

**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
COMMUNITY CHURCH**

Sunday, September 18, 2005



**RELIGION
WITHOUT SCRIPTURE**

The Rev. Randolph W.B. Becker,
Minister

September 18, 2005

READING**from *Religion Without Revelation*, Julian Huxley**

The insufferable arrogance of those who claim to be in sole possession of religious truth would happily disappear, together with the consequences which arise when such people are in a position to enforce their views—consequences such as bigotry, religious war, religious persecution, the horrors of the Inquisition, attempts to suppress knowledge and learning, hostility to social or moral change. The appeal to absolute authority (a product of the races' intellectual childhood) could no longer be admitted, whether an appeal to a sacred book, a divine founder, a revealed code, or a sacred church. All such appeals would continue to carry some weight, but could not be considered a court of absolute appeal, beyond the bar of reason or change. No longer could the legitimate affairs of this world be neglected on the pretext of attending to those of the next, nor unscrupulous medicine-men, priests, or religious organizations feather their nests out of the pretended supernatural power which they wield. No longer would the hideous tenor of everlasting hell torment innocent children or distort the lives of men and women, nor the true comfort of religious worship and contemplation be turned out of its course, as the result of fear of a personal, omnipotent, and exacting God, and forced into the channel of propitiatory sacrifice, the meaningless mumbo-jumbo of certain types of ritual, and what I can only describe as the “begging-letter” type of prayer.

It was a long, long time ago.

It happened to a people, or should I say, it happened through a people who were adrift.

What do you do when you are adrift?

I know when I am adrift, one of the reactions I have is to reach out, try to grab whatever I can to steady myself.

A branch, a hand, a rock.

Something to anchor me.

How about you?

Now, picture that you are adrift in many different ways.

You are physically adrift, torn from your familiar surroundings, and all the habits and patterns. Life is hard.

You are socially adrift, because in your dislocation many of your social contacts have been severed or altered beyond beliefs. Patterns of behavior and dependency have been disrupted. While you are with others, you feel very alone.

You are psychologically adrift, moving in a nomadic life which allows for no consistency, no certainty. You feel anxious, filled with unnamed

fears.

You are spiritually adrift, with the values you affirmed bringing you more suffering than meaning. You are filled with more questions than faith.

Which means that you are both highly defensive and highly vulnerable. Your defensiveness makes you rely too heavily on what has worked in the past; your vulnerability makes you doubt all of that at the same time. You crave something “more” but you will settle for something “less,” as long as you get something.

You know the story, don't you?

It is a story about an ancient people, and it is a story about us. The only difference is that we know there is another option. Maybe they knew it too, but they did not choose it. And that, as Robert Frost would say, “has made all the difference.”

The people - the Israelites

The place - the great Sinai desert

The situation - a wandering tribe, moving toward dissolution, forgetting its customs, being tempted to foreign beliefs and practices, finding that

previous elements of cohesion were no longer sufficient.

They were adrift.

And they chose to make that grab for the steadying element. In their vulnerability, they fall to worshiping idols. Moses, in his defensiveness, tries to reclaim the past, but the past is gone. Or is it? Suddenly the past is not just remembered, it is grafted onto the future of all of Western civilization.

A hand of fire, the finger of the Semitic God, Yahweh, transforms the future by writing into stone what had there-to-fore been held in hearts. And the people, given this secure anchor, drop their golden idols. The re-asserted tradition is grasped. “What is written” is chosen as bring more important “what is known.”

From that desperate act of a people adrift, western religion has grown as religions of the word.

The codification of the Torah, the collection of the stories of prophets, the assembling of songs and sayings. The editing of gospels whose ultimate author begins with the simple affirmation of this in his words “In the beginning was the Word...” The establishment of all subsequent major religions has been based on holy writings, whether the words of an

Arabian prophet, the translation of golden tablets, or the doctrinal words
fo a healing woman.

Religion, in our culture, has come to be anchored in holy writing, what is
called scripture.

Those scriptures serve multiple roles.

They delineate the approved stories of origin.

They assemble the cast of holy people whose lives will serve as
examples.

They prescribe the limits of religious living.

They are lore, life, and law.

What is included is what is acceptable and desirable. What is not
included is what is not.

And, to make them powerful, they are imbued with divine origin: they
are not simply words, they are sacred words.

The sacred words were chosen by a people adrift.

But, did they have a choice?

Is it possible to have religion without scripture?

To answer that question, we need to go back to the beginning.

Back to that existential anxiety, which is not only the experience of the wandering tribes of Israel, but the experience of most people.

For some, this angst is born in infancy. For most of us, infancy and childhood's connections of family, tradition, and faith ward off the anxiety. Loving care keeps the monsters under the bed. We may be scared, but we are not anxious.

Then comes adolescence.

Hormones, brain developments, physical growth, sexual identification, social connection and alienation, and identity differentiation - we all were adrift in that land of anxiety.

And then we faced those same choices known by the ancient nomads.

But our culture, shaped by thousands of years structured by religions of the word and societies of law, teaches that there is no choice.

The only choice offered is to resolve the anxiety of adolescence by reaffirming the elements of tradition as contained in the sacred words of religion and society. Feel adrift, and then connect to something which seems certain. Turning back is the choice, the way out of the anxiety of being adrift. Accept as sacred what has been designated as scripture.

Religion becomes the path of faith by which the existential anxiety of the

human condition of being adrift in a seemingly amoral and meaningless universe is relieved in the revelations of sacred words.

But, as many of us here may recognize, adolescents know they have other choices, which means that we do too.

Of course, what many adolescents do is reject the familiar traditions, the familiar words, but grab for other, to them non-traditional, words, forms, rituals. Lutherans become Goths, Jews become Christians, timid souls go to raves, and so forth. The seeming options are merely the exchange of one set of scriptures for another. That is no real other choice – it is simply substitution.

It reminds me of situations I have seen in the water at beaches.

Swimmers, enjoying themselves, until suddenly one of the them experiences a moment of panic. Perhaps it is a momentary loss of footing, the perception of a riptide, an awareness of how far away from shore they are . . . whatever, and the cause is not that important. You can see the look on their faces – they become suddenly anxious and that

anxiety makes them feel they are adrift. And most of them react by flailing about, reaching out for anything to steady themselves. In their anxiety, they reach for anything, even if that means taking the source of rescue down with them.

But, sometimes you see a different reaction. There is the same look of anxiety, but then things change. The person moves into purposeful action. The person moves ahead in time with intent. Not grabbing for rescue, but working toward relief. Something in the past of that person has equipped them to react by acting.

That is the other choice.

To choose to use a variety of sources of understanding as tools to respond to new situations in new ways. Nothing is taken as absolute, everything is taken as useful.

Had that been the choice taken by those Israelites, there would have been no tablets. And there would have been no golden calf either. There would have been conversations about the guiding vision of the community, and what that guiding vision now required of them in their disorienting situation. Their anxiety, the product of being adrift, would

have been relieved not by an external imposition of sacred words, but by their empowerment of their own future. Like the swimmer who uses familiar strokes to swim to safety through unfamiliar, even frightening waters, all their resources would have been used to chart a new path to their envisioned future.

If they had done that, our western civilization would have been shaped by that other choice, by religions of visionary imagination which could never be contained in any form. That would have been a religion of revelation, not of scripture – of an evolutionary, never-ending process of awareness by which the whole is incrementally revealed but never limited or contained.

Ours would have been a culture of discovery not doubt , with religions of wonder, not obedience. Existential anxiety would find its relief and release through the empowerment of people, not their dis-empowerment and dependency.

But, we are not bound by what happened thousands of years ago. Even

as we identify with those adrift back then, even as we remember our own journeys through anxiety of our growing up, we know not only that we have another option, but that we are not bound by the past to ignore that choice.

So, what would that option look like? What would religion without scripture be?

First and foremost, it would be a religion which does not ignore the wisdom in all of those scriptures, but which treats that wisdom as human insight distilled from the experiences of the ages. No religion of affirmation and empowerment can be built on a foundation of rejection.

Furthermore, it would be a religion which knows that human beings are living experiments in meaning-making, and that the best humans who have lived or are living offer us deep insights into not how their lives were sacred, but how their lives can help us make our lives sacred. In the honest examination of lives, of people as complex as each of us, who wrestled with life and found sublime insights as well as suffered

profound failure, we better glimpse what we can be.

And, more importantly, it would be a religion which honors the direct experience of the religious impulse in the heart, soul, mind of each person. Religious moments are not the stuff solely of history, but infuse every moment of time. Yes, some in that ancient desert had experiences they symbolized in burning bushes and hands of fire, but here, in this room, today, some living, breathing human beings have also had experiences of the transcendent.

A religion without scripture would explore the wisdom of others with an open mind, would look to exemplary women and men to see ourselves reflected in their trials and their triumphs, would honor that the religious impulse is alive and well in people everywhere, of every religion and every culture.

It would seek to find wherever wisdom, truth, and understanding are revealed, how those revelations continually comfort and challenge us.

Religions without scripture become religions with a future.

But, to say all of this theoretically is one thing . . . and not enough if we want that kind of religion.

In search for more than theory, Ed Loomis, our ministerial intern, and I will be devoting several services this year to these elements of a such a religion. We will explore the classical sources of meaning, the lives of exemplary humans, and the personal religious experience of you and me, not to declare them especially sacred but to see what they reveal about how we, you and I, might live lives that are not anxiously adrift, but rather focused on an imaginative, visionary future.