

DECIDING THE FUTURE – A Sermon for Father’s Day

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church - St. Petersburg, Florida - 6/03/18

READINGS (texts below, after sermon)

<u>Gathering</u>	<i>Summary of the UUA Covenant</i>
<u>Invocation</u>	<i>Namaste</i> , by Mohandes Gandhi
<u>Meditation</u>	<i>A Compassionate Life</i> by Karen Armstrong
<u>Reading #1</u>	<i>Sex Roles</i> from <u>Dr. Tatiana’s Sex Advice for All Creatures</u> , by Olivia Judson
<u>Reading #2</u>	<i>Strong Father Figure/Fear Thereof</i> , from <u>Bossypants</u> by Tina Fey
<u>Reading #3</u>	<i>The Measure of My Progress</i> from <u>Between the World & Me</u> by TaNehisi Coates
<u>Benediction</u>	<i>May We Grow</i> adapted from the Covenant of UU Congregations

SERMON

What thoughts and feelings come to you when you hear the word “Father”?

That is a possible question for Father’s Day. But hold it in abeyance for a while. Let’s first consider that yesterday’s newspaper published a summary of an article entitled “There are No Laws of Physics.” The full article itself was published in Quanta science magazine and was written by the director of the super-prestigious Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, New Jersey, home to a constellation of intellectual luminaries starting in 1933 with Albert Einstein.

Troubled by the title, “There are No Laws of Physics,” I read the complete article online, plus another very recent article by the same author and it was clear that he does not believe that there are no laws of physics. It seems rather that what he believes is that we are discovering a multiplicity of formulations of the reality that underlies the laws of physics as we currently posit them. That raises a multiplicity of questions.

As groundbreaking philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn awoke us to in his 1962 book, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, when we have many questions which our model of reality cannot fully answer, we know it is time for a new paradigm for understanding the nature and working of deep reality. Another way of putting this is that there is a deeper reality than the one our current understanding can describe and explain.

Daily human reality is no less challenged than deep cosmic reality with questions these days, not so much about what individuals should best do (ie, love your neighbor as yourself), but about how to get whole communities to do it.

In our times, when intentional fake news continues as ever to be widely used to confuse the people, when for example even articles on finding Noah’s Ark are presented as if we should take them seriously (as was the case this week online), it seems to me that any authors purporting to reveal truths about the fundamental nature of reality need to be very careful in communicating their message with the reading public.

When people are given fake news time and time again, it seems to me that there is great damage to the course of life, even when the fake news is just twisting a headline to provoke attention – as in, “There are no laws of physics”. For example, this month we remember Juneteenth, which refers to a non-specific date in June 1865 when Union troops arrived in Texas and let the still enslaved people there know they had been emancipated, freed from captivity, two years earlier.

We might see the fake news was that the slaveholders had never informed their captives that they were legally free in the United States of America. But could it be that the greater fake news was what the Union troops unwittingly told the people – that the captives were let free? What is being free if you’ve got nothing to lose, to paraphrase a great Texan – no basis for life or the pursuit of happiness – no land, no work, no voting rights, no equality of education, no opportunity to be productive, no opportunity to contribute and belong as a full member of the full community? What if that truth about reality had been told on Juneteenth?

Members of Unitarian Universalist congregations are by and large committed to finding as much truth as possible about all levels of reality. By and large, we are committed to knowing as much as possible about what life is and how it works for good and why it sometimes doesn’t. For then, we have learned, we will less likely be misled - and we will less likely unknowingly waste our potential for blessedness in false relationships and on false promises. Then we can see more clearly our own ways and means to fulfilling our potentials.

In science, in art, in history, in daily life, in deep reflection, we can see patterns and materials that are woven to make reality and that make sense as reality – that hold things together beneficially – and, in that, are relig-i-ous, re-binding. We may never receive the most basic data or know the obscure but revealing math that can describe and explain the ultimate fundamental patterns and materials of existence. But we can experience all sorts of real expressions of this deeper reality.

The ashes of one of the greatest modern theoretical physicists, Stephen Hawking, have just been returned to the earth, without him ever learning what is behind it all, the singular theory of everything. But he found sustaining joy in thinning the veil between deep reality and daily reality – and in learning to live with the daily reality with deepening understanding and caring. And so might we. How and with what reality we weave determines our future and that of our children. We need to know that reality as fully as it can be known to weave our best.

Every human being has a father and a mother, a padre and madre, a pater and mater. These are our paternity and our maternity. These are the pattern-givers and matter-givers – the givers of how to live and who we and our world are – who can help us grow to live so there will be nothing – no confusing veil - between the world and us.

In 1825, when the Rev. William Ellery Channing was asked what is the nature of God for a Unitarian, he said, “Parental” – *parental*, not *maternal* or *paternal*, but *parental* - encompassing nurturing understanding and nurturing caring for oneself, for others, and for the all – providers, as Rev. Fredrick Henry Hedge put it, of quickening transforming grace, that creative light which imparts hope and power to anxious souls.

We can see the parental role as having two parts – one, the paternal, establishing the patterns of being and life within the children and around the children; - and, two, the maternal providing the materials with which they can weave life in whatever range of patterns they can find. Pattern and matter, patterns and matters. And in my experience, and in a growing body of research, it looks like either parent can do it – any human being can do it – whether we be called mater or pater or mentor. As biologist Dr. Tatiana says from her studies as a naturalist, there is nothing preordained about gender roles or potentials or competencies and there are many more ways of being than we have yet realized are in fact normal.

My understanding of current findings from neuroscience and psychology is that there is, for all practical purposes, no difference between human genders in their capacity to learn, grow, understand, and care. The great contribution of Dr. Lawrence Kohlberg was not his methodologically flawed conclusion that men are better than women at reasoning and ethical discernment, but that all humans, regardless of gender, can expand their capacity to understand, value, and reason as they experience and reflect on life. The great contribution of his colleague Dr. Carol Gilligan was not that women are more caring than men in their moral and ethical development, but that the enhancement of understanding and caring are both dependent on how these equal capacities in women and men, in mothers and fathers, are nurtured and developed by the individuals and their communities.

The great contribution of the early Unitarian way was not that God is a unity rather than a trinity – but that humans, as individuals and as communities, can intentionally cultivate their potentials for understanding and caring toward fulfillment and so transcend pre-determined fate.

The great contribution of the early Universalists was not that an all-loving, all-powerful God would ultimately bring all souls into heaven – but rather that all people have almost boundless potentials for growing in and nurturing understanding and caring. It is the fulfillment of these potentials that has distinguished humanity’s heroes and saints and mothers and fathers through the ages.

We can see in Tina Fey’s report that individuals, families, and communities have goals for people and expectations for how to achieve those goals. Fathers and mothers are particularly essential to nurturing the potential in their children toward following the practices of that way and meeting those goals. By accident or wisdom, Tina’s father found ways to imbue ethical standards and yet express loving appreciation as Tina grew her own understanding, caring, and ultimately her own sense of autonomy. And now she reflects on how to do the same for her own children, so they may have patterns to follow and materials to use that will bring blessing and not curse.

We see Ta-Nehisi Coates as a father expanding his mother's guidance for understanding and communicating about the pattern of the world as it is, how to survive and possibly thrive in it, and how possibly to change it for the better for self and others. He identifies questioning and studying as the saving path – the clue to understanding the pattern of life and following it in the matters of life - as his mother had taught. This is what we mean as the free and responsible search for truth and meaning – the center of a life of spiritual growth in understanding and caring. This is what I mean about deciding the future.

So, in conclusion, I see three unanswered questions challenging us on Father's Day and Mother's Day. One, can we come to adequately understand the nature and way of things in finite and infinite forms? Two, can we take adequate care of those things in ways that work best for all? And three, can we learn to teach our children the same? Can we go beyond the limitations and partialities of selfhood to transform the anger of a violent world into not just a source of refuge, but into a source of enlightened being that is wise and compassionate?

These are the questions that I have for Father's Day and Mother's Day. I am glad we are a community working together, along with our world, on finding a new paradigm for shaping a worthy future. Thank you, *namaste*, and *shalom*.

READINGS

Gathering *Summary of the UUA Covenant*

We help one another grow in understanding and caring for every person, human relationships, spiritual growth, truth and meaning, conscience and democracy, world community, and the interdependent web of which we are a part. – *Summary of the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Congregations*

Invocation *Namaste*, by Mohandes Gandhi

I honor the place in you where the entire universe resides...
a place of light, of love, of truth, of peace, of wisdom.

**I honor the place in you where when you are in that place
and I am in that place, there is only one of us.**

Meditation *A Compassionate Life* by Karen Armstrong

A person who is impartial, fair, calm, gentle, serene, accepting, and openhearted is indeed a refuge. In the person who has gone beyond the limitations and partialities of selfhood, many experience a humanity that lets them feel that life is enduring. A truly compassionate person touches a chord in us that resonates with some of our deepest yearnings. They offer a haven of peace in a violent angry world. This is the ideal to which we aspire, and it is not beyond our capacity. Even if we achieve only a fraction of this enlightenment and leave the world only marginally better because we have lived in it, our lives will have been worthwhile. There is no more to be said. We know what we have to do. This is the end of our guidance, and the beginning of our work.

Reading #1 *Sex Roles* from *Dr. Tatiana's Sex Advice for All Creatures*, by Olivia Judson

If not for sex, much of what is flamboyant and beautiful in nature would not exist. Plants would not bloom. Birds would not sing. Deer would not sprout antlers. Hearts would not beat so fast. But ask any assortment of creatures, what is sex? and they will give you different answers. Humans and many other species will say copulation.... For flowing plants, sex is trusting the wind or an insect to carry pollen to a receptive female flower.... The act that all these antics have evolved to accomplish is the mixing of genes, the creation of an individual with a new genetic makeup.

(Do) male and female form a fundamental, immutable dichotomy, the front and back of a single coin, her yin to his yang? Actually, he is less essential than she is. A species can do without him but not without her. What's more there's nothing immutable about the two sexes, nothing preordained about sex roles. Speaking for myself, my years as a sex adviser have definitely broadened my horizons; I now think that many more things are normal.

Reading #2 *Strong Father Figure/Fear Thereof*, from Bossypants by Tina Fey

Let's review the cost-free techniques that we've learned so far for raising an achievement-oriented, obedient, drug-free, virgin adult: Calamity, Praise, Local Theater, and flat feet. Another key element is "Strong Father Figure/Fear Thereof." My dad looks like Clint Eastwood. His half-Scottish, half-German face in repose is handsome but terrifying. I searched the audience for him during the sixth-grade chorus concert and, seeing his stern expression, I was convinced that he had seen me messing up the words to the *Happy Day* theme and that I was in big trouble. I spent the rest of the concert suppressing terror burps, only to be given a big hug and a kiss afterward. It took me years to realize, Oh, that's just his face.

I only hope that one day I can frighten my daughter this much. Right now, she's not scared of my husband or me at all. I think it's a problem. I was a freshman home from college the first time my dad said, "You're going out at ten P.M.? I don't think so," and I just laughed and said, 'It's fine.' I feel like my daughter will be doing that to me by age six. How can I give her what my father gave me? The gift of anxiety. The fear of getting in trouble. The knowledge that while you are loved, you are not above the law. The World-wide Parental Anxiety System is failing if this many of us have made sex tapes.

Reading #3 *The Measure of My Progress* from Between the World & Me by TaNehisi Coates

Here is how I take the measure of my progress in life: I imagine myself as I was, back there in West Baltimore, dodging, ducking, fearful of the schools and the streets, and I imagine showing that lost boy a portrait of my present life and asking him what he would make of it.... I write to you, my son, at the precipice of my fortieth year, having come to a point in my life – not of great prominence – but far beyond anything that boy could have even imagined. I did not master the streets because I could not read the body language quick enough. I did not master the schools, because I could not see where any of it could possibly lead. But I did not fall. I have my family. I have my work. ... And godless though I am, the fact of being human, the fact of possessing the gift of study, and thus being remarkable among all the matter floating through the cosmos, still awes me.

I have spent much of my studies searching for the right question by which I might fully understand the breach between the world and me.... If my life ended today, I would tell you it was a happy life – that I drew great joy from the study, from the struggle toward which I now urge you. You have seen in this conversation that the struggle has ruptured and remade me several times.... The changes have awarded me a rapture that comes only when you can no longer be lied to, when you have rejected the (liars' fantasies). But even more the changes have taught me how to best exploit that singular gift of study, to question what I see, then to question what I see after that, because the questions matter as much, perhaps more than, the answers.

Benediction *May We Grow* adapted from the Covenant of UU Congregations

May we grow, and help one another grow, in understanding and caring for every person, in human relationships, in spiritual growth, in truth and meaning, in conscience and democracy, in world community, and in the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. This is the end of our guidance, and the beginning of our blessing. *Namaste.*