

**September 5, 2010 This I Believe Service**  
**Tom Bookout, Jennifer Caudle, and Robert Heil, speakers**

***Tom Bookout:***

In the days of the Tall Ships, they said to judge a person by the cut of their jib, you must know the shipbuilder and the shipyard.

My parents, the shipbuilders, were very religiously and spiritually neutral. As was the shipyard in which I was constructed, this is, the U. S. Navy. I grew up a Navy dependent, conceived in the midst of WW-II at the Naval Air Station in Corpus Christi. Then after college I went on to have a 20 year career in the Navy. (As my friend Gerry King once said, “Oh, so you never really left home.”) Also, Military chaplains, as you probably know, are not supposed to proselytize for their particular denomination and Navy chapels are as bland and neutral as white bread. A glorious exception, however, was a Baptist chaplain who was our neighbor in Guam. He made, and imbibed, delicious Margaritas.

My mother never spoke of religion or a belief in an afterlife. She would say she thought Jesus very wise, but probably not divine. My father’s religious preference seemed to be Fatalism. I believe he took on this banner after his father died in a freak farm- truck rollover when my dad was 15 years old, and when, during WWII the pilot that took my father’s place for one day was shot down and killed by a German submarine off the coast of New York.

The only time we attended church services regularly was in New Orleans at the Naval Air Station because the chapel was just down the hall from the Officer’s Club and on Sundays they served turkey with delicious oyster dressing. We also enjoyed singing the Navy Hymn.

All of this neutrality was very helpful in creating the “blank slate” I had become as an adult----and remained---- Until I met my five personal saviors, William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Jefferson, Carl Sagan

and Stephen Jay Gould. The last two had the honor of being named Humanist Of The Year and the former three probably would have been.

So, yes. I have become a Secular Humanist, and a member of a sub-group I call Spiritual Atheist. I'm still working on what that sub-group means. As far as I know, I invented the term, but it is still not easy to define. I fear I may have stuck "Spiritual" on the front to soften the word "atheist", a much maligned and misunderstood word in our culture. I am not an anti-theist for I have nothing against any gods, I just feel I do not need one to be good to myself and others.

In fact, I find the gospel according to Thomas Jefferson, as found in his famous "Jefferson Bible", to be a most spiritual gospel, and I paraphrase:

Be just

Treat people the way we want them to treat us.

Always work for peaceful resolutions, even to the point of returning violence with compassion.

Consider valuable the things that have no material value.

Do not judge others.

Do not bear grudges.

Be modest and unpretentious.

Give out of true generosity, not because we expect to be repaid.

But, defining a Secular Humanist is much easier because we have a creed to live by, yes I said creed, because it is written for us in every edition of the American Humanist Magazine. And again, I quote.

Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. Free of theism and other supernatural beliefs, humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.

And to that I say "AMEN."

***Jennifer Caudle:***

I believe in Star Trek's United Federation of Planets. It's a vision of the future where race, gender, number of limbs, and birth world are unimportant compared to the principles of peace, acceptance, and inter-planetary community. It's also a well known example of a group displaying respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But why is it that our planet appears to be taking such timid and excruciatingly slow steps towards this future?

In the same turbulent decade in which Gene Roddenberry hatched the Star Trek vision, John Fitzgerald Kennedy famously declared, "We have nothing to fear but fear it self". Yet in almost 50 years, it seems like fear is growing stronger than ever. We've created a whole culture of fear. News outlets are constantly in a panic about the latest anecdotal threats to our health and safety. Soon parents will again be bombarded with Halloween candy warnings (never mind that there's never been a recorded case of true candy tampering that was not tracked back to their own parents). Many of our religious communities seem to grow and thrive on a message of fear.

This is not new. Human fear of the unknown or the "other" is natural and was probably useful in helping us to evolve. But if we're ever going to unite as a planet in order to join the Star Trek Federation, we are going to have to move beyond fear. We must consciously decide to embrace and learn about the "other" before our natural fear can melt away atop the pillars of common ground and shared experience. Easy? No. Necessary? Yes.

This kind of global understanding can't be rushed or forced upon people. It has to happen slowly, almost imperceptibly when viewed in the time scale of one human life. My optimistic side compels me to believe this is already happening today.

The Internet and technology is making our world smaller. Though it may seem a horribly messy process online, at least a global dialogue has begun. Online communities are slowly taking hold in certain corners that encourage meaningful exchanges of ideas and frowns upon those persons intent on increasing the fear level in our society.

These are grand ideas, but our day to day lives present much more humble opportunities to show courage in the face of our fears. Sometimes small kindnesses like a smile at a stranger or a note to a friend in need are what is needed to continue to break down the culture of fear.

When discussing this essay with Scott, we remembered how scary it was for us to come to Wildflower Church for the first time. In 2002, the Belief-O-Matic quiz had told us that we belonged in the UU community. However, it was scary for both us to make that declaration to our families that we wanted something different than the Catholic Tradition we were both raised in.

It wasn't until considering our children's religious education that we found the courage to take this step. It's amazing how we have so much more courage to do things we believe are good for our children than for ourselves alone. So in the spirit of going "Boldly going where no man (OK, just us) had gone before" we loaded our minivan and came to Wildflower Church for the first time in May of 2009.

We were seeking a religious identity for our children (and a box for them to check). Quickly though, we fell in love with the UU ideal of learning about and respecting ALL of our world's religious traditions. We're excited (and a little jealous) that our children will be raised in this community and we are grateful for all your help in teaching them.

Our biggest surprise in this process has been how much Scott and I value our time here. Sunday morning is something we look forward to and the moments of reflection have enriched our lives in ways that we didn't expect. Joining this community has been a wonderful reward for facing our fears.

Thank you for welcoming us into this beloved community.

***Robert Heil:***

My name is Robert Heil. My partner Karen and I, along with our daughters Julia and Arwen, have been coming to Wildflower Church for about five years and have been formal members for about three.

A few months ago, when we were still in the middle of a glorious rainy spring, Julia heard someone joke about how if the rain kept up, they might need to build an ark. She was confused and later she asked me what an ark was. I was a little surprised she had never heard of an ark before, and so I told her story of the Great Flood. But I told her a different version than the one I heard growing up, instead of the story from the book of Genesis, I told her an older version from the Epic of Gilgamesh.

I told her about the god Enlil - how he was annoyed by the growing numbers of people on the Earth and all their mess and noise, and so decided to cover the whole world with a great flood, drowning all the people and solving the problem.

Then I told her about another god, who Enki, took pity on the humans. Enki warned one man, Utnapishtim, about the coming flood, and told him to build a great boat, an ark, big enough to hold himself, his family, and a pair of every kind of animal.

And then I finished the story, telling about how Utnapishtim and his family and all the animals survive the flood, and how a dove brings back an olive branch as the first sign of dry land. And how the angry god Enlil agrees to no longer try and destroy humanity, but only so long people live in balance with rest of the world and keep their population at a more reasonable level.

I told Julia this version very deliberately - I like this version better - and it is important to be deliberate about the stories we tell, because I believe the stories we tell matter.

I tell stories to Julia and Arwen a lot. We tell stories at bedtime, at the dinner table, and on long car rides. Sometimes, when I suspect that a lecture from dad will fall flat, I will work similar message into a bedtime story. Instead of a scolding, they'll get a story that night about a princess who was bossy with her elf friend, and how that made the elf feel.

I tell them stories, not just to teach them lessons, or just because it's fun to tell stories, but also because I believe that stories have real power.

So what do I mean - "Stories have real power" ?

Certainly stories do have the power to entertain and teach.

Cognitively, stories help us interpret and organize what we hear. We learn more effectively, we remember something better if what we learn is part of a story, rather than just an isolated fact.

But stories do more than that.

The stories we tell about ourselves, shape who we are.

The stories we tell about the world around us impact how we live in that world.

When we tell stories of heroism, we help make ourselves more courageous.  
Stories of compassion help make us more compassionate.

Hearing other people's stories, can give us new perspective, increases our empathy, and strengthens our commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Stories of the words and deeds of prophetic women and men do more than just challenge us to confront evil, they make us stronger for that fight.

Conversely, if we revel in stories of casual violence, we numb our hearts, and increase our capacity to commit violence and to tolerate violence conducted in our name.

Every time we tell a story that degrades others, we increase our willingness to accept the degradation of each other. Stories can take what had been an imaginary division between peoples, and we make that division very real.

Now, I am not saying that all stories are true, or that telling a story makes it come true. I don't believe that.

But I do believe that when a story is told it shapes the the story teller and the listener. Stories shape people like water carves stone - slowly, maybe, but very powerfully.

Think about the story we tell about our country and how it began - these are powerful stories.

Is it a story about a nation founded on biblical principles – principles from which we have strayed?

Or is it a story about a country dedicated to the Enlightenment ideals of the liberty and equality - ideals that we are still working to more perfectly achieve?

Regardless of the historical veracity of either version, these stories are very different, and by telling one, by repeating it, we strengthen it. The national story people tell influences how people view current issues and impacts outcome of current debates.

The stories we tell about where our country has been, shape where our country is going.

The first service at Wildflower that I attended was a “This I Believe” service. And I am very pleased to be a part of that today.

That’s part of why I am here.

I want a place to be able to tell my story.

I want to hear others' stories – your stories.

I want to hear the paths you took, if you walked, or crawled or danced them.

What brought you here, where you are?

What brought us together today?

And as we live out our individual stories, we are also telling a story here together.

Most broadly, as part of the interconnected web of existence – we are part of a very big story – the sacred narrative of an evolving universe.

And we are part of the great story of Unitarian Universalism, a faith that has grown and broadened over the centuries but has always been at the forefront of struggles for justice, reason and social change.

And you and I together, are telling story of Wildflower Church.

I mean, what is a search for a home of own, if not a classic adventure story – full of visions and dreams, sacrifice and hard work, set backs (because all good stories have some dramatic setbacks) until, finally reaching – well, where will we reach? I don’t know yet, that part of the story is still being written.

But what I do know is that I am joyful to be a part of that story, our story, a story of shared journeys, unfolding love, compassionate, direct action.

Thank you for the chance tell a little of my story this morning. I look forward to hearing how our stories turn out.