



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Bucky, Werner, Ayn . . . and Mom

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June 26, 2016

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“It sounds along the ages” . . . You just sang that, and it sounded like you meant it. So what is “it?” What do we hear that sounds along the ages?

Two months ago on a Sunday morning, I visited our socially liberal and decidedly Christian cousin here in Pasadena, All Saints Episcopal Church. Rector Ed Bacon was about to retire, and I had promised myself that I’d hear him preach someday. And I did, on his next to last day in the pulpit. He talked about his conservative Christian upbringing in Georgia, how college shook up his thinking and further study of the Bible led him to a very activist interpretation of how Jesus meant for him to live. Take care of people. Work to change what needs to be changed. Speak the truth as you know it. Live what you believe. That may be what sounded along the ages for Reverend Bacon. I loved the warm, joyful spirit of the service, and Bacon’s passion and humanity. As for the many times during that marvelous service that I heard the words, “in the name of Jesus,” I just thought, well, what you said made sense to me without adding that . . . but I’m the visitor here . . .

In the 1960’s, I worked alongside Catholic Priest Father Phillip Berrigan and his brother Father Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest and poet. We marched through the streets of Baltimore, protesting the war in Vietnam. They were impressive people, very down to earth, very committed to living as their faith dictated. In the home of their friend and fellow Catholic, artist Tom Lewis, I had my first Maryland crab feast, as pots of steamed blue crabs were dumped on newspapers and a distinctly Baltimorean form of communion took place. Newspapers under future crab feasts would include headlines with the names of the Berrigans, and Tom Lewis, and their companions, as part of the Baltimore 4, the Catonsville 9, the Harrisburg 7 and more. Among other actions, they broke into local Selective Service offices and poured blood, some of which was their own, over personnel records to call attention to the Vietnam War, and they later burned draft files with homemade napalm. Not my style, but that was how these committed Christians responded to the lessons of their faith, to the teachings of Jesus, to what sounded along the ages.

I need to pause for a true confession . . . some of my best friends, and many of the people that I most admire . . . have been and still are . . . Christians!

Just a few weeks ago, the sermon coming up at the Sierra Madre United Methodist Church, as announced on its prominent sign was, “NOT A HUMAN MESSAGE.”

As Unitarian Universalists, we need a human message. The “it” that sounds along the ages is a bunch of “its.” We hold ourselves responsible for our beliefs. We’ve decided, each one of us, the right way to live. We don’t have the push from behind that tells us exactly how Jesus wants us to live, nor the sweet carrot up ahead of us promising eternal joy in heaven. And to get that reward, you don’t just live righteously, you must proclaim your loyalty to a particular version of God here in this life. You don’t get to decide, standing like a deer in headlights at

the gates of heaven, that . . . “Yeah, yeah Trust me! I was a BELIEVER all along!” “Yeah, sure, Mr. Trump. Go on, get outta here!”

One of my tennis partners wears a cap that says GAP, not for the clothing store but for God Answers Prayers. During a break the first time we played, we of course had a conversation inspired by his cap. I told him about my church and what I believe. He asked, incredulously, “How can you go to a church that tells you there is no heaven?” I think all of you might answer the same way. “They don’t tell me that, but at my church it’s okay if I believe that.”

Many of us began our journey of the soul, spirit and mind with traditional religious teachings. Then we questioned and started to create our own ethical selves. If we don’t want to use the terms religious and spiritual, let’s just say we’re creating the way we want to live, our beliefs, ethics, and guidelines. The seven principles of Unitarian Universalism are often alive and well, though maybe expressed differently, in those who step into this church for the first time, and they find they’ve come home to a community that shares those principles. Unlike the fundamental requirement of many religions, the point for a lot of us isn’t why we believe, but what we do with what we believe.

The lessons that form our lives come from a lot of sources, a lot of teachers, and a lot of experiences. Sometimes from unexpected places. I’ll bet every one of you can think of a book, a show, a song, a movie, a weekend with a guru, or just a conversation, that left you a little changed.

I’d like to share a few of the things that have influenced me. Lessons taken to heart and those rejected. Buckminster Fuller, once said, “Most of my advances were by mistake. You uncover what is when you get rid of what isn’t.” We’ll get back to Bucky shortly.

I was raised Roman Catholic in a time and place when its human face was not apparent. I was a trusting kid, the priests and nuns were remote, and authoritarian, and the rules were simple:

One, “You must be like Jesus.”

Two, “Jesus is God. You cannot be like Jesus.”

Three, “Don’t ask questions.”

Appropriately confused, after the rite of confirmation at the age of 12, I used that newly confirmed adult wisdom and left the church.

Here’s where Mom first comes in. She had promised her mother that she’d raise us Roman Catholic. But each of us, two older brothers, me, and my younger sister, had the choice of continuing or not after confirmation. We all chose not, and when my younger sister chose not to continue, my mom gave a big sigh of relief and said, “I kept my promise. Now I don’t have to go anymore.” She may even have said, “Thank God!” I’m not sure, but that was an interesting lesson coming from my mom.

Unlike many who turn their backs to the religion they grow up in, I didn’t reject a search for meaning, spirituality, or even that dreaded word . . . church. Through music in my late teens, I

found myself working with a Protestant church. The priests and nuns had told me that even setting foot in a Protestant church was a sin. But I found warm, intelligent, welcoming, trinitarian Christians! Who would have thought? They seemed to live their faith happily, content with their human selves. They knew the rules, treated people well, knew they'd have their rewards in heaven, and gave Jesus credit for all of it.

The minister, Matt Meyer, was a very smart, warm, upbeat man, who was getting death threats for attempting to help an African American family move into then all-white Glendale. Matt once said to me that though he was sorry I didn't accept Jesus as my lord and savior, that I was a better Christian than many in his congregation. That's a heck of a message to a 19 year old! Knowing Matt, and the people there, opened me to going in a lot of church doors, eventually finding myself at home as a Unitarian.

Okay, let's hear from Mom again. Raised by her old-world German Catholic mother, she believed in living humbly, following the rules, and taking what life offered. She didn't think you should call attention to yourself. And yet, as I followed my own heart into music, performing publicly and frequently in my teens . . . she loved it. She was proud of me, and I was calling attention to myself. I think she knew that music helped me be comfortable with myself, brought me a lot of joy, and even contributed something positive to others. When my mom was young, she loved to dance. Not perform, just dance. Maybe she saw that performing brought that same happiness to me.

Then came my two years of social work, which I thought might lead to my "real" career, since, of course, music wasn't a real career. My co-workers were inspiring. They found their joy tutoring kids, working with families or getting to know the neighborhood characters in Baltimore's inner city. I wanted to embrace these little steps and small successes, giving myself to the needs of others. I was confused, and disappointed with myself because I felt I didn't belong there. Our inability to make much of an impact left me feeling powerless and frustrated. Social work, at least in that form, was not for me.

Right at that moment in my life, I read *The Fountainhead*, Ayn Rand's first novel. I couldn't put that book down. Here in this page-turner full of intrigue, double-dealing, sex, politics and power, was Howard Roark, an architect who was challenged to NOT do his best work, because . . . well, though this is not the whole story, more or less because his best did not fit the lowest-common-denominator mold that was more "acceptable." And if he prevailed, the folks who painted the flowers in red and green were "unfairly" passed over. When I told my mom I had read it and loved it, I can hear her voice to this day, "Oh, Steven, you don't believe that!"

That didn't feel so good, given the strong moral compass that my parents provided. But I had been stuck in my mom's world view, feeling guilty because I wasn't satisfied just "going along." In its purest form, I responded to Rand's message. That I should make my own goals, that people are not all the same, that talents and skills are for us to use and that ultimately, it benefits everyone if each of us is able to contribute our best work to society. If Ayn Rand had stopped there, she might be our hero.

Rand said that you should not sacrifice yourself to others. But in that first novel she also said that you should not use others to further your own success. She said, "A creative man is motivated by the desire to achieve, not by the desire to beat others." Everyone offers their best. Some are better at what they do, and they should be rewarded, not expected to move aside in the name of "fairness."

Many of you familiar with Ayn Rand are likely on my mom's side. You may be relieved to know that as I read more of her writings, where she detailed her philosophy, and even her hugely successful novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, she lost me. But the simple lesson I took from *The Fountainhead* was something I needed to help me begin to understand how success and service, pride and compassion might all fit together.

Then there's Buckminster Fuller, architect, scientist, inventor, designer, author, philosopher, humanitarian . . . for starters. When he was 32 years old, a young rising architect, he lost his job as head of an innovative building firm, and didn't know how he'd support his wife and young child. Five years earlier his first daughter had died at the age of four. Life was overwhelming him and that led him to thinking that suicide may be the best solution for his family and himself. At that moment, as he told it many times, a voice said to him, "You do not have the right to eliminate yourself. You do not belong to you. You belong to the universe. Your significance will remain forever obscure to you, but you may assume that you are fulfilling your role if you apply yourself to converting your experiences to the highest advantage of others." For the rest of his life, he attempted to live in service to humankind.

In his lectures, he would talk about the vastness of the universe, and how we were so small in the cosmic sense. Then he would focus on the extraordinary miracle of human life, how each of us has the capacity to create, to expand the boundaries of understanding, to live vivid and meaningful lives. That duality that we are both insignificant and yet ultimately magnificent, made perfect sense to me, and helped me feel there was a place for me on this earth.

In the late 1970's, my band was playing at a club in a hotel in Minneapolis. There was a conference going on in the city, and Bucky was a main speaker, and he was staying at our hotel! I heard him speak, and invited him to our show that evening. Of course, he came. He sat in the front row, in rapt attention. It was surreal, playing with him right in front of us, and afterwards listening to his effusive praise. Buckminster Fuller's life was touched by our music. By my music! A lesson in both pride and humility.

Though one of my brilliant older brothers had tried to explain Bucky Fuller's ideas when we were both teenagers, my personal experience with him came through my association with Werner Erhard and the est Training. So for those whom I lost at Ayn Rand, now that I've added Werner Erhard, I'll pause a moment while you take a deep breath and decide whether to stick with me . . .

Yes, I did est and loved it. Werner's observations of human behavior, and his brilliant package of psychology, philosophy and human technology were, again, just what I needed when I encountered them. Having watched my brothers deal with psychological issues, I dreaded ever "needing" to talk to a therapist. After est, I looked at therapy and ANY form of self-examination as a totally positive opportunity to grow and learn. Beyond the endless insights during the training, it opened me up to learning from everything I experienced from that moment on. To accept rather than judge, to see fear and doubt and limits as legitimate and important feelings, but not let them stop me from moving on.

Werner Erhard and Bucky Fuller both saw the world in a similar way. The universe is often beyond our understanding, but each of us as individuals, whether we are aware of it or not, creates our own reality, and with self-awareness and self-knowledge comes the ability to make conscious choices about that reality.

Bucky and Werner both conveyed the message that each one of us, warts and all, is a whole creation, just what we are supposed to be. If we fight the things we think are wrong, saying, "I've got to fix this . . . and this . . . and this . . . before I can do . . . *that*," . . . well, we get stuck there, arguing with reality. If we accept ourselves completely, we can focus on moving on.

For all the time I spent in est seminars, and all the times I heard Werner Erhard speak, there's nothing I remember more clearly than a moment during a lecture, when he paused answering a question, and, more or less throwing it off as an aside, he said, "In the end it's all about service. But you're not going to get that yet." Then he went on with his talk. Like my mom telling me I did not like Ayn Rand, to this day, I can hear Werner's voice, "In the end, it's all about service, but you're not going to get that yet."

So many lessons, so many choices, so many ways to live. I'm grateful for Bucky, Werner, Ayn . . . and Mom, and so many others whose lessons are still with me. And of course, for those yet to come.

As far as what sounds along the ages for us, as religious liberals, the old sounds are still ringing, and new sounds are added every day. Somewhere in that magnificent symphony is a note that will surprise us with its beauty and its truth, maybe transforming our lives, maybe just making us smile. To hear it, we just need to keep listening.