

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County

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Unitarian / Trinitarian
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Before us, on the chart, is a picture of two tracings of DNA in terms of the National Geographic's project, which they have developed to trace the background of DNA. In the estimation of many scientists, life began on the African continent thousands and thousands of years ago. Along the way, life evolved into the form that we now know, and it is possible to trace from present generations' DNA all the way back to some thousands of years ago in Africa.

The Ice Age resulted in life being clustered in warm areas. As the ice receded, humanity began to move from Africa up into Asia and Europe, on into the Americas. The interesting thing that has developed in DNA research is that all humans share in common 99.9% of all DNA and that 1/10 of 1% is where we differ. And so, instead of finding or quarreling over the differences, it would seem to behoove humanity to come together and celebrate that 99.9% that we hold in common, and respect and give credence to that 1/10 of 1% that differs us.

Humanity, indeed, has a common origin. Anciently, as humans began to evolve, they became aware of changes that took place in the natural environment around them. Now, part of this is conjecture, but certainly, reasoned people would look back on human development and say, "Yes, in all probability, this was the process that took place in the mind of the evolving humans. They recognized that there were powers in nature ... wind, lightning, fire, other living beings, plants, animals, flora, fauna ... and they begin to recognize that there are some life-force presence in these other beings. And there were powerful life-forces that apparently seemed to have no source. There were those who observed the tremendous winds that took place, and fire, and so anciently, humanity began to assign some kind of identity to that force ... a force that could not be explained. Anciently, the Greeks would say that there was a *dunamis*; there was a power in the *pneuma*, in the spirit that existed. Hebrews would say just that there was a power, *elohim*, present in the *ruah*, in the spirit. Now this led to a myriad of mythologies as humanity in different parts of planet earth began to assign power to those deities, to those spirits that could not be seen, but only imagined. And in the exodus of humanity, moving from the sub-continent of Africa into Europe and Asia and different areas, there developed different mythologies. Certainly, ancient humanity began to wonder how it all began, and in almost every culture, there are creation stories that assign some kind of origin, some kind of life force that brought it all together.

Obviously, humanity wasn't around at the beginning of creation. But every culture, every area, began to develop its own concept of how it all began. It also developed a mythology, or an effort to explain what was happening in the world today and in the cosmos that could not be seen or understood. In Scandinavia, there developed the idea that there was a power force, Woden, and that there was a resting place ultimately, Valhalla, and if the warriors were faithful in their task, the Valkeries would waft them on to Valhalla. In the Celtic community, there developed the idea of Wicca, that there were powerful forces. In Hindu thought, polytheism developed that there were many, many forces, many powers, many deities, if you will, that were present in creation, that could not be seen, but only imagined. In the minds of the Greeks, there were powerful divine forces who rested up on Mt. Olympus, and the powerful force, Zeus and other factors, came to bear on creation. In Native American mythology, there developed the idea of many spirits, that all life-forces had a spirit behind them. But in the midst of all of this, there was a feeling that there was one Great Spirit that controlled

destiny. The Eastern concept of polytheism still is a factor in the lives of many people today. Just last weekend, those people who had their origin in Hinduism celebrated a festival of lights that is part of their concept of the deity.

In the Middle East, there developed in the minds of a nomadic tribe called Hebrews the story of their exodus and liberation from bondage in Egypt, and their leadership under a man called Moses, although we have no archaeological data that testifies to the existence of Moses or Abraham, but there must have been a personality around who these tribes coalesced. The Hebrew story says that they were part of the eastern community that worshipped a number of gods. But there gradually developed a concept of monolatry, similar to Native American mythology, that there was one main deity among many other deities. And the classic story that we find that more or less explains this to us is the story of Moses. That he wandered in the wilderness and he gazes upon fire, a force that has always seized the attention, and the interest, and the mind of humanity. What is behind this consuming flame? And, according to the Hebrew myth, a voice speaks to Moses out of the midst of that flame, calling him to lead the people, to bring them out of their bondage and into a new land. Well, Moses, or whomever he was who led them out, was astute enough to say, "Who am I going to tell the people that has assigned this task to me? What power, what force? And he used the term "What is your name," which, literally in Hebrew, is "What's your name," because the name was very important. The name came back out of the burning bush saying, "Elyeh Asher Elyeh" in Hebrew, "I am present and active in history. I am a force in history." And under Moses' leadership, that concept of one-name force, one main power, evolved to one single power. Certainly, the ancient Hebrews worshipped a number of gods.

If you want some support for that in understanding, go to Genesis 31:30 where it tells about moving and taking with them the household gods. But in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, there is a classic statement of the Hebrew faith, the epitome of monotheism and source of Christianity. It says, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." This statement is encapsulated in a little tube and placed on Jewish homes today. As you enter the door, the mezuzah is a testimony to one god. With Christianity, with the onset of those who followed a rabbi named Jesus, there was an evolving concept to establish the authority of Jesus' message, and a Trinitarian view developed. We don't have time to go through all the history and the analogy of how this developed, but it is safe to say that there developed in the Christian faith, to reinforce their faith, to somehow assert to others that there was a powerful force, that this rabbi Jesus had become the Son of God, and He had left a powerful spirit, a pneuma, in history, and so we develop the idea of the trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The story is told that an older Jewish man, in a large city in the east, was struck down by a vehicle, and he was lying on the sidewalk, bleeding, obviously in dire straits. A crowd of people gathered around. They were at wit's end to help him and one of the members of the crowd saw a priest approaching. He went to the priest and explained that the man had been struck down by a vehicle and he was obviously dying. Could the priest help him? So the priest knelt down by this older Jewish man, and he said, "Do you believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost?" The old man looked up and said, "I'm dying and the man is giving me a riddle!"

As in any bureaucratic, academic venture, any process becomes more and more complicated, often to the point of absurdity. We recall that in the Middle Ages, some theologians gave a great deal of thought and study to the question of how many angels could dance on the point of a needle? The involving process of development with humanity moved us on into an age of enlightenment and an age of reason whereby many ancient ideas were questioned, examined. And the Trinitarian concept became suspect as a Unitarian view surfaced. As people struggle with reality, as Socinius and Anabaptists, developed the idea that there must be on the part of each individual the opportunity to make up ones' own mind, that every person must come to grips with the question of reality and origin.

The classic example of this conflict found its way into the new world in New England where Calvinistic thought in the Congregational churches found some divergence. There came with the light of reason the question of many ancient precepts because one of the things that moved people to new world was not just the thought of a great profit and a great opportunity or manifest destiny, but rather the opportunity to be completely free in the area of religious faith. And probably the testimony to that conflict is why we are here today. There remain in New England in many small communities two Congregational churches. One is the Orthodox Congregational Church; the other is the Unitarian Congregational Church. A number of the founding fathers were deists, many of those who came to grips with the question of freedom in this country sought to find a solution to the enigma of the trinity and other concepts. Was the powerful force that humanity perceived to be invisibly present in the cosmos and in this world? Was it something removed, transcended, that broke in and from time to time changing the course of history? Was it something in which we shared, something of which we had a part?

If we go back to the word that came to Moses, we can probably establish some of the wording for this concept. "I am present and active in history" was the voice of the divine, not something removed, but with you as you share in the process. Now if there exists a divine force in community in the process of life, then one can be totally committed to a Unitarian view. At the same time, we recognize that one is part of community, part of society, and one must be open and tolerant to others who find a faith system undergirded by embellishments that one may have discarded. There are a number of different perceptions of how one acknowledges the powerful force that's in creation. Some people believe that, in the elements of communion, there is a presence, a powerful force, in which one can participate. You may not accept this. You may not need this symbol. But at the same time, you may well recognize that it is a force that has changed the life of many people and given them new direction and purpose. Some of us can live without washing feet, without taking communion, without baptism, without acknowledging the trinity, but at the same time it would be arrogant on the part of those who do not feel compelled to be somehow dependent on this, to denigrate the concept for others. The problem, you see, is not the trinity or unity, but the concept of a divine powerful force. Some can live within the gift of life with a non-theistic or agnostic view. By the same token, there are those who are not dependent on any divine assurance. Yet, at the same time, they should stay in communion and not break dialogue with the rest of humanity who are dependent upon such assurances. Now there is good news for us today. There is a trend among some Evangelicals, moderate, yet Evangelicals, conservative Christians who will affirm positively, but perhaps without understanding, the role of the trinity. But those concerns are beginning to duplicate some of the liberal values that are present in humanistic thought

This ad was displayed last week in the Orlando Sentinel. "Mr. President, we need your help in Darfur." There are problems there, and this particular ad is signed by people like Joel Hunter of the conservative Christian Alliance and many others, as Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention. Here are people who are deeply committed to a Trinitarian view and a lot of other concepts that, perhaps, most of us do not feel necessary in the matters of faith, yet they are beginning to recognize that some of the values that we have lifted in the liberal faith are beginning to bear upon their conscience. As someone has said, there are Evangelicals now who have moved beyond "below the belt" issues, such as gay marriage and abortion, and are recognizing that the environment, and peace, and poverty, and the need for health care, and the need for education, and the need for many things are probably far more burning than some of these other issues. For some people, something happens when they embrace the elements of the faith that are symbolic, whether it is communion or washing feet or baptism. The important value is to acknowledge the unique gift that we share in the life process, and the responsibility that we have to stay in communion. There have been decades of debate over the years, over the symbols of divine, but those symbols seem to become less relevant as humankind gains more knowledge and more insight. Perhaps we have been

dying at the wrong barricade. Rather than contesting and quarrelling over the symbols of faith, we need to address the gift of life, and assume a share of responsibility commensurate with our insight, whether it's in Darfur, or in Africa, in Iraq, or in all of human conflict. What we do here, what happens here in this community of free faith is most important. We're not here just for some kind of intellectual fascination. We are here to establish a focus on human values, a liberal voice in Lake County. In Orlando, for instance, if the Sentinel wants to interview someone and get a perspective from the standpoint of liberal faith, they'll send a reporter out to interview Marni Harmony, the minister of the Unitarian Church. We need to establish that same presence, that same authority, that same influence here in Lake County. It happens in small ways. I can recall when Harold Katz was president of this congregation; he made an effort to reach out to the community. He suggested to funeral directors that from time to time you get a request from someone to conduct a service that is not necessarily really a strong Christian service, but a memorial recognition. And there have been times when funeral directors had directed families, usually from someone from out of town who's come down here to look after the passing of an elderly loved one. As a result, they've called this congregation to come in and minister in a kind of open human way to give comfort and undergirding in a time of passing without being a definitely strong Christian service.

Many small groups can get discouraged. It's easy to get discouraged when you are a small group. We're a tiny force in a large community. And this is why here there is all the more reason to stay in communion with one another, to be faithful and open and tolerant of our own diversity and personality because, in effect, we're really the only voice that's crying in the wilderness. And it is important to all of us to keep a warm open invitation out to others to share. Oftentimes, a small group struggles and says, in effect, now if we had a big advertising budget, and we could get on TV or buy full-page ads in the newspaper, we could get people in here. Pragmatically, it doesn't work that way. A congregation with which we are familiar built a new sanctuary, and they wanted the entire community immediately around that sanctuary to come in and engage in an ice cream social and see the church, and the hope was that there would be people that would identify being with them and become part of the congregation. They spent a great deal of money on an advertising campaign. They did things like sending out some four or five thousand invitations to all the people around. There was going to be a big central service. Out of those five thousand invitations, two people showed up! Big sign, TV commercial, useful, yes. Full-page ad in the paper, perhaps. But not near as useful or as important or as significant as that more individual personal relationship that each one of us may have with our neighbor, with someone at work, or with someone in the recreational community that we share.

There are those whose lives can be strengthened and changed in a time of trouble. You may have a neighbor or friend, someone who's struggling with their own version of faith, and it may be that you are the one who will bring liberation and hope to that person as they move from a life that's struggling with things like whether or not there is an element in communion that will somehow change their life to that warm, free open spirit, that humanistic open spirit which we offer here. It may well be that your presence, that your influence, will bring liberation to someone who's trapped in reactionary thought.

Well, I guess this is the Unitarian-Universalism's equivalent of an altar call. It's time for us, as we enjoy the fellowship of a free and open spirit, to recognize that we have a responsibility to share them. You see, we have evidence that something's happening here. The free faith liberal community, its expression has somehow had an influence on the Evangelical community. And the important thing for us to remember is that the Evangelical community has far more numbers, and far more influence, than we have. While we deal in thousands in a country like the United States, Evangelicals are dealing in millions. And if our influence can stay in communion with an Evangelical community and bring them to an affirmation and see if it's closer to our own, can help them to see that there are other values than abortion and gay marriage, then our effort will not have been in vain.

But we can't do it, unless we're faithful, unless we address the task, and stay in fellowship and communion with one another and with the rest of the faith community ... Unitarian/Trinitarian. Most of us don't have any question in our own mind, but we may have found ourselves to be less than faithful to the task to which we're called. So be it. Amen.