

HOMILY: A SIMPLE (STARTER?) CREDO

(aka – “My Ragger Homily”)

* [This week’s “Centering Thoughts” from the Order of Service]

“Theology is—or should be—a species of poetry, which read quickly or encountered in a hubbub of noise makes no sense. You have to open yourself to a poem with a quiet, receptive mind, in the same way you might listen to a difficult piece of music.”^[1]_{SEP}

--Karen Armstrong,

“The Spiral Staircase, My Climb Out of Darkness.”

First Credo Intro

Good morning everyone. Raise your hand if you have done the Build Your Own Theology course or otherwise written a statement of personal beliefs—your credo? [*wait for hands*]. Me too.

When I took the class, the first thing I was told was to respond to the question “What do I believe?” When I heard it asked in that way, my first thought was, “Yaay! Finally, a chance to channel Kevin Costner’s big speech from the movie “Bull Durham.” This is what I wrote:

I believe ‘God’ is why sunsets are pretty, and I’d like to get to know him, *or her, or it*, or the divine part of the universe better.

I believe that social justice should be an expression of my spirituality *rather* than my religion.

I believe that effective meditation practice begins when I’m
thoroughly bored by my thoughts,
That the Three Refuges should be recited in Pali,
That 16 Precepts work better in *two* dimensions,
And in being stretched by Boundless Vows;
But I do *not* I believe I’ll ever fully grasp the Heart Sutra.”

You actually can ask me about any of those things, even any part that sounds like gibberish, and I think it would lead to an interesting discussion. But it doesn’t have to do with the today’s topic, so let me start again....

Homily Intro

Richard Gilbert, who wrote the guidebooks for the Build Your Own Theology classes, believes that one reason “visitors often enter our front doors only to move down the aisle and out the back door” is that we sometimes provide too

little in the way of help for those who wish to build a new theology. I'm on the Adult Ed committee because I agree with that, and I'm constantly looking for ways for us to engage with our spirituality outside of Sunday services.

Another thing that Rev. Gilbert wrote is that,

“We UU's are definitely happy heretics. Theology traditionally has to do with the study of God or divine things, but can also have to do with the ultimate concern and commitment by whatever names we call them.”

I think that tells those of us who are Humanist or Rationalist UUs, that you also have a theology.

But to the today's point, Rev. Gilbert also talks about “doing” theology rather than “having” a theology. It's possible he is referring to Thoreau's statement about “living your beliefs,” but the word “*doing*” rather than “*having*” made me think of the saying that

“Life is the journey, not the destination.”

Perhaps the important part of having our own theology is the work we do to build it. It's about what we discover in the process rather than where we finish. This “doing” is the place from which our conviction grows, the source from which we light the fire of our commitment.

Today, I'd like to share my rather simple credo as an example of one that supports “doing” a theology rather than “having” one. My credo gives me a place to start, rather than describing where I am at the finish, and lets me accept being a “work in progress.”

Second Credo Intro

Another exercise we did during the course was to create a timeline and review the things in our life that have affected us. While working on mine, I was reminded of the following:

... When I was in my early 20s, I did *not* deal well with my mother's death. It made me face the truth of impermanence as it relates to my mortality.

How's that for a roundabout way of saying I got depressed! *Really* depressed—professional help was probably needed. Instead I sat around doing a lot of undirected navel gazing. I came out of that depression rather suddenly—but with a shift in perspective that has impacted the rest of my life. Now I'm not dissing my religious upbringing, but it had not prepared me to understand or explain what had happened.

And because I didn't have the concepts or words to describe what had happened or guide what to do next, I was without a spiritual home for a while. It wasn't a disaster at all—I felt complete clarity and peace; I just couldn't explain. But in that interval before I stumbled into Zen Buddhism and its tools, philosophy, and vocabulary, I could only work with what I already *had*...

Ragger's Creed

Reflecting on my available source material, did anything still make sense? Were there any words that sounded correct coming out of my mouth? Jesus' teachings that I was raised with still felt good; but his message seemed lost when interpreted by those I sometimes refer to as "modern Pharisees."

I might have gone a different direction if I'd known about the Christian mystics. But as my life has turned out I'm glad I didn't. What I finally did remember and use at that time was the creed of a YMCA Ragger.

The YMCA Rag program is a way of engaging with personal growth and spirituality at summer camp and then taking it home. It has a series of increasing spiritual challenges one can choose to accept. And rather than merit badges, accepting these challenges is represented by a series of bandannas one wears like this one. [*my blue rag hanging over the front of the pulpit*]

And the Ragger program has a creed—more of an oath kind of like the Boy Scouts'. To give proper credit, I learned while writing this homily that the Ragger's Creed is actually a poem entitled "My Creed," written by Howard Walter in 1906. If I'd been a Scout *maybe* I would have used Scout words. But once again, I'm *truly glad* now that I was not—I prefer these words:

I would be true, for there are those who trust me.
I would be pure, for there are those who care.
I would be strong, for there is much to suffer.
I would be brave, for there is much to dare.

I would be friend to all – the foe, the friendless.
I would be giving, and forget the gift.
I would be humble, for I know my weakness.
I would look up, and laugh, and love, and lift.

There was nothing in those words that I questioned; no dogma in which I'd lost faith. Perhaps more importantly, the words had value and felt true to me: I could commit to them.

Now most of the Ragger's Creed reminds me of our chalice lighting words. Our chalice lighting says, "...to treat all people kindly, *because we are all one family.*"

The Ragger's Creed says, "I would be true, *for* there are those who trust me." Ok, in the Ragger's Creed those words are probably there to help to make it rhyme.

But the last sentence is different: "Look up, and laugh, and love, and lift." It's just four brief thoughts. But that briefness supports theological historian Karen Armstrong's suggestion that I put in our Centering Thoughts*: that our theology be like poetry: something we can open to if we approach it with a quiet, receptive mind.

I have lived with these words from the Ragger's Creed over the last 40 years; and today I'd like to share what they've come to mean to me. And I would enjoy any conversations that my statements start.

Laugh

Laugh was the first of the four I remember dealing with after my mom's death. Seems fair—I *was* coming out of depression.

As I said, at the time I couldn't explain the shift that happened; but one thought that kept bubbling up was: "It's just *tragic* when someone says, "I *think* I'm happy." To me, when someone says it like that—"I think I'm happy"—they are separating themselves from happiness, like it's not really theirs.

But happiness is not some external quality—something that you may think you may have when you don't. Happiness *is* a quality of thought. If you *think* you're happy, you *are* happy!

But I've also learned over time that I don't take the word *Laugh* as a suggestion we should live the Bobby McFerrin song, "Don't worry, be happy." Rather, I relate more to this thought from George Bernard Shaw:

"Life does not cease to be funny when people die, any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh."

To me, *Laugh* is an instruction to recognize beauty and happiness—whether it's glorious, or wry, or childlike, or wistful, or even absurd—*whenever* you encounter it.

Look Up

To move to my next concept, let me say that going in I thought the "Build Your Own Theology" class would be more about describing how I view Big "G" God, gods, or the lack thereof. Or if the idea was to describe my religion, then I'd be agreeing with some other of Karen Armstrong's words where she defines

religion as “the search for transcendence.” But what is this thing greater than ourselves that we’re searching for? Is it God? Is it capital “T” Truth? Is it our true nature? Or the source of grace?

For me, I started to see a strong resemblance over time between what I had been trying to express coming out of that depression and Buddhist teachings. Then when I dug a little deeper, I found other words and concepts I’d been struggling with, like that example about how we can dilute or ignore happiness. And, in Zen I found a way to “search for transcendence.” Or perhaps I should say *Look* for transcendence.

By the way, I don’t think you have to be a theist or a mystic to look for transcendence – for things larger than yourself. Even if you are humanist or rationalist, I think it’s hard *not* to marvel at the world if you take time to be quiet and notice the magic that appears in every moment.

This is my interpretation of the words *Look up*. Now I have no idea if the direction towards transcendent truth is really *up*. It could be *down, out, in*, or maybe even *towards Mecca*. Maybe the instruction should just be *look*; or perhaps “*be open*.” But “*Look up*” are the words in the Ragger’s Creed, and deep down in my heart I can work with *up*.

Love

So[oo..], looking up... What might one see? Where would you be?

I think one well-known, brief but enigmatic answer that describes this view – this ultimately *wise* view – comes from the Sufi poet Rumi, who says:

“Out there, *beyond* right and wrong is a field. I will meet you there.”

If we wander into Rumi’s field, how would we feel? I don’t mean the transient feeling: religious or shamanic ecstasy. I mean rather the abiding type of feeling. Is it grace? Joy? Enlightenment? The Spirit, holy or otherwise?

I think maybe it’s easier to answer, “How does one look at the world *from* that field?” There, I believe most religions have a similar answer: agape, compassion & loving kindness. Or perhaps simply, *Love*.

OK: now raise your hands: How many of you here have done Loving Kindness meditation? [*wait for hands...*]

[*If many raised hands:*] Uh oh. I may be in trouble...

[*If a few raised hands:*] Ah, maybe I’m going to be OK...

Well, while I may believe that *Love* in the form of compassion & loving-kindness are primary expressions of this view – this ultimately wise view, I don't want to be mindlessly programmed into it via endless recitations of:

May you be well.
May you be free from harm.
May you be happy – truly happy..."

[*put hands up in defense!*]

Now if you do practice Compassion and Loving Kindness meditation, please know I didn't mean that cruelly. But if I've offended you, here! [*pulls out a pool noodle*]: You can beat me with this after the service until you feel better.

I have faith in the practice I just teased; I'm just expressing my curiosity. If we go *beyond* right and wrong, why do compassion and loving-kindness appear. Why don't we encounter something more like Gordon Gecko's famous selfish line from the movie Wall Street, "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good!"

Lift

I truly believe that what arises is compassion & loving kindness; and I also believe this form of *Love* leads fairly naturally to my last concept: *Lift*.

When I was trying to figure it out on my own, I expressed the word *Lift* as a tribute to my mother. I'm someone who can enjoy being an introvert. But I wanted to honor the grace with which she lived by pushing out of my comfort zone to engage with others, hopefully in a positive way.

And you know, after starting a Zen practice I discovered that you can also describe some Zen communities as introverted – that the practice sometimes becomes the goal instead of a method.

UU's are a fantastic cure to this weakness. Along with community – a spiritual community at that that I can share with my beloved Gayle, the UU drive to *Lift* others is a very good reason for being in this congregation.

The Third Principle

Now I don't think everyone needs meditation as a spiritual practice. I think we all have different needs and no single path is right for everybody. And I believe in our Third Principle: that as a congregation we should accept, share, and *actively* encourage our various spiritual paths. To me, the Third Principle is why we are a congregation, not a service organization. It lies at the core of our Children's RE, and I think it's important to include in our Adult Ed as well. That's why I'm talking up the subject of credos today. That's why my earlier talk about "The 'G' Word". That's my reason for the "Meet a UU" sessions we'll be trying this upcoming year. And it's a reason I hope we have more Build Your Own Theology courses, or other courses about UU and other compatible theologies.

I look forward to hearing about your stories, and learning about your spiritual paths. Perhaps *your* spirit grows spontaneously. Perhaps you find it in other rituals or skillful means. Perhaps you find it in submitting to, or being forgiven your failings by a greater power. Perhaps you find it arising in nature. Perhaps you reject the concept altogether.

And perhaps you find your spirit or grow it *through* service – in the *act* of *Lifting* others. However for me, it's the other way around. For me, a call to service is a result of *Love*, which is the face of the wise view, which I try to gain by direct experience of the greater mystery.

But as I have come to understand it, the wise view is also to see things as they *really* are, not as I *think* they are. One part of how I see this link between action and spirituality – between *Looking up* and *Lifting* – is expressed thru a Japanese saying:

"Vision without action is a dream,
while action without vision is a nightmare."

One final note: From the first moment I first saw the UU Seven Principles until today, I find all Seven to be contained within what my credo has come to mean to me. But I think the Principles are missing something, and I think perhaps it is something important: they don't remind us to *Laugh* – to be happy. So maybe I'll make a suggestion to those of us that adopt our Principles as their credo: don't forget to notice and enjoy the beautiful and funny moments in life.

Conclusion

So in summary, working backwards:

1. When I got to Mission Peak UU, I found I'm *already* here in all seven principle(s).
2. I have been—and will continue to be—a work in progress. Zen Buddhism gives me a way to “search for transcendence,” and the concepts and words to describe those things I’m trying to understand and embody.
3. How I try to be—to “do” my theology if you will, I take from the YMCA Ragers’ Creed:

To Look up: to be open to, and try to engage with truths larger than myself.

To Laugh: to remember that the meaning of life is to be happy, and not to miss the moments of beauty and humor that make us happy.

To Love: to express the natural face of the wise view, which is compassion and loving-kindness.

To Lift: not just to have that view, but to act.

If you do want to ask me my take on the subjects of religious belief, I wish I could present you a perfectly Zen answer. I *should* just pull up a meditation cushion, sit down, (shut up,) and pay attention. But fool that I am, I usually try to answer. And then the more words I use, the muddier my answers get and the less I pin it down.

My solution, which may work for you as well, is not to try to figure it *all* out. I don’t have to have a completed theology; I can *do* my theology. I can adopt a credo as a place to start, and hope it will provide meaning if I remain open to it.

What do I believe?

That I should: Look up,... and laugh,... and love,... and lift.