

**Sermon: “And You Shall Have No Idols”**  
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**Readings**  
**from The Clown in the Belfry by Frederick Buechner**

Somebody should write a book someday about the silences in Scripture.... The silence that has always most haunted me is the silence of Jesus before Pilate. Pilate asks his famous question, “What is truth?” and Jesus answers him with a silence that is almost overwhelming in its eloquence.....

Jesus did not say that religion was the truth or that his own teachings were the truth or that what people taught about him was the truth or that the Bible was the truth or the Church or any system of ethics or theological doctrine. There are individual truths in all of them, we hope and believe, but individual truths were not what Pilate was after or what you and I are after either unless I miss my guess. Truths about this or that are a dime a dozen, including religious truths. THE truth is what Pilate is after: the truth about who we are and who God is if there is a God, the truth about life, the truth about death, the truth about truth itself. That is the truth we are all after.

It is a truth that can never be put into words because no words can contain it. It is a truth that can never be caught in any doctrine or creed including our own because it will never stay still long enough but is always moving and shifting like air. It is a truth that is always beckoning us in different ways and coming at us from different directions.

from the Zi Ye from Women in Praise of the Sacred edited by Jane Hirschfield  
(a collection of popular Chinese folk songs, traditionally ascribed to one woman poet of that name 6-3 B.C.E.)

All night I could not sleep  
Because of the moonlight on my bed.  
I kept on hearing a voice calling:  
Out of Nowhere, Nothing answered “yes.”

**Sermon**      “And You Shall Have No Idols”

Whenever I think about the pride we Unitarian Universalists take in our dedication to diversity and our commitment to the open search for truth, two experiences immediately come to mind. The first occurred on a chill, wintry night at the

installation of a colleague. At the last minute, I was asked to step in and offer the prayer. It was an honor to be asked and, of course, I accepted. When the time came to deliver the prayer, I stepped into the pulpit and invited the congregation into the silence. Then I began my prayer with these simple words - "God of our heart's own praise." Notice that I did not invoke the name of the Lord, or pay tribute to the star-filled Universe of Science. I did not call upon the ancient earth Goddess by any of her known names, nor did I appeal to the Spirit of Life which is often a more palatable compromise to those of a more agnostic or atheistic bent. Instead I decided to cast my circle wider than any of those names, choosing an unadorned, non-descriptive, three letter word and a phrase honoring the personal perspective of each individual present - "God of our heart's own praise," I said. No sooner had I spoken these words aloud, when I heard the congregation's Minister Emeritus, who was sitting in an ornately-carved throne-like chair directly behind the pulpit, begin to hyperventilate. The row of people sitting behind my husband in the congregation walked out in protest, without hearing the rest of the prayer.

Experience number two: I was standing in the narthex of a congregation I once served on a warm, spring morning in conversation with a new member. He was expressing a deep and honest concern that our worship is too humanist for him. It felt to him as if we are afraid to even speak the word "God" in our services. He wanted to know, do I really think there is a kind of religious humanism which truly honors the search for spirituality, like his own? Can it really provide someone a sustaining theology over the course of their whole life? Don't I think that humanism is a movement of the past, irrelevant to the younger generations of today? I gave a two-fold response to his honest questions.

First, on behalf of the congregation, as the person most responsible for the nature of our worship, I apologized if our worship had not felt as inclusive and welcoming as I and others aspire it to be, or if it has misrepresented the real and significant theological diversity of our people. Second, on a more personal level, as an almost life-long Unitarian Universalist raised in a predominantly humanist congregation and family, I could not agree that religious humanism is somehow a deficient, outdated theology. I can still witness to the enduring values it gave me as a child. I can still attest to the ways in which it sustained me through some of the most difficult times in my life; how one day in my high school years it inspired me to seek ordination; how it still guides my ministry today. And, for better or for worse, it must be admitted, at the time I was still a member of that younger generation in the church. However, I also assured him that I thought modern humanism could and should honor the spiritual search not only for themselves, but also for others, including those who find meaning on different spiritual paths.

I don't believe that these two experiences are atypical within our Unitarian Universalist circles. In fact, I know that they are all too common. We are not unlike that mythical town where God came to visit one day. As the story is told, the villagers saw her walking down the road – a beautiful sight in a flowing robe and a wonderful hat. Long after she had disappeared from view, they stood there watching in an awed silence. But as they began to reflect on what had just happened, an argument started. Some claimed that the wonderful hat which God had been wearing was blue. Others were certain that it had been red. The argument spread throughout the whole village and no one could resolve it once and for all. In the end, a wall was built to divide the town between the two factions. Each built a new church, one dedicated to the God of the blue hat and one dedicated to the God of the red.

Many years passed and the people remained enemies. Until one day when God returned, walking on top of the wall with her arms out for balance. This time she was wearing no hat at all. The people ran forward and cried out – “You must settle our argument! On that day, long ago, what color hat were you wearing?” God looked puzzled and began to think. Finally she admitted to vaguely remembering that day. “On that day,” she said, “I believe I was wearing my hat that is blue on one side and red on another.” My friends, we are not unlike the people of that mythical town, except that in many ways despite our best values our walls are still standing. Yet, for us, the issue that divides us is not the kind of hat God wears, but whether or not we see God in some image at all. Why it is so important in our creedless religious tradition? Why are we willing to be so divided from one another?

I think we tell ourselves it is important to defend that wall because we need a religious community that accepts and honors our experience. We look to the language, the stories, the questions and the history lifted up in our common worship, and at some deeply personal level we want it to mirror our own. I think we tell ourselves it is important, because we worry that if we hear the language of someone else's heart spoken out loud some Sunday then it means we may no longer be welcome here. And we are afraid of what we might lose. I have heard longtime humanists say that if we were to return more to the Judeo-Christian roots of our faith, they would have no other place to go on Sunday mornings. Similarly, I have heard Christians and theists among us say that if they were turned out, there is no other place where their expansive and liberal understanding of God or the Goddess would fit. Finally, I think we tell ourselves it is important because we forget or neglect this one critical truth: that we have other beliefs that unite us across our differences, beliefs about compassion, justice and liberty that are even more important to defend in the larger world.

This true test of tolerance and understanding is not just a theoretical dilemma for us. I have had conversations with members of this Fellowship which have expressed the

wide range of questions about how to truly live our theological diversity, from personal fears about the use of traditional religious language within these walls to personal fears of ridicule for expressing an honest belief in God. Such conversations always leave me wondering, just what is at the foundation of this great divide? Is it that we have not yet learned to truly embody the tolerance that we love to preach? Is it that the ideal of non-theists and theists alike sitting together in worship is just a naïve dream? I, for one, am not yet willing to concede failure. In fact, I am not convinced that the tension among us is as rooted in the question of God's nature and existence as it might seem. In my mind, we have not yet risen above the debate over God's hat. Put into other words, as a religious movement we are in live danger of participating in a destructive idolatry - an idolatry of the mind and spirit, the exact idolatry against which our great tradition has always warned us.

What is idolatry exactly? The twentieth century theologian James Luther Adams argues that it is what occurs when "a social movement adopts as the center of loyalty an idol, a segment of reality torn away from the context of universality, an inflated, misplaced abstraction made into an absolute." The Chinese philosopher, Wei Wu Wei, simply describes idolatry as the confused act of "worshiping the teapot instead of drinking the tea." We are witnesses to idolatry all around us, every day. A billboard proclaims the Bible as the absolute source of all authority for all time, removing its words from their historical and religious context and elevating its very existence into a kind of deity itself. A charismatic leader makes promises to his people, claiming their loyalty and allegiance for himself, rather than for a larger, shared vision. Two people make their promises to one another, because they like the idea and the ideal of being married, but forget until it is too late that marriage involves being committed to a real, live, and imperfect person. It is a very human tendency; to turn an object of admiration into an object of misguided worship.

We can make an idol out of anything, most especially something that we might otherwise consider good and true. If we are to take down that wall that divides us, we must admit that we have been guilty of idolatries of our own. We need not look far to find them. Reason has always been the bedrock of humanism. The signers of The Humanist Manifesto called for a new approach to religion based upon "the larger understanding of the universe, [our] scientific achievements, and [our] deeper appreciation for [the kinship of all people]." But we know that we have created an idol, that we have torn one piece of reality away from the whole and made it an absolute, when reason becomes the only acceptable means to express that understanding of the universe or that sense of kinship. Reason becomes an idol, when it is deemed wishy-washy to shed a tear in worship or superstitious to find meaning in a ritual, like saying grace or sharing a seed communion. Last, but not least, reason becomes an idol when we insist on interpreting all religious language literally, denying the rich heritage of

imagination and metaphor within our liberal religious tradition.

But idolatry does not belong to the humanists alone. On the more traditional side of the theological fence, I have witnessed the theists and Christians making an idol of tradition itself. Yes, it is true that out of our roots comes a distinctly Universalist and Unitarian approach to congregational life. But we know that we have created an idol, that we have torn one piece of reality away from the whole and made it an absolute, when tradition becomes reduced to mere forms, rather than a living connection to our past. Tradition becomes an idol, when our theological roots are only drawn back to our liberal Christian Unitarian and Universalist forebears, instead of also the free-thinking traditions of religious radicals like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker. Tradition becomes an idol, when the form of our worship becomes more important than the meaning found in it. Last, but not least, tradition becomes an idol for theists, when we believe that our God or Goddess will only be present only if he or she is called by the right name.

Tradition or Reason, the correct language of a God or a Goddess or of Human Good, a red hat or a blue one. Are these distinctions really what we are about as a religious people? Or is there something more? I think of my colleague, Kendyl Gibbons, who once argued that the mature pagan understands the different faces of the gods and goddesses to be aspects of the Divine, not many idols in and of themselves. I think of our Unitarian Universalist brothers and sisters who dare to say to the larger Christian world that there just may be different interpretations and understandings of the meaning of Jesus' life. I think of the comments of the physicist, David Scott, who observed that "the truly great scientists were not afraid to ponder larger religious aspects of their work. They found this intellectually engaging." Gregg Easterbrook notes these connections in his article, "Science and God: A Warming Trend?", observing that Newton, for instance, was fascinated by biblical prophecy [and the zodiac of the planets]; that Werner Heisenberg drew on Eastern mysticism to help develop uncertainty theory; that Erwin Schrödinger considered the inherent beauty of theorems a possible indication of the larger influence in natural law.

Frederick Buechner is right. We are united in our search for truth. Not just any one particular truth, but THE truth. Yet, he warns us, "It is a truth that can never be put into words because no words can contain it. It is a truth that is always beckoning us in different ways and coming at us from different directions." But what unites us as Unitarian Universalists is not just our commitment to the freedom to search for that truth. Our best strength lies in our shared commitment to fight the idolatries of the mind and spirit that persistently and insidiously get in the way of not just our search for truth, but of our free expression of the truths that we find. Historically, in the larger religious world, we have fought against the idolatry of arbitrary dogmas and creeds.

We have fought against the idolatry of charismatic cults and calls to theocracy, and other absolute forms of religion. We have fought against the idolatry of righteous morality that gives people the idea that they have the right to play God in the lives of others. Now, we need only to follow that noble tradition to its logical conclusion, and seek to fight the fear and idolatry that rears up its ugly head from within our own ranks.

The folk song of the ancient Chinese woman lives on: “All night I could not sleep because of the moonlight on my bed. I kept on hearing a voice calling: out of Nowhere, Nothing answered ‘yes.’” We may or may not hear the source of that voice in a Divine being, but this is not the most important religious issue before us. What matters is that we hear an answering “yes” inside of us, a “yes” that calls us to a fuller, more meaningful and hopeful life. What matters even more is that we create here in this place the kind of supportive environment in which we can share our “yes” moments with one another with appreciation of their power to transform our lives and not with a fear of their differences. It is a “yes” which calls us to confess the vast and open mystery of the universe; a witness that both science and religion can agree upon. This courage to cultivate a direct and free experience of religion is what brings us together, theist and non-theists, God and Goddess worshippers, alike, if our idolatries do not get in our way. We must look beyond the names to the truth that the names reveal.

I am still a religious humanist at heart, but I am not a humanist who believes that I must be surrounded by other humanists alone. I am still a humanist at heart, but I am at times willing to try on a red hat, even though the one that I see out there in the universe is blue. I am a humanist, who wants to stand in solidarity with others who see Truth as a many-faceted thing. I am a humanist, who wants to stand arm in arm with the theist and the pagan and the Christian and the Buddhist who affirm with me that there is no place for narrow literalism in religion. I am a humanist, who wants to unite with all who share my belief in the worth and dignity of this life. I am a humanist, who refuses to let mere words build up the walls between us as Unitarian Universalists. The religious message of openness and freedom that we have to offer the world is too important to lose. May we have the courage to heed it ourselves and to bring down our strange and foolish walls with laughter and care.