

This I Believe

by Gerry King

(Given at Wildflower Church on August 15, 2004)

First I will talk a little about the religion I came from and the problems with it. Then a bit about the task of religion and spirituality, and finally, the way I have tried to meet these challenges.

This Unitarian got stranded on an island. A year later a boat found him and docked. The Unitarian showed a visitor what he had done and took him into his hut and the visitor was amazed. They went back out. The visitor asked, "What is that hut over there?" "Oh, that's the church I go to." Well, then what is that other hut? "Oh, that's the church I used to go to."

Well, that other hut is the Seventh Day Adventist church I was raised in. It was stricter than any other denomination I knew. But, it is not the strictness that I regret the most. What have been most damaging are the pervasive ideas

- that God is all good, all powerful and separate from his creation,
- that we creatures are basically evil and controlled by the devil
- that religion is about the facts of god's revelations and rules about how we can be delivered from our evil.

I will later talk about this as the basic sin of fundamentalism that still infects even us.

There is much that I missed, but there is also much that I gained and am grateful for. For example, my parents and their church friends all seemed to practice what they preached and were very good generous people. But they were not happy people, often wracked with guilt, worry, shame and self-loathing.

Well into my 30s I had been depressed, painfully self-conscious, anxious, struggling with shame and low self-esteem and occasionally suicidal, convinced I was unfit for human society. Not a happy camper.

Do you remember the T-groups from the 60s? Well, I joined one when I was 31, and I had a remarkable experience. For the first time I felt accepted and safe. I had precious moments of spontaneity and feeling close to others. I had moments of feeling relaxed and genuine. It was heaven.

Heaven? Heaven? I thought that was where Christianity was supposed to take me. It hit me - if SDA or Christianity was supposed to be the truth, why had it not had a saving

effect on me? Why was psychotherapy having such a powerful saving effect on me? The answer was clear - it and not Christianity had the better theory about why I was so miserable. It was the grace that was healing the basic sin - the destructive split that fundamentalist Christianity had created. It taught me I was whole and could trust my deeper self, my true self.

The Problem with Fundamentalist Religion

When I moved back to Texas to be closer to my aging parents, I moved to Midland where I had been hired to help develop the Sociology department at the new campus of UT. I knew enough about Unitarians to know that I would find some liberals there. So the very first Sunday I attended the UU fellowship. It was there that I began to learn what religion was really about - in particular, that it is about symbols and metaphor and myth and a search for meaning, connectedness and wholeness.

Well, I needed this kind of religion because Christianity had alienated me from the world, from others, and from myself. The word, Religion, after all comes from the Latin root, *re ligare*, which means reconnecting what have become separate. The longing for connection and wholeness appears universal - it is as powerful a human need as any other.

This alienation is the basic problem of Western Fundamentalism that all of us in this society have to face. The belief that God is perfect, omnipotent, omniscient and separate from the universe, and that we are not divine but in our very nature flawed and evil sets us at war with ourselves and our world. It tells us we must look outside of ourselves for salvation to the rules that somebody else says God says.

This fundamentalism still infects most of us. We are deeply suspicious of our own nature and are plagued with the fear and conviction that we must be somehow better or different than who we are or else we will not be loved nor will we be successful. We still act as if we believe in original sin. I believe this is a deeply faulty attempt to be whole and find connectedness, and so it is doomed. It leads to all sorts of desperate behaviors of individuals and nations.

I believe this is the fundamental evil that creates all the other evils and is the root of mental illness and most of our misery. Our desperate attempt to be somebody else not only enrages and terrifies our deeper self, but also diminishes our power and cuts us off from others' love and support. And we should not be surprised that it is creating the evils being perpetrated by the fundamentalist patriarchies in this country and abroad. Since it never satisfies the religious need, it leads to ever more desperate measures.

How Shall We Meet the Challenges of Spirituality and Religion?

So how do I meet my basic need for wholeness and oneness? I am deeply indebted to Dr. Charles Hartshorne and the other Process Theologians for helping me articulate these beliefs.

- The Universe just IS; this is Existence; a Mystery vastly beyond our imagination. We can be at peace just letting Existence Be.
- The Universe is One. Existence is One. Whatever is true of one part of the universe must be true for all of it. So there is no contradiction between science and religion. All beliefs, all beliefs must pass the tests appropriate for that belief. Religion generates many propositions testable by science. Many others are testable by historical and literary scholarship. Some are testable only by spiritual scholarship. We need fear no true investigation.
- Awareness pervades the universe from the quarks to galaxies to humans,
- Freedom pervades the universe from the quarks to galaxies to humans,
- Creativity pervades the universe from the quarks to galaxies to humans.
- The Universe is Process - not a static thing at all, but a process, constant flux. Matter is an illusion; it is all energy and information. It is a continuously creative evolutionary process of which we are a glorious part. We can rely on this. One implication here is that every moment is an opportunity for freshness, for choice.
- The Universe is all deeply interconnected and mutually aware- it is systems of systems of systems. Everything is dependent on everything else. Each of us is deeply embedded in a rich and powerful nexus of forces that takes care of all of us. And we can rely on this.
- All existence is striving to go beyond. Everything is evolving. Everything is creating a gazillion new things, most of them wind up being mistakes and a few of these things actually work better and so continue on. So the natural, healthy thing for us to do is make a bunch of mistakes and deal with the results creatively. There is NO place for perfection, here. So it is natural NOT sinful, that life is difficult, filled with mistakes and often painful. AND natural for the results to be glorious. And we can rely on this.
- For these beliefs to have a real impact on my life, it has been necessary for me to engage in regular spiritual practices and be open to mystical experiences.

Now for some implications of these beliefs: We do our best when we are all of what who we are, nothing less. We, like everything else, are mixtures: of good and bad, strength and weakness, love and selfishness, creativity and stupidity. When we truly know and accept our full selves, we are at peace and come naturally from our better selves. We all see this in people who know themselves and are self-accepting. These beliefs provide the grounding for my knowing and accepting myself

When I open myself to experience my universe, whether it be the skies or the butterflies, I am filled with wonder and mystery and, yes, worship. So for me the Universe is Divine and Sacred and no part is any less sacred than any other. Anything less is hubris and arrogance. I am in awe of the grandeur, beauty and power that pervades the cosmos and is manifest in the magnificent results of biological, geological and cosmological evolution.

From what I have just said you can see that beliefs are not enough for me. What is required is Faith. Now I can hear some of you silently scoffing at "Faith". I say let's wrest back from the fundamentalists their wretched notion that faith is believing what does not make sense to us. There is a more powerful meaning to FAITH.

Belief is like knowing the scientific name of a rose, how it is propagated and cultivated, how long it will last in a vase and which insects pollinate it. Faith contains this but is more. It is like the whole experience of its beauty, fragrances, its thorny irony, the butterflies on its blossoms, the wonder at the processes of evolution that created this marvel - the awe that fills the whole being and makes you glad to be alive and deeply confident in the stuff that this universe is made of. This is Faith to me.

I feel a deep sense of comfort in relying on the good stuff we are made of and on the systems that sustain us and the ongoing creative process that we are. But we must reject the notion that the WE that we are talking about is what is in this skin. We are not separate individuals, islands to ourselves - that is an illusion. The "WE" is this truly amazing and capable human organism AND the loved ones that nurture and challenge us AND the millions of hands that are our society AND all the other living things AND all the rocks AND all of existence. When this is our identity, we are immortal and supremely powerful, and we have nothing to fear.

This faith is what sustained me when I lost my daughter, and faith is what sustains me when I am depressed, when I am confused, when I am anxious, when I am hurt and rejected. This faith energizes my own efforts to go beyond, to create, to love. But Faith does not stay alive within me without effort. Remember? life is difficult. Faith stays alive within me ONLY to the extent I continue my spiritual practices: Mindfulness, meditation, empty time alone, being with Nature, involvement with you in this church, fierce honesty with myself, conversations about spirituality, reading poetry of revelation, community service, and throwing myself into my life.

Back behind all our fears we discover LOVE, JOY, CREATIVITY, COURAGE, and INTEGRITY. When we are with people who are not in their fears, we see these qualities manifest, because this is our nature, the nature of the whole universe.

We are one. We are the universe. We are God.