

RE-ENGINEERING OUR HUMAN SPECIES AND OUR FAITH

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Let me begin by congratulating you all upon Charter Day, the vision of the mothers and fathers of this wonderful Fellowship that made it all happen.

I experience here both a dedication to the search for meaning and warm interpersonal relations. You model so beautifully the best in our faith. Thank you for being.

Among other things I appreciate that you do not mind hearing challenging or controversial issues. My presentation this morning will be no exception. This year has seen my life go in new directions shaking some of the foundations of my outlook on history and even my faith. Ideas can keep percolating even after the ripe old age of 76 has been reached.

In mid-January at Hampton University, I started teaching a course in human civilization from the Renaissance to the present day. Then, April 26 till May 1, I attended the Fourth International Conference on Science and Consciousness in Albuquerque, New Mexico, two amazing eye-openers.

College teaching can be an opportunity for deep reflection. As the word university suggests, it is meant to be mind-expanding, going from the particulars of a subject to putting it into a universal framework.

For me, the question arose, "How do I come to grips with centuries of Western civilization in its relationship to the rest of the world?" My Unitarian Universalist faith had led me to glorify the Renaissance, its magnificent art, geniuses like Michelangelo and Botticelli.

The era called Enlightenment also gave us breathtaking, dynamic scientific insights, beyond the old dogmas of a flat earth as the center of the universe. Scientific pioneers like Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler are some of our heroes. Gutenberg's invention of the printing press allowed for greater dissemination of knowledge. The imagination and creativity of men like Leonardo da Vinci helped in coining the phrase of Renaissance men, to be understood as a high compliment.

The Age of Discovery and the Age of Reason collectively challenged the superstitions of the Middle Ages, while reconnecting with the high civilization of antiquity. The Reformation meant to do away with the corruptions of the Church.

In short, by all appearance, humankind was in for a breath of fresh air, bringing us closer step by step to a golden age of progress, progress forward and upward forever, as 19th century Unitarians liked to put it. However, we also must take into account the shadow-side of that period. There is, to our dismay, a direct link from the marvelous Age of Discovery to abhorrent colonialism, racism, slavery, and even genocide. As European

maritime powers like England, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal came into contact with other continents, the Europeans deemed themselves superior.

Since natives were infidels in the eyes of Christianity, unenlightened and uncivilized by our standards, natives had to be converted, enslaved, or destroyed. As the saying went, the only good Indian is a dead Indian. Religiously speaking, it was a time of intolerance, heresy trials and witch-hunts.

The same year, 1492, when Christopher Columbus sailed for America, saw the cruel, hate-filled expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain, ending centuries of convivencia, of living together in mutual acceptance. The three alternatives: forced conversion to Christianity, death and exile, set the stage for subsequent ethnic and religious cleansing, a deep wound and self-inflicted curse upon human civilization.

Furthermore, religious wars between Christians went on for decades. In summation, the so-called Age of Reason degenerated into utter irrationality. How did dreams turn into a nightmare? Descartes' well-known dictum: *cognito ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am, made the brain the centerpiece of our humanity, putting logos above eros. That resulted in an atrophy of heart, spirit, and soul. We evolved into a superficial, materialist culture, where quantity triumphs over quality, knowledge over wisdom, greed over compassion, the secular over the sacred.

One of the ways in which we glorified the Renaissance is that with the invention of the printing press, literacy increased dramatically. An unlikely person, a surgeon, Dr. Leonard Shlain, from the Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco believes that the alphabet and the printed word are mixed blessings. After all, Jesus spoke in parables, Buddha asked us to be aware, awakened. Hinduism is full of stories told by rishis and elders. Muhammad tuned into archangel Gabriel, the ancient sages and spiritual leaders did very well through oral transmission, without benefit of the printing press.

Before the gospels were written down, Christianity was a fervent, multi-faceted, heart-felt faith. Once the gospel writers, and the scribes had done their work, Christianity turned dogmatic and intolerant.

Dr. Shlain, author of The Alphabet and the Goddess, presented at the Conference on Science and Consciousness. He made the case that the Goddess, or the feminine, is holistic, thinks in images, seeks to nurture and to harmonize. The masculine, by contrast, tends to think in a linear, formal way, something that goes with alphabet. Dr. Shlain seeks to document that the alphabet reinforces patriarchal values and domination.

The Taliban, Dr. Shlain claims, are people of first generation literacy. When Mao Tse Tung introduced the alphabet in China, to replace imagistic ideograms, the Maoist Red Guards went ballistic. Europe started a period of religious wars soon after the printing press came into existence.

Any one of these developments might have been pure coincidence, but the accumulation of synchronicity causes us to wonder. So the pride of Western civilization may also be part of its nemesis. Where do we go from here?

Help may come in part from an unexpected quarter, the computer. Handwriting is mostly done with the right hand, and the right hand is connected to the left brain, which is masculine. The computer, by contrast, requires the use of both hands, balancing the feminine and the masculine spheres of the brain. Hence, the new technology may be coming to the rescue, though that in itself it is not enough, by a long shot, for a re-engineering of our species and our faith to take place. The central direction of science, starting with the Renaissance, was to focus upon a three-dimensional world of matter, space, and time, all measurable, quantitative, provable by experiments. Matter, space, and time became primary in the story of our genesis.

We are stardust come to life. It took over ten billion years of evolution, when, thanks to a chemical reaction, the first living cell appeared on our planet. It took additional billions of years till, with ever-growing complexity, homo erectus and finally homo sapiens appeared upon the face of the earth. This is pretty much what most Unitarian Universalists tend to believe, consciousness and spirit grew out of matter and space, seeded with geological time.

They are primary, while consciousness is derivative. Now, the Albuquerque conference speakers took a different tack. They argued rather persuasively as far as I am concerned, that consciousness and spirit are primary, while the material world, like in the Hindu concept of maya, is illusion or delusion. For instance, a tree is not a tree, but over 99% emptiness, merely perceived as a tree, the image of a tree.

As I mentioned in my reading: We live in “a world where nothing is as it appears to be to the human senses.” The traditional perception that we humans have bodies, endowed with spirit, is turned on its head. Rather, it might be said, we are spirit, dwelling in a body, we are spirit in the flesh, spirit incarnate, spirit seeking to come into its own.

Such a change in perspective brings with it a new evolutionary consciousness: The sanctity of human life and all of creation. Beyond, underneath, and above the secular and the material, as revealed by our senses, there is the realm of spirit. It is our task, our mission, to make that spirit manifest, to be what we really are. So, it is high time to say good-bye to the love of power, the brute power of domination and exploitation, that has been so much part of our history: enslavement, wars of conquest, racism, sexism, classism, and such. They cannot be touted as survival mechanisms anymore, the survival of the fittest. They are prescriptions for ultimate failure.

Where do we go from here?

We are invited to live the power of love, the power of compassion, the power of community. The love of power dooms us to an eye for an eye, to the rape of the planet, to the agony and death of spirit. Our epitaph will read: A failed experiment, the

extinction of the human race, the destruction of Gaia, the destruction of Mother Earth. The power of love, compassion, and spirit incarnate leads us to peace, joy, and a sustainable world. Quo vadis. Which way will we go?