritual communion.

Thanks very much for your kind attention, and may that eternal peace that comes from a spirit driven life be with all of us.

STEVE: After hearing David's words I know the phrase "Spirit of Life" sounds different now. Please stand, in body or in spirit, for our hymn of Benediction, number 123 in *Singing the Living Tradition* and remain standing for our unison words for extinguishing our chalice.

[Sing]

Sylvia 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 Holiday Medley Marcia Jenison