

## **Inquiring Minds Want to Know**

**A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst**

**The Reverend Alison Wohler**

**September 25, 2005**

Once upon an unrecorded, but not unimagined, time, in what we now call the Fertile Crescent, a male and a female of the upright species gave birth to a girl named Eve. Now Eve's family was part of a human-like animal for whom life was pretty routine: look for food, have babies, look for food, try to survive, die. But for Eve something was different, even if she could not identify what that was. It seemed that thoughts were coming to her that she could see were not on the minds of the rest of her family. And her family, whose brains were evolved but had not yet made the leap that Eve's had, could only recognize that Eve was different in some way and therefore to be feared – shunned.

This was a very lonely time for Eve and although she tried to make herself fit in, her heart just wasn't in it. There was something she was looking for but she couldn't quite figure out what it was.

Then one day, when she was taking one of her frequent walks trying to make sense of her life, she met another person in whose eyes she recognized something of herself. Shall we call him Adam? He too had been born to simpler parents and was an outcast from his own kind.

Adam and Eve started hanging out together and it wasn't long before Eve said to her new friend, in the language of those days. "Adam, the two of us are different from the rest of our species. And I know, being a woman and therefore well attuned to matters of relationship, that you and I should stick together. We are of like minds. And would you like to try a bite of this delicious apple I found on that tree over there? Adam wasn't so sure he wanted to make such a big change in his life, but the attractiveness of Eve's intellect finally won him over. And so, self conscious in their difference, and painfully aware that they were no longer welcome in what had been their home, Adam and Eve reluctantly left the Garden of Eden and started a new family.

And here we are. So much has changed and yet, so little has changed.

Why were Adam and Eve sad to leave the Garden of Eden? Because ignorance had been bliss. Their new self awareness, their new sense of power and control over the environment, their particular fear of an unknown they now recognized as Death, made life as a human being much more emotionally difficult. That mythical apple of which they had eaten – the one from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil – had thrown their lives into turmoil. Not to mention their evolving brains.

Consolation came in the form of another uniquely human characteristic, which Adam and Eve had no idea would become the downfall of the entire species. This was called ego. "To be able to out-think every other living creature must mean that we are

better than they are?” they said to themselves. And if we are better, there must be rights that go with that. Like maybe we are supposed to rule over the world – have dominion over it. We are not a part of this creation, we are above it. We are as the gods.

In this anthropologic history of the world according to Alison, this is our original sin, to have ever thought we were separate from the rest of creation. Unique yes, special yes, just as is the very least of it all. And although our rational minds and the discoveries of modern physics would attempt to convince us that any ideas we have of being outside of the interdependent web are just illusions, we cannot seem to keep from succumbing to those illusions. It is our constant battle to try and feel otherwise. It is what religion is all about.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote “We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness.” For me, this one sentence sums up three separate assumptions that I believe are true: First, that reality is, indeed, one unified entity. Second, the nature of our human predicament is that we think we are outside that oneness. And third, that the purpose of religion is to deal with the pain caused by that illusion. “We are here [this very morning] to awaken from the illusion of our separateness.”

The word religion takes its meaning from the expression “to rebind,” to recreate the ties that have been broken. Witness our recognized need for connection and relationship with each other and the world. In the most recent edition of *shift* magazine, a publication of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, Nona Simons writes: “As human beings, we’re built for relationship. Our young remain dependent far longer than most other creatures, and our neural systems and limbic brains are hardwired for empathy, compassion, and connection.” You might be familiar with the lovely reading in the back of our hymnals, (number 468) called We Need One Another – when we mourn, when we are afraid, when we come to die.... It is so true.

In our urge to find connection, others find proof that human beings are hardwired for the religious impulse. In a book called *Why God Won’t Go Away*, Andrew Newberg explores the neurobiologic explanation of what people around the world and throughout time have described as the mystical experience of feeling at one with the Universe or with God. Newberg’s research shows that in deep states of prayer or meditation or even quiet moments alone in the woods, a very specific part of our brain, whose function it is to locate us physically within our surroundings, suddenly finds itself underfed by sensory stimuli and accordingly calculates the body as being located within a much larger space than is actually the case. We feel at one with, connected to, the largeness and oneness of existence. This is the classical definition of a mystical experience and now we are beginning to understand its neurological basis.

A second article from that same recent edition of *shift* magazine is called “A Decidedly Different Mind,” by Stephanie Pace Marshall. Her ultimate topic is about intelligence and how our brains learn, but she begins with a description of what I think is a great part of the religious impulse in all of us – our natural desire to know things. “We are born learning beings. We naturally imagine, wonder, invent, and explore our way

into unknown territories and perplexing and paradoxical questions. Our curiosity and insatiable drive to know and figure things out is innate. Even if we wanted to, we could not stop learning and trying to make sense of our world and our place in it. We could not stop trying to understand who we are, why we are here, and how we belong.” These are all questions of connection. This is why I, personally, have a hard time separating scientific questions from religious ones. For me they are all a part of finding out more about our relationship with the earth and each other. For me learning is a path to better, more informed, relationships of any kind.

I love this short essay on learning by T. H. White. It is written in the voice of Merlyn, that extraordinary teacher of the young King Arthur. “The best thing for being sad, [said] Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then – to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you.”

Inquiring minds want to know. I bet the not so reputable tabloid for whom that was a favorite advertising slogan never dreamed it would someday be used as a sermon title. Maybe we should be talking about something scandalous!

So, how is this place, the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst, a vehicle of religious thinking? How are we using our time here to help us reconnect with that which we have either chosen not to be, or forgotten how to, be in relationship? What would we like this place to be?

In my very first sermon to you, called You Are Invited, I called us (that’s you and me) to create a place of welcome, affirmation and love. I said that our human-ness may come from our form and the evolved abilities of our brains, but our person-hood comes from our ability to relate. We are invited at every turn of our lives to relationships of intentionality and depth. We are invited to regard each other as subject to subject, not subject to object – to see in the other not a separate entity but rather an extension, perhaps expansion, of ourselves. We come together in community to find the possibilities in our interactions, not the limits of our isolation.

Let me speak more specifically about the various activities of this Society and how they fulfill the goal of religious intent.

In our worship services we discover and express our gratitude for what has worth in our lives. The word worship comes from the idea of worth-ship. We pay attention to the difficulties in our lives and those of the rest of the world. We recognize the beauty of music and poetry – the joy of creativity. We spend time in silent reflection, opening our minds to un-thought-of possibilities. We express our gratitude and awe for this thing called life.

As your minister, my place during worship, and particularly through my sermon, is, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, “to convert life into truth,” to deal out to the people my life, “passed through the fire of thought.” I offer to you the experiences, understandings, struggles and joys that I have had – in the hopes that in my story you may find something of yourself.

In our services and also in religious education as it applies to all ages, we expose ourselves to the learning and ideas of great thinkers. We remind ourselves and teach our children of the sacredness to be found in the most everyday of occurrences. We find our own sources of strength that we may in turn help others who are in need or suffering.

In social fellowship, circle suppers, in our small groups, and in discussions over Chinese food after Sunday service, we talk and we talk and we talk. There can never be too much of that for relationship building. From each other we learn about diversity and respect and that we are only whole people in an understanding of our differences as well as our similarities. We talk, maybe not enough, about what it is we believe, or think we believe, or believe today but might change our minds about tomorrow. We understand that we are all, individually and as a community, in process.

In this religious community we also celebrate and acknowledge the various passages of our lives – births and dedications, marriages, separations, illness and death. They are all a part of our lives together. What happens to one of us happens to all of us.

Most of all we practice, in this subset of the larger world, being with one another in right relationship. That’s one more little unique thing about being human. Most of us want to live in a way that betters our world and everyone in it – and our religious communities are places we have created to intentionally figure out how to do just that. We want the right relationship, not just any relationship. Emerson called this our “religious sentiment” derived from our universal “moral sentiment, that fundamental perception that the world has an essential balance and wholeness.” (Robert Richardson, Emerson, *The Mind On Fire*, p. 289)

Where did our Universe come from? How does it work? What is the nature of being human? How are we to behave with each other? What happens when we die? Why did the UU cross the road? Inquiring minds want to know.

Let me share with you David Blanchard’s answer to one of these perplexing questions:

*“There may be several possible answers to why the Unitarian Universalist might cross the road. Among them: because that’s where they were serving coffee; they didn’t cross it, they transcended it; or that they only got as far as the middle of the road since they didn’t want to take sides. The fact is that we ‘cross the road’ for the same reason the chicken did: to get to the other side.*

*Getting to the other side isn’t always simple. People we love die. We grow and change in unexpected ways. We make mistakes and hurt people we care about, and vice versa. We can find ourselves more alone at times than we think*

*we can bear. And yet there are times when we are overwhelmed by the beauty of this world or by the blessing of unexpected kindness.*

*Getting to the other side is made easier when we choose to travel with others. Life in community isn't always easy, but it's the only place we can practice being human.*

*We will reach the other side with fewer regrets, and with less baggage, if we have found a way to accept each other for who we are, even as we seek to be who we might become. In community we are reminded of our ideals, yet it is also a place to confess our limitations and express our deepest hope.*

*Liberal religion is not 'easy street,' but what we do have to offer is this; a tradition that affirms human dignity, that encourages spiritual growth and discovery, and that is intellectually honest in the face of the complexities of our time. We offer these tools and our companionship so that we might help each other get safely from here to the other side." (from A Temporary State of Grace, p. 38-39)*

Today, many thousands of years later, we are still dealing with the same problems that Adam and Eve found troubling. From them we inherit our insatiable curiosities – and our religious impulse. Just as theirs was a world on the edge of great changes, so too are we, as in our reading, at a turning point of global community. Adam and Eve's was a story of isolation and expulsion from the safety and innocence of home – I admit to feeling the same way at times. But I have you. We have each other.

Whatever it is our inquiring minds want to know, it is surely better to look for the answers together.