

Wider Grows the Vision

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Reading

“This House” by Kenneth L. Patton

This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature.
It is a house for friendships, a haven in trouble,
 an open room for the encouragement of our struggle.
It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth
 of every person.
It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring,
 both in times of security and danger,
 the full and undivided conflict of opinion.
It is a house of truth-seeking,
 where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest
 where mystics can abide in a community of searchers.
It is a house of art, adorning its celebrations with
 melodies and handiworks.
It is a house of prophecy
 outrunning times past and times present
 in visions of growth and progress.
This house is a cradle for our dreams,
 the workshop of our common endeavor.

Meditation

by Adrienne Rich

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
make of our lives a study, as if learning
natural history or music,

 that we should begin
 with the simple exercises first
 and slowly go on trying
 the hard ones.

practicing till strength
and accuracy became one with the daring
to leap into transcendence, take the chance

of breaking down in the wild arpeggio
or faulting the full sentence of the fugue.

--And in fact we can't live like that:

we take on
everything at once before we've even begun
to read or mark time.

We're forced to begin
In the midst of the hardest movement,
The one already sounding as we are born.

Reading

from *Religion for Atheists* by Alain de Botton

I was brought up in a committedly atheistic household, as the son of two secular Jews who placed religious belief somewhere on par with an attachment to Santa Claus. I recall my father reducing my sister to tears in an attempt to dislodge her modestly held notion that a reclusive god might dwell somewhere in the universe. She was eight years old at the time. If any members of their social circle were discovered to harbour clandestine religious sentiments, my parents would start to regard them with the sort of pity more commonly reserved for those diagnosed with a degenerative disease and could from then on never be persuaded to take them seriously again.

Though I was powerfully swayed by my parents' attitudes, in my mid-twenties, I underwent a crisis of faithlessness. My feelings of doubt had their origins in listening to Bach's cantatas, were further developed in the presence of certain Bellini Madonnas, and became overwhelming with an introduction to Zen architecture. However, it was not until my father had been dead for several years—and buried under a Hebrew headstone in a Jewish cemetery in Willesden, north-west London, because he had, intriguingly, omitted to make more secular arrangements—that I began to face up to the full scale of my ambivalence regarding the doctrinaire principles with which I had been inculcated in childhood.

I never wavered in my certainty that God did not exist. I was simply liberated by the thought that there might be a way to engage with religion without having to subscribe to its supernatural content. . . . I recognised that my continuing resistance to theories of an afterlife or of heavenly residents was no justification

for giving up on the music, buildings, prayers, rituals, feasts, shrines, pilgrimages, communal meals and illuminated manuscripts of the faiths.

Secular society has been unfairly impoverished by the loss of an array of practices and themes which atheists typically find it impossible to live with because they seem too closely associated with, to quote Nietzsche's useful phrase, 'the bad odours of religion.' We have grown frightened of the word morality. We bridle at the thought of hearing a sermon. We flee from the idea that art should be uplifting or have an ethical mission. We don't go on pilgrimages. We can't build temples. We have no mechanisms for expressing gratitude. The notion of reading a self-help book has become absurd to the high-minded. We resist mental exercises. Strangers rarely sing together. We are presented with an unpleasant choice between either committing to peculiar concepts about immaterial deities or letting go entirely of a host of consoling, subtle or just charming rituals for which we struggle to find equivalents in secular society.

Sermon: "Wider Grows the Vision"

I don't know about you, but when and where I read a book is as much a part of the experience as the words between its covers.

Certain books are famously good for summer.
The kind of thing you read at the cottage.
The kind of thing you read between naps in a hammock,
and the kind of thing
you can pick back up easily enough
should you drift off to sleep sooner than expected
and later find your face smudged with ink.

Other books, I find, require chaining myself to a desk
with a bright light and absolutely no distractions,
and then having to hope for the best.
I've found you can end up with ink on your face this way, too.
(Though, I'm reaching the stage where I'm feeling
life is too short to keep reading those kinds of books!)

And then, for me, there are the books I take on trips.

Books that usually have something to do

with some aspect of where I'm going or what I'm doing.

Very often a certain text will become a conversation partner, helping me to see things in ways that I might not otherwise have.

It was no accident, then, that I picked up Alain de Botton's book *Religion for Atheists* on my way to The Holy Land.

In planes and trains and automobiles, between visits to imperial mosques and ancient temples, I read this book by an atheist exploring whether there are any salvageable parts of religion that can speak to people who profess no faith.

All over the Tube in London, I saw large posters promoting his book.

With beautiful photos of choirs singing in candlelit ceremonies and the stunning stained glass windows of Sainte Chapelle in Paris, the ads rhetorically ask those waiting on the platform: "Even if religion isn't true, can't we enjoy the best bits?"

It's a worthy and provocative question to ponder while waiting for one's train to arrive.

At the end of his recent TED Talk called "Atheism 2.0", de Botton says: "You may not agree with religion, but at the end of the day, religions are so subtle, so complicated, so intelligent in many ways, that they are not fit to be abandoned to the religious alone."¹

In stark contrast to some of the more ardent atheists—like Dennett and Dawkins, and Hitchens and Harris, who've been busily writing over the past few years—de Botton brings a great deal of admiration, and I would dare say, even, a measure of respect, in his analysis of what religion does well.

In his own words, he says:

One can be left cold by the doctrines [of any religion] and yet at the same time be interested in the ways

¹ Alain de Botton, TED Talk, "Atheism 2.0." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Oe6HUgrRIQ>

in which religions deliver sermons, promote morality,
engender a spirit of community,
make use of art and architecture,
inspire travels, train minds
and encourage gratitude at the beauty of spring.
In a world beset by fundamentalists
of both believing and secular varieties
it must be possible to balance a rejection of religious faith
with a selective reverence for religious rituals and concepts.

He sees the grave error of staunch secularists
to be the quick and outright rejection of religion in its entirety
once its central tenets have been found wanting or completely unbelievable.

And, so, he has become quite the public apologist
for retaining the “best bits.”
Or, at least trying to repurpose them to serve a growing secular audience.

He makes a convincing argument that religion has developed useful and
powerful tools for calling us to be our best and highest selves.

A constant theme in the book is that we are forgetful creatures—
creatures who need to be frequently reminded of what we hold to be true,
what we cherish, what is worthy of our time and the energy of our lives.

Religions around the world, he points out,
have done a bang-up job of establishing calendars
that teach certain stories over and over again.

As a Jewish friend of mine put it to me
when talking about how Jews
read through the entire cycle of their scriptures each year,
“The Torah doesn’t change, but we do,
so each encounter with the stories, year after year, is different.”

De Botton says that the great hope that came with the rise of secularism
was that universities would fulfill this role of remembering.

But while the academy can do a great job of teaching to the big questions,
few people, without some external reminder,
make a regular practice of revisiting their Plato or their Shakespeare

for the well-being and edification of their secular souls.

He goes on to say that religion as a whole has done a tremendous job of challenging people toward charity and compassion, of inviting examination of the deficiencies in our character, of making an unflinching assessment of our human capacity to do harm, and of fostering a sense of community that often transcends barriers that otherwise keep people apart.

Needless to say, this book made for a fascinating companion on a tour to some of the world's great religious epicentres.

It provided a helpful counterpoint along the way. Sometimes reminding me of the desperate need for the uses of critical reason in the practise of religion.

And sometimes reminding me to continue to look for the better bits when I found myself frustrated, or angered, or appalled by religions' many, many short-comings.

I'm intrigued by a good number of the proposals de Botton makes in laying out what a "Religion for Atheists" would look like.

He calls on museums, which are sometimes rightly called our modern cathedrals, to be more intentional in engaging the emotional content hidden in their collections.

Rather than being divided up into wings devoted to various eras of art history, he calls for rehanging museums so that one section of the museum might speak to courage, another to loss, and another to compassion.

He sees a need for intentional gathering places and communal meals, where people are thrown together in genuine conversation to create community.

He calls for a new role for education—teaching courses about making meaning through the various stages of our years on this planet.

In fact, a couple of years ago, he established just such a place in north London called The School of Life, which offers an array of such courses,

and even has a small campus bookstore,
where the tidy collection of books
is arranged around topics like loneliness, aging, hope, and grief.

While I made a point of visiting the school
on my way home from the Middle East,
I couldn't get into any of the courses,
as they had all been booked up months in advance.

De Botton also calls for the creation of temples and shrines
to various worthy aspects of our human existence—
to love, to friendship, to peace.

Plans and fundraising are coming along for a new “Temple to Perspective”
to be built in London that would:

evoke...million[s of] years of life on earth.
Each centimetre of the [soaring,] tapering tower's interior
has been designed to represent a million years
and a narrow band of gold [at the bottom]
will illustrate the relatively tiny amount of time
humans have walked the planet.²

Finally, what I actually find most intriguing is that the School of Life
also offers a regular program on Sundays called “Sermons.”

The hour begins with a bit of music and then follows with something akin
to a 30 minute lecture on topics like envy, or curiosity, uncertainty, or evil.

You can watch videos of a number of these sermons on the School of Life's
website.

And, what I've been most struck by when I've watched them is the audience.
And, more specifically, their faces.
I see a room full of people, young and not so young,
hungering for connection and community, meaning and purpose.

Alain de Botton is on to something.

² Robert Booth, “Alain de Botton reveals plans for 'temple to atheism' in heart of London,” *The Guardian*, 26 January 2012.

He has found a way to speak to a slice of the population that has found religion incomprehensible or unbelievable, but who still find in themselves some stirring that's not easily explained, or dismissed, or denied.

Some stirring that longs to be met with, perhaps, the best bits of what the world's religions have been able to figure out over millennia.

That we need one another.
That we need moments of wonder and transcendence.
That we need to examine our lives.
And that we need to be called back to our best selves from time to time.

Now, what I haven't yet said, was that as engaging as I found this book, I also found it absolutely maddening!

I'm in the process of writing a long letter to Mssr. de Botton to introduce him to Unitarian Universalism. . .

Which is to say that my read through this book was ultimately about us.

I am almost always wrestling on the inside with where we are going—as individuals, as a congregation, and as a religion.

There are vast changes happening all around us.

The role of religion in our society is being radically transformed by our diversity and by a move away from the traditional religious forms that have defined so much of this country's history.

One of the most pointed examples I can give of this concerns the Anglican Church of Canada.

If the drop-off in their membership continues to decline at its current rate, the Anglican Church will be completely gone in ten years.

Now, that won't happen.

The trajectory does look bleak,

but there will likely always be a small and dedicated group to carry the banner of Anglicanism.

But, it says a great deal about how the traditional religious structures around us have lost faith, lost traction, or simply lost people.

The question for us as Unitarians, as it has always been, is how we remain religiously relevant to the times in which we live.

Two and three centuries ago, this meant that our forebears challenged the doctrine of the Trinity, questioned the divine nature of Jesus, and rejected the theology that said we are born in sin and all but a few destined to eternal punishment.

We argued that you can't scare people into heaven by trying to scare the hell out of them.

A hundred and eighty years ago, we began to imagine that our sense of the sacred could extend to the natural world around us, and that our sense of the divine need not be mediated by any higher religious authority than ourselves.

A century ago we began to define ourselves in the language of Humanism. We deepened our sense of responsibility for social justice, and we broadened our embrace of the wisdom from the world's religions.

In the past fifty years, we have begun to see ourselves as a unique religion still evolving and trying to serve the needs of the world around us.

Over the past couple of decades, this has brought about a greater ease with the spiritual and the ineffable, and a growing commitment to honour the interconnected web of life, of which we are merely a small part.

We have to wonder at what the next chapter holds?

What does it mean—what would it mean—for us to be not merely relevant, but a truly transformative religion for the times in which we live?

I will tell you that that is the question that flickers in my heart at all times.

Because it is a question of burning importance.

We live in a time of increasing alienation and fragmentation.

The enduring notion of community is being lost.

Material consumption and mass marketing
define our existence in ways almost too powerful to resist.

Our participation in genuine democracy is eroding,
just as it seems we need it most.

The extreme concentrations of wealth and poverty
have left our social contract with each other in tatters
and our covenant with the planet all but broken.

But as devastating as this long list of woes is,
I still have hope and I still have faith that we can build a better world.

For we share a religion that is not only relevant,
but one that can change this world for good.

A few of you have noticed that I have returned from my sabbatical
fired up about what we can do, and what, I think, we must do.

I believe this faith—that teaches us to honour life
and to respect difference, to seek justice and to work for peace—
is the religion the world needs for just such a time as this.

Every problem I mentioned a moment ago has, at its root,
a spiritual crisis.

And, every problem, I believe has a spiritual cure
that I think our theology speaks to in powerful ways.

The healing of this world isn't entirely up to us,
but I believe we can play an outsized role,
if we were to come alive and model a different way of being.

Just before I left for my trip, the Committee on Ministry—
the group of members within the congregation,
to whom I turn to for counsel and feedback,
the group with whom I share responsibility for looking
at the health and vitality of our larger ministry—
issued an important challenge to me.

They asked where I see us heading in the years ahead.

It has always been my goal to help First Unitarian become
the most vibrant and vital congregation we can possibly be.

In my heart is a dream for this congregation
that we will be, above all things,
an enduring community grounded in a love and commitment so deep
that we overcome our differences and model to each other
and the world beyond these walls, a different and compelling way of being.

I dream of the day when a core of people with the needed gifts and skills
take care of the day to day operations of our congregation,
and the energy we together have for ministry
is sent out into the world
rather than dedicated to maintaining our own institution.

I want you to discover that ministry isn't something that only ministers do—
but that each of you, while on this good green earth,
has a calling to ministry to which you can dedicate your life.

And, so, I want for this to be the place where you are fed and supported
and sustained to do no less than the work of healing the world.

I pray that this will ever be a place where we gather
to bow before the mysteries of this life
and to be transformed by the wonder and gratitude
we have for the miracle of our very existence.

I long to see this community as a nexus
for the very best of human endeavour,
celebrated in music and art,
growing in wisdom and knowledge,
deepening in practice and purpose.

The great cathedrals have always been a locus of life
at the heart of the region where they sit.

In medieval times, cathedrals were centres of learning,
places where those in need were served,
where the arts were celebrated
through music, and drama, and powerful imagery.

Years ago, I heard the dean of the cathedral
of St. John the Divine in New York say that in our world,
if cathedrals didn't already exist, we would need to create them
to serve these purposes in the world around us.

What I find interesting is that Alain de Botton
is saying much the same thing.

There is a yearning in the human soul for the best bits of religion—
for the best bits of religion are the best bits of our humanity.

I believe we, as a congregation, have been and are still dedicated
to upholding the very best of the best.

And, so in my heart is the longing to continue making of this congregation,
a true and great Temple to the Spirit of Life.

After finishing de Botton's book,
wrestling with both his ideas and his challenge,
I found myself so deeply grateful to get on a plane and fly home,
knowing that we are so very, very blessed
to already have so much of what is needed to speak to
the times in which we live
and the religious impulse at the centre of the human heart.

May this community, this cradle of our dreams,
this beloved workshop of our common endeavour,
ever serve and ever stand to build with our lives a better, nobler world.

Amen.