

## **Live, Move, and Have Being**

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

February 24, 2013

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My brother is probably the most ironically named person I know. His name is Chris. However it is short for Christian rather than Christopher, and therein lays the irony. Because my brother Christian is one of the most avowed atheists I have ever met. At least he is the one I have know the longest. Although he was confirmed when he was a teenager in the United Methodist Church – the only one of my family to have officially become a Methodist – even then he told me that he didn't believe what he was hearing.

Now I am not sure to what degree my brother Chris has worked out his theology in an intentional way. It may be that he is an atheist simply because it frustrates my mother. I suspect that in the beginning, shortly after those days studying Methodism, his proud and somewhat haughty profession of atheism was a form of teenage rebellion. If so, it worked!

My brother's atheism seems to be driven by anti-Christianity; again making him perhaps the most ironically named person I know.

What may have started out as a form of rebellion has truly taken hold of him as a worldview. Chris is six years younger than I am, and has had an experience of religion that is fairly typical for his cohort. For him God is an external experience. If he has ever had anything like a religious experience he has never understood it to be such. The God that was presented to him when he was young was long ago and far away, and not particularly relevant to his life.

As I said, this is not unusual. Many traditions portray God as being “transcendent,” meaning that God is out there beyond the Milky Way Galaxy someplace. The transcendent God is the God of cosmic majesty and glory. This is a view of God very much present in the Old Testament of the Bible. It was believed that Gods of various sorts were connected to the stars in heaven, and that these Gods pulled various strings among the stars. Thus the political fortunes of nations like Israel and Egypt were merely reflections of the battles being waged in the constellations between their respective Gods. While there certainly are exceptions to this, for the most part the authors of the Bible preferred to think of God as up there and very different than our common everyday human experiences. Their social institutions such as the family, the temple, the church and the synagogue reflected this top down hierarchy as well.

In contrast to this perspective we have Chuang Tzu and our friends the Taoists. The Taoists believed not in a God that was far far away

from the experiences of human beings. Rather they believed in something called the Tao; the way, the sacred force of life that infused every moment and everything no matter how small or how grand. For them the Holy was imminent, as opposed to transcendent, meaning that it was all around us. To illustrate this point Chuang Tzu tells the story of the Old Man who jumps in the waterfall. In contrast to the wisdom of the Old Man he mentions Confucius – who to Chuang Tzu is the epitome of hierarchical transcendent thinking. Confucius is shocked that the man could survive such harsh conditions.

I love what the Old Man says in response, “I have no way.” The “way” translates as Tao, so he is saying, “I have no Tao.” Of course not! Who could own such a thing?! The Holy surrounds him like the water itself. Be he on dry land or under the water, he is following the Tao. God, if we can use that term here, is everywhere. It is the essence of the world, the Ground of Being as Paul Tillich called it. In it we live, move, and have being.

As you could probably guess, I find this immanent understanding of God to be very attractive, and frankly very compatible with Unitarian Universalist thought and practice. In Unitarian Universalism we are all responsible for our own spiritual growth. We belong to what is called the Free Church Tradition. This means that there is no hierarchy, no Pope, Bishop or Council that dictates religious truth to us. We find it for ourselves. This can be a great burden at times, not to have all of the

answers already filled in when someone asks us what Unitarian Universalists believe. However it is a wonderful opportunity too. In our church, the possibilities for spiritual exploration are endless. You don't have to change churches to find out how to do Buddhist meditation, Hatha Yoga, or Metaphysical Spirituality. You can do all of those things right here.

The downside is that we cannot rely on some external savior to come in and rescue us. This is true of our souls as well as our budget. There are no hidden benefactors who will swoop in and be the angel of our pledge drive. While we have had some impressive growth and lots of people that we have welcomed into membership this year, we cannot assume that that alone will solve our financial woes. The upside is that the answers to any and all of our concerns about money are attainable and within our grasp. They are for us to do. We cannot and should not rely on someone else to do it for us. This is the empowering message of our liberal faith.

Paul Tillich and Chuang Tzu both tell us that God or the Tao is a sacred presence that is all around us throughout our entire lives. We are like the Old Man submerged under the water, surrounded in that sacred reality, bobbing along with the eddies and currents. While Chuang Tzu preferred mystical stories, Tillich was a theologian, and a German theologian at that!

Tillich teaches us that while we may be bobbing along in that mystical stream, most of the time we aren't aware of it. We wind up leading lives of quiet desperation, seemingly divorced from that sacred presence. Most of the time we experience God as my brother Chris does – far away and far removed from the concerns of our lives. But sometimes, every once and a while, Tillich says we have these moments when that sacred presence bursts forth into our existence. It grabs us and takes us over, as if we had fallen into that powerful waterfall. He referred to such moments as *Kairos*, sacred time. The experience of *Kairos* is potentially life transforming. It reminds us that yes, that sacred presence of the Holy is all around us, even in those moments when we forget.

What is interesting is that Tillich doesn't say that *Kairos* only happens to you in church. It may not. He doesn't even say that *Kairos* is God exactly – it isn't. *Kairos* is simply a moment of transformation, a connection to all that lives, moves, and has being. Buddhists would probably call it enlightenment. But sacred time can happen at any time and at any place.

This past year I have had more than one experience of *Kairos*, of sacred time breaking into mundane life. This year I have had the great privilege of facilitating one of our Connection Circles. These are small groups of people who share stories about their lives. The meetings are very structured, lead by a trained facilitator. There is a covenant that all

the participants agree to, and the sessions are tied to our monthly themes. If that sounds like a lot of structure; it is. On purpose. All that structure ends up creating a strong container. After awhile people start to trust that structure enough that they open up about parts of their lives that maybe they don't talk about so often. They feel safe because of that structure and accountability. And they become inspired by what other people share.

I had experienced groups like this before. However I don't know if I have ever witnessed a group bond so quickly and trust each other so thoroughly as our Connection Circles have done. And this is among people who have nothing in particular in common: long time members, new members, women, men, racial differences, and on and on. But in that safe environment we create the opportunities for a moment of *Kairos*. The sacred can break into our everyday lives anytime, but there are things we can do intentionally to help it along. That I believe is the best reason to have a church. Being a Free Church does not mean we are a collection of individuals. We are a community geared toward a common purpose: to transform the world and each other for the common good. We need each other in order to do that.

Ever since last year when the Board wrote a new Mission and Ends, based on conversations with the congregation, our church has had a renewed sense of purpose and focus. You see this statement all over the place now, on the back of the order of service, hung prominently in

the Parish Hall, and soon in other places in the building as well. These statements of our collective vision are informing the work of the Executive Team, the Program Staff, all of our teams and staff, and soon a new strategic plan to bring them all together.

And whenever you think of First Unitarian Church you have to think of our fantastic music program. If you were here last Sunday you heard a wonderful musician and learned all about the music of Cat Stevens. If you come tonight to the concert you will hear the original compositions of our very own Scott Ward. Every week Scott and the choir bring an astonishingly high quality performance to our services. It is a true joy to be upstaged by them most Sunday mornings. And in addition to the organ music that we love to hear, we have been intentional in our effort to bring diverse musical approaches to worship.

Some of the most energizing and inspiring worship services come from our youth group and our children. We have continued the tradition of having four intentionally Intergenerational Worship Services this year. Many of you had your heart melt, as I did, when we had our Age of Reason service last month. Our Religious Education program has been flourishing, and it is a testament to the teachers and leaders that we are able to continue running the program while our DRE Catherine Williamson is taking a sabbatical. This speaks to the strength of our Religious Education program and its leaders.

Another avenue where we have seen a resurgence of activity is in social action. We have two new programs, Dismantling the New Jim Crow, which is at the forefront of our congregation's anti-racism work, and the latest is the Adopt a House program which gives assistance to people with mental illness and handicaps. The Connection Circle I have been working with has been envisioning how we live our lives at the intersection between social action and spiritual practice. This is something that our congregation will be doing more of in the future.

Finally I want to raise up the work that has been done this year around publicity and outreach. This past fall our church gained some publicity when Scott performed at a public memorial service. In a couple of weeks I will be giving a lecture at the Academy of Lifelong Learning on the "Uniqueness of Unitarian Universalism among the World Religions." I suspect I will see more than a few of you there! Our Publications Assistant Kanchalee Reeves, in addition to doing a fantastic job on our newsletter and inserts, has also developed relationships with the media that make it possible for church events to become known in the wider world. She has also increased our congregation's footprint with social media, and there is the beginning of an effort to revamp our website.

This is the time of year when we come together to support our Free Faith. No one else will swoop in and do it for us. But the good news is that we can do all that we dream we can do. This year we are doing a

face to face pledge drive. That means you will be getting a call from one of our friendly pledge stewards who will arrange to talk with you about the church. Yes this is a request to financially support First Unitarian Church. However, it is more than simply asking for money. It is a chance for you to share your experiences about the congregation. What has moved you this year? What were those moments of *Kairos* when you felt the sacred presences break into your everyday life? Was it here in the building celebrating a holiday, teaching our children, learning something new in an Adult RE class? Or did your moment of *Kairos* happen at home in a quiet moment when you were faced with a difficult time in your life and you remembered a piece from a sermon that dealt with that situation? Share those stories with the nice person who comes to talk to you about your pledge. Listen to their story too.

We can keep the good stuff going here at First Unitarian Church, but it will take all of us to do it. Consider adding \$200 onto your pledge last year. Or increase it by 10%. Set a goal for yourself as to where you would like your family to be with your giving, and make this year the first year of reaching toward it. It is not an impossible dream if we work together to achieve our mission and vision.

This year, let us be brave in our ongoing project to build a church that will reach out beyond those present here today. The more we can become sensitive to the hurts and hopes of the world, the more relevant and exciting our congregation will become. Let us ever strive to listen

for the Holy trying to break through into our lives. May we be as receptive to its call as the Old Man who jumped into the waterfall, sure that he could ride the water no matter where it took him. May it be so with us. Amen Blessed be.