

THE SIDE EFFECTS OF FAITH
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A friend complained to me that she went to a wedding and, in place of a ceremony that focused on the uniqueness of the couple getting married, found herself in the midst of a ritual that, as she described it, “stole” the couple’s special moment to dispense their theology. I wrote in the August newsletter about this very incident. Maybe you are one of the three who read that.

In my friend’s exact words, “. . . one more special human experience got hi-jacked for a predictable lecture on Jesus.” I don’t know if her description is exactly fair. I wasn’t there, and she is prone to anti-religious rants. Nonetheless, I believe it because I’ve seen it.

I had two different, and divergent reactions to her frustrated account. The first being a curt “of course” they did. That’s what churches, temples, and mosques, as is their right, do. I even felt a little defensive when I started thinking about anyone critiquing our style as being too secular, or personal.

However, my initially indignant attitude was balanced by something softer. I was also sympathetic, because I too have had the same complaint. Most of us here have probably been to a memorial service or a wedding where a memorial for a person who has just died, or a unique couple tying the knot, gets passed over for a lesson in theology.

I validate her experience. When the praise we are asked to spill toward an invisible God does not elicit any of the accompanying magic, transcendence, and depth that can come with such proclamations, our cynicism grows. To the unfaithful, being essentially trapped into a viewing of the presumptions of faith can be frustrating. You probably wouldn’t be here if you never felt that. And I by no means think we are off the hook. Not at all. So, after my initial defense of any religious institution’s inherent freedom to “do it their way”—which I still hold—I came to see my friend’s critique as the start of a healthy religious revolution. It is obvious from the decline in conventional religion that for far too many people our established institutions are not cutting it.

And, this sermon is about claiming that my friend’s experience was not unique, that too many traditional religious services don’t speak to modern people anymore; and what we might do about that!

Although her complaint was squarely centered on a Christian church—a Catholic one to be specific—to be fair, I believe this same frustration of how rote religious rituals can be might also be true for any Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, or Hindu service as well

Having said all that, let me be clear, there often is a very real humanity in traditional religious services. I have often experienced a genuineness in conventional Christian worship that for both the faithful and unfaithful alike can be uplifting and reassuring. However, mostly when I feel this, it feels like the humanity was snuck in. What too many modern people too often feel when they go to a church, or a temple, or a mosque, is not so much a feeling of being touched by the depth of an ancient practice, or a welcome reminder of the grace and love of God, but a feeling of squelched anger. A frustration that what is going on is formulaic, outdated, slightly dishonest, and flat.

In a way this is not the fault of any one particular religious tradition. The problem is we are far too smart for religion to be easy anymore. Doing religion in a world where the challenge of reason and science is constantly nagging at its core truths means that all traditional faith institutions have to do “their thing” with one hand tied behind their back. And, this challenge exists because all of the significant traditional religions practiced today were simply just born at a time when we were not so savvy, skeptical, and empowered. Every significant religious tradition in the world today was born early enough that now their premises and sacred books are dated.

Ironically, the main reason that the religions we practice today are so old is because modern truths don't naturally lead to the construction of new temples, gathered communities, or new rituals. Moreover, people are both afraid not to believe in the old ways and feel amazingly good when they do. What so often qualifies as "faith" is oddly enough perfectly correlated with the degree to which one wants to live in denial. It's simple, but it must be said. What we call "faith" is actually the very inability to accept that an imperfect, indifferent and dangerous world is the world we live in. All this makes choosing "faith" as a very understandable choice to make.

Feeling fear, joy, and relief is a more compelling combination for most people than truth is. None of this is new to you, I know. But, if you are new to being a UU, hearing it in a church might be.

The truth is, and will remain, that we truly are a bit more powerless than our imaginations and hopes for ourselves can justify. Sorry! We are simply more vulnerable than our capacity to accept that fate is. And, all the faiths of the past practiced today—Buddhism being the possible exception—are built on creating a "sense" of relief from the real vulnerability and tragedy of life. Religion works because it works. Until it doesn't.

The religions we still practice are tried, but not true, narratives to life's unanswerable questions. And, when those stories work, it's great. As great as any other myth before, and quite frankly more comforting than any headed our way. I wish it were not so.

The goal of the service my friend was so frustrated by was to imprint upon the minds of those participating in it, it a counter-narrative of belief that provides relief from the real anxieties of life. That means that it might be helpful for my friend to consider any worship service or ritual nothing more than the best attempt to cast a spell. To re-tell a narrative that is a balm and a comfort to believers.

Let's stop talking about faith in the abstract, and try to feel it. This little experiment in "faith" might be hard for you, or as familiar as the back of your hand, or a terrible sad tease. Get ready, this could very well be one of those or moments that you find either frustrated by or properly challenged by here. Maybe both.

(I start to naturally get preachy)

Right now, I want to encourage you to stretch to embrace the feeling that God loves you. I want you to know, deep in your bones, that as much as life continues to throw at you new things to cope with and be anxious about there is a deeper truth at work; a truth that lives beneath the skin of thought deeper than thinking and reason.

You have faith that all is well with you and with the entire universe. You know that had we more complete sight, a sight we will never except in moments of insight and eventually in Heaven ever fully taste. That we would see that all is well.

Despite all the seeming randomness of the travails that you have faced, they are part of a broader plan. God's plan. The universe was created to be as it is.

Only real wisdom, a wisdom that we can only touch with the aid of faith, knows that. Again, brothers and sisters, the imperfections we see and are surrounded by are really a result of our limited human perspective.

I know you are aware of the fear of having been lost, and alone, but again what you will find out as you begin to see with the eyes of faith is that all is as it should be. It feels good to believe this doesn't it? Intoxicatingly good. There is a deep peace that comes from that surrender and the stories that support it.

“Nothing feels better than knowing God loves you, that he is always there for you, and that he will always take care of you.

There is joy and relief in that story . . . until there isn't. Until it all rings false.

What my friend who went to the wedding needs to remember is that what is religious, spiritual, inspiring, and for all those reasons powerful, is that it does not have to be true to be impactful. It just has to be believed.

When you feel vulnerable, which we all eventually do, cultivating a belief in the overarching narrative that the creator of the universe is on your side can sound like the only answer that feels right. And, despite my obvious lack of faith in it, I personally don't want to take that away from anyone. I never want to talk about people out of their faith. What I and even we have to offer is just not as comforting. It just isn't!

All this is why most traditional religions are for humans all at once the answer, and the problem. Traditional faith is all at once, both a wonderful thing, and a cruel tease. And, because that experience that feeling, more than any creed, is really what is worshiped in traditional religious settings. It is very hard to both hold and give up. However, that is not the world my frustrated friend lives in, and that probably isn't the world your mind and heart live in either. And, for better or worse more and more, and more humans more and more don't live there. Can't live there.

When one doesn't carry inside enough of a belief in the narrative being ritualized and spoken of into their religious setting, it will ring flat and hollow. When what is said and sung in worship fails to wash over you as something plausible, what to the ears of the faithful can be a comforting truth can quickly feel like a big well-dressed lie.

My friend's critique about a religiosity focused on a praise and belief in God is not one that begins with a thought, or an idea, but the desire for an earnest, I would add “holy,” yearning for a meaningful spiritual experience for non-believers

The truth is, so “my friend” should not seek solace in Christian worship anymore. Or likely in any other traditional religious frame. Neither she, nor I, nor many of us, find enough of the worldview being presented as plausible enough to be mesmerized by that spell.

Maybe it simply is that you can't walk the path of “faith.” So be it. Let's challenge ourselves to something of a new non-faith. Let's make a commitment to not—as so many people do—get so stuck in not believing what we don't believe in that we can't move forward.

What I think she, and maybe all of us, are left looking for in the rubble of old myths is an incarnate, earthly experience that validates our lives today. You're probably here searching for some solace that feels genuine. And thankfully, that's hard.

Theology might first begin with deconstruction, but religion is fundamentally about construction. So, be it.

OUR RELIGION

With my friend's complaint as a guide, what if we built a religion that invited people to begin their journey with the idea that there either was or was not something of a God. And, or that if there is a God, this God was more unknowable than we have been willing before to admit.

Maybe in this new hamstrung but earnest shot at religion, if we choose to talk about God, that was the name we used not to describe a cosmic personality that vaguely looks and behaves like us, but as the ground and fabric of all existence.

What if what was holy was the universe, in all its physicality, potentiality, energy, and impossible for us to discern personality. What if we imagined ourselves connected not so much to a creator but creation? And, what if worship was thought of as a quiet respectful bow to the undergirding of all experience and the very nature of the universe. Not as comforting as the old way, but more believable.

Let's see if we can go there. Like we went to the other place. I invite you to come to terms with a belief that God either doesn't exist, or is mostly personally unknowable, and in admitting that, admit also that so much of not all that has been said about the holy has been a product of our different cultures. And in understanding that, we understand that religion was mentally the understandable but flawed product of our deep human need to have an image, and a symbol more approachable than, oh, the laws of physics,

I bet my friend would be more forgiving of that more humble posture. What if at religious services the leader admitted that churches were sadly stuck speaking in metaphors and using symbols to explain what is really not only unexplainable, but really not fully understandable, I know I would feel better. I bet she would too. Hearing that, I think I could trust letting my guard down. Maybe she could too.

I would prefer our relationship with God had more of an honest, dare I say almost comically humble, quality to it.

What if it was okay to be afraid of one's seemingly finite nature? And for there to be no miraculous cure to that. Afraid that you, we, us really practically are all alone here together spinning vulnerably but magically on the edge of a planet in a vast universe. A universe we have recently discovered is nearly completely governed by forces beyond our control. What if we chose to follow Einstein not only scientifically but philosophically in his willingness to describe himself as, "a deeply religious nonbeliever."

What if we came to accept that there is no tinkering engaged and loving Father figure, but in light of that, and while grieving its loss, we chose to worship and hold life sacred and its processes as holy? Even if we could never fully define what holy is. And what if we admitted that we were as a species only beginning to understand and religiously grasp our real existential situation? What if we took pride in the courage it takes to claim that? I bet it would make us kinder.

What if, although honest about our limitations, we became the first generation of humans that felt gratitude to be in charge of our own destiny? What if we came to think of all the past religions as our ancestors that prepared us for this moment.

What if, talked openly and frankly that although our consciousness creates some painful awarenesses, it also affords us a window and a capacity to wonder? How about we honor that. How does that feel?

What if we came to, if not "worship," at least hold sacred the very process of evolution. What if rather than being falsely prideful that we were God's chosen species, and inevitability the stewards of Earth's future, but adopted a posture of feeling appreciative, grateful, humble, and even lucky, at the wonder that we as humans have managed to slip through the thousands of chances that we not even exist. And what if in this new humble religious orientation we included is part of the natural process of our evolution, the uniqueness of our intellectual curiosity, and our own spiritual yearning.

What if as part of the natural world and processes we saw worthy of spiritual attention are the moral instincts like kindness and cooperation. And saw in the holy path forward the need to see past our

differences and to seek justice and cooperation among human social groups, our commitment to growing more anti-racist a significant part of that.

And having gone that far, and taken control over our fate, what if rather than religious institutions having a passive and quiet acceptance of economic growth as good, and competition between nations and people as a given, we overtly committed to sustainability and balance as an absolute. How does that feel? Sounds like a call for a new Beloved Community, to me.

I don't have a grand, big answer as good as the promise of a loving God or an end game that includes a nirvana where all desires cease. How could I? Nobody does! We just made that stuff up? But that doesn't mean that although afraid, we can't be honest enough to face life head on without turning to old mythologies for the security of their now clearly inaccurate answers.

"I am a deeply religious non believer- this is a somewhat new kind of religion." Einstein

I know it is hard to sing a rousing gospel song to all that. There is a part of me that feels the need to apologize to you that you have landed in this institution smart enough to not make false promises. Sorry that you, like me, have fallen here. But maybe, like my frustrated friend from the wedding, this is where you belong, and where we as a species must begin to be religious in a new way.

Amen, Shalom, Blessed Be.