

Perhaps everyone has a favorite line from a song, or from a speech, an essay, a novel. I have many, but one of my favorites lately is from a sonnet by John Milton: “They also serve who only stand and wait.” In my memory I had transposed that line to “They also serve who only sit.”

I am by nature a sitter. A sitter in a world of doers, of bustlers. If I’m out on the porch and someone asks Sarah, “Where’s Dennis?” she’ll say, “Out on the porch.” “Oh, what’s he doing?” “Nothing, just sitting,” she’ll most likely say. Well, that’s not exactly accurate. I am, in fact, busy — thinking.

So, a while ago I was hard at work on the porch, thinking about trees. In particular I was thinking about this very large oak that looms over the porch. Everything in that enormous tree, perhaps fiveton worth, came from a single acorn. That single acorn contained a formula, a set of instructions, which enabled it to turn water and carbon dioxide when in the presence of solar energy into sugar with the byproduct of oxygen. That sugar then became the chemical energy necessary to support that acorn as it went about producing “oakiness” — oak roots to suck up water; oak leaves to catch the sunlight; oak bark to protect the internal oak distribution system, and so on. All from a design inherent in the acorn.

I knew that must be the case because not 10 feet away from the oak stood a tall pine whose ripened seed had taken the same carbon dioxide and water exposed to the same sunlight and produced the same sugar, but this time turned those basic elements into “pineyness.” Everything came from the original instructions! First there was nothing in the space — perhaps a century ago — where the oak now stood until the most primitive molecular compounds of gas and water energized by the sun were transposed into this living monument.

(Sometimes I exhaust myself sitting on the porch!!)

Next, my mind wandered. Where is the lesson here — primitive elements changed into a complex living structure? What if, 15 billion years ago, the seed of our physical universe also contained instructions? Not commands. More like a pattern. A pattern that unfolds as the fabric grows. Certainly from the very beginning, or shortly thereafter, there were controlling and designing characteristics: gravity to pull particles, first small and then larger, together. Electromagnetism to produce power around objects; nuclear forces to hold the smallest entities together as well as allow them to break apart and re-form. Light and heat into gases, gases compressed into orbs, stars. Stars flinging off denser, cooling, compounds. Starlight from burning star gas cooling into rock and mineral and liquid. Then into life. Still the pattern developing. Cell into plant. Plant to animal, Animal to man. The original impulse, 15 billion years ago, still unfolding, reaching out through nearly infinite variety of life toward its “universeness,” perhaps just as the acorn does its smaller unfolding and enfolding into oakiness.

Animal to man. Now there’s the change, the pattern development that is of most interest to us. What is the universe reaching for? Certainly to move beyond the purely animal instincts, how else to explain the appearance of civilization? The curbing and directioning of the life urges in the core of every human being: the appearance of morality — the birth of right and wrong. In its primitive stage, morality appeared as taboo, superstition, and then religious ritual empowered by tribal loyalty. Hinduism, Greek and then Roman mythology, Persian mysticism, Taoism and Confucianism, Platonism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, the development of science and finally the development of political freedom, all thrusting upward through time, a florescence of the original urge. What, then, comes after religion as we know it? For, to be honest, as science and education brighten and enlighten, the magic of

the old religions dims. As the pattern becomes more clear, the old explanations no longer suffice. Not because man is becoming less moral — as religionists would cry, but precisely because man is becoming more moral.

Here is where I think the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism come in: what does a moral universe look like post tribal religion? First, every person (perhaps every being) is significant and worthy of respect. The universe is Particular: no one has ever seen Human Being; we have always only seen particular human beings — Bill, Joan, Sue, Fred and so on. Perhaps in the simple, original pattern those billions of years ago, there was the unworded acknowledgement that the universe could only love and be loved in its particularity: as star, moon, rock, tree, baby and old Bob over there. It is why UUs are drawn to celebrate every individuation and life choice without reservation.

Second, justice in human relations. This springs from our first principle. We insist on radical relating: THAT you are is more important than what you own, or where you live, or who you know. Elemental fairness will determine the justice of our thoughts about and actions toward one another.

Third, encouragement to spiritual growth. Slowly it is dawning that spirituality defines the search for meaning and authenticity in the journey outward from the first seed. True spirituality finds its essence in the sense of awe shared by all scientists, artists, mystics, saviors; by all parents who have witnessed a moment of birth or by any who have been in attendance at the moment of death. There is no separation between science and spirituality. The growth of scientific awareness by its very nature enlarges spirituality.

Fourth, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This principle is nothing short of the battle cry which defies political and

religious tribalism. It is the rheostat which gradually enlightens the darkness. More than any other principle, this is the one that caused Unitarianism to begin its separation from the mother ship of Christianity. It is also the principle that insists on the essentiality of honesty in all discourse: personal, professional, political and religious.

Fifth, the right of conscience and the use of (and confidence in) the democratic process in all gatherings. If the universe is unfolding still, in the same way that my oak is growing, then there is always more to be known and the new direction must spring from continual openness to new ideas and expressions and whose source and appearance is continually unexpected, a delightful surprise.

Sixth, world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. This is the exact opposite of tribal nationalism and why UUs find calls to regressive retrenchment so dangerous and repulsive.

And finally, our seventh principle, the interdependence of all existence, intertwined, en-fabiced, of which we are all a part. "No man is an island," said John Donne. I think, perhaps, this last principle may embody the full maturity of existence, the grown tree, the pattern as it appears in the finished tapestry. It may be what a fully matured morality would look like, beyond good and evil, when every part from gnat to galaxy is honored for itself.

So this is this year's message for Stewardship. Give as you are able so we may support the fruition of these wonderful principles and do our small part in the blossoming of this and perhaps distant worlds.