

We Need Not Think Alike to Love Alike – An Apology to Agnostics
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July 19, 2009

I once saw a posting for a seminar entitled “Do all religions lead to one God?” I showed up and sat next to the only other person who seemed both alone and unsure of the discussion’s outcome. The speaker made exactly 2 points. The first was that another religion had 300 000 Gods, whereas “Ours” had one. The second was that “Our” saviour said, “I am the way” ... implying, there are no other ways (no other paths to God). And, no lie, the speaker then announced all religions could not lead to the same God; they all hooted and hollered and applauded; the band started playing; and they joyously danced around in an orgy of self-aggrandizement and mutual congratulations ... leaving exactly two of us completely stunned. I’d like to look a little deeper.

Often after meditation I feel open, liberated ... fully connected with everything. None of the earlier distractions, so dominant in my mind less than an hour earlier, now hold any sway for me ... I see them for what they were: mere distractions: garbage separating me from connection, depth, happiness. And then, after meditation, I wish upon all beings such openness; such complete connection with everything in the universe. And why not? I’m not special ... everyone is capable of it. Regardless of whether they have followed this religion or that ritual, or accepted “our” saviour or denied “their” dogma. We’re all built the same. And this ability to connect with the universe, glimpse the eternal (perhaps I don’t have the right words for it but you all know the experience I’m talking about) is an innate function ... with the required mechanisms being as prevalent amongst humans as those that give us our ability to expel bodily waste.

Clearly people of different religions think differently. And great harm has been caused by the religiously righteous that “know” their way of thinking is best. But, at a deeper level, those same religions have also inspired great acts of love ... committed by remarkably loving people. They build hospitals and look after the poor. Even when help is mandated from on high to be conditional upon accepting certain teachings, there is no denying the unconditional love of those actually performing the caring. I’ve been cared about by them ... and physically feel their loving energy when standing beside them. And ... as with deep seekers of all religions ... I believe, they tap into the same energies I tap into when I’m feeling especially spiritual. Many call it God, Dharma, Yahweh, Allah, etc or, flow, the infinite, eternity, I even heard “the universal field of perfect information” (and try substituting that into our last hymn) - there’s so many names for it.

Call it what you will ... to me, for what we’re talking about today, they’re just names ... words. Emotionally loaded words. But I didn’t grow up with religion ... my many and varied issues lie elsewhere. I would say the baggage we place between ourselves and ___ our name for our experience of the spiritual/divine/eternal ... that baggage differs by religion ... and by individual idiosyncrasies. But what we are distancing ourselves from with that baggage is the same. I’m not focused on our differences today ... our **similarities** are much more prominent. So prominent that, scientifically speaking, race doesn’t exist for humanity. Our biological mechanisms are the same ... so what we are attuned to and tapping into must also be the same thing: from now on I’m going to call it,

the eternal ... because that's the only quality of it (besides love) I feel I have some appreciation of ... but you can substitute any word you like ... I won't be offended. Likewise, the explanations for what we spiritually experience also vary. But, again for this topic, these are just stories - ways to communicate elusive and ephemeral experiences that don't easily lend themselves to the everyday languages of the material world ... experiences that receive little attention even, somehow, in religious circles. But the stories don't vary as widely as the names ... they are often remarkably similar ... but we can talk about religious power struggles and culture appropriation another time. Today is not for differences but for uniting us through what we're all doing right at the deeper level: actively tapping into our experience of the eternal ... which, at its core or essence – beyond surface names and stories – is a universal experience. We don't all have to think alike to be alike when experiencing the eternal. We **could** all be having the same Eternal/God experience. True to our Unitarian Universalist religion we **can** all be right!

And then there's the agnostics.

And I say this last line as the ignorant person I was when I first heard the explanation of agnosticism ... back when I should have made this apology

Here's what happened. Years ago, a member of our church ... in this very sanctuary ... told me he considered himself an agnostic. I asked what that was. And he said, I'm paraphrasing here because I recognize how quick I was to manipulate my own baggage into the explanation, "we can't know what God is, so there's no point trying to know."

Immediately, my mind jumped to this thought. And I pause here to let you visitors know that this is more crude than church here normally is. There's this show on TV called "the World's Strongest Man" where little guys get to give the guys who beat them up in high school inane tasks to do (is that a fair description? ... close enough). This episode was a team competition and the Scots were about to face the Canadians in the last preliminary round. No matter how well the Scottish team did in this event they would still not have enough points to make it into the finals and the interviewer asked the Scottish captain if this would affect the team's effort. Would they still try? The response came in the form of a gruff, bar room voice: "Ack! We don't bend o'er and throw our kilts up for no'un."

To me, at the time, this thought equally matched my agnostic friend. Not being what was, in **my** definition, an active seeker was the same as bending o' ... you get the idea.

Truly an unkind thought. When I later – much later – apologized to my friend, he quickly said there was no problem ... but I'd like to go a little deeper. That way I can make a real apology to him ... and to you, for adding negative energy to this spiritual home **from** which we are trying to give **positive** energy to the world. I mentally committed an atrocious act. I know some believe it's not our thoughts but our actions that count. But our behaviours are just measuring sticks of the force of our thoughts. Add a little more energy to our unkind thoughts and we're not so different from people in prison. And lest you think I'm being too hard on myself, let me count the ways ... First, I am sorry that my definition of active listening took the form of judging ... not listening. Not only could I have allowed this person the opportunity to tell their story ...

which, surprise surprise, doesn't end after one sentence ... but I also could have found out more ... for instance, about the many forms and variations of agnosticism. There's strong agnosticism and mild and pragmatic and so many more. There's agnostic atheism and agnostic theists and ignosticism. My ignorance – in this regard - could have ended right then and there. It's even far from necessarily true that he wasn't being active in the searching that we so value in this religion and that I was being all blindly evangelical about. I think that's pretty obvious and clear.

The next one should have been, too, but I somehow didn't even think it until years later: this person bravely told me their beliefs at a time in this church's history when I knew it wasn't quite a safe place to state one's beliefs (an atmosphere our last minister worked incredibly hard and well at changing). And the important part is not whether you believe me or not but that this was my impression ... and I felt **troubled** by that atmosphere. And even with my radar attuned to this dynamic, I committed the exact same error I had been railing about. That was terrible. I'm sorry for hurting him ... and for hurting you.

And this was not the only instance where I missed something staring me right in the face.

I was happy when the Beloved Community Document came out. I'm quite a sensitive person and even subtly hurtful behaviours or energies can affect me quite strongly ... even if they're not directed at me. I saw it as a good thing that our membership would have a constant reminder and strengthened commitment to be in right relationship to each other. I did not see (ego, arrogance, you name it) that I was just as capable, and guilty, of committing hurtful energies ... [sign].

If you still think I'm being too hard on myself, I'm not finished yet. And, if you think I'm not being hard enough on myself and feel a strong pull to ... offer your assistance ... I left room here so you can sign it, too.

And although this Document came out after this particular transgression of mine, I don't have that excuse for yet another failure to appreciate the lessons you, my fellow congregants, have continually impressed upon me:

There are people in this room who so excellently model kindness and acceptance ... that it really should be rubbing off better on such a so-called sensitive person. And such mentors pervade our UU history. Geoff Edge, the first person I felt close to in this congregation, deeply demonstrated and taught me this ... and I can't tell you why I ignored that teaching when I and my fellow congregants needed it most. Geoff's favourite quote was from Francis David, "We need not think alike to love alike." I saw Geoff live his commitment to this truth. I watched him walk that talk every day. We sat on the finance committee together and disagreed about everything ... and clearly cared for each other. I loved being with him and really liked him. Disagreeing with him paled in comparison. At a recent committee meeting one of our members came up to me and asked if "we" were OK, meaning, "is our relationship still good" given that only moments ago she disagreed so ... bluntly with me. I was taken aback at the possibility that one could be the cause of the other ... after all, she knew Geoff, too. I'm happy that such a proposal could be a shock to me ... and I have my experiences with Geoff and

with you to thank for that. It is our honoured task to ensure our mentors' traits live on in us ... and I missed that opportunity to rekindle Geoff's qualities when I ran into an agnostic. I'm sorry to that agnostic, and to Geoff, and to all of you.

This next one is not tiny: By this one act, I behaved as if I were completely throwing the first four of our 7 principles out the window ... and kicked the feet out from number 6 as well. I think, in the interests of time, I'll leave that with you. But you're all bright people; you'll see when you look at them deeply ... I'm not exaggerating.

And this list is not exhausted. Only time, not truth, makes me move on from here.

The forms of Metta – the sending out of the energy of loving kindness - I utilize after my daily meditations vary, but often resemble prayer. Sometimes I include “I seek pardon ... I seek pardon ... I seek pardon ... from all those I have hurt or harmed by my deeds of body, speech or mind.” I ask your pardon ... for harming your dear, vulnerable members. And I ask your forgiveness for this harmful energy I have inflicted on this sanctuary of love. I'll do my best to come out of this ignorance and to do my part to contribute to the **positive** energy of this beautiful house of many rooms.

And, not that it lets me off the hook in any way, but my initial assumption was wrong, anyway.

I keep thinking about that brief, incomplete explanation: “we can't know what God is, so there's no point trying to know.”

Trying to know what the eternal is or, far worse, **knowing** what God is increases our attachments. But every spiritual or internal gain is only made possible by the giving up of expectations. Typical worldly efforts ... fail us here. So we're far better off not **trying** to know ... just doing our internal work, and letting the results come as they will.

So ... um ... the agnostics have a point.

Moreover, I keep referring to the glimpsing of the eternal when I talk about the experiencing of it. This is because a **full** experiencing of the eternal – a face-to-face encountering, if you will – occurs when something else simultaneously happens – and this comes from those very few people who have been there - the five senses cease functioning. That's, for instance, how they can stay alive for so long without food or water. They call this experience ... the indescribable. Their five senses don't work. How can they communicate their experience when all of our language intimately depends on our five senses?

We can't know God ... not if we talk about “we” as ... anything utilizing any common language. What we typically refer to as “we” ... “I” ... doesn't exist where the eternal resides. Only here do we truly catch up with ... and understand ... science, who has known for well over a century that we are nothing more than a mass of subatomic particles rapidly blinking in and out of existence. In our day-to-day life we see ourselves in a more worldly, less dissected way ... and we need to in order to function and relate.

But we can't fully appreciate the eternal ... not from that place. Any efforts we make from there only take us further from being able to know the eternal.

Horror of horrors ... the agnostics are touching upon deep truths!

And, you know, this continuing to look deeper; keep questioning even when we think we have the answer; to question is an answer that is so fundamental to our religion ... is also at the route of agnosticism. *a-gnōsis*; without knowledge. We're all, effectively, repeatedly say "I Don't Know" ... and there's great power in that.

There's Us | and the Eternal ... side-by-side. A choice makes us intertwined ... co-existing and working together. The garbage I referred to as being in the way ... can be equated to the ego. Saying "I don't know" *opens us up* ... allows something deeper than the ego to take charge ... which can easily bypass the ego. And this is why the religiously righteous, who "know" with absolute certainty, are so dangerous: they're continuously saying "I know" ... building up the ego and distancing themselves from the eternal. A spiritual community best serves its members by helping them to clear away the internal garbage ... but some have put an entire church in the way ... which has been lucrative in the past ... a problem our seven principles – when followed deeply - help us to avoid. I find this process of not knowing; looking deeper ... without ego ... fundamentally important for dissecting and transcending the material world so we can more than glimpse the eternal.

... oh no ... I'm agnostic!

As I heard so well in the discernment process, when you look a little deeper, we're not so different. So we **don't** have to think alike to love alike.

This is an important time for our church. It is the time for us to say who we are. And since I'm a member of the ministerial search committee it's important for you to feel like you can talk to me about your opinions of this. I don't know if you now feel more or less able to approach me ... but at least the truth is out there. Let's keep looking deeper.

And every moment is an important time for our church because who we are is made up of those individual moments. Let's keep looking deeper.

So may it be.