



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

## Hunter-Gatherers Lost in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Until 2007 I lived in a pleasant, upper-middle-class neighborhood in the hills in Oakland. Just about everyone on our street knew each other. We got our families together every Friday in the summer for picnics, a tradition that had been going on for decades. We Christmas caroled together and had holiday parties together. But the scene in Oakland has changed in frightening ways over the last two years, ways that have changed even that little neighborhood. This June, I heard about an awful incident on the street. A young mother was awakened at 2 AM by her dog barking and went downstairs to find two men, armed with guns, in her house. They took her outside into the trees and raped her, then robbed the house. Her two small children were asleep in the house. Horrific and traumatic as this incident was, it was not an isolated incident. On this street of fewer than 20 houses there have been 6 armed home burglaries in the past year and a half. Armed burglaries are spreading across the city and the East Bay and seem unstoppable. Police, surveillance cameras on telephone poles and on houses, dogs, burglar alarm systems and signs, neighborhood watch—nothing has had much effect, though a few people have been arrested. With news like this becoming a common occurrence, you can imagine that people feel completely vulnerable. It is a breakdown of civilization. In truth, civilization has been breaking down for quite a while now in Oakland, under the weight of poverty and drugs. But though we may be late in asking, we should ask: what is happening and why? We Unitarian-Universalists say that we covenant to affirm “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all”. What has happened to the peace, and what can we do about it? These are the questions I am going to discuss today.

To begin, I am going to ask you to try to put away your ideas of who human beings are and how they act. We tell ourselves many myths about our rational motivations that don't work well to explain the situation I just described. Instead, I'd like to delve into what our biology has evolved human nature to be and how that human nature limits and determines our behavior on the scale of communities.

So who are we? For over 6 million years—that is 6 million years-- our ancestors, the hominids, lived in small groups that hunted and foraged for food. In a situation like that, where you might find an animal and kill it today, but more food might not turn up for 5 more days, survival of the whole group depends on sharing food. We share first with those most closely related to ourselves—our children, for example. If we don't, our genes die out and that behavior dies out. So we all evolved to first share with close relatives. But, as I've been reading, in such a small group in such harsh conditions, we also need to share with those in need to whom we are not related, or the group will not survive. In other words, out of self-interest we evolved to be altruists. And we are a special kind of altruist called “reciprocal altruists”. If I share with you today because you have a need, I expect that you will reciprocate later when I am the one in trouble. But what exactly is it that evolved that makes us altruists? Evolution evolved in us feelings—feelings of sympathy, obligation, guilt, friendship, affection, and trust, and toward those who do not reciprocate properly, outrage and dislike. These feelings are what we use to decide what to do in a given situation—to help, or not to help, for instance. In other words, these feelings constitute our conscience. And if we look backwards through our evolution, those feelings at some point cease to exist. I will come back to the conscience in a moment. But I also want to note that we had to evolve some way to police this reciprocal altruism situation. So in all human cultures, showing that it is innate behavior, we find the use of shame, ridicule, shunning, and gossip to spread the word on who is untrustworthy and to keep other people in line, just as described in the interview with Robin Dunbar.

Now, back to the conscience, because this is very relevant to the questions we began with. How can anyone with a conscience perpetrate the crimes I described—home invasions, especially with the attendant violence? Evolutionary psychologists tell us that 30-40% of our ideas of right and wrong are the same, universally, across human cultures. So 30-40% of our conscience is genetic. But that leaves 60-70%, the major part, which is formed by our environment—by the conditions under which we are raised and what we are taught. Evolution had to leave our consciences adaptable because in some situations it is more important to survival that we lie and cheat or even be violent instead of being virtuous. You can think about Nazi Germany as an extreme example. But as we think about the origin of those crimes in Oakland

we can all imagine that poverty produces this kind of situation also. If I can't provide for myself or for my family, I will need to think differently about the right and wrong of lying, stealing, or even violence. It would be the same for any of us. So the human conscience is not what we have always imagined it to be-- a mental system pointing us to the absolute right. It is an innate, evolutionary tool aimed at insuring our survival in a group based on reciprocal altruism. It makes us appear to be "good" and perform properly so that we can stay in the group. And it is tuned by our circumstances.

Of course, over the course of those 6 million years we also had to deal with the arrival of occasional people outside our "in group", the stranger, the "other". And judging by what we see as the natural reaction to outsiders in all human cultures, those people must have been pretty threatening to our survival. Because in all human cultures the natural feelings toward outsiders are distrust and suspicion, and the strategies we employ are often exploitation and even violence. We see this everywhere today. We see it in anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment here and abroad. We see it in the attitude of some of the people of Lancaster, who want to eject everyone in Section 8 housing from their city. A small example is the treatment that my daughter experienced in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, when she wasn't a member of the "popular group", so she was an outsider. I'm sure many of us can relate to that, or went through it with our children. But there are also much more serious examples, like the attitude of one gang in Los Angeles or Oakland toward the gang in the next neighborhood—the other—or ethnic cleansing, or slavery. All of these shameful acts of our present and past are perpetrated by people we would call normal, not by sociopaths. That is a clue that this is innate behavior. This is our natural heritage, too-- our innate feelings toward "the other".

Can't we be saved from this instinctive behavior by thinking? We are supposed to be the "thinking animal". Well, the problem is that the part of the brain that does rational thinking, the neocortex, is "neo". It is new. It arrived rather late, about 250,000 years ago. Until then our decisions were made by a more ancient system in the brain, the limbic system. The limbic system creates our emotions and emotional memories. So if we were confronted with a situation, the limbic system would pull out memories of emotions from previous similar situations. And if felt good, we did it; if it felt scary, we ran away. The neocortex didn't supplant the limbic system; it was an add-on. When information arrives from the senses telling you what is going on in the world, that information goes to both the limbic system and the neocortex, but it gets to the limbic system a quarter second before it reaches the neocortex. That's a long time. It is long enough for the limbic system to flood the neocortex, and it does, with emotions and emotional memories and its own emotional decision about the situation. My daughter Rayna majored in cognitive science in college. And when the professor was describing the limbic system to the class, he told them a true story of a man who was walking beside a river, when all of a sudden he found himself standing in the river, holding a baby. What had happened was that his eyes saw a drowning infant. His limbic system flooded him with emotions and the emotional imperative to save the baby. He jumped in the river and saved the baby before his neocortex ever registered that there was a baby. This kind of thing happens all the time—you jump out of the way of a car literally before you realize you have seen it. Then the neocortex steps in and weaves a story around the situation—a story of decision and free will-- and makes a nice, tidy, analytical memory of the situation. What I am saying is that a lot of our decisions, especially the quick ones, the ones where we don't think we have to think about it much, the ones we don't mull over, have a very large emotional component to them. Indeed, we can't make any decisions without the limbic system. We need to rehearse the situation beforehand and know which decision will make us feel good and which might make us feel guilty. People with damaged limbic systems can't make decisions, as it turns out. So, all of our decisions have an emotional component. And many of our emotions are left over from a time when the presence of a stranger could be a life-threatening emergency. So we can't get around our negative emotions toward outsiders very well simply by trying to be rational. Now things obviously aren't hopeless. We have a whole church full of people here who have learned to value and look forward to being with people who are different from them. But notice that I said "learned". It isn't natural behavior for the person in the flatlands of Oakland to feel positive toward the richer person on the hill—or vice versa. It isn't natural behavior for a gang in Oakland or Los Angeles to be nice to the gang in the next neighborhood. It takes training to change this.

So that is who we are, toward people in our “in group” and toward outsiders.

Now all of this instinctive, evolved behavior worked fairly well in our communities until fairly recently. In my grandparents’ time, the 1890’s, 1900, most of us in the U.S. were still living in something approximating the environment we evolved for.  $\frac{3}{4}$  of us lived on farms or in very small towns. Those in the cities had been in rural areas within a generation or two, so this story of the farms and small towns is the story of all of us. In those towns we recognized everyone around us, were close to many of them, and fear of small-town gossip kept us in line, just as Dunbar said—Granny wagged her finger if you got out of line. But then there came a rapid rise of technology that made possible the rise of big agriculture. Big agriculture brought us something we had never had before—reliable food surpluses. The population grew very quickly, it exploded, and because of mechanization almost none of us have to be on a farm. So, today 80% of us live in cities. Our environment has changed radically. The people around us are mostly strangers. This is not at all what we evolved for. And there was another trend that came with the transition from farm to city. Difference, the characteristic we use instinctively to identify a stranger, has been magnified in new ways. Before 1900 there were a relatively small number of occupations. People might be farmers, or craftspeople, or work in or own a shop. And everyone understood these jobs. There was also a relatively small spread in income for the general mass of people. Families tended to be large by our standards, because big families are needed for farm work. So a family looking at another family in another county or neighborhood saw people like themselves, spending their whole lives raising all of those children, occupying their time in ways that were common and understood, and making do with the same economic resources. But the rise in technology brought a huge expansion in the types of occupation. I may know the job titles of my friends and neighbors, but I really don’t understand how they spend their time every day and why. And before I retired, they certainly didn’t understand what I did every day as a physicist. Moreover, within those occupations there is a huge disparity in income from rich to poor, with families segregated by income in our neighborhoods. Now when a family in one neighborhood looks at a family in another neighborhood they are likely to see people with very different priorities and levels of privilege, doing things all day that are unfamiliar. We don’t know or understand the people we are looking at anymore. And we see hundreds, or thousands, of people every day who are not in our “in group”. This isn’t what we evolved for. Yet human nature has not had time to evolve. It is the same as it was.

Amazingly enough, we don’t do too badly. New York City is not a pit of vipers. Studies show that we still each have our “in groups”, which average groups of 3-7 intimate relatives or friends, plus about 20 people whom we know well and go to for help, and enough more we know somewhat well to add up to about 150, the Dunbar number. But that is 150 out of a population, in Pasadena, of 148,000. Whether we think about it or not, most of the people we see around us every day are strangers. And conditions have gone much farther in this direction since the mid-nineteen seventies. Government policies, especially tax structure policy; economic developments, and corporate greed have hugely increased the income gap between rich and poor. And so we now have desperately poor people segregated in certain areas of our cities. There are no rich people close, in any sense, to the “in group” of the poor. Some of those poor people are in what I would call the slums of Oakland, slums the like of which I don’t see in Pasadena. In such circumstances the 60-70% of the conscience that is formed by our environment gets formed in ways that are practical but don’t favor what we call civilized behavior, and crime, especially crime aimed at acquiring money and property, and all the attendant violence, grows in frequency, as it is in Oakland.

So what can we do? First I would like to make a brief remark about what we are doing. We are doing the evolutionarily natural thing. We are making ever more punitive laws to lock up more and more of “those people”, to keep them away from us. But if you take the species-wide, historically long view that I have been talking about, and look at the causes of these crimes, you will come to the conclusion that these methods don’t work. They don’t attack the causes. And indeed, the statistics show very little effect on the crime level.

So what does work? Two problems stand out as needing our attention. The first is that while neighborhoods can be friendly and cooperative because they have populations below the Dunbar number,

violence between neighborhoods is legendary, especially in situations of poverty and competition for resources. Think about gang-on-gang violence, the legends that grow up in one neighborhood of New York about people in the next neighborhood, hostility between neighborhoods. And we have a lot of neighborhoods. We need to be able somehow to knit together neighborhoods through real relationships, to do what the Buddhists call “destroying the illusion of separateness”. As a UU, trying to come up with a solution for you, I immediately thought right away of potlucks—regular, city-sponsored ongoing inter-neighborhood picnics. But after a few days I realized that something wasn’t real about this solution. Who would have the time and inclination to do all the work of putting together such a program? What I was hitting was an evolutionary wall. Evolution tells me what my priorities are—I need to take care of myself, my family, and some of my friends. It isn’t my business, it isn’t a priority, to take care of a bunch of strangers. I don’t have the time or energy. This also tells us why we allow poverty at all. The others, those strangers, are not our business. But we are not just selfish. We are also altruists. That is why I am standing up here today, and why you are sitting there listening. And so, hard as it may be, we need to harness that altruism and come up with ideas to knit our communities together. My solution didn’t work. I challenge you to find a way. You don’t have to implement it. Just come up with something and tell us all.

The second problem has to do with children. I read three books on crime control and prevention in preparation for this service. They all agreed that normal methods, including most community policing, aren’t effective in preventing crime. What shines out of those books, what does work effectively, is intervening in the life of an at-risk child while they are forming their ideas of how to behave—while that 60-70% of their conscience that is adaptable is being formed. What those children need is the respect of the whole community. They need good education. They need economic equity for their families. These are things that we can’t provide. We have no control over the political situation at that level. We must all continue our political work toward those goals. But the books I read talked about much more manageable things that we all can do that really work. Those children need mentors. They need news of hope. They need opportunities created and brought to them, and something that is proven to be very powerful: formal or informal training in making good decisions. Our church has a program that does some of this—our reading program at Cleveland Elementary School, the “Everyone a Reader” program. I urge anyone with the time and temperament to get involved in that program. I tutor at the other end of the age scale—at Marshall Fundamental High School in Pasadena. Marshall could use everyone in this room in some capacity. Big Brothers and Big Sisters have a proven track record. So please, go out and get yourself connected to an at-risk child. What I am asking you to do is to take a good look at the situation, at where our species is going as the population unfortunately continues to increase and poverty continues to rise, and find a way to push our communities in the right direction. If we intend to carry out the UU mission, to bring the “beloved community” to an overcrowded world, we must do this. Oakland is already out of control, and it is a warning. But we don’t have to go there. These ways of helping that I’ve been discussing have already been proven. They will lower crime. But more, I hold out the hope in my heart that they will also bring more equity to our communities. It is much easier to ignore inequity when it happens to strangers than when we are knit together with those strangers until they are friends. Finally, I hope that you can go out of church today thinking of the song that you heard before the sermon, “Scrambled Eggs and Prayers”. Think of that woman who, seeing a criminal, saw someone like her own sons, someone not different from herself. Her compassion changed his life and her own, and the life of her community. You can do that, too.

Amen, and so be it.