



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Within You and Without You

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This morning I ask you to join me on a journey of discovery, across the universe and back – on a rather free-wheeling Unitarian Universalist-style search for truth and meaning. Just to clarify: when I say truth, I am not using the word as a synonym for facts. Facts – such as those verified by science – facts are one type of truth, but not all truth is factual.

So, Hillman says in the reading, myth is a mixture of truth and poetic fancy. There is no hard evidence for myth. Nothing but the invisible gives myth its power. Normally, we think the difference between myth and truth is that myth is what other people believe in – but what about the invisibles WE believe in, even we UUs? Here are some examples of our myths:

Family Values, Self-Development, Success, Time! Mathematicians can't seem to get a handle on that one – anybody seen Time lately? OUR culture accepts *these* invisible concepts without question. They seem so self-evident, and yet we can't perceive any of them with our senses. They are our myths. And Hillman says that myth, along with mathematics and music, serves as a bridge between what we can see, and verify with facts, and the unseen truths that *might* just be imperceptible to the senses.

Our journey today will start and end with myth. I am no mathematician – though we're going to dive into some intense mathematical concepts. And I'm no musician, but obviously, that bridge is well-covered. But myth... well, myth is intrinsic to our lives. It IS the very stuff of our search for meaning.

In the beginning was the Word. So begins the Bible, right? Well, no. That's what I thought until a few years ago, when I learned from the UU "bible" – I'm talking about NPR – that those are actually the first words of the Gospel of John, in the New Testament.

In the beginning was the Word. *Word* here is a translation of the original Greek *logos*, and *logos* has quite a range of meanings in addition to "word" - in particular: thought, logic, or underlying principle. Today, for instance, Chinese translations of the Bible tend to use the word *Tao* as the translation of *Logos*. *Tao* – basically meaning everything. In the beginning was . . . everything?

I was raised Methodist. As a child I went to church every Sunday – Sunday school AND THEN the worship service. During the service I would often choose one liturgical conundrum to occupy myself with while the minister droned on. For example: World without end. Eternity, you know. In the beginning was the Word. Such rich puzzles for a young mind . . .

Then, when I was maybe 11, a breakthrough! Our monthly copy of National Geographic magazine arrived, cover splashed with a wild, and possibly heretical, theory. The Big Bang. World without end? Maybe. But was it possible that we *could* actually know something about the beginning?

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Oh yeah, there it is: Genesis, Chapter One, Verse One. So . . . God created everything from, uh, everything, and did the heavens and earth part of it in a couple of days, with a **BIG BANG!** (That was my mash-up of science and religion at the time.)

Well, since the sixties scientists have learned a bit more about the *actual* cosmological time frame. We now know that it took more than 9 billion years *after* the Big Bang for the earth to form. So, that couple of days thing – that was a little off, unless you consider it as metaphor. Which I definitely do.

As the name suggests, the Big Bang was conceived of as a huge explosion, in which all the matter and energy in the universe expanded to some 100 million, trillion, trillion times its initial size in one trillion trillionth of a second. That concept naturally poses a lot of questions, and one set of possible answers is known as Inflationary Theory.

This theory supposes that prior to the Big Bang, everything (**logos**) consisted of such a small amount of homogeneous matter that all parts touched all other parts before its virtually *instantaneous* expansion. You can understand why over half the American public doubts that the Big Bang actually took place. It's the kind of thing a non-mathematically-oriented non-scientist would have to accept on faith! You know, maybe it seems less preposterous that God just created the whole shebang in six days!

But it gets weirder! Because mathematics strongly suggests that the cosmos may in fact be fractal in nature. That it may well consist of inflating spheres – universes - that in turn give birth to new spheres – new universes - and so on, ad infinitum. Evolving universes without end.

Feeling small yet? I do. And right back where I started, puzzling about eternity. Infinite space and time. That's why science – useful truth-seeking device that it is – to me, is necessary but not sufficient. Maybe someday mathematicians will provide that final bridge to the meaning of life. But I'm not holding my breath. Perhaps what Hillman calls myth is a more productive way to search for that unseen quality we call meaning.

As I said earlier, we can think of *logos* in any number of different ways. So, let's consider its usual sense, having to do with language. *In the beginning was the Word.*

Language is perhaps the single most clearly defining trait of humans. Abstract language, in particular, lets us consider something removed from us in time and/or space, something not immediately at hand. Language enables both philosophy (myth) and the scientific process. It is the tool we use to talk about the cosmos; for example, to translate mathematical concepts about what we have not seen or heard or touched.

Cognitive scientists tell us that our very consciousness is mediated by the particular words that are in our vocabulary. Great stuff – language – right? Yes – and yet, *without being aware of it*, we

have used the concepts of language – those invisible concepts – to begin thinking of ourselves as solidified *things*. The Buddhist writer Bhante Hene'pola Gunara'tana says:

A close inspection reveals [what we do to ourselves]. We take a flowing vortex of thought, feeling, and sensation and solidify that into a mental construct. Then we stick a label onto it: "me" . . . a thing separate from everything else. We pinch ourselves off from . . . the process of eternal change that is the universe, and then we grieve over how lonely we feel. We ignore our inherent connectedness to all other beings and decide that "I" have to get more for "me"; then we marvel at how greedy and insensitive human beings are. Every evil deed, every example of heartlessness in the world, stems directly from this false sense of "me" . . . distinct from everything else.

So, what to do about this disconnect? This very strong, word-facilitated sense that we are separate? We are lost, adrift in this enormous cosmos, alienated from the interdependent web of all existence, *of which we are a part*. Not FROM which we are apart – OF which we are A PART. Like an electron in an atom, a molecule in a cell, an organ in a body – we are A PART of all existence. Fully integrated. Indivisible. A Part. Literally. If the Big Bang theory is correct, we are actually composed of the same stuff the stars are made of, or the earth, or this sanctuary, or each other. The very same stuff.

When I was 19 I took an intensive course in existential philosophy. On the first day, the professor – tongue in cheek – defined existentialism as “an excuse for sophomores to sleep late.” I took this definition as a prescription (not that I needed much of an excuse to sleep in at that point). And, here's what I got out of that course: There is no God. Life is meaningless. It's important to act as though there is meaning. I turned in my term paper really late! Let's just say that at 19 I simply could not handle that approach to life. I struggle with it even now, though intellectually I have pretty much come to accept it. Several months ago I read a journalist's account of meeting the Dalai Lama and spending time with him. At one point in the story, a waitress accosts the Dalai Lama and asks him “what is the meaning of life?” His answer? To be happy. Right. Of course.

Happiness has become something of a cultural touchstone recently. Lots of research going on about how to be happy. Several of my classmates from “The Preacher in You” are talking about happiness this summer, coming at it from different angles. But is happiness really just one of those myths we believe in? Is there such a thing? And here we encounter again the search for truth and meaning. Perhaps the existentialists are right, and there's no meaning to life, but exercising my free will – and by the way, free will? Seriously being called into question these days – so, using this bridge-making myth of free will, I am going to choose something akin to the Dalai Lama's position.

How can we take our alienation, our tendency to separate ourselves from the flow of life, the web of all existence – how can we take our existential loneliness and turn it into happiness? We have the perfect vehicle right here. Our beloved community. Neighborhood Church. I have faith in very little, but I do believe that this community offers us the opportunity to engage in the kinds of relationships that are hard to come by in our daily lives, that help us grow and

develop in our ability to practice right relationship with one another, with the earth, with the interdependent web.

My late husband and I began coming here 17 years ago – as many new members do, because of our children. Neither of us had ever been particularly attracted to church, but our 8 year old daughter was being actively recruited by her friend’s family to participate in their evangelical church in Burbank, and I could tell she liked the community feeling there. And coincidentally a couple of friends were raving about the sermons of the minister at their Pasadena church. And so we came. Reluctantly.

My friends were right. The sermons were inspirational. Moving. And almost always what I needed to hear. We kept on coming. After a couple of years, I volunteered for the RE Committee and he started teaching the kids. And one thing led to another.

We started getting to know people. I loved that, no matter whom I sat down next to at church events, there was a fascinating conversation. I made a few friends, then a few more. I did my committee work. And there was one person in particular I came to think of as my nemesis. You may know such a person –no matter the topic, you seem to be in opposition with one another. I left more than one committee meeting seething. But somehow the work got done, and we *both* made valuable contributions. And now, years later, I count this person among my friends here. Why, you ask, do I bring up this unpleasant aspect of being in beloved community? Well, you know, it’s not always easy . . .

In one of her books, the Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron tells the story of the Lama who was about to make an initial extended visit to Tibet. Everyone kept telling him how wonderful the Tibetan people are, how friendly, how accommodating. And the Lama got more and more worried. See, a basic spiritual training of Buddhists is to learn to maintain equanimity when dealing with annoyances. So the Lama decided to bring along the most annoying person he knew, his Bengali Tea Boy, just so he could pursue that aspect of his spiritual practice. The punchline to Chodron’s story is that, of course, there are plenty of annoying people in Tibet.

So, this person I mention was my Bengali Tea Boy here for a while. My teacher, as the Buddhists would say. And there have been others! But through 17 years of good times and hard times, I’ve come to understand this community as a kind of family, complete with the complications that extended families present.

WE are Neighborhood Church – not the beautiful music, not the delicious cheesecake, not even the ministers – old or new. Look around. Here we are – coming together to work and play, strengthening our bonds of love through service, and sometimes being really annoying aspects of Logos, of the Tao, of Everything. So, embrace your inner tea boy and all of us tea boys around you and open yourself to our beloved community. It’s an excellent way to experience Meaning.

The mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead formulated the "law of expenditure" -- that is, it is not what you *get* but what you *give* that marks a life. In fact, we all know this: that you get out of life what you put into it. You get out of a relationship what you put into it. And you will get out of Neighborhood Church what you put into it. That, as I see it, is Truth.