**CAPITAL UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION**

**ORDER OF SERVICE** – Sunday, May 25, 2014

**Welcome:** Board Member – Dyanne Lineger

Service Coordinator: Peter Scales

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| **Prelude:** | Janet Yonge |
| **Opening Words & Lighting the Chalice**  #419 – Look to This Day! | Peter Scales |
| **Hymn:** #1028 – Fire of Commitment | Congregation |
| **Story for all Ages:** religions of the world  **Recessional “Go Now in Peace”** |  |
| **Joys and Concerns:** “Pebbles Fall, ripples grow, returning, returning, in community” | Congregation |
| **Meditation:** after #466 (responsive reading) | Congregation |
| **Offering:** with a portion to Capital Connects  Music: | Janet Yonge |
| **Acceptance:** #402"From you I receive, to you I give, together we share, and from this we live" (2x) | Congregation |
| **Hymn:** #1064 – Blue Boat Home | Congregation |
| **Homily**: Atheism is for You! | Peter Scales |
| **~~Responsive Reading~~** ~~#657 – It Matters~~  **Hymn**: #295 – Sing Out Praises! | ~~Congregation~~ |
| **Closing Words & Extinguishing the Chalice** | Peter Scales |
| **Linking Song\*: #123 “Spirit of Life”** | Congregation |

Atheism

Atheism is for You! My advertising blurb for this homily said, “Do you think you might be an atheist? If you have ever wondered about humanism, paganism, agnosticism and atheism, then don’t miss this homily!”

This homily was sparked by a few people in the congregation who have told me that they might be an atheist or might be an agnostic but they aren’t sure. My talk was also sparked by interest in so-called “Atheism 2.0” that is described by Swiss-British philosopher Alain de Botton.

First, I want to define four terms: atheism, New Atheism, agnosticism, and humanism. I’ll remind you of the term SBNR, spiritual but not religious, which I think is a soft way of saying ‘atheist’. Then I’ll get back to Alain de Botton and why I think atheism might be for you.

Atheism is, in a broad sense, the rejection of belief in the existence of gods. In a narrower sense, atheism is specifically the position that there are no gods. Most inclusively, atheism is the absence of belief that any gods exist. Atheism is contrasted with theism, which in its most general form is the belief that at least one deity exists.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atheism>

New Atheism is a social and political movement in favour of atheism and secularism promoted by a collection of modern atheist writers who have advocated the view that "religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized, and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises." The prominent thinkers in New Atheism are Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The New Atheists write mainly from a scientific perspective. Unlike previous writers, many of whom thought that science was indifferent, or even incapable of dealing with the "God" concept, Dawkins argues to the contrary, claiming the "God Hypothesis" is a valid scientific hypothesis, having effects in the physical universe, and like any other hypothesis can be tested and falsified. Other New Atheists such as Victor Stenger propose that the personal Abrahamic God is a scientific hypothesis that can be tested by standard methods of science. Both Dawkins and Stenger conclude that the hypothesis fails any such tests, and argue that naturalism is sufficient to explain everything we observe in the universe, from the most distant galaxies to the origin of life, species, and the inner workings of the brain and consciousness. Nowhere, they argue, is it necessary to introduce God or the supernatural to understand reality. New Atheists have been associated with the argument from divine hiddenness and the idea that "absence of evidence is evidence of absence" when evidence can be expected. I see that New Atheism in not only anti-god but anti-religion and therefore anti-Unitarian Universalist, so I’m suspicious of the aims of New Atheism. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Atheism>

Agnosticism is the view that the truth values of certain claims—especially claims about the existence or non-existence of any deity, as well as other religious and metaphysical claims—are unknown or unknowable. Thomas Huxley identified agnosticism not as a creed but rather as a method of skeptical, evidence-based inquiry. According to the philosopher W.L. Rowe, in the popular sense, an agnostic is someone who neither believes nor disbelieves in the existence of a deity or deities, whereas a theist and an atheist believe and disbelieve, respectively.

Humanism: The philosophy or life stance of secular humanism embraces human reason, ethics, and philosophical naturalism, while specifically rejecting religious dogma, supernaturalism, pseudoscience or superstition as the basis of morality and decision making. It posits that human beings are capable of being ethical and moral without religion or a god. Fundamental to the concept of secular humanism is the strongly held viewpoint that ideology—be it religious or political—must be thoroughly examined by each individual and not simply accepted or rejected on faith. Along with this, an essential part of secular humanism is a continually adapting search for truth, primarily through science and philosophy.

Atheism 2.0 In January 2012 philosopher Alain de Botton published *Religion for Atheists*, about the benefits of religions for those who do not to believe in them. De Botton put it: "It's clear to me that religions are in the end too complex, interesting and on occasion wise to be abandoned simply to those who believe in them."

[www.ted.com/talks/alain\_de\_botton\_atheism\_2\_0/transcript](http://www.ted.com/talks/alain_de_botton_atheism_2_0/transcript)

I’ll come back to de Botton in a few minutes.

Let’s think for a minute about the gods of Ancient Greece: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Greek_mythological_figures> Among the hundreds of Greek gods, goddesses and spirits you might remember Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty, desire, and pleasure; Apollo, the god of music, arts, knowledge, healing, plague, prophecy, poetry, manly beauty and archery; Ares, god of war, bloodshed, and violence; Athena, goddess of intelligence, skill, peace, warfare, battle strategy, handicrafts, and wisdom; Dionysus, god of wine, parties and festivals, madness, chaos, drunkenness, drugs, and ecstasy; Hera, queen of the gods and goddess of marriage, women, childbirth, heirs, kings, and empires; and Zeus, king and father of the gods, god of the sky, weather, thunder, lightning, law, order, and justice. [the Archaic (c. 750–c. 500 BC), Classical (c. 480–323 BC), and Hellenistic (323–146 BC) periods]: Long before Judaism, Christianity and Islam the Greeks had this colourful and explanatory collections of gods. Most of us do not believe today in Zeus and Apollo… does that make us atheists? If we are atheists about Zeus, is that so bad? Are we able to live as moral people? I think we are.

Zoroaster, also known as Zarathustra, was the founder of Zoroastrianism. He lived in the eastern part of the Iranian Plateau. Zoroaster is credited with the authorship of the *Yasna Haptanghaiti* as well as the *Gathas*, hymns which are at the liturgical core of Zoroastrian faith. Ahura Mazda is the name for a higher spirit of the Old Iranian religion who was proclaimed as the uncreated spirit by Zoroaster. Ahura means light and Mazda means wisdom. As far as I know, only one person in this room has an attachment to Ahura Mazda. Does that make the rest of us atheists? If we are atheists about Ahura Mazda, is that so bad? Are we able to live as moral people? I think we are.

[Ahura Mazda first appeared in the Achaemenid period (c. 550 – 330 BCE) under Darius I's Behistun Inscription. Until Artaxerxes II (405 to 359 BCE), Ahura Mazda was worshiped and invoked alone.][Wikipedia]

How many of us have roots on the British Isles? Anglo-Saxon paganism refers to the religious beliefs and practices followed by the Anglo-Saxons between the fifth and eighth centuries AD, during the initial period of Early Medieval England. A variant of the Germanic paganism found across much of north-western Europe, it encompassed a variety of disparate beliefs and cultic practices. Developing from the earlier Iron Age religion of continental northern Europe, it remained the dominant religion in England until the Christianization of its kingdoms between the seventh and eighth centuries. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon_paganism>

Anglo-Saxon paganism was a polytheistic belief system, focused around the worship of deities known as the *ése*. The most prominent of these deities was probably Woden, although other prominent gods included Thunor and Tiw. There was also a belief in a variety of other supernatural entities who inhabited the landscape, including elves, nicor, and dragons. Cultic practice largely revolved around demonstrations of devotion, including sacrifice of inanimate objects and animals, to these deities, particularly at certain religious festivals during the year.

The Isle of Wight was the last openly pagan kingdom. Wulfhere of Mercia [reign 658-675] had invaded in 661 and forced the islanders to convert, but as soon as he left they had reverted to paganism. They remained pagan until 686 when they were invaded by Cædwalla of Wessex. The last openly pagan king, Arwald, was killed in battle defending his kingdom, which was ethnically cleansed and incorporated into the Kingdom of Wessex. His heirs were baptised and then executed. If we are atheists about the gods of Anglo-Saxon paganism, is that so bad? Are we able to live as moral people? I think we are.

Within Haida mythology, Raven is a central character. While frequently described as a trickster, some Haida people believe Raven to be a complex reflection of one's own self. Raven can be a magician, a transformer, a potent creative force, sexual deviant or ravenous debaucher but always a cultural hero. He is responsible for creating Haida Gwaii, releasing the sun from its tiny box and making the stars and the moon. In one story he released the first humans from a cockle shell on the beach; in another story he brought the first humans up out of the ground because he needed to fill up a party he was throwing. Raven stories on one level teach listeners how to live a good life, but usually by counter-example. Raven has been described as the greediest, most lecherous and mischievous creature known to the Haida, but at the same time Raven often helps humans in our encounters with other supernatural beings. Quadra Island poet Robert Bringhurst [his wife Jan Zwicky is a poet who taught Philosophy at UVic; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Zwicky> ] notes that Raven never actually creates anything; he made the world by stealing, exchanging, redistributing, and generally moving things around.

Ta'xet and Tia are death gods among the Haida. Ta'xet rules violent death, while Tia rules peaceful death. If we are atheists about Raven, Ta’xet and Tia, is that so bad? Are we able to live as moral people? I think we are.

[Hinduism is the dominant religion of the Indian subcontinent. It comprises three major traditions, Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism, whose followers considered Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti (also called Devi) to be the supreme deity respectively. Most of the other deities were either related to them or different forms (incarnations) of these deities. Hinduism has been called the "oldest religion" in the world, and many practitioners refer to Hinduism as "the eternal law." Within Hinduism a large number of personal gods (Ishvaras) are worshipped as murtis. These beings are significantly powerful entities known as devas. The exact nature of belief in regard to each deity varies between differing Hindu denominations and philosophies. Often these beings are depicted in humanoid or partially humanoid forms, complete with a set of unique and complex iconography in each case. The devas are expansions of Brahman into various forms, each with a certain quality. In the Vedas, 33 deities are listed. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu_gods> ]

Jews have many great stories within Torah. God was looking on the extreme wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah and was getting ready to judge these two cities. But before he did, he said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing?” (Genesis 18:17) Abraham's nephew Lot lived in one of the cities, Sodom. Certainly Abraham would want Lot and his family to be protected and delivered from the fiery wrath. Abraham cried out for ANY in the city that were righteous and who would perish along with the wicked. Abraham's negotiated intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah certainly qualifies as one of the great stories in Torah. To begin, Abraham appealed to God by acknowledging that he is a just God. He said; "Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" Abraham knew the kind of God he was serving. Abraham's second strategy was to keep pressing. He started off asking the Lord to spare the city if as few as fifty righteous could be found. Yes, the Lord agreed, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account." But Abraham did not stop there. What about 45? 40? 30? 20? And finally, ten. The Lord answered; "I will not destroy it on account of the ten." This god allows himself to be negotiated down by one of his subjects. It’s a fun story but the ending is gruesome. If we are atheists about the god of the Jews, is that so bad? Are we able to live as moral people? I think we are.

Followers of Islam accept much of the content of Jewish Torah and Christian Gospels. Muhammad, the man who in the 600s copied the Quran as revelation from his god, knew the Jewish and Christian stories. The Quran refers to several of the stories and includes them with varying degrees of fidelity. Muslims see Muhammad as primary intercessor and believe that he will intercede on behalf of the believers on Last Judgment day. Islamic tradition narrates that after resurrection when humanity will be gathered together and they will face distress due to heat and fear, they will come to Muhammad. Then he will intercede for them with God and the judgment will start. Hadith narrates that Muhammad will also intercede for the believers who for their sins have been taken to hell. Muhammad’s intercession will be granted and a lot of believers will come out of hell. In Islamic belief, intercession will be granted on conditions: the permission of God, God's being pleased with the intercessor Muhammad, and his being pleased with the person for whom intercession is made. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_in_Islam> This is a god who allows his mind to be changed. If we are atheists about the god of the Muslims, is that so bad? Are we able to live as moral people? I think we are.

Throughout history, people have adapted their ideas about the gods or lack of gods. Many of you probably know women who, on marriage, changed religious allegiance to that of their husband. Many of us know religious converts who have changed from Christian to Jew or Jew to atheist. How many of you would say that you ‘converted’ from another religion to Unitarian-Universalism?

I believe, and I have little empirical data on this except my own life story, that people have been good without god. Atheism does not make a person immoral any more than believing in a god makes a person moral.

Atheists do not launch holy wars. Atheists do launch wars but they give other reasons for their wars. Believing or not believing in god does little to change the actions of one who is intent on violence or war.

Here is where I return to British philosopher Alain de Botton and his “Atheism 2.0” (2012). Let me recite some of his TED Talk: “I'm interested in the kind of constituency that thinks something along these lines: that thinks, "I can't believe in any of this stuff. I can't believe in the doctrines. I don't think these doctrines are right. But," a very important but, "I love Christmas carols. I really like church art. I really like looking at old churches. I really like turning the pages of the Old Testament." Whatever it may be, you know the kind of thing I'm talking about -- people who are attracted to the ritualistic side, the moralistic, communal side of religion, but can't bear the doctrine. Until now, these people have faced a rather unpleasant choice. It's almost as though either you accept the doctrine and then you can have all the nice stuff, or you reject the doctrine and you're living in some kind of spiritual wasteland under the guidance of CNN and Walmart.

“That's a tough choice. I don't think we have to make that choice. I think there is an alternative. I think there are ways -- and I'm being both very respectful and completely impious -- of stealing from religions. If you don't believe in a religion, there's nothing wrong with picking and mixing, with taking out the best sides of religion. And for me, atheism 2.0 is about both, as I say, a respectful and an impious way of going through religions and saying, "What here could we use?" The secular world is full of holes. We have secularized badly, I would argue. A thorough study of religion could give us all sorts of insights into areas of life that are not going too well. And I'd like to run through a few of these today.

“If you went to a top university -- let's say Harvard or Oxford [or McGill] -- and you said, "I've come here because I'm in search of morality, guidance and consolation; I want to know how to live," they would show you the way to the insane asylum. This is simply not what our grandest and best institutes of higher learning are in the business of. Why? They don't think we need it. They don't think we are in an urgent need of assistance. They see us as adults, rational adults. What we need is information. We need data, we don't need help.

“Religions start from a very different place. All major religions (but not Unitarianism) at various points call us children. And like children, they believe that we are in severe need of assistance. We're only just holding it together. And we need help. Of course, we need help. And so we need guidance and we need didactic learning.

“In the 18th century in the U.K., the greatest religious preacher was a man called John Wesley, who went up and down Great Britain delivering sermons, advising people how they could live. He delivered sermons on the duties of parents to their children and children to their parents, the duties of the rich to the poor and the poor to the rich. He was trying to tell people how they should live through the medium of sermons, the classic medium of delivery of religions.

“Now if you say to a modern liberal individualist, "Hey, how about a sermon?" they'd reply, "No, no. I don't need one of those. I'm an independent, individual person." What's the difference between a sermon and our modern, secular mode of delivery, the lecture? Well a sermon wants to change your life and a lecture wants to give you a bit of information. And I think we need to get back to that sermon tradition. The tradition of sermonizing is hugely valuable, because we are in need of guidance, morality and consolation -- and religions know that.

“Another point about education: we tend to believe in the modern secular world that if you tell someone something once, they'll remember it. Sit them in a classroom, tell them about Plato at the age of 20, send them out for a career in management consultancy for 40 years, and that lesson will stick with them. Religions say, "Nonsense. You need to keep repeating the lesson 10 times a day. So get on your knees and repeat it." That's what all religions tell us: "Get on your knees and repeat it 10 or 20 or 15 times a day." Otherwise our minds are like sieves.

“The other thing that religions support is the ability to speak well. Oratory is absolutely key to religions. In the secular world, you can come through the university system and be a lousy speaker and still have a great career. But the religious world doesn't think that way. What you're saying needs to be backed up by a really convincing way of saying it. If you go to an African American Pentecostal church in the American South and you listen to how they talk, my goodness, they talk well. After every convincing point, people will go, "Amen, amen, amen." At the end of a really rousing paragraph, they'll all stand up, and they'll go, "Thank you Jesus, thank you Christ, thank you Savior." If we were doing it like they do it -- let's not do it, but if we were to do it -- I would tell you something like, "Culture should replace scripture." And you would go, "Amen, amen, amen." And at the end of my talk, you would all stand up and you would go, "Thank you Plato, thank you Shakespeare, thank you Jane Austen."

“The other thing that religions know is we're not just brains, we are also bodies. And when they teach us a lesson, they do it via the body. So for example, take the Jewish idea of forgiveness. Jews are very interested in forgiveness and how we should start anew and start afresh. They don't just deliver us sermons on this. They don't just give us books or words about this. They tell us to have a bath. So in Orthodox Jewish communities, every Friday you go to a *mikveh*. You immerse yourself in the water, and a physical action backs up a philosophical idea. We don't tend to do that. Our ideas are in one area and our behavior with our bodies is in another. Religions are fascinating in the way they try and combine the two.”

De Botton concludes: “You may not agree with religion, but at the end of the day, religions are so subtle, so complicated, so intelligent in many ways that they're not fit to be abandoned to the religious alone; they're for all of us.”

I don’t intend to get into the specific arguments here but you may wish to know that there are logic puzzles that people have developed over the millennia, about whether a god exists. In every case where the rules of logic or science are rigorously applied, there is no god. Only Pascal’s Wager gives a semi-logical reason for believing in a god who gives no scientific evidence of existing.

[French philosopher, mathematician, and physicist Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). His wager posits that humans all bet with their lives either that God exists or does not exist. Given the possibility that God actually does exist and assuming the infinite gain or loss associated with belief in God or with unbelief, a rational person should live as though God exists and seek to believe in God. If God does not actually exist, such a person will have only a finite loss (some pleasures, luxury, etc.). Wikipedia]

Most of the features that de Botton ascribes to Atheism 2.0 already exist, right here in our UU congregation. Even for those of you who know you are not atheists, UU’ism holds up a place for moral lessons, the marking of the seasons, rites of passage such as weddings and funerals, religious art such as music and poetry, and clear oratory.

I believe we can be good without god. We can be good without Zeus, without Ahura Mazda, without Raven, without the negotiating god of Jews and Muslims or the Christian god who allows his son to be tortured and murdered.

I think that if you are a good person… that if you tend not to steal, murder, lie, cheat, or start wars… and if you don’t have a strong feeling about one god or another (and there are certainly a lot of them out there!), then you should dump the feeling that you should believe in a god. Atheism is for you!

I look forward to a spirited forum, in Room 5 after coffee.