

The Religion of our Genes Sermon
Anchorage Alaska
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I am not quite sure when it happened. I think it was one morning last fall when I pulled into the parking lot at Catholic Community Services and sat for a moment doing my usual parking lot observation. The smell of breakfast bacon from the Hospitality Kitchen hovered in the air. Accountants and social workers were walking into the building. Backpack toting homeless people were coming from shelters, bridges and bushes for breakfast. Bates Technical College students were illegally parking in our lot and trotting off to classes.

My old paradigm that people are basically good, love is the answer, and that peace and harmony are attainable ideals was pretty much dust in the floorboards of my truck. Now with a 37-year-old anthropology degree, 30-year-old divinity degree and over six decades of human contact, I was again reexamining the true nature of humanity. I was lost in meditating on our inner city parking lot when it hit me.

We are primates. Do a DNA study, and you find that Homo Sapiens is a primate. Look closer and you find that we are genetically the same distance from common chimpanzees as are Bonobo Chimpanzees. We are primates, considered by some zoologists to be a sophisticated third chimpanzee.

It solves most the religious questions. Original sin – not an issue. Need to be saved? From what? Made in the image of God. It is the other way around. The earth and the animals were created for us? Not when you are a primate. We are nothing special. The elk, sturgeons, and ants are equal to us. We have no more right to be here than they do. We are not in charge of anything. We are not the ordained stewards of nature. We are part of nature. We have a responsibility to nature. In the end we are simply animals, birds, fish and bugs living together for a very brief time.

I began to realize that out of our genetic structure emerge behaviors and characteristics that define us as human beings, and lay the foundation for a truly human religion. I began to wonder, what were those core characteristics. I started reading books like to Origins of virtue, the third Chimpanzee, the origins of human kind and the Elegant Universe and talking people smarter than I. This sermon is what has emerged so far. I am leaving a lot out. I am also simplifying a lot of science. Creating a religion for all of humanity is a lot to do in 30 minutes.

I will start with the first and most important human characteristic. We bond and attach to everyone and everything. For humans it takes two. Relationship is the core experience for humans – it is biological: our brains, bodies, and immune system work better; we handle stress and trauma better when we are actively in relationship with another person. Our brains function better when they do so in tandem with another human brain. Our neurotransmitters flow better, we generate better ideas, make better decision with two

brains. It is like human brains were made to function as a cognitive network more than as an individual data processing unit.

The purpose of life for humans is to simply live in relationship with each other. As humans we bond and form relationships with everything - our pets, our car, our front yard, our favorite camping spot, trees, mountains and God.

Relationship and bonding are essential and primordial. We need them to survive. With all human beings when we are away from our loved ones we get sick. In some cultures we even die. Children who are not held and touched in infancy get sick more often, bond less, develop slower, and die more often than children who are touched and cuddled – children who are loved.

Love is the core of human life. It makes us care. And there is a good biological reason for this. If we don't care we don't eat. This is because our core survival and eating strategy is cooperation and collaboration. By cooperation everyone can eat much better than as a single individual.

In order to cooperate we need to have empathy. Human-like empathy began evolving several million years ago in our African birthplace. We have to be able to put ourselves in other people's skin boots so we know how our behavior affects them and visa versa. We have to understand reciprocity and that betrayal of reciprocity means you will not help me hunt antelope next time I need your help.

Out of bonding and empathy and the cooperative survival strategy emerged a whole range of emotions, anger, fear, lust, joy, disappointment, jealousy, and - love. In order to communicate these feelings language emerged. Human's whose voice boxes were low enough in their throat to produce language had an edge with their ability to navigate and negotiate complex social interactions focusing on food, territory and alliances. As a result they got more food and had more children. With verbal communication of emotions we were able to form more complicated and lasting alliances.

We survive by forming alliances and coalitions. The individual organism for Homo sapiens it is at least two people. And, in the long run we survive best if we are kind and cooperative in our alliances. Using computer game theory, scientists have found that in the long run it is always best to first be kind and cooperate. If the other person betrays your kindness, you respond with a negative consequence, and then return to a stance of kindness and cooperation. This second stance is of course informed by the saying "shame on you the first time and shame on me the second time". We form alliances with each other to get the job done. The most effective alliances are long term. The amount of trust and commitment in our alliances determines whether or not in the end we eat.

Underlying all of these beliefs is the awareness that there is something larger than us - an interdependent web of existence of which we all are part. God was born. Let me explain how.

From cooperation came empathy and our ability to see our interconnectedness with another person on a very basic level. We began to bond and attach and develop relationships not only each other by also with the animals we ate. We developed the capacity to put ourselves in their hoofs and paws. We did the same with the plants, mountains, and the sun.

Given our tendency to see things in our image we projected human consciousness and personality into the birds, bears and mountains. As we negotiate, beg and plead, and enter into alliances with other humans, we begin to apply that same survival strategy to animals, plants, and the weather. We began to intuit the strands of the interdependent web as a force or entity that pervades all things. We begin to believe that the earth and nature is a living being with who we are in a pantheistic relationship.

We began to believe that different locations, plants and animals have an unseen power or force with which we can interact thus giving birth to the idea of localized spirits. We began bonding with those spirits. We also began fearing them as well as trying to communicate, manipulate and negotiate with them.

The local spirits changed into many spirits governing many aspects of life. Being human we not only bonded with the spirits we also gave them human characteristics. As with human society, the spirits were divided into hierarchies with larger and more powerful spirits governing the lesser spirits. The larger spirits become Gods and polytheism is born.

Now with our brains able to abstract at levels unknown to our ancestors we begin to realize that everything really is connected. There is some conscious organizing principle behind all things. There is something larger than us – something more than mountain spirits and local desert Gods. God is born.

Being human, we bonded, attach to and anthropomorphize God into our image. God became a separate humanlike being with all the emotions, hierarchies, alliances, and strategies as humans. As with each other we began to communicate, argue with, manipulate, ask for favors, fall in love with and devote ourselves to God. Of course, we do not all know the same God.

There is God the creator, with whom we have an ongoing interactive relationship and communication through prayer and divine guidance.

There is God the being that pervades all things, a conscious interdependent organizing force within rocks, trees, clouds, people, lizards, water and the earth and discover through meditation and awareness.

There is simply organizing energy. The laws and forces of nature. The God of gravity, quarks, and strings of vibrating energy. There is no being. There is simply organized vibrating energy guided by natural laws and principles created at the moment the

universe was formed. This is a force we know through science, observation, and intuitive meditation.

Somewhere in all of these perceptions of God lays an interdependent web of existence. And those brief moments when we are truly aware of our oneness and wholeness with the universe are often the most powerful moments of awe and wonder in our lives.

Somewhere along our evolutionary travels we started to sing and dance. No one really knows when we sang the first song or played the first instrument. The oldest known instrument is a flute made out of a bear femur somewhere around 43,000 to 82,000 years ago. We have been singing and dancing for a long time. It is rather risky behavior. It uses up energy for food gathering and it makes a lot of noise that can attract predators and enemies.

What is the edge it gives us? The edge is that singing and dance brings people together. It signals to the participants that we are all getting along, that the alliances and relationships are safe. Singing releases chemicals in our bodies that bond us to each other. To sing together, to sing in harmony generally requires a group that is in harmony with itself.

Dancing ironically may have evolved out of territorial defense signals still common among chimpanzees. In human culture it has come to signal harmony and common community. Music and dance bonds us. When we sing or dance together we create the whole of a human being. We create community. We create humanity. And with community and humanity we survive.

We bond and love, empathize and cooperate, discover God, and sing and dance. It lays the foundation for our survival. So why is there killing, stealing and war?

Because primates also survive by being aggressive, territorial, and opportunistic. While bonding, empathy and cooperation work best, for most people it is because that is the best way to meet individual needs. And there are times when aggression and violence is the best option to protect people or territory. Therein is a core human struggle. How do I balance meeting my needs with meeting the needs of the whole? How do I balance the genetic and learned urge for cooperation with the genetic and learned urge for aggression? Most of the anthropological research suggests that our first goal is to meet our own needs. When we look at meeting group needs the genetic urge is to meet those needs of our immediate and extended family. Blood is thicker than community. Doing right is often relative.

Of course, if we ignore other peoples needs too much we get arrested. If we ignore our own needs too much we become depressed and burned out. It is a struggle to be respected. It takes time, experimentation and reflective practice to develop an effective personal I - Thou strategic philosophy. And even at its best, there will always be day to day situations where we struggle with competing genetic and social urges.

It is as it should be. Complete selfishness is not usually helpful in the long run. However, neither is complete selflessness. The good is in the daily struggle, the process of problem solving and decision-making - the question and the democratic dialogue. That way each resolution freshly responds to the specific needs of the situation.

This individual vs. corporate struggle leads to another contradiction with cooperation - violence and war between them and us. As with the other primates we have genetically embedded tribal thinking - People who are different are potential enemies.

Think of the early Homo sapiens wandering in small hunting gathering groups of 30 to 150 people competing with each other for food, shelter, and mates. Imagine that it is at the time when there were three species of humans on earth - Homo erectus, Homo sapiens and Neanderthal. People who were not part of your group were potential competitors at best and enemies at worst. You knew they were different if they looked, dressed or spoke different than you.

Imagine that you are camping in the woods next weekend and hear a group of unknown people coming toward you. Do you immediately run out to meet them or do you first wait to take a look to assess risk. And how do you determine whether or not they are safe? For most humans it is by tallying commonalities and differences. It is not accurate. In current culture it is not useful or ethical. It is genetic.

The area of the brain that deals with the fear is much more active in the brains of people who are especially prejudice. Anger and conflict cause people to interpret "different" as bad and dangerous. Interestingly, the elderly elicited the most prejudice, followed by race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender and body weight. Abused and neglected children often interpret strangers as dangerous more often than nurtured children.

This can look like predestine biology. But, your brain can change. Direct association with those different people reduces prejudicial responses. Through brain imaging technology scientists have observed the growth of synapses as the result of one session of psychotherapy. Fear of different others was useful thousands of years ago when we lived in small separate competing groups. Today however, we live together in close proximity in a diverse global village. It creates a challenge. People that are different still scare us. When we get scared we behave badly.

This leads to the other struggle of choosing to get our needs met with force and violence or with cooperation and collaboration. Force works. However, force also has a cost. In the short run force appears expeditious and effective. But it always does damage. I am not optimistic about our tendency to suspect strangers and use violence to get what we want. It will always require conscious evolution and consistent vigilance. It is part of the human evolutionary experiment. The closer we intertwine the more deadly our weapons, the more we have to choose cooperation and collaboration. Global trade systems have been one of the most effective tools for world peace. The place for you and I to start is in our day to day conflicts and problem solving between us and people who are different than us. There is our laboratory for the world.

Each one of us every day is presented with a chance to make an evolutionary choice between suspicion or realistic trust and cooperation or violence.

What is the religion that emerges?

I have covered a lot of ground in this sermon. And there is so much that I have not covered. I am just planting seeds of conversation and awareness. As is the way with Unitarian Universalism – the rest of the process is yours.

Let's put it together into a religion. I want to start by simply having you look around the room. I want you to simply look at someone, anyone, and smile. I am going to ask you to look around the room several times in the next few minutes because of course religion is best experienced directly.

I am sure you have figured out by now that the core of our existence as humans is relationship. We swim or sink in a sea of relationship. Attachment, bonding, compassion, empathy – love is what draws us into and holds us in relationship. Everything goes back to relationship and bonding.

And that is the most important feature of this chromosomal religion I propose. Look around this room. Would we be here if the people were not here? This is a gathering of people who gather together to be together. Most of you would have come today regardless of the brilliance of the sermon. Most of us come here because we care for and about each other. We come here out of a commitment to cooperation, empathy, compassion, and our community.

Tonight as we share our evening meal with those we love, we are performing the oldest and most profound spiritual ritual. We gather together in a circle around a fire share food and tell our stories of the day. We laugh, we cry, we lay our problems on the table next to the macaroni and we deepen our relationship with each other a little more.

It is the most important thing we do. It is the ritual that allows the spirit of love to heal us, support us, and enable us to live. It also comes in the form of group therapy, Church, and family Barbecues. We need to touch and caress each other, to talk about feelings, to realize that the essence and meaning of being human is contained within our day to day relationships with the person next to us and the person in front of us.

Out of these relationships come our alliances – our family, friends, colleagues and neighbors and occasionally, our enemies. Our alliances, properly cared for can save our lives.

My grandfather Henry died of a heart attack deep in the Montana Rockies as my grandmother watched out the cabin window. By mid winter they were snowed in and starving. That's when they heard sleigh bells. Bill Simonson, a dairy farmer from the Yellowstone valley below had hitched his team to a sled filled with milk, cheese, eggs

and bread and had plodded ten miles into the mountains to bring them food. Every week that winter he did the same thing. He did it because that is what you did in the winter in Montana. You were required to be a rugged individualist who could kill a bear with a hunting knife in the middle of a blizzard because that was your way of making sure you could take care of your neighbors and your neighbors could take care of you. The sum of a community of rugged individualist was a whole and interdependent community that relied on each other to survive.

And there is more. We are part of something larger. As human beings we know that there is an organizing force, an interdependent web. Who or what that is, if or how we communicate with it, how that synergetic oneness is part of our daily life is left to each of us to discover and define.

Today we have lit our fire, shared the stories of our lives, and sang together. What we are doing today is very ancient. There is no “before” society for human primates. Our society as Homo sapiens is derived from the society of Homo erectus that is derived from the society of Australopithecus, which evolved from the society of our common chimpanzee ancestors.

Our rituals, our music, the notes, the scales, the core of our religion all come from within our genes and the community of our ancestors. It is good that we sing. It is important that we sing. When we sing we are letting each other know that life is in harmony here. We let each other know that we are safe, loved, and that this is where we belong. When we sing, we sing our living tradition. We sing our beliefs. We sing ourselves into community.

Look around the room again. I doubt that there are very many here who believe that there is an absolute dogma that we have to follow, that only men should be clergy, or that there is only one definition of God. There are many of us who believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; These beliefs define us as Unitarian Universalists. And here in is another aspect of our religion. As much as we can - we consciously struggle with us verses them. In some cases the them includes the religious right, people who oppose gay/lesbian marriage, and an occasional republican.

Here is where we are facing down our DNA. The tendency is to define those different people as wrong and bad. Just as they are defining us as the same. Here is where Unitarian Universalism does some of its most important work. We are choosing to change our brains. We are at the forefront of the primate experiment of acknowledging and respecting differences and our struggle between individual and community needs. We address those different struggles by keeping an ongoing open dialogue rather than using brute violence.

Our weapon of mass compassion is the belief in the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations, in society, and in our day to day conversations. Among us we do not agree completely on all these issues. But on our good

days we keep open the dialogue and maintain the respect. And this is the role and obligation of humans.

You see the common chimp is very aggressive, male dominant and opportunistic. They however survive by forming usually short-term cooperative alliances. Bonobo Chimps are much more matriarchal, and when presented with a conflict their first response is unbridled lovemaking with their opponents followed by cooperation and sharing.

In very simplistic terms, Homo Sapiens evolutionary role is to figure out how to blend both strategies with long term cooperation, negotiation and peace. And this is where we are evolving. Ideally, we are moving toward the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Realistically, for most people it is a daily challenge.

So let's break this down into seven simple principles.

1. Love is the matrix of your existence. Love and relationship are primordial and genetic. We don't love we don't eat. So treasure your relationships.
2. Be cooperative, be kind, and at times be strategic and cautious.
3. Deepen your awareness of your interdependence with everybody and everything from the laces in your shoes to south Americana rain forests to gravity and quarks. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. And what ever it is - be it God, the Tao, or the eternal ground of consciousness, we are part of it and it is part of us. Whatever it is, you live within its embrace.
4. Choose your friends, colleagues, and adversaries carefully and treat them graciously.
5. Celebrate regularly with song, dance, snuggling, laughing and fire lit meals.
6. Make friends with your own daily challenge to balance; cooperation and aggression; The angry I and the evil thou; your needs and your neighbors needs. Commit to an open respectful democratic dialogue even when you think homicide is an option. When you get scared, stop and breathe.
7. Human Beings, this third chimpanzee, are truly on a mission. It is our evolutionary job to figure out how to live in peace within the embrace of the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a very complicated part.

Conclusion

And so here is my conclusion. It is the defining song directly from our ancestors DNA to your heart. I want you to listen carefully. Do not be fooled by its simplicity. The message is four million years old and it is the essence of humanity. And I guarantee you will hear these same words later today "From you I receive, to you I give, together we share, and from this, we live."