

Building Your Own Theology

Sermon by David Macdonald, John Omielan, Carol Cole and George Atherton

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Prelude comments by Joyce Poley:

- This morning we are fortunate to have four members of our own church community who will be speaking to us about a class they participated in during the spring entitled “Building Your Own Theology”.
- In this class, participants were encouraged to write, and re-write, and add to, and revise yet again, their own personal credos.
- So they are here this morning to share with you the current version of that exercise – a description of their own personal beliefs as they envision them at this time.

Building Your Own Theology by David W.G. Macdonald

It was five years ago this Sunday that I first walked through the doors of this Church. I don't recall when I first heard of the adult religious education course entitled “Building Your Own Theology” but it couldn't have been long after I arrived. As with everyone I was struck by the title. It sounds funny and when reduced to its initials “B.Y.O.T.” it sounds too much like BYOB – Bring Your Own Bottle.

I say it sounds funny and I know for a fact that non-Unitarians think it very strange. Colleagues at work who'd learn I was staying late to go directly to my Church to “build my own theology” would laugh and ask, “Doesn't your Religion come with a theology?” I got in the habit of replying, “No, but we get a kit.”

The course, Building Your Own Theology is 'A' kit. A couple of Sundays ago a group of women from UCV spoke of "Spiritual Practice Through Retreat" and really that's another kit for building a personal theology.

We were very fortunate this year to have had the "newly minted" Reverend Joe Cherry as the facilitator of our "Building Your Own Theology" course. Joe powered ahead with purpose where a problematic textbook might have derailed us. In spite of the occasional 'seemingly pointless exercise' or 'incomprehensible reading' in the text Joe always refocused us and kept us on track. The goal? Well, Joe wanted each of us to write a personal credo by the end of the course. It is not enough for any of us as individuals to simply be part of a "beloved community". It is not enough to simply be guided by the accepted sources of our faith or to simply agree on shared values. We need more even than belief, which is an intellectual construct; more than emotion which is a psychological construct. We need conviction which is the combination of reason and feeling with the will to act.

So here's one of the results of the course for me: my credo:

I Believe

I believe in one God, creator of all that has been observed and is as yet unobserved through science. I believe there is nothing anthropomorphic about the Creator. I do not understand God and I recognize that it is likely I never will and entirely possible that human beings are not capable of understanding God.

The closest I can come to describing God and the human spirit is in terms of energy. In keeping with the rudimentary laws of thermodynamics, in particular entropy, energy is never lost it simply dissipates. Therefore the energy or energies that comprise spirit is not lost when beings die.

There are certain higher forms of energy that are unique to or most highly developed in humans. While energies such as altruism and compassion may have had their origins in necessity for the survival of our species, these energies have evolved in humans beyond simple survival mechanisms. My purpose, the central meaning of life, then is to generate the very best energy in my time of being.

Surely there can be no higher form of energy than love. For example, charity that is derived from love will have as its goal the empowerment of the recipient in a manner that obviates the need of charity.

I believe humanity is in no way fated – there is only free will. I’m free then to love what I want, like gardens or art or beer – but I must love things in moderation and in such a way that no one is injured. When it comes to people the bottom line is not who loves me; it isn’t even who I love; the bottom line is how I love; the quality of my love. I don’t believe it wise to love madly, nor is it necessary I love all deeply, but I must love truly. Amen.

Good morning everyone. My name is John Omielan.

During the course, I expected to consider my personal beliefs and, to some extent, be able to clarify some of them in my mind, plus learn about the other participant’s personal beliefs. For me, the course reasonably met those expectations. I also learned more about the rich & diverse history of this church. The biggest surprise for me was the extent that my personal belief in a higher power had similarities with other course members’ beliefs.

After several preparatory lessons, we were asked to create our own credo, with mine being as follows.

I believe that a higher power exists in the universe. It is some form of pervasive, sentient energy. We are all part of it, to some extent, including even after we die. This higher power may guide and encourage us, such as through sending messages by helping to create amazing coincidences. However, it does not control us, as I also believe that we all have free will. This means that we are responsible for our actions, or inactions, as well as their consequences. I also believe that we all have one or more destinies or purposes in life, with at least one of them being for me to use

my knowledge, skills, values and beliefs to guide me in living the best life that I can, plus to encourage everyone else to be the best that he or she can be.

We are all part of a vast and wondrous universe and, in a way, each of us has a universe within ourselves. We each have all of the elements of love, hate, joy, sadness, generosity, greed, etc. Each of us has a choice of which parts to express and feed more, so that they become stronger and more dominant, plus likewise which parts to suppress and starve, so that they become weaker and less influential. However, no part ever disappears completely so that every aspect, both good and bad, is available to grow later if we choose to let it.

I try to treat everyone with love, dignity and respect because I strongly believe in the statement that you should do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

I believe that we hold the environment in trust for ourselves, all of the other living creatures and our descendants. Thus, I try to keep my footprint as reasonably minimal as I can. I also work towards making the earth a better place when I leave it than when I entered it.

Although many people need temporary help, I generally believe in the concept of a hand up, not a hand out. There are some people who, due to reasons such as medical ones, require help on a longer-term basis but, otherwise, providing help for too long runs the risk of creating a dependence on that. Instead, the long-term solution for people's myriad challenges is usually to provide whatever help is needed for them to be able to eventually deal with those difficulties themselves. As the saying goes, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

The knights of the middle ages no longer exist, nor do I consider myself to be a modern day version of a knight. However, I believe in, and try to follow, their code of chivalry. According to Wikipedia, this code is to:

- Defend the innocent.

- Never lie & remain faithful to your pledged word.
- Be generous & give generosity to everyone.
- Always be the champion of the right & good, and the foe of injustice & evil.

That is the credo statement of my current set of beliefs.

Good Morning, I'm Carol Cole.

I'm going to say a couple of sentences about my expectations before I took the course, and my impressions during the course, but spend the majority of my time describing my draft credo, which I have to emphasize is a work in progress.

Regarding My Expectations:

I was very excited about what I thought would be exploring non-conventional spiritual options, and hoped the required reading and exercises would provide a few modern credos, which I could "try on", and then pick one. In retrospect, I realize how naïve this sounds, given the infinite possibilities and our individuality, particularly as Unitarians.

Regarding My Impressions of the Course:

- I thought the book provided a good basic structure for the course, which was a helpful starting point, even though it was a confusing book and we often disregarded it.
- The group was particularly flexible, diverse, and respectful. The others gave me some ideas, but mainly I was encouraged by their supportiveness and their struggling too. Therefore, I decided to try to elaborate even slightly on the spiritual kernels I had been thinking about over a few years. I stopped feeling silly after a while, but I never lost feeling unsure of absolutely everything.
- I also feel a stronger sense of community now that I have gotten to know the others a bit better, and have established quite a bit of trust with them.

Regarding My Credo:

I am pleased that I have at least elaborated on something I imagine could be possible, and that I have put it in writing for future reference. Often I think what I have written is ridiculous and childishly simplified, but sometimes it inspires me. So, here goes. There are two main components: an Inner Guidance System, and Opposing Energy Fields.

First, the Inner Guidance System

- Each one of us is pre-programmed with an Inner Guidance System.
- It generates pre-programmed guidance, and it also potentiates guidance we receive from other people, and things we read, and hear.
- The guidance is both Good and Bad.
- We must learn to identify and welcome the good guidance, and to identify and dismiss the bad guidance. We must develop this skill, and that requires a lot of trial and error experimentation over a lifetime. Good guidance is often available in nature and in stillness. Bad guidance is often available in chaos and in glamour.

Second is Opposing Energy Fields

- There is a Goodness Energy Field and a Badness Energy Field (very simplified terms). They swirl around the earth's surface, sometimes intertwined; sometimes very obviously apart.
- Goodness is drawn to love, and multiplies it. Badness preys on fear and multiplies it.
- While we are alive, we add fuel to both fields through our thoughts and actions. When we die, our energy dissipates into them, like the wisps of an extinguished candle (I must credit an anonymous classmate for the candle image).
- Badness is stronger than Goodness one-on-one, which really scares me, but Goodness builds bonds between people and that repels Badness because love dilutes Badness. Badness preys on hopelessness. Goodness compounds in those who embrace it.
- The fields move into voids through a kind of osmosis. Clashes are inevitable when the fields get too close to each other, by underestimating the presence of the other, or when either field draws attention to itself. Total eradication of either is impossible; pockets of both will always remain everywhere. Therefore, we are never completely hopeless, nor completely safe. So, don't despair or be too complacent.

- Our purpose is to strengthen Goodness and lessen Badness in many little ways, and sometimes in big ways, everyday of our lives.

So this gives me hope.

Thank you for listening.

Credo of George Atherton: Introduction

A couple dozen of us were sitting around a long table in Lindsey-Priestley. On that first day of BYOT, the Reverend Joe Cherry – as we are all are so pleased to call him now – had given us an exercise that for me proved to be the foundation of the whole course. Each of us in turn was saying what we believed in. There was a catch. We had to use just one word. As my turn approached, I was thinking, “This is going to sound ridiculous.” Well, my turn came, and I said it anyway: “Being.” That was it. I now had something to build on. And that is what I did. I started to build my own theology.

When we come here on Sunday and look at the Order of Service, we may or may not read these words on the cover:

“We are a community of diverse beliefs and shared values. In fellowship with one another, we seek spiritual growth, social justice, and environmental sustainability through worship, ethical action, education and artistic expression. We welcome all who would join this compassionate and visionary community.”

“We are a community of diverse beliefs ...”

So it’s OK to have your own theology. It’s even a requirement:

“To become a Unitarian Universalist, you make no doctrinal promises, but you are required to do much more. You are required to choose your own beliefs – you promise, that is, to use your reason and your experience and the dictates of your conscience to decide upon your own theology, and then you are asked to actually live by that theology. You are asked to take your chosen faith very seriously.”

So said Marilyn Sewell, Minister Emerita of the First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon, in an Internet article that Joe quoted from in his last sermon here, on June 12.

It could not be clearer: We are *required* to choose our own beliefs – that is, to use our reason and our experience and the dictates of our conscience to decide upon our own theology, and we are asked to actually live by that theology.

Building out from that one word “being” on the first day of class has included so many words that my credo now has three parts. It is of course a work in progress. As Marilyn Sewell also says:

“And there's another theological perspective that Unitarian Universalists have concerning truth: we believe in evolution – not only evolution of life forms, but evolution of thought and evolution of moral and ethical understanding. So the truth that I embrace today may not be the truth I embrace tomorrow. Revelation is not static, but is ever unfolding. More and more will be revealed. Our part is simply to be open, and thirsty, thirsty for the truth that would be ours – but just for the time being. Such a stance keeps us humble – and awake. When we venture into the Mystery, we are entering the ground of the infinite with the powers of a finite mind. An awe-filled agnosticism is perhaps the better part of wisdom.”

And now, to that credo, a prose poem in three parts.

Note: The block quotations above are from “The Theology of Unitarian Universalists” by Mary Sewell. In what follows, “an Iland, intire of it selfe” is from John Donne (Meditation XVII); and “thy will, not mine, be done” is a common reordering of “not my will, but thine, be done” from Luke 22:42 (KJV).

Being, Doing, and Loving

Being: All That Is ... Happening Now

Being is all that is, the known and the unknown. Being is what is happening now.

Nothing is apart from being; no being is apart from what is happening now.

No being “is an Iland, intire of it selfe;” nothing exists apart from what is happening now.

Nothing exists in any form imaginable, even as thought or belief, apart from what is happening now.

Being is what is happening now, including all thought and belief.

Being includes awareness – of being, of what is happening now.

Being is what is happening now, the known and the unknown. Being is all that is.

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Doing: Being Here Now

- Do no harm.
- Love all being.
- Learn by doing.
- Practice loving kindness.
- Do today what is to be done today.
- Do now only what is being done now.
- Be aware of being: what is happening now.
- Be aware of being what is happening now.
- Give thanks to all for all that is, for being, for being aware of being.

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Loving ... All Being: Wanting Nothing

Be well. Want nothing. Live simply.

Thy will, not mine, be done.

Once needs are met, all want is in the mind. This want is caused by thought and nothing else directly.

Thoughts just come and go unless they're played with.

Play with the thoughts that help, but let the others go.

Practice letting go, wanting nothing, not even to be wanting nothing.

Live simply. Love just being. Love only being – in all its forms. Love all being.

Live simply. Want nothing. Be well.

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[and so to]

Grace and Blessing

Thanks to all for all that is happening now, the known and the unknown.

May all be well, wanting nothing and giving thanks to all for all that is, for being, for being aware of being. May it be so. Amen.