

## **FRIENDS, FAITHEISTS, AND FOOLS**

**A sermon given for the ‘What We Believe’ 2018/19 sermon series  
by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on  
Sunday, June 2nd, 2019**

**This past fall, a member of this congregation sent me a feature-length article in the *New Yorker* titled “Without A Prayer: Why Are Americans Still Uncomfortable With Atheism?” It was a thoughtful piece written by an author reviewing a couple of newly released books about modern atheism, and was, as this member had written me, indeed “illuminating”. There is rarely a dull moment here at UU Wellesley Hills, but as a minister, I must admit to taking a special satisfaction in that moment when a congregant asks: “Have you considered atheism?”**

**Over the years, yes, I have considered it, and more recently, considered in it many varieties, because as one of the authors cited in that *New Yorker* piece notes, we should really speak of atheisms, plural, since atheists are not of one mind about religion. They quite have different commitments to and concerns about religious truth as they understand it. The best known public figures these days are the so-called “New Atheists”, vocal opponents of organized religion who want us to do away with religious institutions, myths, and doctrines altogether. The sooner those are dismantled, their thinking goes, the better. Their tone tends toward the strident and their sound-bites can**

**create a media sensation and strong feeling. But they do not speak for all atheists, or even the majority of them.**

**What I have noticed is that atheists — both within our congregation and out in the wider world — very understandably want to have their own say. Some people, when they hear that I am a minister, will go on the record immediately. “So you’re a minister?” they ask. “I don’t believe in God.” I can never quite be sure how that’s intended, either as a challenge or a confession, but my response is almost uniformly understated. “Oh, is that so?” I reply. I hope to signal some mix of acceptance and curiosity. We could go on, I suggest, or just leave it at this; I’m glad to hear more or to simply take you at your word.**

**Avowed atheists remain a religious minority in America today, although they have been growing in number. They deserve recognition and respect, obviously, but such things not often been accorded them over the course of our national history. Too commonly, atheists have been greeted with outright rejection and told that they not belong, either in a particular religious context or within the larger culture of this country. They have been threatened with social and spiritual isolation. Our UU congregations have been havens for many who identify as atheists and humanists, because they require no individual testimony, no theological assent, nothing apart from a desire to belong to the whole.**

**Throughout this program year, I have been preaching a sermon series about what we UUs believe, using the Rev. David O. Rankin’s popular ten-point outline as a guide. His tenth and final point is this: “We believe in the importance of a religious community. The validation of**

experience requires the confirmation of peers, who provide a critical platform along with a network of mutual support.” All of us need validation from one another. We must have communities where we can reliably find that.

In his book Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion, author Alain de Botton notes that established religions have a great deal of collective wisdom to impart to modern secular types, including lessons about the costs of being community and why we should bother to bear them. “Religions seem to know a great deal about our loneliness. Even if we believe very little of what they tell us about the afterlife or the supernatural origins of their doctrines,” he writes, “we can nevertheless admire their understanding of what separates us from strangers and their attempts to melt away one or two of the prejudices that normally prevent us from building connections with others.” What does prevent those connections, exactly?

One fundamental prejudice that we have is against people who think differently than we do, especially about matters of Ultimate Concern. De Botton himself has called for a newer atheism — which he labels “Atheism 2.0” — that trades in the hostility that the New Atheists have harbored toward traditional religion for an unabashed desire to crib from the best of it. He suggests that we should not simply trade one orthodoxy for another, a total embrace for blatant dismissal, and he is not alone in that approach.

A humanist chaplain who has served on a couple of college campuses now, Chris Stedman is also the author of Faitheist: How an Atheist

Found Common Ground with the Religious. In his memoir, he contends: “Dialogue isn’t meaningless.... to be understood, we all must work to understand.” Characterizing himself as “an interfaith activist”, Stedman writes: “I am interested in both exploring godless ethics and identifying and engaging shared values with the religious — in putting ‘faith’ in my fellow human beings and our shared potential to overcome the false dichotomies that keep us apart...” It is this hope he has for connection across significant divides that qualifies him as a “faitheist.”

An increasingly popular misconception these days is that community and uniformity are one and the same. Yet that makes little sense to anyone here schooled in the ethic of “unity in diversity” and “e pluribus unum”, out of many one. If we are not consciously allowing difference, then we are not intentionally building community. At its best, religious community helps us to reconcile with one another, and sometimes it does that in unlikely ways.

As de Botton notes, human beings rightly feel ambivalent about belonging to communities, which require their sacrificing some of their individual drives for the greater interests of the whole. So religions seek to provide us enticing incentives to do just that. They give us holidays and festivals and happy rites when a child is born or grows or comes of age or a lovely wedding ceremony when two people marry. They puts joyous dates on our calendars. Even thinking about our program year here at UU Wellesley Hills, which later this month is drawing to a swift close, I recognize that we have a Water Ceremony for our Ingathering at the start of it and a Flower Celebration at the end of it, both beloved rituals.

Not everything we do is so formal or orderly, however. Today is Bring-a-Friend Sundae, and after this service, we will have an ice cream social in outside in the courtyard, and several hour after that, this evening in our Parish Hall, we will have our Stand-Up Comedy Show complete with local headliners. Last month, for our Spring 2019 Carnival, we put a big Bouncy House our front lawn and closed the parking lot for pony rides and assigned a few folks to the face-painting table and welcomed the town and a little chaos into our seasonal routine. Our faith communities need silliness and frivolity and delight alongside all that is serious and important and high-minded.

Those that play together are more likely to stay together. In the medieval church, not now known for being especially light-hearted, de Botton observes, believers celebrated a Feast of Fools at the start of each new year. Its four days of revelry eventually became their own sort of holy days of obligation, a time for merry-making, forced hilarity, outrageous behavior, disorderly conduct. So clearly, bacchanals did not die out with the ancient religious. Our desire for them persists well into our modern-day. Lax and relaxed encounters suggest that we can trust each other, even in irregular or unguarded moments.

In her *New Yorker* article “Without a Prayer”, Casey Cep suggests that in America, atheists have been regarded not as a group of skeptical people, but as a group of suspect ones. That was truer in the earlier in our national history, when religious toleration was exceedingly selective, and people could be jailed for breaking so-called Blasphemy Laws. (Interestingly, Massachusetts is one of six states in the union to

still have those on its books.) More recently, both the Supreme Court and the U.S. Congress has recognized the rights of atheists. “The freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is understood to protect theistic and non-theistic beliefs and the right not to profess or practice any religion,” the newer version of the International Religious Freedom Act declared in its unqualified language.

What Cep and other writers on this subject have requested is that we recognize atheists for what they do profess to believe instead of what they do not, whether they tag themselves faithiests or Newer Atheists or skeptics or another designation altogether. Surveys have found that Americans do not object to attempts to keep atheists from holding public office, including the office of notary public. But we are all now asked to recognize the value of atheistic perspectives in our religiously pluralistic era.

There can be no freedom of belief without freedom of unbelief; that much should be obvious to us. The late minister the Rev. Kenneth Patton wrote that our UU congregations should keep “an open room for the encouragement of our struggle. It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person. It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinion. It is a house of truth-seeking,” and that means our spiritual home needs to stay roomy enough to hold all sorts of complicated truths — partial or total — for other people and ourselves. Only then can it serve as “the workshop of our common endeavor,” Rev. Patton concluded.

**Belonging is at least as important as believing. Most of us here intuit that, which is why we are here in this spot on a Sunday morning and not elsewhere. “We can be dogmatically fixated on who is ‘right’ and who is ‘wrong’, or we can discern a way to live together in tension and ambiguity,” Stedman declares in Faithiest. “Joining forces, we can... dictate a new narrative — one that bridges the religious and the secular, rather than threatening the ‘other’ with extinction.” We can ‘Co-Exist’, just as that colorful bumper sticker urges us on local roads and our highways.**

**Stedman and de Botton arrived at their atheisms through distinctive routes themselves. De Botton was raised in a secular Jewish household by intellectuals and later came to discover the power of philosophy in his own life. Stedman was raised by spiritual seekers and came to an evangelical Christian sect in his teens, but by his twenties, he recognized that his co-religionists there would never affirm him as a gay man and so left it. Interestingly, both men founded their own communities; de Botton opened his School of Life, the first one, in London, while Stedman served for time on one college campus before going to another campus and starting the Humanist Community there.**

**The two recognized the importance of religious community, just as we do, but theirs are carefully populated in a way UU Wellesley Hills is not. As a UU congregation, we are a multi-faith community: people come here from Jewish and Christian, Hindu and Humanist backgrounds, among others. A friend of mine and colleague in ministry taught me to say, “Some do, some don’t”, in response to broad theological questions. For instance: “Do UUs believe in an**

afterlife?” Some of us do, some do not, while others of us cannot be sure, and still others refuse to even speculate.

My own theological framework is not atheistic, admittedly, and I worry about doing atheisms complete justice, because I know it is squarely the frame of reference for some of us here today. It stretches us spiritually to entertain one another’s perspectives, and so we issue no doctrinal tests here at UU Wellesley Hills. We are in some-do-some-don’t territory and making our way through it together. What we cannot do is leave our points of difference unacknowledged. We need to love those points instead of fear them, speak them instead of stifle them. As the Rev. Dr. Michael A. Schuler observes, “without trust there is no space for communities to gather or for friendships to be forged.” Without openness, there can be no trust.

For ten months in a row now, I have been preaching about what we UUs believe, and I am loathe to end this sermon series shrugging and tossing my hands in the air, as if to say, “We believe in whole bunch of things!” So please understand that this is not what I am saying today. At the start of his familiar outline, Rev. Rankin declares: “We believe in the freedom of religious expression.” At the end, he declares: “We believe in the importance of religious community.” We also believe — somehow, against all odds — that those two things can be combined into one ethos.

Since last fall, I’ve thought about that *New Yorker* title “Without a Prayer.” Maybe it’s the minister in me talking, but I believe that we all have our prayers, whether or not we have words for them, or whether or not there is “a God somewhere”, as that familiar old hymn holds.



**Sometimes, we may pose theological queries to one another, while other times we may keep each other company, maybe here in the Sanctuary by that communion table where we light our candles, maybe out on the lawn by that Bouncy House, maybe in the Parish Hall tonight at our Stand-Up Comedy show. If that seems like so much tomfoolery, then so be it. Here we are friends and Faithfuls and fellow companions. Where we cannot share certainty, we can certainly share joy.**

**\* \* \***