



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

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### Creation!

Rev. Hannah Petrie  
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As many of you know, this is my first day back after two months of maternity leave. My husband Kit and I welcomed our first child, a boy, Pender Wells Petrie, on September 3.

Many things have surprised me about motherhood so far, but nothing as much as what an amazing feat it is to learn how to breast-feed. Nothing during my ministry training ever compared with this level of challenge. Even when you are motivated by great love, nursing does not always work out. I'm pleased to report that, while getting the hang of it was fairly traumatic, what further surprised me is what you can manage to do WHILE nursing. Sure, you can listen to the radio, maybe eat part of a meal, read a few paragraphs, stream endless episodes of *Lost* on Netflix, but did you know that you can also write an entire sermon on your iPhone while breast-feeding? My friend Erin assures me that eventually you can also turn cartwheels while nursing!

While it would seem that, after giving birth, the subject of creation – the worship theme of the month for November – should come easily enough for me, I did have the luxury of puzzling over it for several weeks, which led me in many directions. When it comes to creation, it's impossible to not start asking the timeless questions that underlie straightforward human creation. How was the universe created, why was it created, and what is the earth's place in it all about? Why are we here? Or as some wise person once summed it up: who are we, where did we come from, and where are we going?

As a life-long UU, I instinctively headed in the first obvious direction: I thumbed through a copy of Stephen Hawking's *A Briefer History of Time*. Surely this would point to an 'acceptable' view of creation that I could briefly outline to you this morning, and we could all go home satisfied, end of creation story, end of religion. While I don't want to offend the science-minded folks in the house, and I know there are many of you, I have to be honest and confess, that that book did nothing for me. While I can appreciate how far we humans have come in our knowledge of the cosmos, I couldn't stave off the sinking feeling of how much further we have to go, and how our dearth of understanding limits our capacity to progress as human beings, indeed, to *evolve* as citizens of a planet. Reading this book was drab and depressing to me, and I realized that, brilliant as he is, Stephen Hawking could not relay the good news this morning.

I always want to bring you good news, where possible, on Sunday morning, and so to do that today, I realized I was going to have to take a big risk, and tell you what *I* believe about creation, which is not very scientific. I don't know if you've noticed this, but UUs don't actually do that that often – all UUs enjoy the liberty to decipher their own answers to timeless questions, but we often lack the confidence to SHARE our thoughts with others. It's one of the draw-backs of our plurality; while we share many values, the reassuring weight of a community of like believers is generally not there when it comes to matters of faith. But later I'll explain why that's okay.

*I have faith* that we are here for a reason, that the creation of the universe, our galaxy, our little solar system, our dinky earth, and our being here is not accidental. While I believe in a divine architect of the whole kit and caboodle, God for short, I'm content knowing that God is unknowable, that the *ultimate reasons* for creation are far beyond my capacity to *reason* it out. The one reason for our being that I cling to with confidence, and I think appeals to typically well-educated religious liberals, is that, we're here to learn. We're here to evolve, and we do that as individuals, so that we can help others to learn and evolve, so that, little by little we move forward as one people of one planet. As I said, we have a long way to go.

One thing we might all agree on is that evolution takes time. Because that is so, I believe that the life we're living now does not represent the totality of our existence. There's so much knowledge, truth, and wisdom to learn, that it would be impossible to learn it all in one lifetime. I think we learn bits and pieces in successive lives, building upon what we've already mastered. Reincarnation is a term for this, but I like to think of myself as a student who makes return trips

to Earth University. For those of you who have had tendencies to over-educate yourselves, and make return trips to school, keep in mind that it may be you're already working on a degree to earn in this lifetime. You're already in school!

I believe we each decide what course of study we want to take at Earth University before we're born. Once you've been born, reared, and become an adult, how do you know what you set out to learn? Here's the good news: as citizens of a common planet, our individual goals of human progress have common themes. Like the mother's tale to her new child that I read at the beginning of the service, we're all destined to learn that we are part of the divine oneness of all creation, a creation that was motivated by love. We're all here to learn how our living can best serve this understanding.

There's a reason why all the major faiths developed by human beings over millennia have common prescriptions, such as the Golden Rule, such as compassion, and service - thinking of others before yourself. In various ways, we are all learning how to supercede our ego and let love - the source of all creation - motivate everything we say and do.

Now let me try to bring this down to earth. What are the kinds of lessons we learn in a lifetime? They are many, and of varying degrees of difficulty. When you look at the totality of your life thus far, what were the themes of the major turning points? What were the lessons that changed you? The lessons that changed me were never easy ones. What were the toughest lessons of your life that you know made you a better person? It's easier to think of the lessons we learned in our youth than it is to think of the lessons we are learning as adults. I can think of a few examples from when I was younger that still guide my behavior. When I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I stole \$40 out of a girl's purse in the locker room, and I got caught. After my heroic struggle to survive the social fall-out that followed, I was never tempted to steal again, and I learned a lot about compassion. My freshman year in high school I plagiarized a story for English class, which was submitted to a contest by my teacher that I ended up winning. I didn't get caught that time, but the anxiety was so awful that I've never been tempted to plagiarize again, and I learned a lot about integrity.

Much more recently, becoming a parent, I'm learning that, with the arrival of this great new love in my life, also comes terror. The love for my child is so powerful, that the fear of him suffering, or the fear of losing him - of something going wrong - becomes a possibility that I simply have to learn to live with. I suspect the intensity of this emotion may dissipate while Pender is two years old, but the point is that there is great risk in creation, in anything we dare to create. I remember a novelist describing the discomfort she experienced after sending a manuscript, her baby, to the publisher - the vulnerability similarly frightening. When it comes to our own efforts of creation, whether it's a fear of loss, or fear of judgment, we need a strong faith to guide that courage.

Thanks to my new parental terror, I'm learning to strengthen my faith in the answers I'm formulating to those timeless questions of creation. While my child came through me, I don't think he's of me. My love for him is a love for the divine that I see in him. His being in my life is a gift that will teach me how to be a better person, how to love better, how to be aware that we are both part of the divine oneness of creation. I don't credit myself as much as I credit the divine for creating him. In other words, I'm finding that humility tempers the terror. My child is not a possession that can be lost - he is a presence to honor on its own terms.

Think of some of your most prized, most beloved creations. Maybe it's your family, your career, your friendships, a hobby or skill you learned. While it's certainly true that these things came about in your life by your own efforts, isn't it also true that these creations have elements of grace, as though they were co-created with a divine energy that came not from you?

In his email conversation with God, Rev. Brian alluded to 'Process Theology,' the idea that we are co-creators with God. I like that, as Brian says, it has nothing to do with 'defining, particularizing, and limiting' our understanding of God, it has *to do* with *what we do*, with our creating, and our learning. By its nature creation involves a lot of doing because a product of creation cannot be thought into existence. Have you ever noticed that you learn more from doing than thinking? Creation demands active participation, and unfortunately we human beings have recently developed a tendency to count thinking as doing.

This is according to popular religion writer, Karen Armstrong, author of recent book *The Case for God*. In it she argues that pre-modern religion had a much greater capacity to shape us than it does today, because religion was not primarily something that people thought but something they did. Everyday life and religion did not fall into separate categories as much as they do now. Religion was not a matter of belief or verbal discourse like it is today, but demanded active participation through ritual and practice. By Armstrong's assessment, we have actually *devolved* religiously as human beings, because religion has become something we think about and discuss and argue over, rather than motivating our every action and way of being.

One of the ways nowadays we miss out on applying religion to our lives, Armstrong says, is through myth. It's unfortunate that the modern fundamentalist trend toward literal interpretation of scripture has encouraged people to reject the value of scripture. Armstrong says that our pre-modern forbears understood that "revealed truth was symbolic, that Scripture could not be interpreted literally." They understood that "revelation was not an event that had happened once in the distant past but was an ongoing, creative process that required human ingenuity."\*

Armstrong says that in the ancient world, creation stories were never regarded as factual. She writes, "A good creation myth did not describe an event in the distant past but told people something essential about the present. It reminded them that things often had to get worse before they got better, that creativity demanded self-sacrifice and heroic struggle, and that everybody had to work hard to preserve the energies of the cosmos and establish society on a sound foundation. A creation story was primarily therapeutic."

I recognize that my creation myth - my belief in Earth University and pre-selected lessons - is, indeed, therapeutic. It makes sense to me, but more than that, it inspires me to work hard. We are all warriors in our own heroic struggles, as we struggle to find meaning, purpose, and a definition of success in this life that we can feel good about.

The concept of Process Theology is also a creation myth. As my beloved mentor Davidson Loehr points out, 'Process Theology is like Processed Cheese: it smells like cheese and it tastes like cheese, but it's not cheese.' I said before that, as human beings, we have a long way to go toward our evolution, and the main reason I say that is because we are far too arrogant. Like the forebears of Galileo, we still in most ways believe we are the center of the universe when in fact we are small, small bit players. We are only beginning to understand how connected we are to the rest of the universe – we cannot fully know this until we learn how connected we are to all living beings on *this* planet. Co-create with God? It is a lovely, even elegant notion, but it's only a story that makes us feel less small, that reassures us. It emboldens us to act in a life that is uncertain, to act in a world that is largely out of our control.

And that's okay, and that's why religion, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone, is okay, and all our idiosyncratic creation stories are okay. The good news is that, whatever it is that encourages us to create to the best of our ability, to love as well as we know how, to learn to serve a vision much greater than ourselves, is good and holy. Because what matters is not the saying, or even the believing – what matters is the doing. Faith is only so good as its fruit; the proof is in the pudding.

When I've reached cliché idioms, I know my sermon has ended itself. So let me conclude:

What is your creation story? What stories bring you the best challenges? It's ok to be eclectic, to see all the stories we hear as a smorgasbord, picking the ones that best empower and comfort us, knowing that later, we may move to different stories to empower us in different situations. This is why our plurality, our creedlessness as religious liberals is a good thing. Who do you think we are, where do you think we came from, and where do you think we're going? While it's true that none of us really know the answers to these questions, what matters is that we ask the questions. What matters is how our asking them inspires us to wonder, and how our wondering and figuring and imagining inspires us to act.

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\* Thanks to Ross Douthat, reviewer of Armstrong's book in the New York Times Book Review, for this citation.

That is the stuff of honest religion – honestly not knowing, but not letting that stop us from creating our heart's greatest desire to serve humankind, to love as hard as we can love, to not fear what we do not understand, but to move forward, evolving, one gifted day at a time. It won't be perfect, but we hope, pray, and believe that it will be enough.