

# "Heresy in the Cafe: Religious, Scientific, and Personal Ways of Approaching Life Honestly "

## Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here

*across the threshold of the time change*

in the midst of autumn's high color

*to worship, to go deeper, stretch higher,*

and encounter not so much the timely

*as the timeless, that we might choose wisely.*

*And so, we pledge to journey together along the ways of truth and affection, as best as we can name them now or may learn them in days to come; that we and our children may be fulfilled, and that we may speak to our world in words and lives of peace, justice and goodwill."*

## Readings

**Reading 1.** *The first reading comes from the amazing writings of a Reformation era genius, now almost forgotten, Sebastian Castellio. His books on Reason and his critique of both Swiss Reformer John Calvin' theology and actions can dazzle even modern minds. From two sources: first, from his Four Dialogues 1578. He was commenting on the terrible cruelty of John Calvin in burning Miguel Serveto as a heretic, just because he questioned the then 1100 year old doctrine of the Trinity.*

To burn someone is not to protect a doctrine, it is to kill someone.

*In his On the Art of Doubting and Believing, On Knowing and Not Knowing written in 1563, he wrote:*

Because sacred writings are obscure in controversial matters, and often give probable support to both sides, it has proved impossible down the ages to put an end to dispute merely by quoting scriptures. Hence, it is necessary to see

something in which truth is made so clear and universally acknowledged that it cannot be destroyed by any force, or even any probability that suggests the contrary. What is this agent of truth I am talking about? It is our sensory experience and reflective understanding. Since these are the source of our judgments in every day life, there should be little doubt as to their reliability. But there are those who want us to believe with our eyes closed, and put our trust in things which contradict our experience. They are impertinent to try and persuade us to put aside our own judgment of the matter, and accept their own, as if we could not see, and they can, and that we should follow them regardless of the pits of absurdity into which they stumble.

2. *Joy Atkinson, my colleague from California, wrote these words, The Womb of the Stars, in 1992*

The womb of stars embraces us; remnants of their fiery furnaces pulse through our veins. We are of the stars, the dust of explosions cast across space. We are of the earth: we breathe and live in the breath of ancient plants and beasts. Their cells nourish the soil; we build our communities on their harvest of gifts. Our fingers trace the curves carved in clay and stone by forebears unknown to us. We are a part of the great circle of humanity gathered around the fire, the hearth, the altar. We gather anew this day to celebrate our common heritage. May we recall in gratitude all that has given us birth.

### **Communing (Meditation/Prayer)**

Light is less now, yes, and what light there is  
now slants lower in the south.

My shadows grow longer,  
and stretch away farther than I can reach.

Love, let me be content with all I can't reach.

Tutor me in how to embrace my limits as gifts.

Let the earlier entrance of night shroud my sunnier expectations of how things  
ought to be, so that I can see things as they are, and begin there. Always there.

And I know that the clouds of Paris in November will build a slate wall against  
the stars as they always do, but I just as surely know that the stars will still be  
there, behind them, steady, reliable. May I never abandon that which eludes my  
sight, nor expect a day when all clouds vanish forever and there is only light.

O Love, the rich autumn is here, and I am here too, and so are all the people in  
this whole building...both the season, and the people *equally* the offspring of that  
original flash of power and light billions of years ago, the flash that first burst  
forth into the universe from a silence far deeper than this one:

*The Great Silence*

## Preaching

Most every morning, I go to have my social cup of coffee at One Line Coffee on High St. in the Short North, a vibrant neighborhood in the city, Columbus, Ohio, USA, where I live. They have most excellent fair-trade brews from specific estates around the world, many of which one of the owners, David, has visited to inspect the site. The baristas there are remarkable; Mick, who supervises the place, openly understands himself as the "spiritual leader" of the staff; and indeed, the feeling of warm friendship between the people behind the café counter, and with those who just come to get their morning cup, like me, is vivid, transformative, and welcoming.

On Friday this week, I was talking with Nate, one of the baristas. Somehow we ended up speaking with each other about our personal trips to Mexico. He spoke fondly of his time learning Spanish in Cuernavaca, and I spoke of the museums in Mexico City, and then we compared our visits to the City's *Zona Rosa*, a lively neighborhood indeed.

Eventually I heard him use a certain word over and over, which helped me to reflect more deeply on what I am talking about this morning, even though he didn't know he was doing that. And I will use that part of the conversation to conclude my words this morning.

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Each of us in this room, I think its safe to say, grew up in different cultures, different families, different geographies and distinct traditions. We may use the very same words as each other, sometimes, but have an entirely different history with them.

Take the word "secular" for example. Today, there are folks who describe themselves as "secular humanists," both in the world around us, and in many of our congregations. I suppose most of us know something of what that phrase means.

But I grew up with several *different* meanings associated with the word *secular*. I heard the word "secular" in its original Latin form every day when I was a child, back in the 50's of the last century. This is because I attended a Roman Catholic grammar school, in Detroit, where I grew up. We attended mass every morning before school, and Latin was the language of that service. Several times each day at the morning service the priest would say or chant "per omnia

saecula seculorum," which, translated literally from Latin, means, "in all of the centuries of the centuries," since the word saecula only means "century"...a hundred year period. The phrase I just chanted was not understood literally, but simply means "for a *really* long time."

And, that same basic Latin word *saecula* was used in its English form too...the priests in the church of my upbringing were called "secular priests" which only meant they were not part of some order, like the Franciscans, the Dominicans, or the Jesuits.

But over some thousand years, the Latin word *saecula*, which, as I said, only meant "century," came to refer instead to the *difference* between religiously ruled nations, and nations which chose to remove clergy from political influence, to replace them with people who were working on the issues of *this* world, not the next. It didn't mean that a person in government had to avoid religious activities personally, only that theology was not to be the main focus of governance. People's ordinary daily lives, in *this* life, in the present world, were to be the focus. Because of this, quite a few self-anointed fundamentalist or conservative religious authorities in the somewhat whacko American religious scene have declared that "the secular world" itself is a dangerous heresy.

Heresy. Another ancient word. This time from Greek not Latin. ἄιρεσις - *Hairesis* means a *choice*. That's all. A choice. Something chosen.

But today, obviously, if my choice for coffee in the morning at *One Line* is the one grown in Honduras instead of a Mexican coffee, there is nobody in the wings with a pile of wood and a match, ready to burn me alive at the stake for such a choice, such a heresy.

This is because, like everything else I can think of, meanings always change over the centuries, over the *saecula saeculorum*. And the word heresy came to mean something more serious than which coffee a person drinks...it meant stubborn non-conformity, or deliberately choosing the decidedly wrong party or theology. And people took these intellectual choices so seriously, they killed people just because they dared to decide for themselves what was right.

The 16th century Swiss fellow whose writings you heard this morning, Sebastian Castellio, actually saw people killed for heresy with his own eyes. He saw a whole group of people who believed differently than the majority burned at the stake. This event sickened him to the depth of his soul. He had hoped that the Protestant revolution in Europe would eradicate violence toward those who chose different paths. The famous reformer Jean Cauvin, or John Calvin, of Geneva had even become a friend of his for a while. When Calvin was young,

Castellio applauded the Genevan's affirmation that people need to be able to think and question freely.

However, as more and more power fell into his hands, Calvin's theology changed; when a theologically inclined physician, Miguel Serveto of Saragossa, Spain, boldly questioned the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Calvin threatened to kill him; you know, "Just wait to see what happens if I get my hands on you...." And true to his promise, when he actually *did* get his hands on him, he kept his violent promise. Burned him at the stake outside the walls of Geneva. When Castellio heard what his friend had done, he was horrified in the extreme. He immediately sat down and wrote a book (under a false name, to avoid being burnt.) The book criticized Calvin boldly and cleanly. As you may remember from the reading, Castellio wrote the perfect sentence: "To burn someone is not to protect a doctrine, it is to kill someone."

Those words offer one of the truly most profound insights out of that whole era. They became famous, proverbial. They echoed through the *saecula*, and some historians even say those few words planted the seed for the Enlightenment two hundred years later. Castellio was saying "Lets look at this in a non theological way. A theological idea is just that, an idea. A living human body is just that, a living human body. To kill a body is *not* to kill an idea, it's to murder someone."

In the next passage you heard, Castellio attempts to split off truth from mere authority. "Things are not true," he was saying, "just because *you* say so. I have a capacity for understanding myself. I can read and experience the world too. If I choose to regard my own experience as the source of my truth, you can have no claim over me." Or, if you prefer, use the more concise phrase of the US Quaker genius Lucretia Mott several centuries later: "Truth for authority, not authority for truth."

Sadly, Calvin, a true scoundrel, paid no attention to his former friend's criticism, but, having found out that Castellio had written the critical book, did everything he could to keep the brilliant theologian (and his family, even more cruelly) in abject poverty till the end of his life.

And sadly, Serveto was not the last heretic to burn in fire. When a non-secular priest, a Dominican monk named Giordano Bruno, publicly asserted things that today sound like astronomy and not theology, he was also burned alive at the stake. At the Flower Square, (Campo di Fiori) in Rome. He too questioned the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, but what really bothered the authorities is that he had said that the universe is impossibly vast, and that many stars that make up that universe are also suns like are own, and that living on the planets that go around those suns may be forms of intelligent life...sort of like ours. His statue

stands in the Campo these days, which is a lovely memorial...but rather no statue, and instead, a nice long life fulfilled.

Of course, as the late and great polymath Isaac Asimov made patently clear, heresy is not just a *religious* term. Even in the world of secular science, there are heretics. Stakes and fire don't greet them, assuredly, but they do spark hot outrage. Folks like Immanuel Velikovski, who wrote that the planet Venus was ejected from the planet Jupiter just a few thousand years ago, caused many astronomers to steam at the ears and contemplate how to get people to ignore him. And even more infamously, Erich Von Daniken, a Swiss author who wrote *Chariots of the Gods*, (and other books,) a man who spent several years in prison for financial fraud while writing his tracts, tried to reinterpret *every single archeological understanding of the last 100 years* by saying that alien beings from other planets, (which Bruno first theorized) were *undeniably* there, and controlling *every single aspect of human history*, humans apparently being mere fools who can't do anything for themselves. Every single thing he has asserted in his many books has been soundly and totally disproved by actual astronomers, cosmologists and archeologists, yet his books still sell by the millions.

But while the heretic Bruno turned out to be right about the universe's size, about life out there among the other planets, we're still waiting. And Von Daniken has been crisply proven to be wrong *on every single count*, not a single exception. As was Velikovsky, save for his suggestion that Venus might be very hot, (hardly a surprise since its so much closer to the sun.) What I am saying here is that some heretics...in any field, secular or sacred, indeed *prove to be wrong* in what they assert. Not all heretics, after all, are right *just because* they differ. I don't want to romanticize heresy, in other words. Or say its always the same thing as heroism. Sometimes, its just garden variety chicanery.

But in modern times, because we no longer burn folks for their unorthodox theories, the story of Bruno provides the best example of how heretics more often than not, *unlike* Velikovski and Van Daniken, *add* to the truth, not subtract from it.

For example, when Georges Lamâitre, a secular priest and professor of physics at Louvain, in Belgium, first suggested that the universe started from an extremely small "first atom" or "cosmic egg," he was criticized by almost everyone at first. Even the usually gentle Albert Einstein scolded him. "I can't argue with your calculations, but your physics is terrible," he said. And astronomer Fred Hoyle, who taught that the universe has always existed, and will always exist, in a steady state, without any big explosion at the beginning, made fun of Lamaitre's idea one day by satirically renaming it "The Big Bang" on a radio show one day. Strangely, it's the word still used today about what he said, not Cosmic Egg, (perhaps because such a poetic term echoes most of the

mythical creation stories found in the ancient world.) Lamaitre's first term is not used either, First Atom, since that is confusing, everything being made of atoms and all. So Hoyle's "Big Bang" although intended as an insulting ridicule against someone he considered a scientific heretic, stuck.

Yet today, despite Hoyle's criticism leveled against *the very idea* of an expanding universe being caused by an explosion, the Big Bang idea of this Belgian secular priest is almost universally accepted. Hoyle went to his death-bed repudiating it, but that appears to have been more stubbornness on his part than scientific evidence, which he was never able to muster. Hoyle also suggested that the only reason that the Big Bang theory later made sense to most cosmologists is that they were all in the thrall of the Book of Genesis. He was sure that no religious person could even *be* a scientist. He was suspicious that they were trying to sneak God in by the back door, and as an atheist, he made clear, he would have none of it. His theory about religion and science, in the case of Georges Lamâitre, at least, proved to be totally false. When the pope at the time tried to publicly suggest that Lamâitre's Cosmic Egg theory was somehow a "proof of God," Lamâitre not only repudiated the pope, but actually got him to stop asserting such a fool thing as a "proof of God," no easy political task, I assure you. Lamâitre, a priest, found the word *God* was useful for his own spiritual life, but was not going to play the silly game of "proofs," as if religion was a science experiment. I agree, frankly. "Proving" spiritual concepts is the most unspiritual work of very sad and frightened people.

But now, Georges Lamâitre's "heresy" is everywhere the accepted notion. It's so well known that Hoyle's mocking term for Lamaitre's idea has even made it onto US television, as the title of a many-season comedy, *The Big Bang Theory*.

More to the point, writings like my colleague Joy Atkinson's, rooted in Lamâitre's theory, are used in churches and synagogues now, offering many people an invitation to what Einstein called "the feeling of the mysterious."

"The womb of stars embraces us;" she writes, "remnants of their fiery furnaces pulse through our veins. We are of the stars, the dust of explosions cast across space." Lovely words. For many these days, this origin story of the cosmos supplants all the ones that came before it; and yet, as you heard earlier, in many ways, it echoes them. After all, I agree completely with the late beloved Carl Sagan, who in his criticism of Von Daniken, proclaimed forcefully that the ancients, our ancestors, were *not dummies*.

Heresy, choice, was once fraught with fear and death. Think and say the wrong thing, die a cruel death. But in our own day, in our own secular world, with the stakes left aside, *what we choose*, as an old Unitarian hymn puts it, *is what we are*. Our choices, our heresies if you will, are what define us, and help shape our

identity. And once again, I'm not talking about the humdrum choices, like whether I drink Honduran or Mexican coffee at One Line Café in Columbus OH. But I'm talking about the deeper choices based on the deeper questions... how do I want to live my life? Who decides how I live my life? Other people? How do I know how to live? Because various orthodoxies, both secular and religious, *tell* me how to live? Because I uncritically accept assumptions and religious assertions made around me by society or family in all their contradictory reality?

And this is where I return to Nate, the barista at my favorite café. As I talked with him that day, I started to realize I was in conversation with someone who understood his responsibility to decide things for himself, to live a life of choice and decision. His heretical life is not dramatically theological, of course. But nevertheless, he chooses his own path, and doesn't let others pave it for him. He doesn't tend to favor current or popular music; he prefers to wear used clothes, and not keep up with the fashions of his generation; As Castellio put it, Nate *reflects* on his own *experiences, thoughtfully*. He lives without rigid expectations, or cares much about what others might think of him. And most importantly, he lives his life from a center of gratitude, not complaint; thanksgiving, not entitlement. He accepts who he is, is glad to be who he is, and does not want to be anyone else. He's not interested in competing with others, or emulating others. He certainly doesn't fall for the consumerist hype of our age, thinking you have to buy everything before you yourself have any value. He is thoughtfully aware of the privileges and gifts he does have, but recognizes that others don't have those privileges, and he finds his grounding in life working to do what he can in that regard. As well as serving coffee, Nate is a DJ at a unique local dance venue. The most important part of his work to him? Not the joy of the coffee or his DJ work, but this: that his venue *makes sure* that of everyone is not only welcome there, but encouraged to join in. Welcome is rarely enough by itself. Not just those who show up, mind you, but they make every effort to announce their open policy out in the community. Old, middle age, young, gay, bi and straight, all gender variants, all abilities, all ethnic backgrounds, all beliefs and no beliefs, all cultures...they come together to rejoice on Saturday nights. This is the idea that makes him beam when he talks about it. This is what he chooses to do with his life that more important than anything else. As Nate and I were speaking, he kept using the word "choice" over and over, and I mentioned to him that I was noticing that. He said it's a central word in way of life. He *chooses* to work for wider justice via his work. I told him he was inspiring me about what I might say here this morning about heresy, which simply means *choice*. He was so delighted to know that definition. It's a definition that is important to me, I said to him.

We embraced, and both went on to the rest of our day.

Which brings it back to us, we who often, and understandably, proudly lift up our history of heresy..Seveto yes, but also Priestley, and Katarina Weiglowa, and Sozzini and so many others. But we live now, not 500 years ago. My conversation with Nate, almost a complete stranger to me at that time, reminded me I still need to live responsibly, via my choices; this very day, I still need to claim a life of heresy. Oh sure, I know that the flame no longer leaps up along stake, but is now confined to our chalice. Yes. But what I am saying is that it is still a heresy, a decisive choice if you will, in much of the world, to live out Nate's true joy in our own lives: that *everyone*...regardless of things like gender and ethnic background and physical ability and health and sexual orientation and economic status etc. can live out their deep hopes and visions as they choose. Living out that high affirmation is still labeled as heresy in much of the world. Some of our congregations back across the sea have been picketed, protested against for embodying the very things that make Nate full of joy. Portland OR comes to mind. Some, as you know, have even been attacked with gun wielding fanatics, as in Knoxville a few years ago. Nate also reminds us that we Unitarian Universalist are not alone in proclaiming this threatening heresy. Many of other religions and no religion, share much of our same worldview. We are hardly leading the parade. But our historic history of heresy IS significant...it says only this: that no one should be cut off from the privilege of living an honest, loving, compelling and healthy life, that no one should be exiled for changing his or her mind. That no one can be rejected because of who they are. Oh, I'm no fool...some indeed have had to be marginalized from our congregations because they have threatened harm, or actually harmed us. Welcomes can be worn out, and its not right to think we are all psychiatric nurses trained to deal with people who cannot help their violent approaches. We're not so trained, and so reserve the right not to be hurt by those prone to violence.

But those are rare occasions, and they still make me sad. Listen, limitations due to safety are not betrayals of our central heresy, just clear acknowledgements of what we can do and what we honestly can't do, without shame. No problem there for me.

Nevertheless, no matter how else we word it, this, I think, is our mission, for ourselves, and the world outside these doors. A community of welcome. An open heart, regardless of belief or unbelief for that matter. This is the heresy revealed by our own Unitarian Universalist history, and by a stranger named Nate who crossed my path one day. The heresy of a wonderfully open heart. In this beautiful autumn season, and at every other time as well.

## **Closing Words**

Oh slowly, slowly, they return in the darkening of the year;  
the memories of me jumping into piles of crisp golden leaves  
that fell from the weeping white-birch next door,  
the homegrown purple figs my grandmother handed me in a paper bag,  
the spicy scent of orange chrysanthemums, the wonder of that first time in the  
fall when you can see your own breath unfurling in the air.

Bless me, you experiences without belief or unbelief.

Bless me, you experiences without either faith or doubt.

Bless me, light and dark of the season; let me experience you for what you are,  
and not what you symbolize. Cleanse me of argument.

Trees of the season, continue to dazzle me, and let my need to be certain fall  
from me as your leaves fall away from you.

I am blessed.

May all be blessed. Amen