



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Work That Even God Cannot Do

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August 24, 2014

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I loved Jay Ward cartoons: Rocky and Bullwinkle, Peabody's Improbable History, Dudley Do-Right of the Mounties. How can you not love a show that name checks *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* through a story about Bullwinkle the talking moose finding on the shore of a local pond a model boat encrusted with red jewels? That's right -- a ruby yacht. For a youngster struggling with his teachers' attempts to impose strange rules of grammar and syntax, I loved watching Jay Ward's characters gleefully blow up the conventions of language and of history and rearranging the debris for the sole purpose of making me laugh. I didn't understand most of the references. Heck, I was deep into my teens before I got that Ruby Yacht of Omar Khayyam joke. But I did learn an appreciation for the power of irreverence.

My sharpest memory of a Jay Ward character wasn't from one of his cartoons. When I was very young, I had a dream that Snidely Whiplash had tied me and Nell to the railroad tracks. The evil Snidely *always* was tying the beautiful young Nell to the tracks, just before Dudley Do-Right the dim-witted Canadian Mountie came riding to her rescue, brought there by his infinitely more intelligent Horse, who went by the name "Horse." This time, though, Dudley and Horse were nowhere. And the train was coming. I could feel it in the tracks. They started to sway, then shudder, then shake, and violently. I saw the train appear around the bend as the tracks erupted, breaking our ropes and throwing me clear of the approaching locomotive.

I woke up when I hit the floor next to my bed.

It was 6 a.m. on February 9, 1971 and we were living in Canoga Park, about 20 miles from the epicenter of the earthquake near Sylmar. I wonder how many children in the Bay Area might have had a similar experience this morning. Our thoughts are with them, and we hope that they are well.

Psychiatrists call this "dream incorporation," when a physical stimulus inspires and shapes a dream. In my mind, this melodrama with Snidely and Nell had played out for several minutes before the tracks ruptured, but in the reality outside my imagination, my mind quickly incorporated the shaking of my bed into a manufactured memory that became my dream. This is power of the mind. It can shape and define your reality.

A few years ago, I underwent surgery to fix my long-screwed up nose. The surgery required a general anesthetic, as well as an immense amount of packing and bandaging inside my nose. Thanks to the medical team, all went well, and I came to in a recovery room.

Like my moment with Snidely Whiplash, my memory of this time waking up remains vivid. But there was no mental narrative leading up to this moment. No train. No villain. No thought. With my nose packed, there was no breath. My dream incorporation was a view into absolute nothingness. Absence of sight, smell, sound, taste, feeling, even thought. What existed before I opened my mouth and drew the breath that finally opened my eyes was nothingness. The

complete absence of life. Death.

I do not believe in God. Whenever I say this, inevitably a believer will challenge me: "Shouldn't you believe in God, just in case, for when you die?"

Thanks to that moment of clarity in the recovery room, this is what I expect when I die: nothing. My brain will stop functioning, it will stop defining and creating my reality, and I will simply cease to be, save for whatever remains in the memories and historical records maintained by others. But that is not **me**. That is simply the impression of me left upon others.

If you find that thought, or Sam Harris' words on the topic to be discouraging, please don't. For we are not dead yet. (I feel like I should say this in a Monty Python voice: *I'm not dead yet!*) Even if our brains and souls cease to be upon death, we can live beyond that moment in the works and words we leave for others. If having an afterlife is important to you, then do something now that you can be 100 percent certain **will** endure.

So I have a response for the believers and it's a question of my own: "Why shouldn't you **not** believe in God, just in case there is no all-powerful independent being who's going to come down and make this a better world?" Why simply invest your faith in a better death, when you instead could redirect some of that mental effort into creating a better life, right now?

I am atheist, but do not for a moment assume that I lack faith and belief. So what do atheists believe? I'm sure you'll find more than a few to ask in this room. Of course, if you asked outside this welcoming congregation, we might not want to identify ourselves. Discrimination against atheists remains a socially acceptable, and often politically endorsed, form of discrimination in America.

A 2012 Gallup survey found that less than 10 percent of Americans said that they would not vote for an African American, a woman, a Catholic, a Jew, or a Hispanic simply because of their race, gender, ethnicity or religion. That is progress, to be sure. But 30 percent of respondents said that they would not vote for a gay or lesbian candidate. Forty percent of respondents said they never would vote for a Muslim. And 43 percent of respondents said that they never would for an atheist, the most discriminated-against group in the survey. Polls from Pew Research Center have returned similar results.

Despite a clause in Article VI of the US Constitution that prohibits religious tests to hold elected office, eight states still maintain legal or state constitutional prohibitions on atheists holding office in their states. When he was Vice President, George Bush (the elder one) once said "I don't know that atheists should be regarded as citizens, nor should they be regarded as patriotic."

Regardless of my nation's hostility toward me and people who share my atheism, here is what I believe: I believe in you. All of you. I believe in the power of you and me, working together, to create heaven on this Earth so we don't have to settle and suffer for the mere promise of it in

death.

We *can* do this. For two years, my wife and I taught Suzuki violin classes for dozens of first graders at Pasadena's McKinley School. Well, my wife taught the classes, and I pretty much just herded the kids into the place.

I would go to the children's primary classrooms and line up the students who were taking violin, then march them up the hallway to the room where we taught the class. Then, an hour later, I'd line them up and walk them back to their regular class.

But after a few weeks, I was beginning to believe that I might actually be okay at this. I picked up the gestures that teachers use to get their students' attention. I learned to project the confidence that would get some respect. And I figured out how to use kind words and friendly expressions to slide my way around emerging breakdowns, so the kids would keep behaving well.

I thought that I was learning how to teach children. Which shows just how little I'd actually learned from the experience.

One day in early December, I walked to pick up one of our classes of young violinists from their homeroom. On the window looking into their classroom, the students had posted little construction paper cut-outs of Christmas presents, with their Christmas wishes written upon them. Some kids come into first grade with the ability to read and write, but for many children that age, even writing something as motivating as a Christmas wish can be a challenge. But, with the help and patience of their first-grade teacher, they'd done it.

I read a few, while I waited for the kids to collect their violin cases and line up in front of me. "For Christmas, I want a soccer ball," said one. And on another, from a more, uh, ambitious child: "For Christmas, I want an Xbox." And then, the one that humbles me to this day: "For Christmas, I want to teach my mother English." At that moment, I felt ashamed that I'd wanted attention, good behavior or anything at all from these kids. I recognized instead that *I* had been blessed with the opportunity to serve a child who'd wanted, simply, to give more than to get. And this child with that awesome Christmas wish was hardly the only one in our school who just wanted to learn, and to share that love.

Whether that young girl ever managed to teach her mother a word of English, she's given me a wonderful gift – an opportunity to see the beauty of unselfishness, and the motivating power of service to others. But that's what happens when you give – it's rarely contained. Gifts abide by their own Newtonian law of motion. They continue giving and giving, never ending . . . until someone tries to stop them.

How many of you have an account on Facebook? How many of you have unfriended someone, or at least been tempted to, because of the stuff they've posted? I have several friends from my time back in Florida who routinely fill their profiles with Fox News posts and right-wing

memes. But I don't unfriend them for it. When I see one of those posts, I simply mute it and remind myself why I became friends with them in the first place.

Here's an example: When I worked at Walt Disney World, every year on the Fourth of July and at Christmas, we'd get a few free one-day tickets that were good at all of Disney's theme parks. It was one of the nice, union-negotiated perks we enjoyed for our work herding tourists. Now, as employees (sorry, *cast members*) we got into the parks for free whenever we wanted to, but I saw the value of these tickets as future wedding presents, so I hoarded mine.

But one of my fellow cast members didn't wait to make a gift of her tickets. She was in school, too, and had collected quite a few free tickets over the years. After picking up our latest free tickets with our paychecks one day, we'd ridden the monorail over to Epcot with some friends. On our way back, she'd struck up a conversation with a couple of kids about their day at Disney. They were gushing to my friend about everything they'd seen and pestering their mother if they could stay another day.

The mother told them no, that this was the last day on their tickets and that they'd go to the beach instead tomorrow. As she said this, my co-worker reached into her purse, pulled out the free tickets she'd just gotten and, to my shock, handed them over to the mom. The mother looked stunned. "I insist," my co-worker said, as the kids squealed. The monorail arrived back at the Magic Kingdom, and my co-worker got up to exit before the mom could refuse. I collected my jaw from the floor and ran after my friend. I was going to ask, "Why?" but when I saw the huge smile on her face . . . I had my answer.

Sometimes, you find the greatest joy not in what you get or what you achieve, but in what you do for other people. That's why I won't de-friend her or any other real-life friends over their Facebook posts. Fox News can stir up people's anger, but I refuse to believe that it can completely extinguish the capacity for kindness that exists in every human heart. Yes, I believe in us. All of us.

We began the service this morning with one of my favorite hymns: *Jerusalem*, by Charles Hubert Parry with lyrics from a William Blake poem. The conceit of the poem is that Jesus is said to have visited England with Joseph of Arimathea during those "lost years" in the Gospels, between Jesus' birth and ministry.

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England's pleasant pastures seen!*

*And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,*

Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold up. One minute we're walking with Jesus among the green and pleasant hills of England, and in the next line, we're toiling in a "dark, Satanic mill"? It's like someone changed the channel from Teletubbies to Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*.

And this is why I love this song. Because it says that Jesus himself can come walk into your country; you can build the promised land of Jerusalem in your hometown, and none of that is going to save you from ending up toiling in some dark, Satanic mill one day. None of it.

So where's the hope? Bring on the next stanza:

*Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!*

*I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land*

God's not going to save us. **We** are. And if we are to accomplish the work that even a God cannot, we will need every weapon, every asset, every resource, *every person* we have. We will need the immigrant children and our native-born, from our schools to the detention camps on our borders. We will need the conservatives and the liberals. The atheists and the believers. We will need everyone who can have the faith to stop turning on one another and start believing in each other instead.

So bring us our teachers, inspiring our children.
And bring us more unions, so our work might earn worth.
Bring us more scientists, and run them for office,
so we can have governments that care for our Earth.

We mustn't let fear shut down our minds,
nor let ballots be snatched from our hand.
For only we, together, can build a just and righteous paradise
and save a green and pleasant land.

Amen.