

GOD BLESS THE SKEPTICS

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Good Morning. And thank you once again for the opportunity to stand before you and share some thoughts, some perspectives, and, in this case, a bit of personal history. We may find some commonalities on our journeys from what we were to what we are and on to what we may become.

One of the many special things I find about our group is that we are from such a diverse background, diverse in so many ways. No one here is where they were in their youth. We are a theological mix of ex-something-or-others. Even those born into UUism can claim today's UU-ism isn't your father's Oldsmobile, so to speak. Unitarian Universalist perspectives are also changing. Maybe I should say always changing. It seems that as soon as we start getting smug about knowing the right path on a certain issue, up pops a challenge to our perspective and suddenly the clarity of our perspective blurs and a new picture begins to form. And we, hopefully, progress. We may be a bit miffed because somebody fuzzed our comfortable picture or we began to question and fuzzed it ourselves. Became a bit skeptical of its clarity. Maybe some common sense mixed with that good rational skepticism. But if no one, not even ourselves fuzzed with the focus on our picture of life, we may all be back where we were. And to that, I say, God Bless the Skeptics.

Back where we were for me is a part of the children's choir of Trinity Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, a Dutch reformed background of high moral standards, an ample dose of thou shalt nots, and a generally literal and ritualistic interpretation of the Bible. One might characterize the Dutch Reformed Church as fundamentalist, but that term has been so politically contaminated that I hate to use it. It has connotations that just don't apply in this case. I would rather say this was just a good, wholesome group of people, trying to encourage each other to live hard-working lives focused on stable families while avoiding the challenges of alcohol, obscenity as they define it, dishonesty, divorce, and such. Another thing to avoid is theological challenges to their Biblical foundations. At some point, this later perspective began to puzzle me.

I knew from Leviticus 11: 6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

Leviticus 25: 44 states that I may indeed own slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from a neighboring nation. I had heard that applies to Mexicans, but, for us in Michigan, Canada was so much closer. Why not Canadians?

My Uncle Harold was a farmer. He violated Leviticus 19: 19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as did his wife by wearing garments made of two kinds of thread (Aunt Cora liked cotton/polyester blend). He also tended to curse and blaspheme a lot. (Uncle Harold wasn't Dutch Reformed.) Is it really necessary that we go to the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone him? Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws as in Leviticus 20: 14?

Speaking of in-laws, if my brother dies do I really have to take his wife into my home, treat her as my own wife, including sleeping with her and all? Now that is a pretty traumatic thought to a 14-year-old who has very little confidence in his six-year-old brother's judgement of women.

I questioned – with, I think, good result for me anyway. God Bless the Skeptic.

I became Presbyterian. Not being good at halfway efforts, around age 24 I found myself on the Board of Session and chair of the Strategy and Planning Committee. Shirley and I taught a high school level church school class each Sunday, but we chose to focus on skills of life, decision making, etc. which allowed us to comfortably avoid whether or not we needed to wear gloves playing football or whether I needed to sleep with our maidservant to produce offspring if we were not so blessed based on our own efforts. With a change of ministers, I found the new Reverend, in his words, really would have preferred to be Baptist. He took offense in our rec room at our 40-foot long time line representing earth's history that displayed the Christian era in proportion as the width of a rather fine wire. A bit too humbling, I guess. The growing discomfort on our part was eased when General Motors transferred us to Europe, where we discovered UU-ism through our reading on alternative life styles. Upon return, we became a part of the Birmingham UU church under the late Bob Marshall, a cohort of Rudi Gelsey in the Detroit area UU world.

We found UUism. God bless us Skeptics.

Skepticism isn't really a religion, maybe more a philosophy, certainly a waver of the red flag against the doctrine of the day. Guthrie in *The Greek Philosophers* states that moral and political philosophy first arose in Greece in an atmosphere of skepticism. Consider religious evolution. Hasn't skepticism played the key role in establishing new paradigms? The Pope is dealing with skepticism today as he wrestles with communion for those professing his brand of Catholicism while simultaneously supporting abortion. And even Catholicism continues to evolve. God bless the Skeptics. You can shout, AMEN!, if you're so motivated. No, No. Just Kidding.

I, and maybe you, have come to believe skepticism is critical to a positive outlook on life. I, and maybe you, consider skepticism the difference between defining your own journey through life vs. being led, sometimes by the nose or the wallet, by others with ulterior motives. The Skeptics among us discovered this in different ways. During the early part of my life, we were totally engrossed in our respective careers as are most young people, paying only periphery attention to the larger issues of society around us. Newspapers, magazines, and television kept us generally aware. Perceptions changed when the national media began to take an interest in the Automotive Industry in a vast variety of ways. I even ended up on national TV. Another time, I found myself on stage in Washington debating certain issues with Ralph Nader with a few of his cronies as hecklers from the floor. Now, for the first time in my life, the media was talking about something I knew a great deal about, so I paid attention. And I was appalled. The truths lie on the cutting room floor ignored and the snippets were rearranged to fit an agenda of lies. Some media were worse than others. And it continued for years. It was amazing what the general public was told, what they believed, and what some still believe today. O, God, where were the Skeptics?

A fairly recent example is when NBC faked crash tests on GM pickups (those rolling firebombs, you know). And the government became their indiscriminating echo. What NBC didn't know was that the camera on the dash of the standby local firetruck also taped the test. Including the voices of the test crew saying "well, that wasn't much" in spite of the rigged test intended to show Chevy trucks explode on impact. Careful editing saved the predetermined premise as the piece aired. Later, it was learned the tanks were filled to spilling, the caps not installed and the test truck was found in a

junkyard with the remains of rocket motor igniters to initiate fire still in place. NBC was challenged privately and stood behind their story. GM revealed the lie and Michael Gaertner, President of NBC News, lost his job. Skeptics know we engineers control these designs and we put our loved ones in these vehicles. It was a short leap from that experience to the realization that, if what the public is being told by the popular media is grossly lacking in integrity in areas I know in depth, I need to be considerably more cautious in what I accept in areas where I have NO depth. Exciting public outrage or fear, towards ones own ends is dangerous. During those years, God, we needed more Skeptics.

Maybe some of you folks know about Sarah in our small community. She's active in another church and seems to be the self-appointed supervisor of that church's morals. Several members were unappreciative of her activities in this area, and these would-be skeptics of her judgment feared her enough to maintain their silence.

Poor George was relatively new to the congregation when Sarah accused him of being an alcoholic after she saw his truck parked in front of the town bar one afternoon. She commented to George and to many, many others that everyone seeing it there would know that he was an alcoholic. George, a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and just walked away. He said nothing.

Later that evening, George quietly parked his truck in front of Sarah's house...and left it there all night. I hear Sarah has become a skeptic.

One of the reasons we skeptics must help each other is so that we don't damage each other, or damage others...with all the best intentions, of course. You who have the expertise in child rearing, education, philosophy, law, military matters, government agency infighting, medical services, microbiology, and what have you are right here in this room. And, yes, religion. Please be our expert skeptic vs. those who wish us to believe other than the truth, or wish to put us off balance from what common sense would dictate. Contribute to our discussions. Assist us with your expertise as Larry so expertly did a few weeks back. Help us help our society from doing others harm.

I think of the Mom and Pop red apple growers of the Great Lakes and Northwest. Remember Alar that reddens apples? The National Resources Defense Council, through CBS 60 Minutes, claimed Alar, was "the most potent cancer causing agent in our children's food supply." Where did that come from? NRDC contributions had slowed so they hired David Fenton, a PR expert who was in transition from representing the Marxist governments

of Nicaragua, Angola, and Granada to the more lucrative environmental extremist clients. Fenton found them the Alar issue, suppressed normal research peer review, promoted it on 60 Minutes, and recruited Meryl Streep to speak for a front group named “Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits.” Your wallet was the target and Alar was the missile. Mothers dumped apple juice down the drain. Schools pulled apples from the lunchrooms. Remarkably, three government agencies tried to damp down the hysteria. CBS broadcast a follow-up a few months later building on the panic. Some of the 4700 apple growers and distributors, having collectively lost \$200 million, never recovered. Orchards that had been in families for generations went under. Fenton bragged about his success in the magazine, “Propaganda Review.” What 60 Minutes did not do in the shows titled “Apples are Killing Our Kids” was to tell us that the EPA had issued a press release 3 weeks earlier that stated Alar was shown to be “statistically negative for cancer response.” Mice eating Alar equivalent to 14,000 apples per day for 70 years did NOT produce tumors but doubling the dose to the equivalent of 28,000 apples per day finally did. But Congress was shortly off and running on the scent, looking for victims and Meryl Streep to join them on TV. These government circus performances are termed Barnumocracy. The EPA was politically forced to decertify Alar. The special interest group, National Resources Defense Council, received a considerable boost in income and grants, up to \$12 million annually, and went on to spearhead more such movements. God, please bless the Skeptics with a bigger megaphone – those skeptics needed to be heard before the damage was done.

It’s apparent when such alarms go off that we need, among other things, to carefully consider the source. What are the consequences to the presenter if the data presented is right or wrong? Where is the integrity and accountability? Is there a consequential financial side to the issue, and aspect that drives many actions?

Even if we aren’t apple growers, we pay the bill. Skeptics know that no big company “pays” for any of these irresponsible fire drills. Every cost imposed on business is a cost passed through, sooner or later, to consumer and/or taxpayer. That’s why it’s funny when the media or politicians talk about raising business taxes or some corporations are paying too little in taxes as though that was decreasing the average taxpayer’s burden. Business taxes are also just a pass through to the consumer, you and me. The bottom line is that only people pay taxes and buy products and services – not companies. God bless the skeptics. They think through these things and don’t just echo the nightly news. In the Alar example, knowledgeable

skeptics shared that the National Cancer Institute studies show no cancer increase during the period marked by large increases in agricultural chemicals. And that cancer mortality rates have in fact decreased 40% for children – we weren't, as CBS said, killing our kids with apples. And don't ignore UC Berkeley studies that point out that all but 1/10 of 1 % of ingested pesticides are put into the plants by Mother Nature as part of their own defense system. Plus the National Academy of Science studies find eating large amounts of fruits and vegetables grown as they are today is a good way to REDUCE the risk of cancer. Think before being scared. Think who gains by scaring you. Think W-W-S-S, "What Would Skeptics Say."

When a terrorism expert on Larry King calls the events at Waco as a representation of Christian Fundamentalism or when the wacko who shot an abortion doctor in Florida is labeled as some kind of pro-life nut when he was just a wacko with marital problems, be skeptical. Let the other guy's God bless the skeptic, too.

As an illustration of the frustrations of trying to get good science into the hands and heads of the public vs. scare science, the head of the inquiry into the Three Mile Island accident, sensationalized to the hilt, commented at the conclusion of his work, "I left Washington fully expecting the following story in one of our morning newspapers: Three scientists, named Galileo, Newton, and Einstien, have concluded on the basis of their research that the Earth is round. However, the NY Times has learned authoritatively that Professor John Doe of Podunk College has conclusive evidence that the Earth is flat." Hey, God! – sounds like another Skeptic was born.

History helps us gain confidence in our skepticism. Today's church bulletin includes all nine claims used to found Earth Day in 1970 as reported at the time in Life Magazine. It scared me, but then I was only an embryo skeptic at the time. Only a portion of one of those 1970 scares has survived. You might want to reflect on which of the popular scares of today will have sufficient credibility to survive the next 30 years? By choosing carefully where we invest our time, fortune, and faith, we may end up blessing ourselves for being skeptical.

In closing, this is a quote from Andrew Newburg's "Why God Won't Go Away": "The conflict between science and faith was propelled by the great discoveries of the scientific age, which arguably began when Gallileo's observations verified Copernicus's view of the solar system. The revelation that the earth had not been lovingly set at the center of the universe by a

doting, divine creator was a devastating blow to orthodox Christian doctrine at the time. To make matters worse, when the Church tried to silence Galileo by proclaiming him a heretic, it showed itself, in the eyes of many rational people, to be more concerned with dogma than with truth.”

Imagine if Galileo and all folks with their eyes heavenward since his time had not persistently questioned the popular beliefs and prostelizations of their day. Are UU’s vulnerable to adopting such current beliefs and themes as dogma? Thank God for our Skeptics. W. W. S. S.

BULLETIN INSERT --

Life Magazine in 1970, along with many other media announcing the first Earth Day, included “Unless something is done to reverse environmental destruction, say many qualified experts, horrors lie in wait. Scientists have solid experimental and theoretical evidence to support each of the following predictions:

- By 1980, urban dwellers will have to wear gas masks to survive air pollution.
- In the early 1980’s, air pollution combined with temperature inversion will kill thousands in some U.S. cities.
- By 1985, air pollution will have reduced the amount of sunlight reaching earth by one half.
- In the 1980’s a major ecological system – soil or water – will break down somewhere in the U.S. New diseases that humans cannot resist will reach plague proportions.
- Increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere will effect the earth’s temperature creating mass flooding or a new Ice Age.
- Rising noise levels will cause more heart disease and hearing loss. Sonic booms from SST’s will damage children before birth.
- Residual DDT collecting in the human liver will make the use of certain common drugs dangerous and increase liver cancer.

The “experts” had the most to gain in influence, attention, funding, and power. Of these nine issues, one has come to pass, partially: AIDS is a disease that humans can not resist, and in certain pockets in some U.S. communities it has reached plague proportions. And certainly that in parts of the undeveloped world. However, environmental pollution, the focus of Earth Day, did not start or spread AIDS as the early cases seem to have stemmed from unprotected acts within the male homosexual community.