

Unusual Beliefs and Mental Well-Being

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

January 22, 2012

© 2012 Unitarian Church of Vancouver

He stared at the sun with one eye for as long as he could bear, secretively cast horoscopes and performed countless experiments in the alchemical arts. Writing over a million words in spidery script, he strove obsessively to crack prophetic codes predicting the end of the world he believed were hidden in ancient scripture and used a novel form of math of his own creation to interpret the esoteric meaning of the texts. In his youth, he sometimes wished his step-father dead and his mother too: in a rage he threatened to burn their house down around them. Sometimes he wished himself dead. In his thirties his hair was already gray, falling to his shoulders and usually uncombed. He stayed in his chambers for days at a time, careless of food. Colleagues learned to leave him undisturbed at meals and to step around diagrams he scratched with a stick in the gravel walkways. They described him as silent and alienated, with flopping socks and broken down shoes. (James Gleick, *Isaac Newton*, pp 11, 99)

She was certain that she had been abducted by aliens who had implanted her with a chip that they used to monitor her thoughts and activities. Annoyed by this invasion of her privacy, she fashioned a hat made of tin foil which, she believed, disrupted the link between the monitoring device and the alien observers. This strategy seemed to work; everything was fine when she wore the cap indoors, but stepping outside, everyone looked, made fun of her and told her to her face that she was crazy. She increasingly became reclusive and withdrawn from the world. (composite of several people described in Tamasin Knight, *Beyond Belief: Alternative Ways of Working with Delusions, Obsessions and Unusual Experiences*, 2009)

Losing himself in philosophical and mystical monologues, he would make bizarre, fanciful leaps of the imagination. “A short uncouth figure, stout, unshaven, not overly clean...he walked in with a frayed notebook under his arm. He was miserably poor. I asked him what he wanted. He said a pittance to live on so that he might pursue his researches. “ And the notebook?—it was filled with math theorems...”I had never seen anything in the least like them before.” He claimed they had come to him in dreams through the agency of the goddess Namagiri who wrote the equations on his tongue. “An equation,” he said, “has no meaning unless it expresses a thought of God.” (description of S. Ramanujan, from “Einstein, God and the Universe,” PRI podcast *To the Best of Our Knowledge*, 12/25/2011, and Wikipedia article: “Srinivasa Ramanujan”)

Although a team of US and British weapons testers had released a damning report and “unsatisfactory progress” just the month before on nearly all high-speed flight testing situations citing chronic structural, equipment and electrical flaws, the Canadian official told an audience in Texas: “We will purchase the [aircraft]. We’re on record. We’re part of a crusade. We’re not backing down.” (Bob Cox, “More problems with F-35, *Star-Telegram*, Dec. 14, 2011; Michael Byers, “Heavy Turbulence for Canada’s F-35 Fighters, *Tyee*, 11/25, 2011)

A venerable, well known musician refuses to use the internet because he believes the FBI had cameras with which they can spy on people through their computers. She was convinced all the water was poisoned, refused to drink, and resisted suggestions that she was deluded. He came naked and walked through Westminster Hall...with a dish of fire and brimstone burning on his head...crying “Repent! Repent!” Though addicted to opium and alcohol, and reduced to wandering the street in search for food, he dressed like a dandy and generated endless schemes and bizarre plans to bring himself wealth and fame. Meanwhile, though hardly read or understood by anyone, he devoted heroic energies to his writing, probing the foundations of

semiotics, cosmology, logic and mathematics and general philosophy. (Tamasin Knight, 5; Samuel Pepys Diary, July 29, 1667; Robert S. Corrington, "Peirce the Melancholy Prestidigitator, *Semiotica*, 94-1/2 (1993), 85)

He believed in the rationality and self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholders' equity, staunchly opposed regulation of derivatives trading and credit default swaps, and had total confidence in the self-correcting power of free markets and mortgage lending. (Edmund Andrews, "Greenspan Concedes Error on Regulation," *NY Times*, 10/24/2008)

Sensing that he had come to a crucial junction in his life and undergoing a spiritual crisis in the summer before leaving home for university, he started reading an off-beat book of scripture and prayed. Later, he described what happened: it was like the top of his head came off, and he was filled with what felt like warm light and an affective kind of intelligence. He was convinced that the book was true; he would go to university as a religious person; he believed that a personal God had heard and answered his prayers.

Unusual beliefs? Deluded people? Paranoid or psychotic reaction to irrational and unsubstantiated fears, to transitional, uncertain, stress-filled moments in life? Do we know for certain which beliefs and actions are normal, unusual, and harmful? And if we were to be confronted by one of these individuals and situations, how would we respond? Shame that she is a member of the family? Embarrassed because he's a friend? Do we call 911? Try to talk them out of their beliefs? Appeal to reason, evidence, common sense, one's own story, by calling forth our own values and religious convictions? Should we refer them to mental health teams? Later, do we nod our heads knowingly, sympathetically when we learned that they had been diagnosed with a mental illness, hospitalized, medicated, eventually put on disability?

The long haired, unkempt, reclusive alchemist who obsessed over Biblical apocalyptic prophesy?—Isaac Newton posthumously extolled as the archetypical figure of the Advent of the

Age of Reason. The mystic on whose dreaming tongue a Hindu goddess inscribed fantastic equations? His named was Srinivasa Ramanujan, the Indian genius whose extraordinary contributions revolutionized 20th and 21st century mathematics. The faith-based, damn-the-evidence-and-cost-because-this-is-a-crusade Canadian official?—that’s our Associate Defense Minister Julian Fantino. (We’re gonna buy those F-35s at \$150 million a pop, no matter what!) The opium addicted, mania-fueled-melancholic-food-stealing dandy who obsessively wrote philosophical tomes to a phantom and uncomprehending audience—C.S. Peirce, now revered as one of the greatest philosophers of the 19th-20th centuries. The staunch believer in the self-correcting power of free markets and mortgage lending who presided over the collapse of the American economy in 2007-8?—Alan Greenspan, former Chairman of the Federal Reserve. The university bound kid with the weird scriptures and goofy religious experience?—Me at age seventeen.

Who’s deluded? Who’s possessed with unusual beliefs? And whose beliefs, if expressed and put into practice publicly, actually cause the greatest harm? Are unusual beliefs and attendant behaviors always unwarranted and meaningless? Who gets to decide what is abnormal or normal, and based upon what kind of evidence, really? I’ve been thinking a lot about these questions and their consequences. It’s hard going there; it’s difficult for me anyway, because when I slow down long enough to consider them, to really open up my heart and mind to other people and their beliefs, it can trigger some real confusion and a realization of just how often, culturally, we can look away from, defer and avoid tragedy and isolation, loss and despair, poverty and hubris. It’s no wonder we don’t feel brave enough, patient enough, or sane enough ourselves to deal with it all sometimes; and thus we push them—the people and the questions—out of our minds, get on with life, and pass them on to professionals to deal with

But let's think about this—consider the vignettes of unusual beliefs I shared with you earlier and the pictures in our order of service. For example, Hopi Indians of the American Southwest practice the Snake Antelope Dance to this day. In their world, it is perfectly acceptable and reasonable for an individual to dance with rattlesnakes in his mouth at designated times and in ritual settings because of a worldview, a landscape, and beliefs where these serpents are viewed as messengers to the gods—divine beings who live in the San Francisco Mountains to the west of Hopi mesa-top villages and who hold the power to send or withhold life giving rain.

By virtue of priestly authority, and in ritually designated times and settings, a Roman Catholic priest presides over the transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine into the Real Presence of the body and blood of Christ. To those who believe, who grow up Catholic, and in homes and families where these activities take place and are accepted as eminently plausible, such beliefs and rituals make sense. The same can be said of Ramanujan, the Indian math genius—in his strictly observant Hindu home, there was nothing improbable about a Hindu goddess appearing in his dreams and writing math theorems on his tongue.

These things make sense to those who believe because of what students of religion call “plausibility structures.” That is, beliefs and practices make sense because they are taught from birth in the home, affirmed by parents, neighbours and other adult authorities, and upheld by churches, temples, synagogues, scriptures, history, hymn singing, religious buildings and institutional bureaucracies. Plausibility structures are not confined to religion and to what someone may think is irrational beliefs. Worldviews are conferred and upheld by the plausibility structures of university education, academic degrees, secular ideologies, and professional cultures and standards. Alan Greenspan's “master of universe” view of rational self-interest, deregulation and the self-correcting power of free markets made eminent sense to him because he

was surrounded by people who shared his belief, hailed him as an economic sage and doted on his every word—until the economy collapsed. Now he confesses to being “distressed” and in a “state of shocked disbelief.” His plausibility structure’s crumbling. Too bad for us, and a little too late.

Soviet psychiatrists, abetted by the machinery of the State, forcibly hospitalized and chemically lobotomized thousands of Soviet dissident citizens in the 70s and 80s despite the outrage of many in the West. Why? Because the plausibility structure of Marxist-Leninist workers utopia and its so-called scientific materialism. Anyone who dissented from this, from the logic of history, who jeopardized their happiness, their careers and family, had to be crazy—and thus they were diagnosed by compliant psychiatrists with “paranoia” and something called “sluggish schizophrenia,” whose symptoms included “reform delusions,” “perseverance,” “projects for the benefit of mankind,” and “the struggle for truth.” Unusual beliefs indeed!

Lock ‘em up in a hospital and drug the nonsense out of them! (for more on this sorry story, see Richard Bonnie, “Political Abuse of Psychiatry in the Soviet Union and China...,” *Journal of the American Academic of Psychiatry and Law*, 30:136-44, 2002; and the Wikipedia article: “Political abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union.” On plausibility structures, see Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, pp. 16, 45-51, etc.)

Viewed from outside, the beliefs of Hopi snake dancers, the Hindu mathematician Ramanujan, Alan Greenspan, and Roman Catholics make look unusual indeed. Bill Maher, the comic and social critic, who we may know from the mockumentary “Religulous,” said that a Catholic “*has* to be schizophrenic to go about life normally for six days a week, only on the seventh, to go to church and believe that when drinking the communion wine one is drinking the blood of a 2000 year-old space god.” On the “Rachel Maddow Show,” and talking about the US presidential candidate Mitt Romney, Maher said “all religion is nuts...and magic tricks... But Mormonism just takes it to different level altogether.” Golden plates, angels, sacred

underwear... “Mormonism is just a particularly cheap, novelty store brand of magic tricks.” And before we get too smug about it, while Unitarian principles and practices may seem totally plausible to us, fundamentalist Christians may and have seen us a neo-Pagan, earth-worshipping satanic cult. Martin Luther King Jr. decided he couldn’t be a Unitarian because we are “too sentimental concerning human nature” and that we “leaned to false optimism.”

And to be frank, speaking of sacred underwear, I see little *essential* difference between the Mormon, Sikh, and Orthodox Jewish practice of wearing religious undergarments, of men in turbans, fezzes and yarmulkes, nuns in habits and women in hijabs, of individuals who don tin foil caps to disrupt attempts to read their private thoughts, *and those* who clad themselves in Brooks Brothers suits, Boss and Gucci designer clothes and underwear, and drive around in BMWs and Benzes. Each expresses deeply held needs, values and beliefs supported by personal experience, social context, economic class, and plausibility structure; each comports himself in ways that align with a worldview he embraces and others he would, on principle, avoid; each dresses distinctively in order to remind herself who she is and that which she finds meaningful in life—what they fear, what they welcome, in order to deal with the uncertainties, needs, trials, indignities, and pleasures of a living in a complex world.

And speaking of BMWs, and all the vehicles that stream by relentlessly out there on Oak and 49th—“Margaret Thatcher once remarked that anybody over the age of thirty who used a bus should consider themselves a failure in life.” Well, I can tell you that there may those using public transit who think that car driving at the drop of a hat is madness when viewed in light of global warming, petrowarfare, and Tar Sands induced distortions to our nation’s economy.

I can imagine that belief in alien abduction could be an understandable response to traumas like extended viewings of Fox News, or being shipped off to boarding and residential

schools, or being plopped down in the lap of a terrifying stranger with a long white beard, dressed in a ridiculous red outfit who keeps laughing “ho, ho ho!” over and over.

I can well imagine that paranoia could be an understandable response if I was a young man, especially of colour, between the ages of 18-30, who, when he steps out into streets studded with surveillance cameras, *knows*; he knows in ways *undreamt* of by us, that he is of special, prejudicial interest to those policemen who keep looking at him as they cruise by.

And speaking of race, black and Asian people, according to one report from the UK, and working class Mexican women in the US, are 50% more likely to be diagnosed as paranoid and schizophrenic than are whites. If you were in a social position characterized by powerlessness and the threat of victimization, if you were poor and living alone in a substandard housing, it may be functional to imagine you are being followed and oppressed; it may be functional to believe and hope that you have a messianic solution to the problems of the world you face day-in-day-out—for you see the Alan Greenspans in charge of the world, and know it’s going to take more power to change things than what you possess alone.

You can see where I am going with this. What was improbable, what’s most important for me in the story of Ramanujan, the Indian mathematician, is that G. H. Hardy, a Cambridge University math professor, didn’t dismiss Ramanujan as a demented crank. Hardy actually *read* Ramanujan’s unsolicited letters from India filled with fantastic, unprecedented equations, and invited the young, self-taught customs clerk from Madras to England, to Cambridge. That is, he *listened*; he did not try to argue Ramanujan out of his unusual beliefs; instead, he listened and learned and marveled. He patiently sat with Ramanujan for days and months to decipher and make meaning of his theorems. He helped Ramanujan, the devout Hindu, *to cope with living* in a strange European city by finding ingredients and shops that could cater to his unusual, strictly

vegetarian diet, and to track down out-of-the places where Ramanujan could continue his ritual practices and worship.

But then, perhaps, it took someone like Hardy, a closeted homosexual, a committed atheist and someone who came from a lower middle class background, to appreciate and not dismiss Ramanujan's fantastic story. They were both outsiders in a world of High Anglicanism, aristocratic privilege, and sexual respectability.

Let me repeat this: Hardy accepted Ramanujan's reality and helped him to live with it.

A growing body of research and practice is showing that the best, most effective, humane and mutually transformative way to help someone deal with unusual beliefs and experiences is not to deny, argue, institutionalize or drug them out of their perceived reality. Rather, like the residential school Truth and Reconciliation Commission going on in our nation, invite the person to talk about their beliefs and experiences, and without judging them—actively listen without trying to modify their beliefs. Find out about their reality, and then look for ways to help them cope more effectively with things *as they perceive them*. If you're at a loss, talk to me; I can refer you to some excellent sources that suggest strategies and techniques to help deal with unusual beliefs and to reclaim the kind of life we want to live. [Madness Radio Listening Group]

Closing—the contemporary Unitarian philosopher Robert Corrington, who's definitely had to deal with mental health issues in his life, said this: people going through these kinds of experiences can “suffer to an extent that, frankly,”[a normal person] can hardly imagine...Almost all medicines fail after a number of months...[But] when one is like this, there is a deeply pain-driven search for meaning...” At its best, it's like we are “using an evolutionary surplus energy (so rare in our species)” that helps us “to forge products that probe into complexes of nature that have an uncanny depth and provenance” that “collectively constitute

[some] of the treasures of human thought and creativity.” (see Corrington and Niemoczynski, “And Introduction to Ecstatic Naturalism...,” *Kinesis*, 36, 1, Spring 2009; and his extraordinary autobiography, *Riding the Windhorse: Manic Depressive Disorder and the Quest for Wholeness*, 2003)

Sitting here in this beautiful building, it may seem impossible to believe now, but historically we were the hunted, the heretics, the people imprisoned and burned at the stake for our unusual beliefs. We have been the ones who insisted on freedom of religious belief and acceptance of myriad paths to spiritual growth. Every week, it says right here on our order of service: “We are a community of diverse beliefs and shared values.” May our shared value of compassion and acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth be our guide and trusted companion so that the uncanny, diverse depth of beliefs and insights that “constitute ...treasures of human thought and creativity” will flourish, provoke and inspire us always.