

Following video of George Carlin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmXacLOUny0&list=RDqmXacLOUny0#t=0>

I just love George Carlin – ever since I was a teen ager and rolling off the bed laughing as my friend and I listened to the Seven Deadly Words you can never say on television on an LP. You actually hear many of those words on TV today – but back then we thought it hilarious.

I've shared this clip today, not because I am especially partial to either baseball or football, but because it shows how clearly two games can share the name of sport, but being incredibly different in how they are played and how they are viewed. Sport can be life affirming and healthy or dangerous and threatening to your body. And how you participate in the sport you choose also offers up a wide range of possible outcomes. You can play touch football with good friends for fun and exercise on a sunny afternoon – and everyone walks away in good shape. Or play an incredibly competitive game of table tennis where injuries abound because it's being taken way too seriously. Winning become the absolute goal and fun has been left in the dust.

And just as there are different ways to experience sports, there are very different ways to experience religion. We're in church – you knew we were going there!

One of the most influential books I read in seminary was for a class called "Evil, Trauma, and Ambiguity." The book was titled "The Demonic Turn" by Lloyd Steffen. Written close on the heels of 9-11, Steffen argues that while horrific acts can be laid at the feet of religion, it is not religion itself which is the problem but the way people practice religion.

Religion is extremely powerful because it deals with questions of ultimacy. Every human being has a relationship with ultimacy – with figuring out what is most important in life to them. It can be huge – like life, death, and the meaning of the universe – or it can be as simple as your next meal, place to sleep, or for the addict, that next drink.

Ultimacy is where we place our energy and deepest questions. Religion in every place and time has focused on figuring out our human relationship with what theologian Paul Tillich named Ultimate Concern.

But Steffen says the problems that we have are not with religion but with how Ultimacy is perceived. Ultimacy is expansive. It is beyond our finite ability to comprehend. It expands

in all directions & dimensions. It is beyond. In the 12th century St Anselm described it as “that beyond which nothing greater can be imagined.”

The definition of ultimacy, in this sense, is that it defies definition. But human beings don't like something we can't define. Sometimes we are uncomfortable with something that can't be put in a handy box so absolutism has been added to Ultimacy. Absolutism has edges. The God most people are familiar with has absolute Ultimacy – meaning that God is all knowing, all powerful and contains all things within it.

This creates a closed system which necessarily encompasses both good and evil. It is this very addition, absolutism, which introduces the whole problem of theodicy – the question of why a good god would allow evil in the world. Naming God as absolutely good takes human relationality out of the equation. Everything good exists within God so God – Ultimacy – equals good. Whatever God wants is necessarily good.

Steffen says that people choose this option because they don't have to struggle with the greater good. The freedom to have to figure out what is right and what is wrong makes some people anxious. They use their freedom to give it away – to let a greater ultimacy direct their choices. Steffen says this is the first turn toward the demonic. God becomes the absolute definition of good in any circumstance and this good can justify any act – no matter how intrinsically immoral; acts like the crusades, inquisitions, jihads, honor killings etc. Things like lynching's bombing abortion clinics. If God is ultimate good then as long as God wills it – it's above reproach and morally justifiable.

Ahhh – there's the rub. Who gets to say what God wants? Obviously those people who have allied themselves with this absolute ultimacy – they claim that power.

Now, in contrast, human morality is concerned with the good. Specifically the good in relationship with the other. The good holds up that which is relationally good, that which supports the values of life – the mystery and wonder of life. Morality provides a guide, but one that is flexible and sometimes must struggle with opposing goods – the lesser of two evils.

It's easy to see the downward slope that Absolute Ultimacy creates. We see it in simplified form in the struggle against same sex marriage. While it's *morally* wrong to treat other people differently – to treat them as less than we want to be treated – it's *okay* if it's in the service of a larger law of God. You can use God to do some pretty awful things – you only

have to take a short romp through history to come up with dozens of examples. It doesn't have to be logical - because God is Ultimate and Absolute good – and beyond human reason.

But Steffen argues that even good things – life affirming, virtuous things – can become demonic if they are absolutized. Even those things which liberally religious people love and support can turn harmful if they turn away from free choice and toward absolutized solutions.

Take peace for example. Steffen writes “The commitment to peaceful nonviolence, once absolutized, can be expected to yield contradiction: even religious pacifism, if absolutized can come to express the demonic.” P136. The moral good of pacifism comes from its respect for life; from the idea that it's better for people's health and wellbeing, to avoid the ravages of war. Proponents of pacifism understand that violence begets more violence and they set a goal of non-violent action to oppose oppression and end destructive aggressions.

However, an absolute pacifism, one which never allows for the possibility of violent action, can also lead to a place of death, destruction and disrespect for life. The power behind Gandhi's non-violent action was the suppressed but visible accumulation of influence and authority. Having power provided the freedom to refrain from exercising that power. Non-violent action without the power of enormous gathering of people behind it, it would have been crushed and erased without remark. Non-violence was an ultimate guiding principle – but it was not absolute. Gandhi understood that action was the essential element in creating change – and non-violence was the preferred but not sole method.

Steffen affirms that religion is powerful; it can be powerfully good or powerfully demonic. It is up to us to determine how we will practice religion; whether we will choose unlimited possibility or the enclose ultimacy in a restricted and self-contradicting box. It is the box which causes the destruction and the violence, the absolutism, not the power of ultimacy itself.

Religion which is open to change, open to reevaluating its symbols in the light of new knowledge and truth, can offer life giving and affirming experience. Our own faith tradition has come this route. Each passing generation has seen an expansion of ways to experience and explore ultimacy. From Francis David to James Freeman, from Theodore Parker to Margaret Fuller to Mary Stafford, our ancestors have been willing to reinvent religion and the way they related to Ultimacy.

This is life affirming faith. This is the ultimate definition of liberal religion. Religion which is committed to freedom, which is open to undiscovered possibilities and which engages in an ongoing search for the moral good. At its best our faith steps outside the dichotomies of either/or and looks for both/and, for things as yet unimagined.

It's what Rev Helen was trying to accomplish here during your interim period. She was breaking long held patterns of behavior in order to really look at what you were doing. Many of the things she shut down were not intrinsically negative or even unhelpful. But by discontinuing them and trying things another way, it made space to look at past practices with an open mind and to really discern if something was positive – whether it held a deeper truth – or whether it was just comfortable.

Unitarian Universalists define ourselves as people with progressive values – folks who are willing to step outside the conventional.

But you know – we are human. A defining characteristic of our faith is that it is dominated by come-inners. Folks who have abandoned former faith tradition which no longer served and who brought their experiences and perspectives with them into Unitarian Universalism. They come for freedom from dogma, freedom from restrictive descriptions of god which fit into neat and tidy boxes, freedom to evolve their own vision of ultimacy. They come because their experience of an absolute ultimacy was not life affirming and they reject the religious language which they grew up with.

But I would argue that this is also a challenge for Unitarian Universalism. In rejecting one absolute description of ultimacy, we often take up its opposite without letting go of traces of the absolutism that made us feel safe and secure.

I struggled with this for some time as a come inner from Catholicism. I wanted there to be right answers; a right way. This practice of being open to examine, to reject, to look at all sides was perplexing and challenging. I'd left behind the “wrong” religion and now I had to be in the “right” one.

Or not.

I was confusing the symbols of ultimacy, the words, the ritual, the dogma, with ultimacy itself. By rejecting those symbols without engaging with the larger realities to which they pointed, I was merely trading one side of the box – the inside – for the outside. I was still *bound* by absolutist thinking.

It's a common experience. There are a whole group of prominent atheist writers out now who are intelligent and eloquent and who succumb to this same logical fallacy. They argue forcefully and persuasively that belief in God is dangerous and harmful. Sam Harris, in *The End of Faith*, says that the men who committed the atrocities of 9-11 "were men of faith-- perfect faith, as it turns out--and this, it must finally be acknowledged, is a terrible thing to be." This statement, by completely ignoring the millions of Muslims who live faithful and moral lives, indicates that he's traded one side of the box for another. But there's still a box.

And in *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins states; "The take-home message is that we should blame religion itself, not religious extremism - as though that were some kind of terrible perversion of real, decent religion." Again, a failure to acknowledge the *wide* spectrum of behaviors which exist in *every* major religion.

So... Unitarian Universalism is all about freedom. It's about supporting one another on a free search for truth and meaning. But do we? Do we actually walk that walk? Maybe you do a truly wonderful job of that here – I am still getting to know this community. But – at every UU church I've been part of so far there has been an undercurrent of suspicion – sometimes even hostility – towards those folks who still claimed a theistic faith.

In my home church there was a wonderful older gentleman named Sam. Smart, kind, welcoming; he was the guy who greeted me when I first came to that church, and who always made me feel welcome. But Sam was what you might call an absolute atheist. He was the guy who informed our minister of the number of times he had used the word "God" in any given service – with great disapproval. For Sam, God language, had no part in a UU service and he made certain every instance of such violation was duly noted.

What he might not have realized is that people who came into the church with a Christian perspective often felt silenced and belittled– afraid to share their own views very often.

I had a great deal of sympathy with Sam. When he arrived at his understanding of the universe back in the 1950s – a universe which did not include a judgmental white God with a beard – he suffered a lot of rejection and pain for his atheist views. Finding the Unitarian Universalist church in Cleveland felt like finding an oasis in a sea of hostile Christianity.

Having "God" talk – even language of reverence - filter back in felt like an affront to all that he had stood for and he fought against it - absolutely. There was no room in Sam's world any religious symbolism. The symbol was the reality for him, and he couldn't find a way to

climb out of that box. Anything that couldn't be seen and measured did not exist. God could only refer to the idea he had abandoned – and anyone else with any common sense would be sure to follow. Unitarian Universalists can get stuck in our own absolutist boxes, we can get stuck in the patterns of being religious learned early in life, stuck by the attraction of being right.

True liberal religion means throwing away all the boxes. Even other people's. Words are symbols which point to experienced realities – and they change and evolve.

A century ago the word queer meant something a little odd or strange. When I was growing up, queer was one of the worst insults you could hurl – and it generally meant some derivation of homosexual. But today, Queer Studies are a respected discipline in academia and queer is actually the word I prefer in claiming my own sexual identity. The *valence* of the word has changed. I claim it as a life affirming, outside of the box, morally good. It points to an identity that is not locked in, but fluid and free to evolve.

Many other words have evolved. They have been reclaimed by groups formerly injured by their use. Words like geek and nerd, witch and Dyke. Words have no inherent meaning of their own. Their meaning is imbued by the definition and integrity we give them in relationship with one another.

I am fairly comfortable using the word God interchangeably with spirit, universe, and ultimate reality - but it bears little relationship with the God of my youth. I am in relationship with something much larger than I can possibly imagine or place within a box, and "God" works as a reclaimed way to describe this experience. I am neither a believer nor a non-believer. I am present to what is before me, open to new experiences and enjoying the ride.

Being truly liberally religious means opening to all of the unnamed and unimagined possibilities of life. It is not merely rejecting one set of boxes to acquire another. It is a place of wonder and awe, a place of potential not limited by past understandings, but called into relationship with a wholeness of life and love beyond that which we've yet experienced.

When we believe there is an absolute right, whether religious or secular, whether personal or communal, it is incredibly hard to stay in relationship and open to other possibilities. Some tiny voice in our head says, if you are right, then I must be wrong – and I don't want to be wrong.

It's that anxiety of freedom which Steffen named. While it feels good to be 'right' to stand firm on a soundly constructed soap box, this very standing can often turn us toward the demonic; away from life affirming freedom, away from relationship building and into a place of dichotomy and constriction. But we don't have to live there. Physicist Niels Bohr observed: The opposite of a fact is falsehood, but the opposite of one profound truth may very well be another profound truth.

The universe is not only bigger than a black and white, it is bigger than all the colors we perceive to exist, all the colors we could imagine, bigger even than our conception of light. I imagine it to be like George Carlin's description of the baseball field – open ended, expanding out into infinite space. A place where cooperation yields a good run; where we call one another on errors, but where we always understand that the ultimate goal is to be present and to enjoy the wonder and goodness of the day and to trust that being human means being in relationship.

The Sufi mystic Rumi wrote:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other" doesn't make any sense.

Our liberal religious faith calls us to that field. To a place beyond the limits of any sized box and to a way of thinking that finds commonality and relationality - and that acknowledges the transformational good of being in community.

There exists a field of possibility – I'll meet you there.

Amen & Blessed Be.