

# Faith and Reason

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This is a sermon about two other worldviews. It asks you to think about how you know what you think you know. If it is successful, you will leave a little confused and a little more open to alternative points of view about the great questions. Questions like "How come we are here at all?" and "What does it all mean?" And I would love it if it broadened the language that you can hear without feeling squeamish or left out. We'll be playing in the field of science — specifically physics — on the one hand, and the perennial philosophy — the spiritual worldview — on the other.

The only thing I can declare to you for sure is that I don't know very much, but like every other human being, I have to act as if something is true to make my way in the world. All of us carry around our answers to these mysteries, even if we have never tried to bring them into speech and sort out what they are. Mostly, we just put one foot in front of the other and move along dealing with all the demands that life lays before us each day.

Here is a serious declaration. Even here in this place where we do so sincerely aspire to be welcoming and generous, even here there is often tension between and among our points of view. I see people here discount what we commonly call "the other side" without trying to hear anything new or work to find allies who believe as "they" do. If we really mean to "welcome all," it is an important thing to keep asking, "Why do I believe what I think I believe?" And, "What is my attitude toward others who believe differently? How is it with my ability to be genuinely gracious?"

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Within every division of beliefs there is diversity. Most Christians are not literal believers in the Bible. Not all scientists disregard or avoid those things that can't be measured. Scientific experiments begin with intuition and hunches and something drawn out from experience. That's also where mystics begin. The mystics build their worldview out of their own experience and their own knowing or gnosis. Looking at these divisions, it feels to me to be more like arcing around a circle rather than moving to opposite poles. Are we not all interested in finding Truth with a capital T?

"I think it is time for all of us to take out our minds and dance on them because they are all caked up." That's a quote from Mark Twain. The imagery is perfect. "Take your mind out and dance on it. It is all caked up." While I'm busy trying to give credit, let me say that much of this analysis comes from the works Forgotten Truth and The Big Picture of Huston Smith, one of my great teachers, and from the New York Times science writer Dennis Overbye.

The scientific worldview is based upon the controlled experiment. It declares that we can know things because we can demonstrate them over and over again to be true. We can drop things off of buildings and see how fast they fall. We can test and measure and prove hypotheses and theories. Certainly since we began to figure out how to measure things more carefully, we have created astonishing things. We have gone to the moon and built computers. Can you hold on to how quickly the world has changed since we got better at measuring? No wonder we are dazzled by science. Does loving science require that we give up our appreciation for things that can't be measured? If something is beyond this world of form and substance, must we discard it? Science does not deal with values or aesthetics or meaning, all of which are so important in a human life. Awe and wonder are alive and well at both ends of this spectrum or all around the circle of beliefs.

Let's talk about the perennial view. There are commonalities among all religions and spiritual systems, from Confucianism and Taoism to Buddhism to Christianity to Islam and indigenous cultures. Confucius, who is known for his aphorisms about society and virtue, also said, "Heaven above and earth below and of these the only one that is true is heaven." Taoism is about following "the way" or "li." "The Tao that can be spoken is not the real Tao." I mention those two examples in case you wanted to argue that neither Confucianism nor Taoism engages a conversation about life beyond what we can observe.

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And, by the way, as we look at these answers to the questions, you may find it interesting to ask yourself what worldview you would like to believe. If you could simply choose, which worldview would make your life the most interesting?

The perennial or traditional worldview says that the lesser is derived from the more. The lesser came from the greater. We live and move and have our being in something larger than ourselves. For example, the Bible begins, "In the beginning, God." God or mystery was first, and people, like everything else, came out of the vast and unknowable. To quote a mystic, "out of the deep and dazzling darkness."

In systems like Buddhism, which are not built on God talk, there is still the idea that before anything else, there is our Buddha nature. Our energetic core is not limited to our flesh and blood and chromosomes. We are more than inert matter glommed together. There is more than this narrow plane of our earthly experience

In the scientific worldview, the more is derived from the lesser. Out of the ooze and the slime, single-celled organisms began to assemble and somewhere along the way developed sentience. The greatest level of development yet achieved that we know of is human intelligence, and if we use Darwin's theories, we came from some sort of creature which had fewer capacities. The more emerged from the less.

In the perennial view, everything has meaning. All of creation is somehow purposeful. We can trust that we exist within something larger. "Whether or not it is clear to us, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should."<sup>1</sup>

In the scientific view, whatever meaning we have, we make ourselves. There is nothing outside of us to assure or comfort us. "Across 15 billion light years of space, the only meaning to be found is found in the human mind."<sup>2</sup>

The scientific view's lack of assurance can feel like the poetry of I think A.E. Housman — "Alone and afraid in a world I never made."

In the perennial worldview, we belong here. All of life is of the same essence as our life. This is truly our home. By the way, this puts the Gaia hypothesis about all of creation being alive right in the middle of the perennial frame of reference.

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In the scientific worldview, we might say that we emerged through a long series of interactions and resulting accommodations. Our kinship with the rest of life is of a different order of importance. We exist as the result of a series of fortunate events.

In the perennial view, the story will come to a final chapter and the conclusion promises a happy ending. The coming of Maitreya in Buddhism. The coming of the Messiah in Judaism and Christianity. I don't take these as literal promises, but as assurance that finally, somehow, there will be peace. Or, "All will be well. All will be well. All manner of things will be well."<sup>3</sup>

Science demonstrates to its initiated that what it says is true.

How must believers of the perennial sort support what they say is true? Is it taken from thin air? While it is not possible, at least for most of us, to move between the worlds at will, many people report that they get glimpses of other worlds and that these glimpses can be cultivated. Some experiences are spontaneous, some come from spiritual disciplines, some come from near-death experiences, some from entheogens or that class of non-addictive psychotropic drugs like peyote or mescaline. Ancient India had festivals involving a drug called Soma. I saw an advertisement for a diet pill this week called Soma. It made me wonder. The Eleusinian rites were certainly drug-induced.

In our time, science has demonstrated that the centers of the brain affected by these chemicals lie right next to the centers that are affected by exhaustion and fevers. Stories abound from people coming back from great illness or exhaustion who recall experiences that change the course of their lives. Time does not permit me to retell them today, but many a life has made a dramatic corner after an experience of high fever and not merely out of the fear of dying but rather from the visions that came.

I will tell you that on my great journey, my personal vision quest, living in woods and wild places for more than a year, I noticed things that I would not have noticed had I remained among friends living my ordinary life. I noticed that over and over and over again, I was so awash in the beauty, in the luminosity of the world, that I had to keep saying "thank you." "Thank you." The gratitude was overwhelming; I could not express it enough. Gratitude for

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all that is my life. This experience of consuming gratitude is not other than love. It is like entering the numinous.

I was rarely lonely. Sometimes I wanted to talk — you know how I enjoy being with people — but it was not about being lonely. I was as filled with joy as I have ever been and almost constantly aware of the gift of life itself.

I wondered myself what I was saying “thank you” to. I do not have a concept of a god with attributes, but I often experience my life as part of something more. More what? Again, I am at a loss for language. And what is a “god without attributes”? I hope you find that a provocative idea but it will have to wait for another sermon.

Could I say that all of that glory was only my brain doing somersaults in scientifically predictable ways? I could, but that feels unfaithful to the experience. It feels like rejecting the real depth of the life I was living. What feels right is simply to answer, “Yes, yes, yes to the miracle of life!”

There is another universal human experience that the poets speak of best. It is our unquenchable longing for something we cannot name. I believe this longing is universal. If you do not know this feeling from your own experience of it, please let me know. *Please* let me know. Most of us carry that incomplete feeling to greater and lesser degrees inside us our whole lives. It drives us to search for meaning and belonging and completion. If we run from it, it can lead to all kinds of consumption and that will not serve us well.

The poet Rumi says, “See those love dogs baying at the moon? Give your life to be one of them.” Do you know the feeling he is talking about? He is saying that our longing is a desirable thing because it leads us to find what Sufis call “The Beloved.” He believed that “that which we are seeking is causing us to seek.” Would a bird have wings if there were not such a thing as air? Would we experience thirst if we did not need to drink water?

Now I ask you the big question: “How do you decide what to believe?”

Don't you simply have a tendency to believe what you were taught by people you trusted? Perhaps it is just that simple. As an example, I believe that the earth moves around the sun

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not because I've proved it but because people I trusted taught me that that is the way it is. As I've learned new things, this model of the solar system still seems to work.

I trust that my mystical experiences are more than mere daydreams because Rumi and Walt Whitman and Aldous Huxley and Huston Smith tell me that I am right to pay attention to and value my own experience.

In December of last year, the New York Times had a piece about string theory, which is now twenty years old. By putting all forces into a single theory, string theory has the potential of achieving the goal Einstein sought without success and that has captured the dreams of every physicist since then. It may illuminate some of the deepest mysteries we can imagine, like the origin of time and space.

Dr. Andrew Strominger of Harvard says that there is disappointment that despite all efforts, verification or proof seems far away. On the other hand, the depth and beauty of the subject and the way it has reached out, influences and connects other areas of physics and mathematics way beyond the wildest imaginations of twenty years ago.

What if the basic constituents of nature and matter are not little points as we have presumed since the time of the Greeks? What if they are tiny wiggly bits of string? And what if what appear to be different particles like electrons and quarks were the way the string vibrates? String theory had its beginning in trying to understand forces that bind quarks into protons and neutrons. String bits require as many as 26 dimensions to work and an astonishing number of mysterious particles. One of those particles, the graviton, could be responsible for transmitting gravity in quantum theory. Einstein's general theory of relativity concerned itself with how gravity shapes the cosmos.

There have to be at least 10 dimensions of time and space. The extra six dimensions after three of space and one of time, go around in sub-sub-microscopic loops.

In 1995 Dr. Edward Witten from Princeton showed that the prevailing five theories of string were in fact related. He argued that they were all different manifestations of a shadowy as-yet undefined entity that he called "M" theory, with the "M" standing for matrix, magic, mystery, membrane and murky. "M" theory has eleven dimensions — ten of space, one of time — and it has not only strings but also membranes of various dimensions know as "branes." Our

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own universe could be a four-dimensional brane floating in some higher dimensional space, perhaps with other branes or parallel universes floating near by.

That's enough and that's all from about the first two pages of the article. It does go on to suggest that strings may be stretched from their normal sub-microscopic lengths to become as big as galaxies during spurts known as inflation. And there are sets of ghost-like particles yet to be proved, with operating names like photinos and squarks and selectrons.

These ideas were bandied about and celebrated at the Aspen conference last fall where Dr. Shenker, a string theorist at Stanford, quoted Winston Churchill: He said, "This is not the end, not even the beginning of the end, but perhaps it is the end of the beginning.

Now I believe that these scientists are dealing with bits of the truth. Partial bits of the partial truth. I respect their work and the elegance of their theories. Why? It is all so fantastical and so beyond my comprehension. But I take it on faith. I am a believer in science. Especially when it comes from institutions like MIT and Harvard and Cal Berkeley and Stanford. As completely incomplete as we know it must be, as mysterious and unlikely, I put my faith in it as the path we must take to understand more of the cosmic soup we live in.

I will leave you with that which I hope will taunt you to think about what you believe. As I said in the beginning, my hope is that this flirtation with faith and reason will help us to maintain respectful bridges between our beliefs and those of others right here. Every person here has a different map of Truth. Unitarian Universalists draw from everywhere, from the direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder to the science labs at Stanford. May we cherish all of it and use it to live more interesting and richer lives.

Blessed be.

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<sup>1</sup> Max Ehrman, "Desiderata"

<sup>2</sup> Huston Smith

<sup>3</sup> Julian of Norwich