

# “Atheism’s Gift to Believers”

Sermon by Chris Moore,  
student for Unitarian ministry at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary.  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
11 August 2013

The opening line in our reading this morning referred to the scientific community as suffering from “Myopia” or near-sightedness. This is a condition I am very familiar with. I am wearing glasses right now. As I take these off – you are all a blur to me right now. I was given my first set of corrective lenses when I was still a teenager. In fact, I am very near-sighted indeed. My first prescription for lenses was deliberately weaker than required because my optometrist feared I would suffer unbearable headaches if I was given the full strength of lenses needed. These glasses served me well enough. But eventually they broke. New frames and lenses were required. These ones had a tint in them that shielded my eyes from the sun. They were also a little stronger. What do glasses have to do with atheism? Well, pardon the pun, but you will see. But first I want to share a story, a story that took place a few weeks after I acquired my first pair of glasses.

Years ago, I was attending a Christian youth retreat, near Huntsville, on the Lake of Bays. The lake was a huge expanse of ice covered by layers of snow. One night I set out to walk to the middle of it; which I knew would take a while. I walked and walked. I stopped, looked around, and decided I was still a long way from reaching the mid-point of the lake. So I started walking again. I kept hiking out onto the ice until fatigue convinced me that I would never quite make it to the middle. Besides, the lake itself was very irregular in shape. I wasn’t sure where the mid-point was. But at one point I looked up to see the world around, with my glasses, like I had never seen it before. The lake stretched for miles and miles in every direction all around me. Beyond that, there were a few lights near the shoreline and then huge tracts of hills covered by great forests. Trees covered the distant landscape far, far beyond where eye could see. In that moment, as I was standing there all alone; just me in the vastness of the universe all around me. I could see, as I looked around, how vast, how unimaginably huge our planet was. And while I was standing in amazement at the vast wilderness around me - I looked up at the stars! Tears rolled down my eyes. I was standing in the midst of the universe and I was seeing, truly seeing it for the first time.

I have told this story in many different places and at many different times. I shared it first with my Christian youth friends. I would share it again with my Roman Catholic, Buddhist, and Pagan friends. I shared it more recently at seminary and with the folks at Grand River Unitarian Congregation. I have had many other very profound spiritual moments in my life, before and after this one. But the reason I share this one the most has to do with my story about glasses. The way I view the world, the frames and lenses through which I see, have changed several times over the years. And with each change I like to go back with my mind's eye, with my new frame and lenses to look at that same experience yet again. And each time I do, I notice things a little differently, new insights emerge. I first saw the universe that night through the lenses of a bible wielding, Christian fundamentalist at the ripe old age of eighteen. I would go back to that vision through the lenses of an adult convert to Roman Catholicism. The picture didn't change all that much. It wasn't until becoming a pagan that I became keenly aware of how precious our planet really was. Then the frames and lenses I wore started to make a difference. Then one day, years later, I decided to attend a Sunday morning service at a Unitarian congregation. The new minister there was still very much in the process of introducing himself to his new congregation. He boldly declared from the pulpit that he was an atheist. Now I had encountered atheism through many of my activist friends at university and within the labour movement. I understood purely secular atheism, or at least I thought I did. But this was different. I wondered for a moment if I had gone to the wrong Sunday morning event. However, he did say he was the minister, right? But a minister who doesn't believe in God? What, was he quitting? I thought he just got here! I simply could not comprehend why an atheist would even bother attending religious services - let alone become a minister.

Unitarians were clearly stranger than I thought. But then, my own religious convictions were likewise unquestionably strange to most people. And these Unitarian folks were awfully warm and welcoming. Besides, I was now awfully curious. It was now obvious to me that I did not understand atheists or atheism as well as I thought I did. But what I needed first to learn about Unitarian Universalism is that I did not have to understand atheism - any more than atheists had to understand my theology. Unitarian Universalists are not required to have a thorough understanding of all the different theological positions held by various people in their midst. As the saying goes, "We need not think alike to love alike". But as a seminarian and future minister I did eventually want to understand these various positions as much as possible. Particularly those that have had an enduring influence on our tradition as a whole.

And so I would solve the mystery of Rev. Shawn Newton, Atheist and UU minister! But to be fair in this, and all kidding aside, he is hardly alone. A great many UU ministers would probably fall into this category. So when Waterloo Lutheran Seminary offered a course in Atheism, I jumped at the opportunity. And I am so very glad that I did. And while my own universe is still populated by the gods and goddesses of many traditions and cultures - I decided to try on a *new* pair of glasses.

I asked myself what would happen if I was to go back to that frozen lake long ago. But this time I would walk out, not as a believer - but as an atheist. As someone for whom there are no gods of any kind. What would that night look like? How might it change? So I put on those glasses and I stepped out with my mind's eye as I did decades ago. To my surprise.....The vastness of the forests was still there! That frozen lake still stretched out for miles in all directions. The heavens were still full of the light from billions of stars. That deep sense of humility and awe that I felt as I first experienced the enormity of the universe was still there too.

Sufi mystic, author, and lecturer, Inayat Kahn, is one of those credited with having brought Sufism to the west. He writes, in his book, *the Hand of Poetry*, the following:

“The scientists and engineers, people who are absorbed in the making a search of material things and never think of spiritual things, after making a great deal of search, they arrive very near the same knowledge which is the ultimate knowledge. Therefore whatever they may seem to us – materialist, atheist, agnostic – in the end their goal is the same, and their attainment is the same.”

Even if I was to become an atheist - I would still be able to sense that this was and ever shall be a sacred moment.

Time and time again, the proponents of atheism speak of the wondrous transcendence of our natural universe. Now that is something I can relate to. And it is truly something to be celebrated – regardless of our theological positions or convictions. Dawkins, for example, in his book *The God Delusion* is nearly poetic when he begins to describe the intricacies of living organisms.<sup>6</sup> We are right now – living miracles of life. The planet on which we live is full of beauty and wonders every day – from the sweet scent of wild flowers to warm sunsets and cool breezes.

The whole great universe is full of mysteries beyond our mortal comprehension or understanding. Do you seek the meaning of life? Then I have a question. Why does life need a reason? Does the universe really need to justify its existence? Why should it not simply be? And why should we not learn to appreciate it for what it is, as it is? Life is a miracle. Love is a miracle. Our world is a miracle. Do we really need more miracles than these? Thank you my atheist friends for deepening and enriching my own appreciation for our physical world and for the wondrous mystery of *this* life. Thank you for deepening and enriching my own spiritual path by awakening me to the wonders that are continuously all around me, thank you and Blessed Be.