

“What We Choose Is What We Are”

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Delivered (by committee) at Berrien UU Fellowship February 5, 2006

Opening Words “Fate or Destiny?” from “Earth Medicine by Jamie Sams (p372)

Responsive Reading # 519 “Let Me Not Pray To Be Sheltered,” Rabindranath Tagore.

Closing Words “Visions” from “Earth Medicine” by Jamie Sams (370)

Note: Jamie Sams is a Seneca Teacher and Writer. Her other works include “Other Council Fires Were Here Before Ours,” with Twylah Nitsch.

Children’s story:

(one piece of yarn per child. Put mine in before; mention during opening words)

Today’s service is about being able to believe anything that you choose to believe. Do you think you can in this church? Believe anything you want?

Can you DO anything you want to? Supposing you wanted to roast marshmallows? Could you start a campfire right here in the sanctuary? No. Could you build a firepit with bricks out on the gravel, safely away from the building, and with adults around, have a fire there and roast marshmallows?

Can you just talk and shout anytime you want during a service? No. Can you choose to read, or sleep, or color, or write, or make silly faces at one another during MY sermon? Sure, as long as you don’t disturb the adults who are listening so intently to my every word. Some choices are ours to make, and some are not, like shouting in the middle of a service.

Some choices, like singing the hymns or not singing the hymns, are choices you can pick between. Even some adults can decide not to sing the hymns **if**

they don't want to. (and don't think I don't know who you are!)

Some choices, like not listening or making silly faces in the service, are choices you can make. Did you ever do that? Make silly faces during the service? Yes? No? Do you want to? You don't have to. But you could.

If I ask you to do something, do you HAVE to do it? Or can you choose NOT to? When I asked you to make a silly face you could choose to do that, or NOT. It's OK to say "I'd rather not do that."

I'm going to ask you to do something: you don't have to do it if you don't want to. Please introduce yourself to somebody you don't know. If you can, I'll give you a Seneca hair braid -it means (*Page 2 in Earth Medicine.*)

To get this hair braid, please go to one person you don't know, and say "Hi, my name is ..." and tell them your first name, and ask them their first name. Then shake their hand and tell them one thing you like about this church, and ask them to tell you one thing they like about this church. You don't have to do this - you don't have to talk to anyone if you don't want to. It's your choice. You don't have to tell them your first name if you don't want to, you can just say hi. It's your choice. You don't have to tell them something you like about the church if you don't want to, it's your choice.

You could even choose to tell them something you don't like about the church. You **could**. I would **prefer** that you told them something you liked, but I won't be listening to what you say, so you can choose to say something like, the minister talks too long, if you choose to. Probably nothing really mean, but whatever you choose to say. OK?

(Give braids to all who do it; offer braids to those who didn't if they promise to say something really nice to someone they do know, before they leave today)

Do you have to wear them in your hair? No, you can choose to or not. Can you choose to spend the next few minutes trying to put them in your hair, or hook them around a shirt button, or tie them on your belt, **instead of listening to me?** Well, you can you choose to.

SERMON

What about you? Can you do anything you want to here at this church? No. Of course not. You can choose, we all can choose, only **within** a range of options **limited** by among other things, our responsibilities to one another.

Can you do anything here in church that you choose to? Can you choose, for instance, **not** to come into the service? Of course, and every Sunday, one or two people do exactly that. But if you **do** choose to come in here for this hour, your choices then become much more limited. You can choose to listen intently, or just kinda be here and soak things in. You **can't** choose to talk, except for maybe a very polite short whisper, or else you might be asked to leave. You can't choose to sleep, or at least not too many of you can choose that, or I might be asked to leave. You **could** choose to stand up and stretch or even move around a little, and some people do from time to time, but if you decide to lead an aerobics class while the sermon is going on, most people would say that's a choice you can't, or at least shouldn't make.

You **can** choose to respond briefly to what is said and done here, but it's a funny choice: it works much better if you're indicating agreement, than disapproval. While we don't normally have folks saying Amen and "Preach it, sister," we wouldn't be too upset by somebody quietly saying "that's right," or laughing at an ironic observation they appreciated. But if you **choose** to say "nonsense," or "I've heard enough of this," we tend to think you might have **chosen** a better time to indicate your sentiments.

The same sort of limitations apply to what you **choose to believe**, as they do to what you chose to do. One of the things frequently said about our faith is that **we can believe anything we want to**. We say that to one another: "You're free to believe that if you want," and other people say it about us: "You UUs can pretty much believe whatever you want, can't you." We tend to smile and say yes, because it's easier to agree, than to take what could be a long time to explain. It's easier, but it's wrong. And I've got twenty minutes, so here's the explanation.

Liberal religion requires choice, and therefore requires facing being wrong, failing, choosing unsuccessfully. One of the reasons some people find Unitarian Universalism so hard is that it does not provide a guarantee: it says in effect, what we choose is what we are, and when we choose unwisely, or even with incomplete information as we sometimes must, we are still responsible to one another for our choices and their consequences.

We embrace and celebrate that ability to choose - that **willingness** to risk being wrong. As we said this morning in the responsive reading: Let us not pray to be sheltered from dangers; let us not pray to be sheltered from hard choices, let us not pray to be saved from having to choose. But in our celebration of choice, and of our willingness to risk, let us not lose sight of the fact that we cannot simply choose whatever we want to. Limitations are placed upon our choices by the responsibilities of community, by an awareness of our history, and by the values which determine who, together, we are.

The answer to the question: Can I believe anything I want? is of course, yes you can. The answer to the question, Can I believe anything I want and be a good UU, is "No." What you **want** to believe has little to do with it. What you can choose to believe as a UU is **limited**, to what your heart and mind and life experience **compel** you to believe. As a UU you can only choose among those things that meet the test of our community values.

Let's get specific: a significant number of people in this church have a belief in God. Some of those would even express it as a proposition of fact: that God exists. It's an assertion that none of us can prove, or disprove. That is **not** to say that there is no evidence. There is of course evidence in favor of the existence of God, and evidence against it. But so far none of that evidence, **either way**, has been compelling to any significant number of people who didn't already hold that position.

A significant number of people in this church who say: "I believe in God," mean that they feel there is something beyond the merely human, which has something to do very vital to with the meaning of life, and the purpose of their individual life. This **feeling** is not susceptible of proof. Folks may be able to cite you factual situations that point them in that direction, or they may simply say "I don't have any strong evidence, I just feel that's the way the universe is constructed." As long as they aren't making an existential claim they expect other people to honor, their belief is perfectly **reasonable**.

And **reason** in matters religious is one of our central values. Reason doesn't point to one conclusion or another about God. Reason demands of us that we examine this claim, indeed every religious and ethical claim, and look dispassionately at the evidence, or lack thereof, and look also at our own interest in making that claim, and limit the conclusions about the claim to what that evidence will support.

If you say: "I believe in God," and mean by that, "I believe in a force, a will greater than my own that has a plan for my life, and that my religious task is to find out what that plan is," well, that's not something that can be disproven. It's a belief that ought to be respected in a church like ours. It ought to be respected, even if it includes the belief that

this greater will has a plan for my life too. **It ought to be respected unless** the belief includes you telling me how **I must** react to **your** claim.

You **can choose** to believe in a power greater than yourself; you **can choose** to believe that it has a plan for your life; you can believe that **your** task is to discover that plan; you **can** believe that power has a plan for **my** life; **but** if you try in any way to compel me to change my behavior, or change the way we conduct ourselves as a church, in order to help you further your belief, then we are in violation of our highest values as a community.

Over the course of twenty seven years of serving UU parishes I have had hundreds of folks say to me: “Here’s what I believe: here’s my current spirituality: can I believe this and be a Unitarian Universalist? And my first response to all of these people is: “What difference does it make in your life to believe that way?” Does it make you a kinder person, does it cause you to have gentler interactions with others? Does it cause you to want to serve your fellow human beings? In other words, does it serve our central values as a faith? Does it serve Freedom, Reason and Tolerance?

One of the things that is unique to UU ism is that it says beliefs are **instrumental, and not ends in themselves**. That there are higher values than belief in God, or belief in the Goddess, or in Gaia. Those higher values include the promotion of justice in this life, the promotion of love and not hate in human relations, the fundamental equality of human beings in matters moral, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and the preservation of both individual and collective choice in all matters political and ethical.

If you have trouble with those values, then no, you can’t be a Unitarian Universalist. If you choose not to honor those values by and large, it doesn’t matter whether you are theist, atheist, agnostic or Christian, this isn’t the church for you. And if you do live your life so as to honor and promote those values, then you can be a Christian UU or an atheist UU, a mystical UU or a Buddhist UU, an agnostic UU, a Pagan UU or a theistic UU.

Can you choose not to be passionate about human equality and be a UU. No, you cannot. Can you choose not to pursue fairness and justice in relationships and be a Unitarian Universalist? “ the answer clearly is “No, you cannot.” Oh, you **can** make those choices and even justify them, but you do disqualify yourself from being a liberal religionist when you do. If your spirituality, if your personal sense of relationship to that which is beyond you, **negates those values**, well, you’re welcome to that lifeview, but you can’t hold it and call yourself a UU.

Do you believe that people ought to be told what to do for their own good? Then you can’t be here. Oh, probably nobody will drum you out directly, but you can’t be here. Most likely no one will ever tell you that you **have to** leave, but you can’t be here. And in fact the nature of our relationship with one another, the nature of our covenant, our agreement to abide by certain mutual values, makes it such that eventually a separation will occur. Or, your values, and subsequently your behavior will change to allow you to stay.

I've used the phrase "Belief in God" because it serves as a placeholder for a range of spiritual positions. You can choose to be a UU and be theistic, or atheistic or non theistic or agnostic, but what you cannot choose to be is an atheist who declares that justice and fairness do not matter, nor can you be a believer in God who thinks that love ought not to be operative in our relationships, not and continue to live in this community.

Can you be a Christian and be a UU? Of course you can. You can be a UU Christian who follows the ethical example of Jesus. You can be a UU Christian who wants a personal relationship with the son of God. But to be a Christian who believes that Christ is Lord and Savior and the *only* route to salvation, then your beliefs deny the fundamental equality of all people, and that belief would disqualify you as a Unitarian Universalist.

Can you be an atheist and be a UU? Of course you can. You can be a UU atheist who thinks it **unlikely** that there is any supernatural reality; you can be a UU atheist who is absolutely **convinced** that there is nothing beyond the material world and that spirituality is of no value to you; but if you are an atheist who wants others not to ever speak of their spirituality because that somehow prevents you from living a truly skeptical and scientific lifestyle, then you are in violation of the central value of tolerance for the beliefs of others, and you cannot be a UU.

Can you be a mystic and be a UU? Of course you can? Can you believe that the red string ritual of the Jewish Kabbalah, serves as a reminder to be kinder, to be more connected, to take the ethical lessons of that ancient religious tradition to heart -- there's no reason why you can't do that. But if your mystical belief actually assigns the red string on your wrist magical powers, so that the incantations themselves actually change the material and psychological factors of your life, then you are outside the Unitarian Universalist religion.

Can you be a Buddhist and a UU? Of course. The practice of meditation and the encouragement of mindfulness are very compatible with our values. But you cannot be a UU Buddhist whose pursuit of nirvana takes you to a point of disengagement from others, or promotes a disinterest in the demands of social justice. To take Buddhist practice to *that* degree would disqualify you from being a Unitarian Universalist.

Can you hold New Age beliefs and be a UU? Can you for example believe that the spirits of the dead can be channeled to provide insight and guidance for the living? If reading someone's writings gives you greater clarity in your own life, and "channeling" them gives **you** greater clarity, then you are having a valid experience, and are still within the confines of our faith. But if you believe that greater clarity should serve as evidence to the rest of us that channeling **actually happens**, then you are stepping outside the UU pale, by denying our central value of the demands of reason.

If you believe that the emerging scientific field of Neurotheology shows evidence of a human predisposition towards experiences of oneness with all of the universe, and the loss of self, then you are, as long as you stick with the actual evidence, and not just wish

fulfillment, well within the boundaries of our religious approach, but if you believe that the neurological theory now being developed to the effect that there is a “God shaped hole” in the human brain, **proves** the existence of things supernatural, then you are not only misusing science, you are misusing our faith.

There are many other examples, but the lesson comes down to this: individually you can choose to believe what you need to believe to make sense of your own existence, and together, we are responsible for gently telling one another which of those beliefs can be honored here for the mutual good of us all.

I need to add just one more thing: I have suggested here what I believe our central values are, and how they determine what beliefs we can and cannot choose to hold as UUs. The fact is, it's all my opinion. You pay me to have such opinions, to think carefully about them, to test them against my own experience and in my life together with you. You hold me accountable for expressing such opinions from this pulpit, carefully and responsibly. But in the final analysis, they are still one person's opinions. They are not authoritative, They are the starting point for a conversation between us.

I'd like to think that I considered this long enough and carefully enough and dispassionately enough to have gotten it really right. But I'm reminded of the humanist bumper stickers that I sold at the General Assembly. Stickers like this one - **Militant Agnostic: I don't know (pause) and you don't know either.** When it comes to knowing **exactly** which beliefs fit within our faith and which don't, we UUs are all militant agnostics.