

Bearing Life in the Necropolis Unitarian Universalism as an Alternative Lifestyle

By

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As you may have already noticed, I like to talk about a lot of different things. If there's one commonality in my sermons, however, it's that they are all meant to question and challenge our ordinary paradigms. That is, they are meant to make us reconsider some of our most common ways of thinking about things. During my candidating week here back in April I gave a sermon in which I referred to myself as a *Heyoka*, an American Indian term referring to someone who lives and thinks the opposite of most everyone else. I suppose most people would just call me a contrarian, which I think is also fair to say. As such, my sermons are often oppositional, that is, they ask us to consider that the opposite of what we believe might be true, and the opposite of what we usually do might be right.

The question is, why am I so contrary? What has gotten me so crossed? I've thought a lot about this. It could be, having had an extremely domineering father, that I've come to unconsciously oppose any authority, including the dominant ideas and values in our culture. That might be part of it, but I think it has more to do with having studied philosophy in college. For that's when I first shook off my fundamentalist beliefs and started asking a lot of questions. In fact, my philosophy professor, Dr. Wallace Roark recently published a book entitled, *Think Like an Octopus*, "on one the hand, but on the other hand, on the other hand, on the other hand," and so on. So, under Dr. Roark's tutelage, I was trained to be a professional skeptic. But I might also be a contrarian simply because I'm a Unitarian Universalist. Or I might be a Unitarian Universalist because I'm a contrarian. As a mystical tradition, our religion encourages us to continually question, not so much to arrive at firm conclusions, but for the sake of the journey itself. As our song says, "to question truly is an answer." UU's are seekers. The nature of our quest is but to question.

I think there's probably some truth to all these explanations. I was raised to be contrary. I was trained to be contrary. And I'm part of a contrary religion. So what choice do I really have? But the most important reason I keep questioning the paradigms of our larger culture is because I must! If more of us don't begin questioning what's going on in our world, our world may not keep going on, at least not for us humans. Right now the Earth is in the midst of experiencing its 6th great dying. It's not in danger of dying. It is dying, to the tune of more than 120 additional species becoming extinct every day. The last great cataclysmic dying resulted in the familiar dinosaur extinction just 65 million years ago. The first great dying, however, which you may not have heard of, nearly turned the Earth into a lifeless fireball, and was similar to what we're experiencing today. Oxygen has since become essential to life, but, as you know, it's also essential for fire, and at high levels it can

become extremely volatile. That's exactly what happened 2.5 billion years ago when Life on Earth was still comprised of only single-celled organisms.

Back then all cells excreted oxygen. Oxygen, now so essential to all life, was but the product of cellular waste. And, as tiny as they might seem, our single-celled ancestors experienced a population explosion so great that they polluted the environment with more oxygen than it could naturally recycle. In the same way oxygen corrodes iron, causing it to rust, it proved disastrous for early life, which was mostly anaerobic, meaning it lived without oxygen. In fact, so many creatures were killed by this deadly toxin that the oxygen catastrophe is still considered the largest mass extinction ever in Earth history. But even after this massive die-off, the atmosphere was still filled with a potentially explosive amount of oxygen. Were it not for the emergence of a few single-celled contrarians, survivors of this holocaust, that learned to eat this excess compound and emit carbon dioxide in its place, life on Earth would have failed almost as soon as it began, and our planet would now be just another fireball in space.

Today, a particular multi-cellular creature is also in the midst of an unsustainable population explosion and is responsible for altering the chemistry of the biosphere to the point that all of life is being threatened. I'm speaking, of course, about our species, the human species, and the impact of our out-of-control carbon emissions. If all those tiny little cells could bring the planet to the brink of destruction, just think of the impact 7 billion humans, dependent upon carbon based fossil fuels for most our energy needs, can have! We can only hope that a few contrarians will be enough to establish a new way of doing things before it's too late.

Despite this grave threat, however, perhaps the greatest threat to life in 2.5 billion years, we continue, as a whole, to act as if nothing is wrong by ignoring the inconvenient truth pressing in upon us from every direction. Even in the midst of yet another unprecedented heat wave and drought that is turning a third of our nation into what the Shoshoni called, *Tomesha*, meaning, "Ground Afire," and what the 49ers renamed, *Death Valley*, we prefer to focus our attention on reestablishing our failed, unjust, and unsustainable economy. Instead of acknowledging that nearly every consecutive year for the past decade has been the hottest on record, we concern ourselves with the latest celebrity breakup. Or, perhaps worse, instead of committing to really doing something about climate change, many of our nation's top leaders are simply hoping for a miracle. Just this week, Governor Mary Fallin, of Oklahoma, where the heat is expected to remain in the triple digits for days to come, asked her constituents to go to church and pray, just as Governor Rick Perry asked Texans to do earlier this summer. Yet Perry, you will recall, is also the Governor who is currently fighting to make sure Texans remain "free" to use whatever kind of light bulbs they damn well please.

But in denying our role and responsibility regarding Global Warming, Perry and others are really in denial that our cultural paradigm of dominion over the Earth is ultimately based upon a love of death. It's based upon what Erich Fromm

called a *necrophilous orientation*, that, in his words, is “the quintessence of evil, the most severe pathology and the root of the most vicious destructiveness and inhumanity.”¹ Some in our society attempt to compensate for this evil, this disdain of life, by advocating for the rights of the unborn, or by promoting the afterlife, but their concern for the welfare of actual living beings right here and right now seems lacking, to say the least.

Of course, nobody wants to admit that our entire culture is based upon a pathological love of death, so we tend to deny and ignore it. And that’s easy to do because the most difficult thing for us to be aware of is our own paradigm. A fish doesn’t think about being surrounded by water, or a bird by air, anymore than we are aware of our own patterns of thinking and being. Indeed, our dominator culture, based upon very few ruling over most everyone—patriarchs over the masses, men over women, husbands over wives, adults over children, people over animals, humans over the Earth—is such an ancient part of our routine that it is almost instinctive. Historian Riane Eisler says it began, in particular, when humans largely stopped associating power with the ability to give life, with birth, and, instead, associated it with the power to take life, to kill. In her classic work, *The Chalice and the Blade*, she refers to the sword as the original symbol of this paradigm shift from life to death, from peace to war, from equality to dominion. The difference between now and then, she continues, is that this power to take life has been “amplified a millionfold by megatons of nuclear warheads...”² In short, we are more destructive today than ever!

But, like all paradigms, we’re so immersed in this way of being that we hardly notice we’re living in a Necropolis. Our culture of death is so routine that most of us don’t realize we’re trapped in its endless cycle. As William James, the pragmatist philosopher, complained nearly a hundred years ago, “We divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can; and the slaughter-houses and indecencies without end in which our life is founded are huddled out of sight and never mentioned, so that the world we recognize officially in literature and in society is a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world really is.”³

Life on Earth is going extinct at an alarming rate, largely because we pull death right out of the ground, where it rightfully belongs, and use it to fuel our lives. We use the corpses of dead plants to fuel our coal-fired power plants, and the oily remains of dead animals to fuel our cars and factories. We even use petrochemicals concocted from these dead resources to grow the food we eat. In fact, if you think 7 billion is a lot of people, consider that there are 20 billion livestock animals being

¹ Fromm, Erich, *The Heart of Man*, Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1964, p. 37.

² Eisler, Riane, *The Chalice and the Blade*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 1987, 1995, xvii.

³ James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, A Mentor Book, New American Library, 1902, 1958, p. 85.

fed petro-based diets to feed but a small portion of the human population, all emitting tons of methane gas, another contributor to global warming, into the air every day.⁴ According to a 1999 *Time Magazine* article, “In the United States, [alone] livestock now produces 130 times as much waste as people do.”⁵

Yet we reject the notion that it is death that has made our lives so convenient, even as part of a nation that’s currently fighting at least two deadly wars, and has been legally executing at least one to two prisoners every week for the past 200 years. Despite its homage to peace and love, and to the sanctity of life, even the dominant religion in our nation is based upon death and violence. Too many of us don’t really believe life and love will save us. The faith of many, rather, is in violence and death. As theologian Walter Wink laments, “The Myth of Redemptive Violence is the real myth of the modern world. It, and not Judaism or Christianity or Islam, is the dominant religion in our society today.”⁶ Although the historical Jesus may have taught his followers to love one another, to put away their swords, and to turn the other cheek, his teachings have been largely ignored in favor of the Apostle Paul who said, “I resolved to know nothing among you except Christ, and him crucified.”⁷ And ever since, Jesus’ original life affirming teachings have become nearly meaningless compared to the symbolic importance now attached to his brutal death. Even the cross is ultimately a symbol of execution, tyranny, and death. To this day Jesus remains largely revered because of his death, not because of the exemplarily life he led. If more people were to truly follow his teachings about caring for the poor and the sick, things might be different today, but, as Martin Luther King said, “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

But there is an alternative kind of religion that does continue to emphasize social justice and the welfare of all beings, that does practice loving one another, putting away our swords, turning the other cheek, caring for the poor and persecuted, even if it seldom ever mentions the name of Jesus. Unitarian Universalists, being the contrarians that we are, are lovers of life, and, thus, offer the world a more biophilous option. Of course, as we all know, our dominator culture despises alternative lifestyles, especially those based upon partnership and equality. It doesn’t mind traditional models of male domination, of fathers as head of the household, but it’s terrified of men living together in love as equals. It often goes so far as to ridicule, demonize, and even outlaw those who do love each other. It calls us sympathizers, N-lovers, tree-huggers, and bleeding hearts—as if a heart is good

⁴ According the University of Missouri Extension department, just one 150 hog produces 4.1 cubic square feet of methane gas each day. Multiply that times 5 billion (25% of all livestock animals) and you get 205 billion cubic tons of methane each day from hogs alone. [<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/G1881>]

⁵ Ayers, “Will We Still Eat Meat?” (*Time*, 1999)

⁶ Wink, Walter, *The Powers that Be*, A Galilee Book, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1998, 42.

⁷ I Cor. 2:2

for something other than loving and bleeding.

Our numbers may be few, and our world might be hanging off the edge of a dangerous precipice, but, like those tiny cells that eons ago found a way to bring the world back from the brink of total annihilation, our message of life, love, and equality can still turn things around. And like our other single-celled ancestors, those who stopped eating other organic molecules, other cells, and learned instead to eat sunlight, giving the world the gift of photosynthesis, we can lead our culture into a new age of solar power, the power of light and life, so that we no longer need to devour dead things to sustain ourselves. And now, in this wondrous age of mass communication and globalization, we might even help guide our entire planet into an age of post-nationalism, world unity and equality for all. Jesus said if you have enough faith you can move mountains. And I have faith that Unitarian Universalism can move the whole world, not by praying for a miracle, but one shovel at a time. But it's going to take all of us, working together, getting involved, sharing the burden, courageously promoting and modeling our alternative lifestyle. It's time for UU's to come out of the closet by being a bolder, louder, more visible presence in our world! As Schopenhauer once noted, "All truth passes through three stages; First, it is ridiculed. Second it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident." The culture of death has already ridiculed us. It has already violently resisted us. The time now has come for us to help it accept that our principles of life, love, freedom, justice, and equality, are self-evident. The time has come for our mustard seed sized faith to grow into a tree large enough to hold all the birds of the air. The time has come to live in harmony with nature. The time has come for our alternative lifestyle. The time has come for life. The time has come to question. The time has come to be contrary. The time has come for Unitarian Universalism!