

No God, Just Us
A Sermon by Rev. Tim Kutzmark
April 28, 2013
Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

An ancient poet once wrote:

*“I lift up my eyes to the hills;
Where will my help come from?
My help comes from God, who created heaven and earth.
(Psalm 121)*

*“Out of the depths I call you, O my God.
Listen to my cry!”
(Psalm 130)*

What caused this ancient poet to cry out for help to her God? Perhaps a loved one was aging or ill. Perhaps a relationship was unraveling. Perhaps they were mourning a dying dream, or wrestling with confusion or depression or the results of unskillful choices. Perhaps they felt as we do on those days when we wish we could press ‘pause’ and escape from our lives for just a moment. When things have gone terribly wrong, who hasn’t secretly wished to be saved by something that would just wipe it all away, something that would lift us out of the uncertainty and fear and the overwhelming sense of not being in control of our lives? Who hasn’t asked, as that long ago poet, asked:

*“How long must I wrestle with my thoughts, and every day have sorrow in my heart?
Answer me.” (Psalm 13)*

But what if no answer came? What if the God they called to was silent? What if they never heard an answer to their plea?

Another Ancient poet tells this story. In a forest, there once lived a deer. And what a deer it was! This deer was strong and stately, stunning in speed and agility. One day in the forest, the breeze shifted. Suddenly, the air was alive with a wondrous smell. The deer raised its head high and breathed deep. The deer became entranced with this new, intoxicating smell. What was the source of this sensational scent? The deer had to find the origin. It ran to the North, searching, but never finding the source. The deer ran to the South, still not finding where the smell came from. The deer searched days and days: to the East, to the West, to the mountains, to the valleys, to the shore of the far away sea. Finally, exhausted, the deer fell in a sweaty heap. Its head collapsed down into its belly, resting on its own navel. It took its final breath and the deer smelled full and complete the glorious thing it had been searching for. The scent came from the deer’s own navel. It was its own natural essence. In that last moment before it died, the deer wondered why it had run so far and so wide. Why had it never realized that what it so desperately was trying to find was in its own self? (The Teachings of Yogi Bhañan, p. 46)

The Wisdom of the Ancients tells us there are two different places to look for help and strength and deliverance.

There are those who search for external fragrance, an outside elixir. There are those who lift their eyes to the hills and look to God as source and support. This is a valid way of understanding life; it is true for the person for whom it resonates as meaningful. And many of us in this congregation live our lives within this belief of God's presence beyond us. But there is a second way to understand help and strength, and many of us in this congregation live our lives within this other belief. In this second way, the power lies solely within. Any support for self and society must come from human hands and hearts. In a great oversimplification: the first way reaches towards the power beyond us, God--we call this Theism, and we call the person who believes in that power a Theist. The second way reaches towards the power within us, towards self and other humans--we call this Humanism, and we call the person who believes in that power a Humanist.

Humanism is belief in the human potential. Humanism believes in the power of humanity to transcend the limitations of life. Yes, humanism denies the existence of divine power working within the universe. Humanism denies an external Deity that creates and sustains the world. Humanism denies a personal God. But humanism is so much more than what it denies. The power and potential of humanism are found in what it affirms. As a member of the congregation recently wrote to me: "We Humanists ARE believers: We believe in each other. We believe in finding our strengths and dealing with our weaknesses . . . We believe in the natural miracles found in nature . . . we believe in love, kindness, intelligence, and creativity."

Humanism champions rational thought, scientific exploration, and human empowerment. It challenges us not to pray for a future, but to transform ourselves into the future. As one humanist thinker wrote: "More needful than faith in God is faith that humanity can give love, justice, peace, and moral values embodiment in human relations. Denial of this faith is the only real atheism. What the gods have been expected to do, and have failed to do through the ages, humanity must find the *courage and intelligence* to do for [ourselves]." (A. Eustace Haydon, as quoted in *American Religious Humanism* by Mason Olds, Revised Edition, p. 13, adapted) Fulfilling this possibility is the goal of a Humanist.

I want to share with you the story of one Humanist thinker and his belief, his faith. He was a key player in the creation of the modern Humanist movement. Charles Potter was his name.

Charles Potter was very much like the deer in the ancient story I shared a few minutes ago. He was born in 1885 in Marlboro, Massachusetts, just over 30 miles from here. Even when he was child, his brain burst with questions about the meaning of life and the nature of existence. They were the types of questions his Baptist Sunday school classes did not easily entertain or answer. He wondered about life—where did its power and possibility lie? Like the deer in the story, he raced here and there searching for an external answer to give peace to his mind. He earned his degree and began serving as a Baptist Minister in 1908. Six years later, Charles Potter left that faith when he could no longer believe in the teachings of the Second Coming of Jesus or salvation through the

blood of Christ. Like many of us here today, his spiritual searching brought him to Unitarianism, where his freethinking was encouraged. He served as a Unitarian minister for almost ten years, beginning in 1914. In 1925, he participated in the famous Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, serving as a “librarian and Bible expert” for Clarence Darrow’s defense of the theory of evolution. (Olds, p. 128) But eventually Potter’s searching found even the broadness of Unitarianism too confining for the answers flowing from his mind. He moved on again, this time seeking to create his own form of religious community--a religious society of Humanists. He did just that in 1929, forming the first Humanist Society of New York. His advisory board included Julian Huxley, John Dewey, and Albert Einstein.

Charles Potter saw the spiritual journey not as a journey to a traditionally understood God, but rather, as a journey into self-awakening and self-realization. In fact, according to Potter, our entire universe has been on an amazing journey of great awakening. Our entire universe has been on a journey of expansion into ultimate cosmic unity. We human beings are the products of that journey. And now, we human beings will determine its final direction.

Potter viewed this journey, and the sweep of time itself, in four stages. These four stages were each separated by what he called *saltations*, great “jumps ahead in evolution.” (Olds, p. 134)

The first saltation, or evolutionary moment, came when nonliving matter became living. As Potter wrote: “Long, long millions of years ago, there came a point in the process of evolution when gradually changing combinations of chemical elements on the surface of this planet began to live and move and have being.” *This primitive life, this being, was the first step of our journey into awareness.*

The second saltation occurred millions of years later, after life had evolved through many forms. Life then developed a primitive consciousness, such as is found in lower forms of animals. *Consciousness was the second step of our journey into awareness.*

The third moment of evolutionary process arrived when consciousness become self-conscious, when the thinking animal realized it was thinking. Potter said this capacity for self-recognition differentiates humans from other animals. *Self-consciousness was the third step of our journey into awareness.*

The final step waits somewhere in the future. In Potter’s model, the best is yet to come. *The fourth and final saltation is the leap into what he calls “cosmic consciousness.”* For Potter, cosmic consciousness occurs when human self-consciousness expands beyond the self. There it experiences its interwoven relationship with the universe; in doing so, it becomes unified with all the cosmos. With cosmic consciousness, a human would experience “sudden mental clarity, a surge of peace and oneness.” They would perceive “the immensity of the universe and that all things were” pulsating with life. Self-limitation would melt away, and “they would experience a disappearance of guilt, doubt, and confusion.” They would be washed with “an influx of great exaltation and joy of spirit, and an assurance that immortality had already begun.” (Olds, p. 141) As Potter

wrote: “In this state of mind, [a human] becomes intellectually and emotionally aware of the universe as definitely and closely related to [themselves]. [A person] recognizes [herself] as an integral part of the universe, and even in spirit identifies [herself] with it.” (Olds, p. 135)

In plain English, it’s something like the deer suddenly finding itself as the source of the scent, then experiencing that scent in everything, and knowing on a profound level that nothing truly exists except the scent. There is no separation of that scent. There is no separation from that scent. The scent is all things and all things are actually one thing.

Potter believed spiritual leaders such as the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, and other blessed women and men were possessors of cosmic consciousness. He believed that their power and the platform from which they taught was not a God-bestowed revelation. Rather, these religious leaders were forerunners of a new breed of human, what he called “Next-men” or “Supermen.” (Sorry for the sexist language, but this was the late 1920’s.) These “Next-men” were the natural evolution of humanity. For Potter, the Buddha, Jesus and the like weren’t teaching God-consciousness, they were living a naturally evolved cosmic consciousness. The future had arrived in them. When the Buddha spoke of enlightenment, he was speaking symbolically of the new insight of cosmic consciousness. (Olds, p.141) When Jesus spoke of being “the light of the world,” he too was speaking symbolically of this new insight into human perception. The Yogi who meditates and reaches *samadhi* (a deep sense of peace and oneness) does so not through magic but through the natural development of one’s innate mental and emotional capacities. The so-called ‘religious or mystical experience’ is within the natural realm of reality.

But being within the realm of reality does not guarantee its fulfillment. As author Mason Olds summarizes: “Before humans appeared on the stage of history, the evolutionary process had been largely random. In humans the process became self-conscious, and for the first time the possibility of consciously directing the evolutionary process became a real option. Chance yielded to conscious creative control.” (Olds, p. 138) In short, if we’re going to get to a better future, we have to work for it today.

For Potter, this is the work and purpose of religious community. It is why we come to church; it is why we join with others on a shared spiritual search. Potter believed that we must consciously together direct humanity’s evolution. He believed that self-improvement was the key to this happening. And he believed that there were three levels to this shared self-improvement.

First, there is self-recognition, an awareness of who we are in both strength and limitation. Secondly, our self-recognition demands self-direction. We need to experience ourselves as creating and shaping our lives and the world around us; it is not just awareness, it is action! Lastly, self-direction leads to self-giving, the “human need to express ourselves to others.” (Olds, p. 140) For Potter, self-giving is the pinnacle. It is in self-giving that we transcend the small self. It is in self-giving that we experience the interdependent web of all creation (which is a key element in our Unitarian Universalist religious understanding). Self-recognition, self-direction, and self-giving: these become

the training ground for cosmic consciousness. The goal is to evolve ourselves and all of humanity. The place to do so is here, in religious community.

No matter what we believe, no matter where we seek our strength and find out support, we must claim ourselves as self-conscious co-creators in this universe. Whether Humanist or Theist, or our own unique combination of both—whatever we believe, as Unitarian Universalists—one thing is shared and is true: we must build ourselves into who we must become. Charles Potter would say, “The future still holds the coming of the great human.” (Olds, p. 139)

May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen.

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