



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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ATHEISTS AND THEISTS AGREE

Let me confess right off the bat that I've stolen half this sermon. I suppose if I tell you from where and whom I stole it it's it less like stealing and more like an academic citation, so I'll do that. David Wong, a writer I know nothing more about than his name, wrote a piece called, "The God Fuse: 10 Things Christians and Atheists Can (And Must) Agree On." I read it first in a newspaper, I believe, and found it again posted on a web-site called Cracked.com by searching on the idea in the title. You can find it there too, no doubt, though on my recent visit to check it's still there, I couldn't find how to go to page 2 of the article, so you only get to about number five now. Thank goodness, I stole all 10 points while I still could!

Now somewhere I heard that the best writers know how to steal really well. Perhaps I got that wrong, but I do know that all the best *preachers* steal *really, really* well. To let you in on a trade secret, preachers practically cackle with glee when they come across something that hands almost a whole sermon to them right on a... page. Considering that I've told you all about it before I even get started, that means I'm a pretty bad thief – and an even worse preacher, no doubt. But I had to 'fess up because a lot of you are avid readers, and I'm sure some among you have seen this article already. Now, I can get away with looking honest and upfront, a man of principle!

For background, Wong's article came out shortly after the last US Presidential election, when Americans were all stirred up about religion and politics and power and morality, and it jumped out as a good piece of commonsense at a time when swords were drawn. I read the extremes of religious polarity in the United States as just a bit cooler now than they were. Atheist champions have gotten some good attention and some of the religious are gettin' religion finally – environmental religion, poverty religion, that is. Not that the situation isn't still perilous, but the religio-political atomic clock has shifted back a minute or two. It's not impossible that Wong had something to do with this. Now, he does write about *Christians* and atheists, but we're Unitarian Universalists, so I'm applying his points to *theists* in general.

We may think that the American situation doesn't pertain here. Clearly, Canadian society and politics are far more secular than those in the United States. For instance, we have settled the issues of prayer and science curricula

in our schools. Yet we have now a Prime Minister who is religiously conservative, and some of our elected politicians would if they could impose *their* religious principles on the whole population. For instance, there is talk of importing US-style vengeance into our justice system with harsher sentencing and perhaps even the death penalty.

On the other side, Dawkins and Hitchens have both been on Canadian bestseller lists; from that I conclude that Canada too has a strong anti-religious faction. And, in any case, this polarization exists inside Unitarian Universalist communities, to some extent our own included, so it is relevant to us. I'll add here that I've started to read Hitchens and plan to read Dawkins, so that I hear what they have to say and can talk about it here some future Sunday.

So, getting on with looking at what Wong writes, he points out that both atheists and theists are entirely sincere in what they believe, at least most are; worldly power grabs *can* be hidden behind many masks. But on the whole people in both groups genuinely feel that their way of seeing the world offers great benefit to all people; their definitions of benefit are very different, but in their own minds they promote what they see as best for themselves and for others.

When I was a chaplain intern I became close friends with a young woman who is a conservative Christian, not the *most* conservative kind, mind you, but distinctly so. We grew to love each other as dear friends; near the end of our term, she tearfully shared with me that she honestly fears for my soul. Now, I could have felt offended by that, but I knew she *sincerely* wanted only good things for me. Whether what she feared is real or not didn't matter to me; it's real to her, and I accepted her concern as a form of her love for me. *She* wasn't judging me, far from it; she simply feared that God would judge me. This was based on truth in her eyes. I felt moved by how intensely she cared for me. Of course, I realize that some believers feel smug and fully qualified to judge other people, but smugness is not built into religion; it's a human failing that appears everywhere.

I also believe that American secular humanists who want creationism removed from school curricula and only evolution and science taught to young people are motivated by their desire to reduce ignorance. They want to empower students to live in and deal with the real world, that is, the natural, scientific world. They believe this will help society move forward, and this is based on truth in *their* eyes. Of course, I realize that some atheists feel smug and fully qualified to judge other people, but smugness is not built into atheism; it's a human failing that appears everywhere.

Wong also observes that the day-to-day lives of most theists and atheists are very similar, apart from religious practice, that is. For the most part, you can't pick out a theist in the crowds at Park Royal, nor an atheist driver on the Upper Levels, though I found myself behind a little jeep-like car on Taylor Way driving

home the other night. On its spare tire cover on the back was the fish symbol with feet on the bottom of the fish. I've seen symbols like that before, but this one made me laugh right out loud. This version was so cute, like the fish was wearing little booties or rubber boots. But, that sign does *not* indicate that the driver is an atheist; one might assume that but there are theists who believe in evolution, and atheists who believe in reincarnation. You can't tell just by the back of their cars!

Similarly, it's evident that there are truly good, honest, loving, upright citizens on both sides of this divide, and that these people contribute to the community, assist others less fortunate than themselves, raise healthy children, and in so many other ways help create, maintain and improve society's functions and institutions. This sounds like it goes without saying, but remember that Wong writes into the turmoil of blame and judgment that can easily get rolling between these groups.

To move away from the goodness and light aspects of the similarities between atheists and theists, Wong also reminds us that undeniable horrors have been done in the name of both sides. Think of the Spanish Inquisition on one side and the Russian gulags on the other. The Christian Crusades and the historical jihad of early Islam were religiously motivated wars, but I've never heard anyone say that Genghis Khan slaughtered countless people in the name of religion; his motivation, as far as history has been able to conclude, was secular power. That doesn't mean he was an atheist actually, but it reminds us that human beings can act with unthinkable brutality for many motives.

Wong points out boldly that each side of this divide has been legitimately offensive to the other. It doesn't matter who started it. Certain theists lay blame for naturally occurring tragedies in the world on the social tarnish that secular humanism brings; certain atheists lay blame for almost all the tragedies of history on the ignorance of the religious. To argue either of these positions by referring only to negative examples of the behavior of the other group is judgmental, mean-spirited and self-righteous.

Similarly, both sides exaggerate the maliciousness of the other and the virtuousness of themselves, at least when they look each other in the eye. In the privacy of religious study, theists may face their faults, deficiencies and imperfections, yet can don a robe of purity when trying to score points for their argument. Likewise, atheists may feel doubt and be critical of themselves, but can don a robe of haughty condescension towards those they disagree with.

Those are the points that Wong makes. As I tell them to you today I'm extremely aware that the majority of members of this congregation identifies with labels such as humanist, atheist and secular. It may sound as though I'm tarring all of you with Wong's accusatory brush. I don't intend that, rather, I'm using this piece of journalism to point out to us all the dangerous possibilities of taking

sides without careful thought, without an open mind and especially without a sense of compassionate effort to continue communicating.

Unitarian Universalism offers an alternate way. It does so in particular through the work of Henry Nelson Wieman, another 20th century Unitarian theologian. I've been pulling out the big guns here the last few weeks with James Luther Adams and now Wieman; you should thank goodness that I don't understand process theology enough to start spouting Alfred North Whitehead.

Wieman's idea, in a nutshell, is that creativity is the fundamental process affecting humankind. But, as in the selection we heard earlier, Wieman doesn't just mean creative work: art, inventions and such; nor is he speaking of the natural creativity that leads to planets and living things. He's speaking of the interchange between one human being and another, the special kind of interchange in which the person is changed. Of course, this is called creative interchange; Wieman describes it as happening between persons, but I wonder if these days he wouldn't also see it as arising as the individual has a deep encounter with nature.

Creative interchange can occur unexpectedly. A smile from a stranger on the street whom you'll never see again might just remove a subtle veil between you and all those around you. This seems hardly 'creative', but in Wieman's sense it *is* because there has been even a tiny transformation in you which, like the proverbial butterfly and tornado, can build into something much more obvious and powerful. I suggest that the same can happen by seeing that butterfly, or a sunset; one could state that the whole environmental movement is happening because more and more people are experiencing transformation through creative interchange with our planet and its ecosystems. There is an encounter; the encounter creates an opening; inspiration in some form pours in; the person is altered, and through that the universe is altered.

Although Wieman does not rule out the possibility that the inspiration, the creative interchange might be powered by something supreme, he in no way asserts that such is either fundamental, necessary encounter or the source of all transformation. Rather the foundation that we *know* through experience is more simply and directly the interchange itself and the resulting transformation. What is crucial is that the person is open enough to what is around her that the interchange can truly be creative and transformative. If we approach every experience in the same old way, nothing will happen. We would continue to exist but not to grow; we might continue to contribute to the material world, but not to its transformation.

I read in Friday's paper that human beings have now created life, not by reproduction but by construction. Granted we've created about the simplest bacterium there is, and we didn't make it up; we copied it. But with technology we made the genes that made this bacterium; further, we *altered* it by removing

its infectivity, so in my mind that means we've created a new strain of bacteria. Is that creative transformation? No, it's not. It's merely creativity, invention; material progress is not the product of creative interchange. The eventual transformation that comes from ongoing creative interchange is the non-material production of justice, equity, peace and global community that we affirm in our principles and by which we work to live our lives.

On Friday night our Coming of Age class experienced, I strongly suspect, transformation through creative interchange during their Downtown Eastside Scavenger Hunt, a major part of our youth programming; a couple of weeks ago our young adult group took a similar opportunity. It's not impossible that while they were there they sparked some kind of transformation in someone they encountered; it's just far less likely. It's hard to be open to the world when you're starving; then the 'world' is just the next bite you can scrounge. But the possibilities of creative interchange that these programs offer to our youth and young adults can transform *them* into people who will help bring about conditions in which more people have greater opportunity to experience such transformation.

And this brings us back to our work right here in this church and the importance of those of us who are atheists and those who are theists to see the ways in which we can agree. In which we must agree. This sets the stage for creative interchange right here. It is the basic work in our individual and communal transformation.

As we succeed in that, we empower ourselves to reach out and transform the world.

May it be so.