

The Spirituality of Being (an Atheist). By Thomas J. Begush

So the buddhist says to the hot-dog vendor, "Make me one with everything." They share a chuckle, and a moment later after buying a hot-dog, the buddhist says, "Hey, where's my change" and the hot-dog vendor says "Change must come from within." This bothers the buddhist, so he wanders for a full day and night until he comes upon a beautiful empty field the following morning at sunrise. He decides this is the perfect place to sit and meditate.....And so he chants his mantra - Oooooooohm. A cow wanders over to the buddhist and says "dude, you've got it all backwards... it's supposed to be Mooooooooooo."

This sermon will have many quotes. I'd like to start with two.

"We have always been shameless about stealing great ideas" - Steve Jobs

"I invented nothing new - I simply assembled the discoveries of other men, behind whom were centuries of work. Progress happens when all the factors that make for it are ready and then it is inevitable." - Henry Ford

And so it is true with this speech and with my philosophy. I am thankful for the opportunity to share with you my feelings about how amazing and glorious our existence really is, and I am thankful for the opportunity to do it here among open-minded and open-hearted friends who will not judge me. I cannot claim that the foundation for this sermon is new or original. Parts of it do come from my own mind; but much of it does not, I am simply carrying the torch of the great thinkers that came before me. I've had a very difficult time writing this piece. I do not wish to alienate anyone. I do not wish to burn bridges or create animosity; in fact, I sincerely encourage you all in your spiritual searches. I don't want to attack organized religion right now, but writing these words without some small anti-theistic rhetoric is impossible, and for that, I ask for your patience & understanding but not your forgiveness.

Please take a moment and appreciate the humor in the fact that standing here, in the pulpit, is an atheist, delivering a sermon. And in the course of this sermon, I will attempt to answer some of the questions I have been asked about not-believing.

I will be the first to admit that atheism and spirituality are an odd couple, but they can happily coexist in the same person; just as the Baha'i faith teaches that religion and science can both benefit mankind and even each other. I don't need to declare membership to a specific denomination to enjoy the architectural beauty of a church or a mosque. I don't need to belong to the choir for a hymn make the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I can cry from happiness, marvel at a sunset, volunteer, donate time or money, and take pride in being a husband and father, all without dogma or doctrine.

I do not wear a nametag at this congregation because I do not like labels. Labels add constraints, confine people and narrow ideas. I have been called a skeptic, a non-believer, confused, angry-at-god, agnostic, evil & unholy, a devil worshipper, and even the most spiteful name in the book, the dreaded atheist. Let's talk about that label for a moment: atheist. "In fact, "atheism" is a term that should not even exist. No one ever needs to identify himself as a "non-astrologer" or a "non-chemist." We do not have words for people who doubt that Elvis is still alive or that aliens have traversed the galaxy only to molest ranchers and their cattle. Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs." - Sam Harris.

But yet, I will use the term atheist, because I haven't anything better.

Before we talk about something as easily definable as spiritualism, we must first talk about ourselves. We, those passionate, hopeful beings who, if we are lucky will experience an exalted and elated feeling of spirituality at some point in our lives.

Who is an Atheist? What is an Atheist? Lookout! Here comes a statistic! As of the last census, 20% of America claims “no religion” and that embodies 1/3 of people under 30.

Atheism is the lack of belief in any gods, which infers that nothing exists but natural phenomena (matter and energy), that human thought is a function of energy flowing through our grey-matter, and that death, the permanent cessation of all perception, irreversibly and completely terminates individual organic units. This means that there are no forces, phenomena, or entities which exist outside of, or apart from physical nature; or which transcend nature, or are “super” natural, nor can there be. Humankind is on its own. We are not the playthings of some angry and spiteful sky spirit. We, and we alone, are the makers and the masters of our own environment - we will reap what we sow. So how do we apply a definition to someone like myself who wishes to avoid all labels?

Atheists are people. Although some might disagree.

“An atheist loves his fellow man instead of god. An atheist believes that heaven is something for which we should work now – here on earth for all men together to enjoy. An atheist believes that he can get no help through prayer but that he must find in himself the inner conviction and strength to meet life, to grapple with it, to subdue it, and enjoy it. An atheist believes that only in a knowledge of himself and a knowledge of his fellow man can he find the understanding that will help to a life of fulfillment. He seeks to know himself and his fellow man rather than to know a god. An atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An atheist believes that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said. An atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty vanquished, war eliminated. He wants man to understand and love man. He wants an ethical way of life. He believes that we cannot rely on a god or channel action into prayer nor hope for an end of troubles in a hereafter. He believes that we are our brother's keepers and are keepers of our own lives; that we are responsible persons and the job is here and the time is now.” Murray v. Curlett (1963)

Some people might say they don't believe in god - Whereas I, more or less humbly, know that it is equally unlikely any gods exist, including - any god you can name. Perhaps Harry Potter's friend Hermione put it best when she said “You could claim that *anything's* real, if the only basis for believing in it, is the fact that nobody's *proved* it doesn't exist!” So what's the difference between knowing and believing? - The difference is a subtle but important one. Can I honestly say the Earth is a sphere? I believe that it is, but if I have never traveled far enough away from the ground to see for myself, how can I *know*?? Countless other humans before me have concluded thus. Why do I take their word for it? Human are fallible. I believe, nay, I know the world is round because there is irrefutable evidence to support that claim. I have seen photographs of a round planet Earth, but only handmade drawings of a flat Earth. I have seen the arc of the atmosphere through the window of a plane, I have seen with my own eyes, ships disappearing over the horizon, I have seen the **round** shadow of Earth on our moon, and I know that according to the laws of physics a sphere is the smallest shape you can make when gravitational forces are evenly distributed - meaning, that our planet is round for the exact same reason that a soap bubble is round.

Where do you get your morals? Without the bible, or a god to answer to, what stops you from just running around killing people?

Yes, I have really been asked that question with a straight face. Why should mankind need a bribe of

divine reward, or threat of divine retribution to act hospitably to ourselves?

Not to sound condescending, but have you ever seen the children's television program Sesame Street? That show does a wonderful job of teaching morality, and it does so without any religious persuasion. Sesame Street teaches virtues like; sharing, kindness to others, being friends, patience, acceptance of differences, honesty, and perseverance in the face of adversity. With or without a religion we can all agree that those are wonderful qualities for anyone to have. If we'd like to expand our answer, we could also attain our morals from our legal code, - but as UUs we also know that what is moral is not always legal and vice-versa. My morals come from my family, my peers, friends, society at large, and I can also make my own decisions about right and wrong using my own common sense and logic. There are many societies all over the world which teach some version of - you get what you give, what goes around comes around, do unto others... Why do we see such similarity in morality around the globe regardless of specific beliefs? Because it is good advice. What is seen as immoral today wasn't immoral 2000 years ago, and in the future what we are doing now may be considered immoral, for example, burning fossil fuels. Morality is an ever-changing, constantly evolving fluid of ambiguousness & what-ifs. However, I think that any text that condones slavery and advocates gender discrimination is immediately disqualified as a source of morality.

Why do atheists hate god?

Perhaps what turns me off most about organized religion is that it directly or indirectly causes us to exclude others, and teaches us to be satisfied with not understanding our world, our reality, our fragile planet. Why - isn't - this - enough? Shouldn't this be enough? "Just this world? Just this beautiful, complex wonderfully unfathomable, NATURAL world? How does it so fail to hold our attention that we have to diminish it with the invention of cheap, man-made myths and monsters?" - Tim Minchin

Much of my personal opinions are shaped by the fact that we live in a country where the majority of people claim to be some sort of Christian, yet act nothing like the ideal that they idolize. Religion is full of contradictions and the hypocrisy leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. I am asked to open myself up to the possibility of a god, and yet, to ask a believer to open themselves up to the possibility that there is no god, falls on unhearing ears. My heart holds no love for any organized religion - and that is based on my personal observations and experiences. Because of my atheism I have endured professional demotions, undeserved punishment, ostracization, and discrimination. It has ended relationships and cost me many friends. Quite frankly, without speaking of specific atrocities, organized religion terrifies me. Religion makes reasonable people do unreasonable things. Living this life as if you're already in the next, removes from your actions all responsibility and consequence, the burden of which is spread to your fellow man. When religious excuses motivate people into preventing my friends from getting married or adopting orphaned children, that breaks my heart. When a politician says the End of Days is near, and therefore we don't need to regulate pollution, or take action to prevent global warming, that affects everyone, especially our children. When a bunch of old men use their superstition to control the bodies of women, I am enraged. When a mega-church spends more on its monthly electric bill than its annual humanitarian aid, that should embarrass all people.

But here's the really important part.

Where do you find meaning in your life? Why have children? What's the point of even living? And perhaps most importantly.... How can an atheist have a spiritual existence?

Some believers accuse skeptics of having nothing but a dull, cold, scientific world. I am left with only art,

music, literature, theater, the magnificence of nature, mathematics, the human spirit, sex, the cosmos, friendship, history, science, imagination, dreams, oceans, mountains, love and the wonder of birth. That'll do for me." - Lynne Kelly

"Life is beautiful, wondrous, thrilling; not because of what might or might not come after it. Life is rich and fulfilling in its own right. What a waste to keep it to yourself, and how beautiful to give life, and your passion for it, to someone new. Our humanity is **built** or broken down by the relationships we create with those around us. These relationships are the root of what moves us, comforts us, scares us, or gives us strength. Building a family can create the strongest type of bond we know... unconditional love. This love is symbiotic. It empowers both parents and children and is absolutely worth sharing, living for, dying for." - unknown

"[A] most astounding fact is the knowledge that the atoms that comprise life on Earth, the atoms that make up the human body, are traceable to the crucibles that cooked light-elements into heavy-elements in their core, under extreme temperatures and pressures. These stars, the high-mass ones among them, went unstable in their later years. They collapsed and then exploded, scattering their enriched guts across the galaxy. Guts made of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and all the fundamental ingredients of life itself. These ingredients become part of gas clouds that condense, collapse, and form the next generation of solar systems - stars with orbiting planets. And those planets now have the ingredients for life itself. So that when I look up at the night sky, and I know that yes, we are a part of this universe, we are in this universe, but perhaps more important than both of those facts, is that the universe is in us. When I reflect on that fact, I look up - many people feel small because they are small and the universe is big - but I feel big, because my atoms came from those stars. There is a level of connectivity. That's really what you want in life. You want to feel connected, you want to feel relevant, you want to feel like you are a participant in the goings on of activities and events around you. That's precisely what we are, just by being alive." ~ Neil DeGrasse Tyson

Carl Sagan wasn't kidding when he said "We are all star stuff", and what better way to feel connected to your fellow man, mother earth, and the whole universe, than to realize that we all came from the same cosmic star-dust? And speaking of being created from dust, according to Genesis 2:5, man was created from dust. So perhaps there is yet room enough to reconcile science and religion after all.

What about heaven? What happens when you die? - What happens when you die? The same thing that has happened for billions of years before we were conceived, and the same thing that will happen for billions of years after we are gone. We did not exist before we were born, and we return to the same state of non-existence after we die. Why does non-existence bother some people so much? I do not believe in an afterlife or reincarnation.... *Let me say that again*, I do not believe in an afterlife or reincarnation, - but what I do believe, is that we have ONE life, this life, right here, right now, ONE chance, ONE shot to get it as right as we can, to make this world a better place, to leave it better than we found it, and to NOT destroy it for the sake of all living beings and future generations. Buddhists say that nothing is permanent - everything changes, everything passes - and I have found this to be true. So the fact that there is no *great-beyond*, makes every day, every action, every decision, every kiss, every tear, - every single experience all the more precious. The universe will continue to turn with or without us. Science tells us that you cannot destroy matter or energy, only transform it. One day I will pass on, the molecules and electrical impulses that make me, me, will eventually dissipate and get recycled into new things and new life. And eventually, about 5 billion years from now, our sun will collapse and then explode, scattering all our molecules across the universe to be reborn into new stars, planets, and even

more new life. Just as we now are made from those ancient stars. That is a fact. From the universe we came, and to the universe we will return. Oh, and by the way, Genesis also says that man will return to dust. Now what was that I said about not believing in reincarnation?

Life is the great indulgence—death, the great abstinence. Therefore, make the most of life HERE AND NOW! There is no heaven of glory bright, and no hell where sinners roast. Here and now is our day of torment! Here and now is our day of joy! Here and now is our opportunity! Choose ye this day, this hour, say unto thine own heart, “I am my own redeemer.” - Anton LaVey

An anonymous Poem: “When I die, my atoms will come undone. I’ll be space dust, once again. The wind will carry me, and scatter me everywhere, like dandelions in springtime I’ll visit worlds and alien moons, it will be so damn poetic- until I land on your sandwich.”

The universe is what we make it.

“The problems we face did not come down from the heavens. They are made by bad human decisions, and good human decisions can change them.” - Bernie Sanders

As much as I’d like to hope that we are an important part of existence, I’m not so prideful as to think the universe was created just for us, nor are we the center of *anything*. At best, we are just minor background actors, lucky to be here at all. Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and Moses, all stressed the importance of humility multiple times, but it is an attribute easily overlooked by both believers and atheists alike. So here’s a reminder to help us maintain some humility.

“Consider that as you listen to this, we are traveling at [almost 1/2 a million miles per hour] across the galaxy. 90% of the cells in your body carry their own microbial DNA and are not “you.” The atoms in our body are 99.999 999 999 999 9999 % empty space and none of them are the ones we were born with. Human beings have 46 chromosomes, 2 less than a potato. The existence of a rainbow depends on the conical photoreceptors in our eyes; therefore to animals without these photoreceptors, the rainbow does not exist. We don’t just look at a rainbow, we create the rainbow. This is pretty amazing, especially considering that all the beautiful colors a human is able to see represent about 0% of the electromagnetic spectrum.” –Sergio Toporek (paraphrased a little)

Our world is created by our perspective. “If you want the world to be scary, you’ll find evidence that it is. If you want it to be logical, you’ll find evidence for that. Mystical? Ordered? Fascinating? Dangerous? Wondrous? Yep, you can find evidence for all of these. Examine not what you find, but what you look for, and then ask yourself - why.” - April Yax

“Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumored by many. Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.” - Siddhārtha Gautama

Ultimately, I would like to leave you with these last two points. Firstly, I will make the claim that we are both atheists. I’m pretty certain that (unless you were born several thousand years ago), neither of us believes in Wotan, Jupiter, Anubis, Zeus, Osiris, Bacchus, Thor nor the countless other tens-of-thousands of gods that man has created in our short time here on planet Earth. You don’t believe in any of those thousands of other gods, and neither do I. The only difference is, I just believe in one fewer god than you.

And lastly, atheism is not a ticket to wickedness, it is not a malignant burden, nor is it an empty black void in my soul. A lack of belief in the supernatural does not hinder me, or taint my world view, in fact it liberates my mind and empowers me to focus on what is truly important in our brief, brutish, and beautiful existence. It is said that perception is reality. Therefore - our universe, our reality, really is what we make it. Be it delightful or be it dastardly, it is because we have made it so.

Thank you.