



A sermon by The Rev. Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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THE BEST OF OUR RELIGIOUS ROOTS

Last May many of you attended the wonderful celebration that *you* put on for our whole church when you ordained me as a minister and installed me as your minister at this point in your congregational history. What an awesome occasion you brought about that day, and I'll be grateful for it the rest of my life.

Someday I must watch the recording of that event and actually make notes of all the wisdom that the various participating clergy and laypeople shared with us. Some of you might remember that Dr. Steven Epperson, my esteemed colleague at the Vancouver Church, gave the Charge to the Minister. The one thing I remember clearly from it was his encouragement that I look back at my various religious traditions, my multi-part faith heritage, so that I could be clear about what from them is truly worth keeping as a Unitarian Universalist, and what must definitely be left behind. He suggested I think of three things in each category; I have time today to talk about only two of the three roots of my current spiritual and Unitarian life, so that makes six things I want to keep and six I have already put behind me, or continue to work at doing so.

I found it interesting that there are actually rather more than six on each side, to keep or to discard, but there are more to *keep* than not. That must be because I didn't separately count specific theological positions that I've changed, but focused on the whole experience of these three religious phases and on factors representative of a whole stream of these faiths.

Growing up in the United Church of Canada, mind you in the 1950s and 60s version of that denomination, quite a far cry from what it's become over the years and now that The Rev. Gretta Vosper is making God optional in her church, I developed a genuine appreciation for religious community. This was different from a school community, although my best *friends* were from school; at church I knew whole families. I knew brothers and sisters about as well as I knew those my own age; I knew their parents and sometimes grandparents. More than that, I knew people who'd known *my* parents when they were children; my mother's favourite Sunday school teacher was now a good friend of hers, and I loved something about her for many years until she died at a very old age. I felt that there were many people I barely knew who had some kind of

investment in my well-being and a kind regard for me. It was my main entry into a world broader than that of my own childhood.

Also, at church we learned differently from at school. To put it as I most likely would have as a child and young teenager, we were learning to be *good*; we were learning ways to relate to other people. In the schoolyard there are spoken and unspoken rules that are more about fairness than anything else, but at church it was about “Love thy neighbour as thyself,” and “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” I didn’t learn those things at school. The appreciation of the particular qualities of a *religious* community is deeply rooted in me.

And part of what was religious about it is that we all learned and repeated these amazing stories that somehow had a special beauty about them. All of us, all ages, just being there paying attention together to these lessons and stories and celebrating special times of year. This is the second thing I’m so very glad to keep from my Christian upbringing – Bible literacy. Far more than Greek classical myth or the masterpieces of Shakespeare, the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament are the foundational texts of western culture. Totally apart from the contents of the stories or the theological implications that have been drawn and even fantastically elaborated upon from these stories, they are the richest fount of metaphor, narrative themes and figurative speech in many languages, not to mention their inspiration for the roots of our justice system. Not to know these stories, or certain quotes from the King James translation, or characters like Adam, Eve, Abraham, David, Samson, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul – well, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, it’s unbelievably important! And I thank Wilmot United Church in Fredericton, New Brunswick for all of it.

And the third religious root that I cherish from my church background is the love of music: church music, religious music, good old hymns that are so beautiful I don’t care what they say – I’m so glad I finally found a way to get “Immortal, Invisible” into one of our services, even if I never manage it again! I sang in school choirs, too, but almost all of my choir singing until I was in high school and beyond happened at church. I may have learned specifically to read music at school, but my sight reading all came from the church. Starting as a boy soprano, cracking through alto for a few months and then landing in the basses with a thud gave me an ear for the whole chord, not ignoring the tenor line which I whizzed by without stopping for during the summer of my hormonal flowering. That’s one reason it’s so important we have a choir here, and now a learn-to-sing class; church music can change your whole life.

Now, you see why it’s so easy to get excited about keeping the *best* things from our religious past; I better get on with what I gladly left behind. I remember the time I took a

friend to church at Christmas when I was in my late teens, rather after I'd stopped going myself. Afterwards he said to me, "There was no happiness in that service!" I'd never thought about it before, but yes the United Church liturgy of my childhood was rather reserved if not cold; if you think my services tend towards being formal, I'm flipping cartwheels up here compared to what I saw growing up. I may have found joy in the community, but I rarely found joy in church.

Part of that may have been that I found sobering even the passing references that United Church folk made to hell and who went there and why. I never could understand how the God of Christmas and the Golden Rule also damned people for eternity, just for not believing something. I'm glad that hell wasn't a constant theme in my Christian roots, but its mere suggestion put me off the whole enterprise. And closely related to that is the narrow Christian focus on faith in Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation; once I was old enough to understand that, it never struck me as true, except perhaps for those people who actually lived and met Jesus in His lifetime. But what happened to those poor folks who climbed the wrong mount and missed the sermon? "I just assumed it was Mt. Sinai! I wondered where was everybody. And I brought a loaf and a fish, too!" (You see, Bible literacy is why you get these jokes! I hope *our* children will get these jokes someday, too.)

Now, let's be clear, I'm having fun with this idea, but I'm not ridiculing it. It just didn't make sense to me as a coherent belief given so many other things that Jesus also taught. So that's what sent me off looking elsewhere, becoming Bahá'í at age 18.

There came a time when I yearned for religious answers and knew I couldn't turn back to Christianity to find them. Specifically, I wanted to figure out the God-thing. Could there be a god with a more coherent story than Christian theology had given me? The Bahá'í Faith said, "Yes!" and I came to believe, though God as I understood the concept at that time was far different from what I believe now. So, first and foremost, I'm thankful that I found personal faith at that time. This is why I included today the Bahá'í healing prayer; I memorized that prayer and created that chant way back when. Again, it's not so much the literal meaning of it that has kept it important; rather, it's a reference to the whole relationship with God that has been a source of healing for me.

That personal faith arose largely from the Bahá'í sense that revealed religion advances over time and history, developing an increasingly wide focus and leading humankind to a broader sense of identification with others at each step. This view had divinity engaged with us all along the way, not at one point in time way in the past; there was a purpose to human life and to mine in particular – this is the time in human evolution when we must enlarge our sense of relationship to the whole species, and indeed the

whole planet. This sense of being in relation to a vastly grander whole is something else that I've never lost and greatly value. The fact that it's widely held *now* in various religious and secular groups only points out how remarkable a realization it was for little old me from the Maritimes 37 years ago.

This connectedness to the whole involves the recognition of unity at so many levels, and this is the third gift I keep from that religious root. The unity of the human race; the unity of the essential spirit of religion; the eventual unity of the planet and of global efforts for worldwide well-being all came alive to me at that time, not to mention a deep appreciation for unity in diversity. No wonder that being Bahá'í set me up so well to be Unitarian Universalist many years later.

What eventually drove me away from that Faith were the aspects of it that are fundamentalist. As the next religious step after Islam, the concept of submission is very prominent, not just to God's will and the religious law, but also to the worldly representatives of that will and law. I don't want to make it sound like a cult because it's not; it's just that, beyond merely observing Bahá'í law, both positive as in praying daily, and negative as in avoiding alcohol and drugs, it is not acceptable to ask certain questions or to challenge authority. Besides obedience and silencing, the way that I understood these issues at that time triggered immense shame and guilt in me. I began to feel utterly abject in my spirituality and to believe there was no other way to believe. I experienced a breakthrough about this when I suddenly received a more accepting image of God, and that helped me see that there is far more for me in the spiritual universe than I had succeeded in finding in that religion.

Now, I must talk about why I believe this topic is important. Traditionally, many Unitarian Universalists have come to our congregations in search of a refuge from religion or in deep reaction to religious experiences or the evidence we see around us of the damage that bad religion wreaks. As Christopher Hitchens states in his book, *God is Not Great*, religion can amount to child abuse; I believe that, too. Where I disagree is that he seems to conclude that *all* religion is child abuse, and I'm sure there are many of us here who can say that's not true.

With this attitude in mind, we have tended clearly to articulate what we don't believe, what we reject and what we want to be entirely free of, if not safe from. In doing that, we sometimes become blind to any gift or benefit that our prior religion may have given us. We may take it entirely for granted that, say, our earliest organized exposure to music came from religious involvement. This has long been the average story of discovering Unitarian Universalism. We value our free and responsible search for truth and meaning, but often we assume that means the search only looks *forward*, when it's

essential that it also look backward. It's a terrible risk we take when we fail to deal fully with the effects of religion upon us, both to know it and *digest* it, so to speak, to let it nourish us as much or little as it can and then to let the rest go.

What is increasingly common now, though, is that more and more people come here to find *positive* religious and spiritual experiences. These among us and this generation come here with the freedom from religious baggage that so many long-time Unitarians *wish* for! Many of our visitors and newcomers don't have it; you never have. What you do have is open-mindedness and a thirst for communal experience of something larger than our individual selves, something deeper than sentiment and more expansive than reason alone. This difference between the traditional freedom *from* religion and the current freedom *toward* religion can set up a 'we and they' mentality. When this happens, some of us jump into a fear of scarcity; the feeling that there's not enough church for both sides so some are going to lose what they need.

Dear friends, this need not be so. In fact, we need this *not* to be so. We can and must be a community of "both – and." What more Unitarian quality is there than the ability, no beyond ability, enthusiasm to embrace and accommodate difference. Rational study and direct experience. Faith and reason. The intellectual and the mystical.

So, let us look back at our personal religious roots to find there what is worth preserving and bringing here. What we each choose to keep or discard may be the opposite of what someone we love here chooses. It's the love that's truly important; that is the basis of our acceptance of each other. That acceptance is the basis of our community.

May we all find that worth preserving.