

It All Started with Abraham

by the Reverend Don Garrett

delivered September 18, 2011

The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

More than half of world's population belongs to the religions of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. A lot of attention has been focused on how these religions are different from each other, but they each do have a similar assumption at their base: that the nature of ultimate reality is beyond human understanding.

For Jews, God's revealed nature is summed up in the words to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus, saying, "I am that I am." Or "I am *the* I am," defining deity as identical with the fundamental existential nature of being. Christianity defines God as love, an inclusive and integrating force that calls us rather more to action in the world than understanding of its nature. The Muslim faith is even more explicit about the unknowable nature of ultimate reality. They have 99 names for God and insist that all of them together cannot contain the whole truth.

All three, however, do derive from the same root: the story of Abraham. This is why scholars include them in a single group, calling them the "Abrahamic" religions.

Now, there are a lot of stories about Abraham, and it's easy to be confused about what it means to be Abrahamic. But if we're looking for the root, it's usually a good idea to go back to the beginning, to look at how the very first story shapes the rest. The Book of Genesis simply says that the Lord told Abraham to leave his father's house and land and that he would become the father of a great nation.

As stories go, that's not much. But, fortunately, the Jewish tradition and the Qu'ran offer us more, and reveal an Abraham that we Unitarian Universalists might well recognize.

According to Walter Wagner, professor of Biblical Studies at Moravian Theological Center, Jewish lore tells us that Terah, Abraham's father, was a Babylon-based maker and seller of idols. Abraham, however – like a good, critical-thinking Unitarian Universalist – reasoned that the idols were lifeless and therefore powerless. Observing the stars and nature, he concluded that there was

only one god who created and sustains the world. Abraham's revolutionary innovation was the rejection of the belief that the ultimate reality of the universe could be named and controlled. He saw reality as so incomprehensibly vast that humans could only try to understand it through observation, and to live in harmony with what they come to know of its nature. In the language of the times, this meant to serve God.

In an attempt to convince his father of the error of his ways, Abraham smashed all the idols in his father's shop, which led to some rather harsh words and various threats. Jewish lore suggests a hot furnace, while the Qu'ran includes the threat of stoning. Either way, it seems that the Lord had a lot of help in convincing Abraham to leave home.

Another major event in Abraham's story came when he was lounging in his tent one day. He looked up and saw three strangers approaching. Now, three or four thousand years ago, seeing strangers coming at you out of the desert wasn't necessarily seen as a good thing. There was no way to be sure of their good intentions. But Abraham looked up and recognized the infinite nature of divinity at the center of each of them and immediately welcomed them, and fixed them a lavish feast of the best of everything he had.

And these strangers turned out to be emissaries of Abraham's infinite unknowable God. So it was that, through an act of practical compassion, by serving needs greater than his own, he ushered in the holy.

This root value of Abrahamic religion is expressed in a poem by the Muslim poet, Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi

Visiting the sick always brings benefits.
Maybe the sick person is a hidden saint,
or maybe he is a friend of the Way,
or he might at least have some relationship
to someone who is of the Way.
Even if he is your enemy,
your visit might turn him into a friend,
or at least lessen his dislike of you.
There is much more to be said,
but so as not to be tedious, the gist to this:

befriend the whole community.
Like a sculptor, if necessary,
carve a friend out of stone.
Realize that your inner sight is blind
and try to see the treasure in everyone.

Rumi also told a story about the irrelevance of arguing about religion, which I first heard from a Turkish host at a Ramadan Iftar dinner, the evening meal breaking the day's fast.

Once upon a time a man gave an Iranian, an Arab, a Turk and a Greek, whom he saw together, some money. In doing them this kindness, he said, "Buy whatever you like with this money".

One of the four, the Iranian, said, "Let's buy some 'angür' with it".

The Arab disagreed. "Don't be stupid! I don't want any 'angür'. I want some 'inab'."

The third person, the Turk, didn't like either of those ideas. "I don't want any 'angür' or 'inab'. Let's buy some 'üzüm'," he said.

The Greek, who had been watching what was going on, cried, "Stop this foolishness. I want some 'istafil'. Let's buy some 'istafil' with this money!"

All at once, all four of them started arguing, each man yelling that they should buy what he wanted. Fists flew and there was a big fight. Before long a scholar, who was passing by, broke up the fight and asked what their problem was.

The Iranian said, "I want to buy some 'angür' with the money that was given."

"No, we're going to buy some 'inab'," protested the Arab.

"I say, let's buy some 'üzüm'," shouted the Turk.

"We're going to buy some 'istafil' with our money," insisted the Greek.

The scholar understood that these four people talking in different languages actually all wanted the same thing. He said, "Be quiet and listen to me. I'm going to buy what all of you want with this money. Believe me!"

Then he went and bought some grapes. When he gave them the grapes, he made all four of them happy and that settled the senseless argument. They had different words for “grapes.”

All our words about God, or truth, or ultimate reality are culturally determined. After all, grapes are grapes, no matter what we call them. The sky is the sky. Breath is breath.

The essential nature of the Abrahamic religions was probably best summarized by Rabbi Hillel, who lived near the time of Jesus. One day he was approached by a man who said that he would convert to Judaism if Hillel could explain the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Undaunted, Hillel stood on one foot and said, “Do not do to another that which you would not want done to you. The rest is commentary.”

The whole of the teaching in one sentence. Do not do to another that which you would not want done to you. And I invite you to notice: there is no reference to God in Hillel’s answer. He is simply saying that we need to try to see the treasure in everyone, to see the portion of the infinite nature of divinity in each person, to see and honor the holy – both in one’s self and in others.

This was illustrated so well in a sermon by Kaaren Anderson at the Sunday morning worship service during our General Assembly in Charlotte last June that I want to share it with you now.

This story is about two of Kaaren’s friends, Marcie and Brian. One night, Marcie and Brian went out to have dinner together at a Chinese restaurant. And they sat at one of those tables that have a big picture window right in front of them.

So they’re sitting there, with the big picture window in front of them, and they order some noodles and they’re sharing them together. And as they’re sharing them, this frail, kind of wiry woman comes up to them, grabs the plate of noodles and says, “Sorry,” and walks off with the noodles. Now, she doesn’t go to the kitchen, she walks out of the restaurant with their plate of noodles. And she is standing on the sidewalk in front of the picture window, holding the plate of noodles in the flat of her hand and she is shoving noodles into her face.

The proprietor of the restaurant realizes what's happened. He walks out and starts yelling at her in Chinese and bars her from going either way. She continues to eat the noodles. Finally, he wants his plate back, so he grabs a hold of it and they are fighting over it and the plate goes back and forth, and of course the noodles are sliding from side to side and then they drop pathetically on the sidewalk. And he still wants his plate back. He takes it, pulls back, he gets it, and he puts it in the air like it's the best trophy every, and he walks back into the restaurant.

And she is left with a pile of soggy contaminated noodles lying in the street. When the proprietor comes back, he offers Marcie and Brian a new, heaping plate of lo mein noodles. But because they had already eaten half of what they had, they asked him to box it up.

They take the box with them and they walk to the movie they were going to. They get about a block-and-a-half away they spot the lo mein thief. And there she is, kind of yelling at all the people around her.

And Brian says to Marcie, "Can we just leave this stranger alone, please?" And Marcie, says, "Nope."

So she walks up to the woman and she holds out the noodles and says, "Um, we haven't been formally introduced yet, but a little while ago, you were interested in our noodles. Are you still hungry?"

The woman takes the container, bows ever so slightly to Marcie, and says, "Thank you."

Now Kaaren's friend, Marcie, told that story as an atheist. But as she said, it was real and moving. She said something happened in that exchange. She did not use traditional theological language. Yet, like Abraham, she was clear that her act of a practical compassion had led to a holy encounter. Two stories, two very different theologies. One of Abraham, the theist, the other of Marcie, the atheist. As belief systems, incompatible. As experiences, virtually the same.

Kaaren Anderson pointed out that this sort of summed up the dominant pattern of theological debates in many Unitarian Universalist congregations. We've had discussions featuring two very different belief systems which, while they haven't always been atheist versus theist, those are the two that have been featured most often. And there are still some atheists among us who are still

trying to expose their theist friends as illogical, and there are still some theists who metaphorically pat their atheist friends on the head and condescendingly tell them they can't wait for the day when they grow up and become more spiritual.

But Abraham, Hillel, Mohammad, Rumi, Marcie and Brian are all showing us that these debates are irrelevant, beside the point. It's time to really grow up and be clear that the question of belief is not about which belief is right and which belief is wrong, but whether your belief leads you to the right experience – to the experience of practical compassion and practical connection.

Whatever your beliefs – atheist, theist, pagan, Buddhist, or NPRism – the relevant question to ask is whether they lead you to connection, lead you to listen to your deepest voice, be open to life's gifts and serve needs greater than your own.

In other words, I ask you: do your beliefs connect you to self and others and life? Do they help you to see the hidden treasure in everyone?

Now, I don't know about you, but even though I believe in the need to see the divine essence, the hidden treasure in each person, when someone steals my lo mein my first response is not always completely noble. Sometimes there's a flash of anger, "No! Those are my noodles!" Sometimes it's accompanied by an automatic assumption about the character of the person being a bad person, someone deserving of punishment, retribution, or at least ill fortune.

But I usually recall my deeper beliefs that call me to see the hidden treasure in each person, to love my neighbor as myself, to see the divine essence at the center life, beliefs that call me to open my heart even though it just had sprung closed like a steel trap.

And then I engage in a struggle with my heart, a struggle to live up to my own ideals and beliefs. And this is a struggle that has very little support in our culture. I ask you, how many ways do we have to describe what happens when we close our hearts? When our hearts snap shut. We have an almost endless litany: "He made me so mad." "She really ticked me off." "I'm going to get even." Or we resort to our culture's rich collection of vitriolic profanity, which I'll leave you to imagine on your own.

But our culture lacks a word for the struggle to keep one's heart open to another person despite the impulse to close it down like a slamming door or a

steel trap. What is this struggle, how do we name it, describe it, value it without a word for it? Do we have a word for this? We have so many ways of talking about our hearts being closed, and such little language for talking about the struggle to keep them open.

I was fascinated to discover that our Muslim friends, whose ethic of hospitality far exceeds our own, do have a word for this struggle. Having a word for it helps them to practice the path of the open heart, of generosity, of appreciating a person despite any negative feelings we might otherwise have.

Before I tell you this word, I want to remind you that there is the possibility – even likelihood – that, in any religious or psychological system, references to inner struggle will be projected outward upon others, distorting its original meaning and intent. And this has happened to this wonderful word that describes the struggle to keep one’s heart open, as well as the call to help others to open their hearts.

The word is “jihad,” yes, “jihad.” The Muslims have a word for it. The Muslim leader, Fethullah Gulen, describes “jihad” as the effort to attain one’s essence. He describes two kinds of jihad, the greater and the lesser. The first, or greater, jihad is conducted on the spiritual front, for it is our struggle with our inner world and the ego, controlling our lesser impulses with our higher values. The second, or lesser, jihad is based on helping others to understand and enter into the greater struggle within their own hearts. Now, this may include seeking justice or ending oppression, but should always be anchored in the commitment to the loving appreciation of the indwelling presence of the infinite within all, friend and foe alike.

Hillel didn’t say it would be easy to treat others as we would like to be treated. He just said that was what we should do, no matter how we feel about our noodles. The struggle to keep our hearts open remains the essence of all religions. Do your beliefs call you to connect you to self and others and to life? I invite you to join that struggle with me, learn to notice the moment when our hearts spring shut and to stop, pry that trap open, so that we can find the hidden treasure in everyone – even in ourselves.