WHY DO WE BELIEVE?
Or The Questions I Wish I Would Have Asked

By Janelle Gray

A few years ago now, Phil and I went to the MDD Conference in Denver where the Keynote speaker was the biologist Ursula Goodenough. She talked about what she called "Religious Naturalism", which simply put, seeks to find meaning, awe and wonder in scientific truth.

This way of looking at things really resonated with me. Maya and I amuse ourselves by speculating on the evolutionary purpose of everything from why there are dictators to why the father in "A Christmas Story" was so enamored of his lamp shaped like women's legs! I've spoken on evolution-related topics a number of times, and I'm about to do it again. I tell you this by way of disclaimer: I am aware that I found a hammer and everything I've seen since is a nail!

For today's talk, I decided to explore why we believe—what is the evolutionary purpose and the biological basis for religious belief?

One day last June, I was having lunch with my assistant—a lovely teenager who is intelligent, engaged and hard working. She also makes no secret of her faith, referring to her boyfriend as "a good Christian boy" and bowing her head in grace before lunch. I knew from other conversations that she was a Big Horn Avenue Baptist.

On this day, she asked me, "Do you have any religious beliefs?" And I did just what UUA President Peter Morales says a lot of Unitarians do: I squirmed. I fidgeted. I struggled. I tried to talk about the 7 principles, which I can NEVER remember under pressure, except # 7, the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, and that one about a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And then, frantic, I ran a line from Morales' talk: what you believe isn't the right question. The right question is what do you love. Funny, it made a whole lot more sense when he said it!

It was awkward, to say the least. I found myself wishing I'd not mentioned the principles at all, but instead, asked *her* a question: Why do you ask?

Why did she ask? Maybe she was curious. Maybe she thought she could grow in her own faith by discussing mine. This is what a UU would think: after

all, our principles come from "Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life."

Maybe she wanted to convert me. This is definitely a Baptist mandate, so it makes sense to find out if I'm already saved. But I also wanted to convert HER, or at least save her from what I think of as false belief, and this was why I felt such angst about fumbling the principles.

Maybe she asked so I could be categorized. If I believe as she does, I can be trusted. I can be put into a "friend" or "foe" slot. We all do this, in religion and politics, as Bill alluded to at our last service. Morales outlined the problems with this. He said, "Just look at what happens when a belief system takes hold. First, we define everyone who does not agree with us as either ignorant or evil. If we have the truth and are certain we have it, then our task in life becomes spreading this truth. Our task also becomes defending the truth from all of those who disagree. Suddenly we have enemies everywhere. The world becomes a battleground. …. Believers are dangerous."

Another question I wish I would have thought to ask my Baptist friend is the one I asked you to reflect on earlier: how do you decide how you feel about someone? What makes you enjoy them, admire them, respect them and want to be their friend? I don't know what you came up with, but Phil, my sister and I quickly listed the following: honesty, integrity, personality, kindness, mutual respect and trust, sense of humor, good outlook on life, ability to listen. Not one of us included belief. I suspect belief might have *headed* the list for my Baptist friend. But I find that belief in God or Allah does not guarantee any of the other qualities.

How many of you have been asked, if you say you don't believe in god or mention that you're a Unitarian, "how can you know right from wrong? How can you be moral?" There is this circular reasoning that says Morality comes from God, and Morality proves God.

But I heard about a study that turned that notion on its head. I apologize because I haven't been able to track it down. My memory for details may be poor, but the gist is accurate. Researchers administered a questionnaire designed to test ethics and morality. The questions were probably on the order of "is it wrong to steal?" The subjects answered the way most of us would—showing that they knew right from wrong and would act altruistically. Then the researchers interrupted a specific pathway in the brain and re-administered the quiz. The responses were now strikingly amoral. The research concluded that rather than being imposed from outside, morality is a function of a normal human brain.

What would my young friend have made of this? A little paperback entitled "Venti Jesus Please" that Maya received for her birthday (from a friend who goes to the *other* Baptist church) presents a disturbing view of science. First, it says that both evolution and creationism are matters of faith, since neither can be duplicated in a lab. And as far as proven scientific methods, such as carbon dating? Well, they can be ignored because one day they might be proven false. The implication is that science is nothing more than a religious test. If you believe it over the Bible, you've failed.

How can you reason with this? Besides making me have incredible sympathy for science teachers, this gets back to today's question, and adds a layer: why do we believe, and to such a fault?

I was trying to track this down when I picked up a book called "The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into our Genes" by Dean Hamer. Hamer used data from something called the "Self-Transcendence Scale" and genetic studies to see if there was a link between spirituality and a particular gene.

The self-transcendence scale measures three components of spirituality: self-forgetfulness—which is what you experience when you get so involved in something you lose track of time; transpersonal identification—which is the ability to feel a unity with all things; and mysticism—which is being fascinated by things that can't be easily explained. Hamer's results are controversial because they haven't been independently verified. But based on other studies I read about, I think he's on a plausible track.

Hamer found a connection between spirituality and monoamine production. Monoamines are key in producing feel-good chemicals in our brains. You have all experienced monoamines because you can get them from eating dark chocolate!

Monoamines are certainly important: genetically altered mice missing genes for their production were born runts, and died prematurely.

So what do monoamines do for us, and by extension, what does spirituality do for us in an evolutionary sense?

The answers can be found by examining peak spiritual experiences. People report similar sensations: a sense of wholeness and unity with the universe; connection to everyone and everything; transcendence of time and space; positive mood; a deepened sense of joy; peacefulness; an openness to emotions; a willingness to try new things; increased tolerance; appreciation of

nature and the environment; a shift in values; and a loss of the sense of boundaries of the physical body.

When researchers studied the brains of Buddhist monks engaged in meditation, they found an increased blood flow to the frontal cortex and thalamus of the brain. These are the newer parts of the brain, evolutionarily speaking, and they control thought and emotion. There was a related slowing down in the parts of the brain that tell us about boundaries: this is my hand vs. this is the podium, for example. They attribute the sense of unity the monks experienced—where they could no longer tell where their bodies ended and the outside world began—to this biological phenomenon.

By blurring our sense of self, Hamer says, spirituality allows us to become members of a cohesive group. Spirituality also provides us with an innate sense of optimism. It alleviates anxiety and gives us a sense of purpose beyond ourselves. This can keep us from being incapacitated by the thought of death, and drive us to want to keep on living. Other studies have shown that spiritual practice actually improves health and extends life.

The implication is that spirituality just plain makes us feel good. If we feel good, we are more likely to reproduce; thus, this gene or genes would have been evolutionary advantageous, and would have been selected for.

Next, I picked up Barbara Bradley Hagerty's book called "Fingerprints of God". Hagerty is an NPR reporter—and a Christian. Her purpose was to find evidence—fingerprints—of the Christian God in scientific studies of the brain. After fairly reporting on the studies, she concludes that science might be pointing to a God who hard-wired us to be able to communicate with him. Hamer acknowledges that this conclusion is possible. He says, "Does science disprove religion—or does it, in fact, reveal some of the mechanism by which it works? If God does exist, he would need a way for us to recognize his presence."

Hagerty finds the perfection of math to be further evidence of God. She quotes Stephen Hawking, who said it's not enough to think of the rules and equations that make life possible but to contemplate "what it is that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe." Hagerty says, God may be "a conclusion driven by the math of the universe."

While reading Hagerty's book, I kept wanting to ask: "Why do you need a god? Why are you so adamant about proving God exists?" For me, learning that my morality is tied to a synapse, or that the profound love I feel for my children is nothing more than chemical reactions in the brain—these ideas are a

source of fascination, wonder and ultimately, spirituality. But many people, like Hagerty, find this reductionism disturbing—and nihilistic.

Similarly, for me, the here and now is enough. I don't need to know that there is something beyond death, but this is clearly important to many people. Hamer speculates that some people embrace such beliefs because of "genetic differences in how those beliefs are received by the brain and how they make those people feel."

Hagerty, steeped in the notion that Christianity is the ultimate and only truth, struggles mightily with the inescapable conclusion of the brain studies: spiritual experience is strikingly similar across cultures. The brains of Buddhist monks, Franciscan nuns and Sufi mystics all look the same on scans. Hagerty admits that "Genetics—and science in general—cannot referee between Christianity and Islam, or Buddhism and Zoroastrianism."

Spirituality is not an absolute quality but an ability we all have to one degree or another, one that can be enhanced by practice. Hamer identifies stages of spirituality that start with aesthetic appreciation and range through romantic love to religious awe to altered states of consciousness. Likewise, Hagerty shares a description of spirituality as a wheel with spokes leading to the hub. Each of the spokes is a path to God. "They will all take you to the direct experience of God. But you have to choose one and go all the way down it . . . [or] you'll never reach the hub."

While I have given reasons for why we believe, I still haven't addressed why we believe to such fault, to such an extent that we reject reason. I've been using the terms "belief" and "spirituality" pretty much interchangeably. But, of course, they aren't the same thing. Anthropological evidence shows that Humans have been *spiritual* for at least 60,000 years, clear back to the Neanderthals. And that bent towards spirituality seems to lead again and again to the development of belief systems, or creeds. In Morales' opinion, religious belief is the enemy of spirituality. "Every major religious tradition seeks to impart a sense of wonder, of mystery, of awe, of humility, of openness to creation," he says. "Belief systems stop this cold."

So why do we keep making them? There must be something in our nature that causes this to keep happening. The question is, to paraphrase Ronn, why do we cling to Creeds without Wisdom?

One possible answer is that they make our lives simpler. If all the answers are provided, we can make daily decisions in an almost instinctual way. Certainty, even if it's wrong, is easier than doubt.

By contrast, our non-dogmatic principles are a lot of work. Judy Fjell expressed this perfectly in song. Singing about the worth and dignity of every person, she asks, "Every person?" And replies: "Every person." Ronn talked about how our principles require the head *and* heart working together. Sometimes they have to argue to get it right!

Another attraction to creeds is that they neatly eliminate the paradox of death through the promise of an afterlife. It's a compelling trade-off: abandon reason for the promise that you'll never die. Hard to resist. IF you can believe it.

We might also "believe to a fault" because of "memes", a concept introduced by Richard Dawkins. Memes are transmittable units of culture. Twitter and the Tea Party are memes. Memes are passed on like genes, except they transmit through upbringing and popular culture and unlike genes, develop and move rapidly. Unfortunately, while genes will eventually be lost if they don't confer advantage, memes don't have to be adaptive to persist. Memes can be creeds, like a religious creed, and they don't have to make sense or allow people who believe them to function properly in the world.

It's too bad that spirituality so often gets obscured by religion. The fact is that being spiritual is uniquely human, as ancient as our species. Among all the creatures on earth, WE are the only ones who can find meaning, in anything from the most mundane to the most complex.

Reason, too, is uniquely ours, and with it we can understand our nature—and thereby rule it instead of being ruled by it, which is the premise of Religious Naturalism. Our own Unitarian tradition "counsels us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science." Our principles summon us to reason while inspiring us to be spiritual.

I'd like to close with these words from Dean Hamer. He says, "Our genes can predispose us to believe. But they don't tell us what to believe in. . . . It is important to distinguish between . . . beliefs and the act of believing." That act of believing, the *ability* to believe, is the great gift of human kind.