

"beliefnet.com"

**03 July 2005
Unity Church-Unitarian**

**Worship Leader: Rev. Lisa Friedman
Worship Associate: Ginger Reynolds**

Reading: from "On Believing More Than Most" – John Buehrens

When it comes to believing, the prophets knew that it's not a matter only of vision – though without that the people perish – it's less a matter of ideals than of faithful realism. About 12 years ago, at a Unitarian Universalist minister's retreat ... we were each asked to write a short personal credo. Mine I called, with tongue in cheek, "A Creed, With Apologies to the Apostles." It went, I think, like this:

I believe in (at most) one God, creator of heaven and earth,
And in Jesus, and others, including God's daughters,
Who found themselves anointed to high tasks and powers,
And were filled with the Spirit (at least more than I am),
But were born and conceived in the usual way.
We are all crucified (unless we chicken out)
And descend into hells, too often of our own making,
Yet the Spirit refuses to stay buried for long,
And rises again in human form.
How great a cloud of witnesses surrounds us on high
And will follow us
To judge what we've done or left undone!
I believe in a Spirit, beyond us, within us, sometimes among us,
Making for wholeness and holiness,
A church universal transcending tradition,
A communion of holy women and men,
The forgiveness of sins (for we all miss the mark),
And the Spirit's power to arise from death,
In the form of justice, embodied and live,
And share life with others, everlastingly. Amen.

Funny, I still believe that. And probably more, not less. I believe, with the Buddhists, for example, that the chief spiritual task of life is to free ourselves from the egocentric, and that the task of faithful living is to serve the common good by knowing what's Real, like the realities of Earth... Some beliefs that I hold I share with neo-pagans, and with atheists, to whom I say, there are many gods out there worth denying. What I won't submit to is the notion that there is any virtue in believing as little as possible.

Reading: Impassioned Clay – Ralph N. Helverson

Deep in ourselves resides the religious impulse.
Out of the passions of our clay it rises.

We have religion when we stop deluding ourselves
that we are self-sufficient, self-sustaining, or self-derived.

We have religion when we hold some hope beyond the present,
some self-respect beyond our failures.

We have religion when our hearts are capable of leaping up at beauty,
when our nerves are edged by some dream in the heart.

We have religion when we have an abiding gratitude for all that we have received.

We have religion when we look upon people with all their failings
and still find in them good;
when we look beyond people to the grandeur in nature
and to the purpose in our own heart.

We have religion when we have done all that we can,
and then in confidence entrust ourselves
to the life that is larger than ourselves.

Sermon: "beliefnet.com" – Rev. Lisa Friedman

Someone forwarded an article to me recently, touting an internet site that is considered the "world's leading religion and spiritual e-community" – www.beliefnet.com. Intrigued, I dialed in and was immediately offered a test of my religious beliefs through the Belief-O-Matic Quiz. "Even if YOU don't know what faith you are, Belief-O-Matic knows," the site promised. "Answer 20 questions ... and Belief-O-Matic will tell you what religion (if any) you practice or ought to consider practicing." Then in small red print beneath this bold statement read the words "Warning: Belief-O-Matic assumes no legal liability for the ultimate fate of your soul."

Well, who could resist? I tackled the 20 questions one by one. Some were theological, probing my beliefs about the nature and existence of God, the origins of the earth and the meaning of death. Others were more philosophical. How did I explain the reality of human suffering? What did I see as the sources of human salvation? Then the last section explored my moral opinions about such diverse topics as the abortion debate, homosexuality, and the state of the environment. Before I knew it, my answers were committed in writing. I clicked on the "send" button and waited for its response. I was curious. Would it tell me something that I did not already know or had failed to see after all these years?

I admit to a distinct sense of relief when the results came back to tell me that my beliefs matched 100% with those of the Unitarian Universalists. After all, how embarrassing it would be for the minister to be anything else! In close succession, I had 98% in common with secular humanists, 92% with liberal protestants, and 92% with liberal Quakers.

At first glance, Belief-O-Matic appeared to have earned its reputation for wisdom: it knew a free-thinking religious liberal when it saw one. But then I continued to glance down the list of results. What did it tell me to know that I had almost the same amount of beliefs in common with the multi-theistic neo-pagans and the skeptical atheists and agnostics? What did it mean that I had more in common with the cult-like Scientologists or the conservative Mormons than the more familiar Roman Catholics, with whom I grew up? I began to wonder about Belief-O-Matic's method. What does it take to discover someone's theological and spiritual home? Could religion be something more than merely a tabulated list of our values and beliefs?

To tell you that I am a Unitarian Universalist, on the one hand, might tell you more than you ever wanted to know. It could reveal to you that I am most at home in a creedless church that has a diversity of theological beliefs and does not require a uniformity of religious experience among its members; that believes in the human power to create justice even in the midst of a flawed and imperfect world: that encourages the free religious search of each individual and that has a proud radical religious and social history. But, on the other hand, there are many things that would remain a mystery to you. To simply say that I am a Unitarian Universalist does not tell you what hope enables me to get out of bed in the morning. It does not tell you whether or not I find it helpful to pray. It does not tell you what gives me the courage to love other people, despite inevitable disappointment, or to strive for goodness, even though I cannot

measure my success. It does not tell you to what I am willing to give my deepest loyalty or trust, or for what, if anything, I am willing to take a leap of faith.

Religion is something more than attending a synagogue or mosque, a temple or church of your choice. It is something more than those rare moments of star-gazing, when we wonder if there is anything that knows we are here. It is not that these things are unimportant — on the contrary, I have had some of my greatest insights beneath those stars, and my dark nights of the soul would have been immeasurably worse without a community of supportive, like-minded souls to stand by me. But to leave religion to a one-hour event, one day a week, or to those unusual moments of solitude, is to deny its most personal nature. It is to deny what even the Belief-O-Matic quiz knows — that regardless of how we choose to define them, each of us has opinions about what it means to be alive in this world, opinions which cannot help revealing our beliefs about what truly matters.

This morning, I would invite us to think about the religion that is not found on the internet, or in the traditions of the church, or in a treatise on theology; but rather the religion that is found woven into the fabric of our daily actions and lives.

If I were designing a quiz of my own for religious discovery and self-understanding, I would reduce the list of questions from 20 down to three. First and foremost, I would ask, where is your home? This is not a question about where you live, or your social station, or your financial net worth. It is a question about your sense of place, or what some theologians have called your ground of being. In those moments when you feel most at peace with yourself, strong and calm, renewed and ready to take on the daunting world once more, where are you? Are you at the dinner table with your closest companions? Are you walking through the woods, alone amidst the beauty? Are you serving food to the hungry or lending a hand to stranger in need? Are you caught up in a moment of honest reflection and silent prayer? Each of us has a kind of place or a type of experience that centers us, that humbles and inspires us with the realization both of our small role in the infinite span of time and of the power of finite human beings to make a difference today. Each of us has a place which reminds us of who we truly are in all our confidence and doubt, and of our connection to the wider circle of humanity. Each of us has a place which, when we go there with open eyes, recalls us to the meaning of our days.

We might give different names to the experience. Some would say that in those moments they stand before the presence of the Creator, or know themselves to be part of the Spirit of Life that flows through this world. Others would say that it is in those moments that we become fully human, aware of the love and redemption that we are capable of bringing to life on our own accord, if we would only dare to choose them. How we name it is perhaps not so important as the experience itself. What is important to know is where we stand, to see how we might become rooted in best of this world, so that we can begin to shine a light into the places of darkness in our lives. Often, simply by trusting our footing, we are able to reach farther than we might think in sharing our sources of meaning and hope. And so the lover of nature reminds us that what is sacred in this world lies in each of us, even as it lies in the depths of the ocean or the time-worn pebble in the sand. The compassionate activist calls us back to the meaning that is found in our connection to the stranger and our willingness to cast wide the embrace of our humanity. The loyal companion witnesses to the fact that the universe does not abandon us, while the meditative mystic invites us to listen to that still, small voice within. Where is our home? It is often in different places, but together they help us to reflect the light of understanding and truth back to each other.

Second, I would ask, where are your doubts? This may seem like a strange question to ask in the search for religion, but it may be the most important one of all. For none of us is born with the one, true answer to any aspect of our lives. We search and discover, search and change, and begin the search again. It is perhaps more honest to admit up front that we live out the biggest questions of our lives with more ambiguity than clarity. And so it is that in his personal credo statement, a snap-shot of his beliefs in a given moment of time, that John Buehrens admits to believing in “at most one God,” while allowing the possibility for none, recognizing that perhaps the truest God is the one we have tested, doubted, and reclaimed over time. He affirms the presence of creative power that at times works through humanity, while doubting that it has occurred as only an isolated moment in history or only in the lives of men. He challenges the traditional concept of resurrection as meaning not the salvation of souls but rather the renewal of justice in this world, while recognizing that hell is often, to our shame, a place of our own making. His beliefs stand side by side with his doubts. His challenges stand side by side with his heart-felt affirmations. His credo might indeed become a page of what my own minister once called his “loose-leaf” bible, a collection of hard-won wisdom and time-tested truth that sometimes requires pages to be added and to be taken out to remain true to oneself.

Why do our doubts matter? Because they reveal to us the places in our lives where the light and the dark meet, the grey lines at the edges of our understanding. In doing so, I believe that they serve a healthy spiritual purpose. If we have a reasonable doubt as to our ability to completely know the universe's ultimate plan and purpose, then we are less likely to attempt to play God ourselves or to set ourselves up as the arbiter of another person's life or death. If we have a reasonable doubt as to the destiny of our humanity, then we are less likely to naïvely ignore our potential for evil or to lightly dismiss our potential for good.

The grey lines ask us to pay attention, to watch and to wonder. They do not suggest that we arrive at no conclusions or articulate no beliefs at all, but rather they keep us alert to the folly of our own human rigidity and arrogance.

Even more than this, our doubts can reveal to us growing edges of our lives. If questions about the meaning of death keep us awake at night, then we often find ourselves striving to make more of the gift of our days. If questions about the nature of prayer keep returning to us, then we find ourselves learning to listen to the rhythms of the universe with more accuracy. Where are our doubts? In the places where the light and dark meet, where there are choices and commitments to be made without perfect knowledge, and where we discover ourselves, again and again.

Last, but not least, I would ask, where is your heart? This is perhaps the most straightforward of the three questions, though sometimes it is the most obvious answer that slips beyond our sight. I remember once telling my father that I thought I would choose a career in politics, not as a politician per se, but as a lobbyist or an activist for change. Several months later he said to me one night at dinner, "Lisa, I'm not sure that politics is the best fit for your desire to make a difference in the world." He went on to explain that he believed that a person's calling was discovered more through her actions than her words. "You would much rather call a friend who was having a bad day, than read the newspaper at night. You would rather help serve the meal raising funds for a good cause, than go door to door with a petition. You would rather read a book of poetry than an essay written by our congresswoman. It's not that these are bad, but they don't point to a passion for life in Washington, DC." At first, I was rather hurt, for it wasn't that I didn't want to do these things in an ideal world, but neither could I refute his argument. My heart did appear to lie elsewhere, and my actions and daily commitments followed my heart rather than my head.

After our conversation, I began to watch my father for a while in return. Most traditionalists would describe him as a non-religious person, despite his involvement with the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, for he is the kind of person who does not sing any words in the hymns that he does not believe in, and consequently doesn't sing much. But as I watched him through those days, I saw him following his heart, living out examples of his values and faith. Although he worked a strenuous job, he dedicated time and money not only to his family, but to a variety of local organizations and national causes. In any meeting, he was the voice of possibility and encouragement amid the doubt and worry. He had a knack for bringing diverse people together, only to discover that they had much in common. Where does his heart lead him? To a simple faith in humanity and life that I can see so clearly, but that I don't know if he has ever articulated to himself.

Where does your heart lead you? This is the religious question that we answer daily, whether or not we know it. Our actions reveal whether we live more for ourselves or for others, whether we live with more hope than despair, whether we are sustained by a vision that broadens the horizons of our humanity or reduces it through fear. Our faith may be seen more through the answers to life's smaller questions than the larger ones, through our response to the sadness of a child, or the need of neighbor, or the immediate plight of our community. It may be seen in the communities and congregations which we choose to walk with through our joys and sorrows, and our quests for justice. This is the religion that the Belief-O-Matic Quiz or any creed cannot measure – the generosity and determination of the human soul. Where are our hearts? In the places where we find hope and sustenance for the journey through life.

Now, I recognize that my quiz won't give you a handy label, nor will it necessarily tell you your closest religious companions. The results of the Belief-O-Matic are not without merit, for sometimes it is helpful to know where we might find a spiritual community that fits and a place of welcome. But to do so is only the beginning of a life-long process of homecoming, if we are to take the journey seriously. What is the meaning of life? We answer that question daily. Out of the ground of our own being, we claim the light of hope for our lives and our world. Out of our doubts, we claim the truth that revelation is not sealed, but brings new glimpses of insight to us throughout our lives. Out of the depths of our hearts, we claim the right to choose to dedicate our best selves to a larger human legacy. And is this

not religion? Is this not the essence of what binds us to the beauty of our days and the possibility of our hours? I wish for you a faith that has room for the world in which we live and that embraces the lives that are given us as mystery to be lived. May you live it with integrity, even as it evolves within you.