

“But Is That Rational?”
First Sunday of Christmas
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
November 29, 2009
Rev. Bruce A. Bode

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

We light this chalice
For the renewal of faith,
The wonder of hope,
The beauty of love,
And the gift of joy.

Opening Words

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this opening Sunday of the Christmas season.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve integrity, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history; blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: On this first Sunday of the Christmas season we gather in our sanctuary to celebrate the wonder, glory, and joy of life.

CONGREGATION: Generation after generation – children and adults – all those with open hearts and minds – have celebrated the qualities of Christmas.

MINISTER: We do not always come to the Christmas season with happy hearts and carefree minds. We are not always ready to sing and rejoice.

CONGREGATION: Sometimes we are burdened with personal sorrow. Sometimes our community is torn with dissension. Sometimes our world is ravished with war.

MINISTER: Sometimes, even at Christmas, the world seems dark and dreary. We are burdened with the memory of too many failures, too many defeats, too much sorrow.

CONGREGATION: Sometimes loneliness, fear, selfishness, discouragement, and resentment turn the bells of Christmas into bitter mockery.

MINISTER: At such times we must remind ourselves that the lights and bells and songs of Christmas are meant to celebrate not only the good we know, but the wonder and glory we have lost and would find again.

CONGREGATION: So we come to our sanctuary this morning at the beginning of the Christmas season to open our hearts and minds to all that is good and beautiful and worthy to be treasured.

MINISTER: We come in the strong and confident faith that if we seek we will find, and if we open our hearts we will be filled with the joy and wonder of life.

(Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair, adapted)

Lighting the Candle of Faith

This is Thanksgiving Day weekend, but already our thoughts begin to turn to the celebration of Christmas. Maybe you children who are here this morning have noticed that already Christmas lights and displays are appearing in the yards and in the houses of our community.

We also like to decorate for this season here in our sanctuary, and, as you can see, the first banner, the banner of Faith, is already hung on our wall.

This will be a kind of special year for the celebration of this Christmas season. Since we expect to move into our new sanctuary in about two months, this will be the last Christmas season that we will decorate in this space as we have done in the past.

And so even though we look forward to moving into a new and, what promises to be, a very beautiful space, there's also a kind of sadness in leaving this existing space where we have enjoyed and shared so many memories of love and care.

So this Christmas I think we should pay special attention as the banners are hung and as the candles are lit.

The candle we light this first Sunday of the Christmas season is called the "Candle of Faith." Faith is the first candle we light because faith has to do with our whole approach to life and what we give ourselves to and serve in life.

Everyone has a faith of some kind. So the question is, "What is your faith? What do you most deeply believe in? What do you give yourself to and what do you serve with your whole heart?"

In our "faith tradition," these are questions that each of you must answer for yourself. Our church is not going to answer for you. You have both the privilege and the responsibility of spending a whole lifetime developing and growing your "faith."

But another part of our "faith tradition" is that we try to help each other as we discover and develop our faith. Together we search and explore and question and doubt. And together we use our minds and our hearts in building a worthy faith, a faith that both makes our human world more precious and peaceful, and a faith that is faithful to the earth itself and to the inexhaustible energy that pours through it.

Sean Westlund (1st service), Claire Forbes (2nd service), will you please light the first candle of the Christmas season, the Candle of Faith.

Credo Statement (introduction)

In this past year on a number of occasions, I've invited persons who took last year's "Building Your Own Theology" classes to share their credo or faith statements with us in our Sunday services. At this time, Holly Mayshark, will read share her Credo Statement with us.

Credo Statement
By Holly Mayshark

I was brought up in an eclectic and entertaining household: a Republican father, a mother who is an active Democrat, a non-church going father and a proud, third generation Unitarian mother. Out of my 4 siblings, 2 are life-long, practicing Hare Krishnas, which my father, during his most frustrated moments, would blame on my Mom's overly liberal, religious beliefs, and the other two are either Agnostic or Atheist. It makes for never ending interesting family dynamics.

Somehow, somewhere I fit into the mix. I've always been interested in all points of view and feel my beliefs have been shaped by many different belief systems. Perhaps being a 4th generation Unitarian contributes to my inquisitive nature when it comes to spirituality. I also am aware that my beliefs are ever-changing. It was an interesting challenge to put my credo statement together. It was rewarding and difficult and I believe it is and possibly will always be a work in progress.

I believe in love. I believe in the nourishing connections we make with others through love. I also believe that the journey to contentment is driven by the power of loving oneself.

I believe in the beauty that surrounds us and the strength and support that it brings. Through color, nature, kindness and artistic expression I feel this beauty. It is beauty on multiple levels; spiritually, emotionally and physically.

I believe hope strengthens us, connects us, protects us, and allows us to keep learning. There is endless wisdom available to us when we are open. To me hope is one of the shining, mystical and magical qualities of life.

I believe faith carries us to our core strength. It rides on the wings of hope and creates within us the power to move forward during struggles and darkness. Over the years my faith has grown and changed. Faith grows with the combination of being open and inquisitive as well as giving in to the realm of the unknown. That process of giving in creates the space for faith and helps me open up to trust and hope.

This realm is often a roller coaster for me. One minute I can see the truth, the next minute truth is obscured. Relying on faith, hope and trust creates a huge challenge for me when I am in a state of limbo, waiting for clarity to make its presence known. Freeing myself from the all too common human trap of trying to control things keeps me humble.

One of the greatest gifts in my life is being a Mom. It has all of life's joys, challenges and lessons all wrapped up in one not so neat package. I am constantly tested and reminded that it's not about me, that I am not in charge and not in control. Ultimately I know I need to let go and just express and appreciate the love for my children and go to that place of surrender where my faith and trust in God, in love and in life has the power to see me through in great form. After all, it's in God's hands anyway.

I believe in human connection. I believe in friendship and family and the way we humans come together, make impressions, create openings and change and influence each other. I am constantly thrilled and amazed at how people appear in my life at just the right time. They create challenges, lessons, joy and sorrow and all this is part of the dance of life for me. It's another part of the magic that makes the music of life a symphony. The harmonies, the dissonance, the drums and the violins all play their parts. The voices, the rhythms, the subtleties and the grandeur are all important. It's all there. All the parts together create the score. It all creates the music that is life.

Reading

I will be speaking this morning about the subject of rationality, which is often related to objectivity. To be a rational person is to be an objective person, a person free from bias or preconceptions. But is such a thing possible?

My reading relates to that question. It's a reading from the book our Early Bird Book Discussion Group is just finishing titled, On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You're Not. It's written by a neurologist, Dr. Robert Burton. (pp. 154-156)

My wife and I are among a small group of neurologists and psychologists attending a University of California at Berkeley neuropsychology seminar. The lecturer announces that he is going to show us a thirty-second video of two basketball teams, one team dressed in white, the other in black, three players to a team. Our assignment is to count the number of times the men in black uniforms passed the ball back and forth.

There is plenty of time for an accurate count, yet I count ten and my wife counts eleven. Most of the audience counted eleven, so I am wondering if my wife has once again out-observed me when the lecturer stops, asks the group if anyone has seen anything unusual in the video.

No response.

“Anything at all?”

A sea of shaking heads.

“How many saw the gorilla?” the lecturer asks.

No one raises their hand.

“You're sure there was no gorilla?”

Most nod, though they are concerned. They know there wasn't a gorilla, but there must be a point to the video.

The lecturer reruns the tape. Toward the end of the tape, a person dressed in a black gorilla suit walks onto the court, stops in the center of the picture, thumps his chest for about nine seconds, and then walks off. The players continue passing the ball as if

nothing unusual had happened. The audience laughs with amusement and embarrassment at not having spotted the gorilla.

I have no doubt that the image was recorded by our retinas. The failure of perception took place between the retina and consciousness, suppressed by an alternative intent. (The research team termed this *inattentional blindness*.) When our attention was redirected to looking for a gorilla, we had no trouble seeing it, but we might well have missed something else.

This gorilla study underscores how any choice of evidence depends upon the mind-set of the observers. Each of us in the audience told our unconscious what to look for. To carry this out with maximal efficiency, an implicit second instruction was sent to the unconscious – to downplay or ignore irrelevant visual inputs. As we can't anticipate all inputs to be considered, this latter instruction is open-ended. The unconscious has free rein as to what should or should not be seen.

Few believe that individual perceptions represent an exact correspondence to the outer world. We know better than to believe that observations arise out of a neutral dispassionate mind. We accept that the unconscious is loaded with unrecognized agendas, motivations, and complex ill-defined innate predispositions. We shouldn't be surprised by the gorilla study, and yet, as though we cannot believe our eyes, we persist with the faded notion of objectivity.

In the early 1800's, there was an ongoing scientific dispute as to whether or not it was possible to undertake a scientific study without some prior bias. Charles Darwin responded in a 1861 letter to a friend: "About thirty years ago there was much talk that geologists ought only to observe and not theorize; and I well remember some one saying that at this rate a man might as well go into a gravel-pit and count the pebbles and describe the colors. How odd it is that anyone should not see that all observation must be for or against some view if it is to be of any service!"

Darwin doesn't equivocate or hide behind the myth of the autonomous rational mind; his straightforward acceptance of how observations occur is consistent with our understanding of brain function. He doesn't suggest that we can rid our minds of such biases. He proceeds with a full knowledge of his limitations – an extraordinary achievement and profound lesson to the rest of us.

“BUT IS THAT RATIONAL?”

Introduction

This morning as we begin moving toward the Christmas season, the season that more than any other celebrates the value and meaning of the human heart, I invite you to reflect with me on a slippery subject, the subject of rationality. Rationality, reason, and the mind are often set in contrast to emotion, to feeling, and to the heart.

So what I'd like to do this morning is to walk around this subject of rationality, asking: What does it mean to be a "rational" person? Also, I'd like to look at some of the latest scientific explorations of "rationality" – the connection, for example, between rationality and the "feeling of knowing" or the "feeling of certainty."

Rational beings

Let me begin with the observation that the word “rational” generally carries with it a positive tone and meaning. To be “rational” is generally considered a good thing. Most of us like to think of ourselves as rational persons, rational beings. We like to believe that we both think rationally and generally act rationally.

One of the problems, however, is that what is rational to one person or group of persons is not necessarily rational to another person or group of groups, who also like to think of themselves as rational beings.

To illustrate, let’s listen in on a conversation between Bill and Mary, two “rational” persons:

“Mary, would you please be rational?”

“Bill, I am being rational.”

“No, Mary, you’re not.”

“Yes, Bill, I am.”

“Mary, you are not!”

“Bill, I am, too!”

“Mary, you are *not* being rational.”

“Bill, rational is *exactly* what I’m being.”

“Mary, a rational person would never think the way you’re thinking.”

“Bill, I’ve got some news for you: I’m a rational person and this is exactly the way I’m thinking.”

“No, Mary, let me tell you how a rational person would really think.”

“Oh, yeah, Bill, you’re so rational; why don’t *you* go ahead and tell *me* how a rational person really thinks.”

Actually, this wasn’t a conversation between Bill and Mary at all; it was a conversation recently recorded in Washington D.C. in the halls of Congress. (Just joking.)

Defining a rational person

So: what is a “rational” person? Given the fact that persons from such varying points of view all wish to consider their positions as rational positions, I might ironically define a rational person as one who agrees with our position on matters. A rational person is one who see things as we do, shares our world-and-life view, holds to our particular faith perspective.

I say this is an ironic definition because typically we think of rationality as something that is objective, cool, and unchallengeable – if only the proper evidence or arguments could be brought forward, we would all come to the same conclusion; we would all see the truth of the matter (which just happens to coincide with our position).

A new scientific view of rationality

But this understanding of rationality as something objective, cool, and unchallengeable is slipping away; we are losing faith in this understanding of rationality. Actually, according to cognitive linguist George Lakoff, this is an old philosophical theory of rationality dating back to the 17th century, but one that has been found wanting in the 20th and 21st centuries due to recent studies of the brain.

Lakoff, a professor of linguistics at the University of California in Berkeley since 1972, is the author of numerous books relating to what is involved in rationality, including: Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don't; Philosophy In The Flesh: the Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought; Where Mathematics Comes From: How the Embodied Mind Brings Mathematics into Being. And one that you may have heard during the last election cycle: Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate. Also more recently: Whose Freedom?: The Battle over America's Most Important Idea. And, most recently, The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century American Politics with an 18th-Century Brain.

I want to quote Lakoff at some length from a recent article related to the health care debate that nicely summarizes some of his views relating to rationality and reason. This article was published this past August. Lakoff writes:

Over the past four decades, cognitive science and neuroscience have provided a scientific view of how the brain and mind really work....

The old philosophical theory says that reason is conscious, can fit the world directly, is universal (we all think the same way), is dispassionate (emotions get in the way of reason), is literal (no metaphor or framing in reason), works by logic, is abstract (not physical) and functions to serve our interests. Language on this view is neutral and can directly fit, or not fit, reality.

The scientific research in neuroscience and cognitive science has shown that most reason is unconscious. Since we think with our brains, reason cannot directly fit the world. Emotion is necessary for rational thought; if you cannot feel emotion, you will not know what to want or how anyone else would react to your actions. Rational decisions depend on emotion. Empathy with others has a physical basis, and as much as self-interest, empathy lies behind reason.

Ideas are physical, part of brain circuitry. Ideas are constituted by brain structures called "frames" and "metaphors," and reason uses them. Frames form systems called worldviews. All language is defined relative to such frames and metaphors. There are very different conservative and progressive worldviews, and different words can activate different worldviews. Important words, like freedom, can have entirely different meanings depending on your worldview. In short, not everybody thinks the same way.

[And] ... what is taken as "objective" discourse is often worldview dependent.

(George Lakeoff, "The Policy-Speak Disaster for Health Care")

And then one more quote from Lakoff, a footnote I found in the book from which I took my reading this morning. Here Lakoff is quoted as saying:

Cognitive thought is the tip of an enormous iceberg. It is the rule of thumb among cognitive scientists that unconscious thought is 95 percent of all thought – and that may be a serious underestimate. Moreover, the 95 percent below the surface of conscious awareness shapes and structures all conscious thought. If the cognitive unconscious were not there doing this shaping, there could be no conscious thought.”

(On Being Certain, p. 237)

Technical and ontological reason

This idea that 95 percent of our thought and reasoning is below the conscious surface of the mind reminds me of a distinction in thought that I am familiar with from theology and philosophy, the distinction that Paul Tillich, for example, makes between what he calls “technical reason” and “ontological reason” – reason relating to our overall understanding of being. Other terms for the same basic distinction are “strong reason” and “broad reason.” (James R. Horne, The Moral Mystic); or, again, “scientific thinking” and “existential thinking.” (Rudolf Bultmann)

So “technical reason” has to do with following the rules of logic, with determining means to an end, and with marshalling evidence for a given position. In other words, given the starting point, given the premise, given the assumption, this is what logically follows from that.

And then “ontological reason” or “broad reason” or “existential thinking” has to do with the premises and assumptions with which one operates. This is akin to the “frames” of which George Lakoff speaks (though it’s not necessarily understood to be unconscious to the same degree).

“Rationality” is, thus, a word that covers both types of reason.

And the arguments that we have with regard to rationality more typically concern this second type of reason, this broader type of reason, and not so much technical reason.

Often we think we’re discussing or arguing a given subject in a strictly logical way, and perhaps wondering why the other person can’t see the sense of our very logical arguments; but actually it’s the frames, the underlying and perhaps mostly unconscious world-views, that are making the difference. One is starting from a different place and seeing the evidence through a different lens.

Thus, two persons, given the same information and evidence, will fit that information and evidence into different frameworks. Both may be logically consistent within their framework but come to vastly different conclusions because their frameworks are so very different.

So it’s generally not logical consistency that is the problem, though the accusation is made often enough; rather, the problem is related to the underlying framing of things.

So, if you really want to get anywhere in a discussion or debate, the thing to do is to try, to the extent you can, to explore the underlying frames in which the particular issue is embedded. Otherwise, you will be like two ships passing in the dark.

The feeling of knowing

Now, let me move on to another study relating to brain research and rationality, this in the book from which my reading this morning was taken, titled On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You're Not.

In this book the author, Robert Burton, challenges existing ideas in which we tend to believe that our feeling of knowing and our feeling of certainty is a result of conscious reasoning, of conscious thinking.

New studies of the brain, however, he says, indicate that the feeling of knowing comes from other parts of the brain than those related to conscious reasoning and reflection. The thesis of the book is stated as follows:

Despite how certainty feels, it is neither a conscious choice *nor even* a thought process. Certainty and similar states of “knowing what we know” arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason. (p. xi)

Burton argues that the “feeling of knowing” cannot itself arise from the rational thought process. Thought, he says:

is doomed to the perpetual ‘yes but,’ that arises out of not being able to know what you don’t know. Without a circuit breaker, indecision and inaction would rule the day. What is needed is a mental switch that stops infinite rumination and calms our fears of missing an unknown superior alternative. Such a switch can’t be a thought or we would be back to the same problem. The simplest solution would be a sensation that feels like a thought but isn’t subject to thought’s perpetual self-questioning. The constellation of mental states that constitutes the *feeling of knowing* is a marvelous adaptation that solves a very real metaphysical dilemma of how to reach a conclusion. (p. 125)

I don’t know if this is assuring to you or not. On the one hand, say Burton and the other researchers, we have a mental mechanism that stops the weighing back and forth of the rational thought process and provides us with a “feeling of knowing.” But, on the other hand, this “feeling of knowing” or this “feeling of certainty” is outside our rational thought process and control – you can’t force such a feeling. And you may discover later – as perhaps you have on occasion – that your “feeling of certainty” was well off the mark. As a friend recently said to me, “Many times I’ve been very certain, and many times I’ve been very wrong.”

Going forth with confidence

Let me give you a commonplace example related to the “feeling of certainty.” In the sport of golf, for example, one is advised not to proceed with a shot until you can commit to it. If you are uncertain as to where you should aim your shot, or of what club you should use on a shot, or how hard you should hit your shot, then don’t swing yet. Back off and study the situation until you *are* certain what you should do, and then hit the ball. You should have perfect faith and confidence as you swing.

Now, this perfect confidence doesn't guarantee that your shot will go where you want it to go, but it will have a much better chance of going where you want to it go when you hit with confidence rather than hesitantly and indecisively. (And I can confirm from personal experience that is certainly the case.)

But, you ask, "What if I back off and study the situation and still really can't determine what to do? I mean, you really can't talk yourself into being confident, can you?" And the answer is, "No, you can't." "Well," you ask, "then what?" And the response is: "You're in the soup; tough luck; that's life."

Biology, however, does support us, as research indicates. It pushes toward providing us a "sense of knowing," a "sense of certainty," even though it can be wrong. But there's a better chance of making it, if we act decisively rather than to be hesitant or frozen in place.

Conclusion

So where does this leave us in this discussion of rationality?

As late as ten-thirty last evening I was asking this very question and not getting a "sense of certainty" with respect to this sermon. I was saying to myself: "Okay, where is this thing going? What conclusion can you come to? Please, help me, dear unconscious, please, kick in, dear circuit breaker, please stop this back and forth indecision and give me some direction and some relief."

Finally, the pressure of needing to be here this morning pushed the circuit breaker into action and I have what I have. I leave it to you to decide whether you think the circuit breaker kicked in at the right place.

So here are my current conclusions with regard to rationality, which you can enter into your own frameworks:

1) First, the conscious 5% of the iceberg of which George Lakoff speaks is very important. It can, as Robert Burton says, provide another input to the underlying unconscious thought system. It can feedback some data. This 5% is not that large, but it's a little light that we have, and it can observe some things. It can feed back to the larger, underlying mind, saying, "Hey, Unconscious, hey, Deeper Mind, could you please come up with another premise, maybe even a whole different world-view, because the one I've been operating with isn't working so well and could use some adjustment." Slowly, slowly, then, underlying premises may shift and change and you find yourself believing differently than you did before. Sometimes, "Aha," a light bulb goes on in your head, and you see new and beautiful truths with the aid of this light.

2) Then, secondly, when that light bulb does go on in your head, be a little humble about it. When a "feeling of certainty" comes over you, when a revelation occurs, be thankful, but also be humble. Recognize that it's your solution, here and now, and not even for all time. Later, you may find it doesn't work anymore for you and you don't even like it. So be a little cautious and be a little humble. It's your little light – and it isn't necessarily meant to illuminate the whole world.

3) Thirdly, not only be circumspect in regard to your own revelations, but also be wary of those who come proclaiming that they have found THE TRUTH. *Trust your own uncertainty more than the certainty of others.*

4) Fourthly, along the same lines, see if you can expand your sense of ambiguity. The drive to be certain is a necessary thing in order to live and to thrive, but it can also get us and everyone else in a lot of trouble. So don't worry too much about finding a completely air-tight, logically consistent religious philosophy, for most likely it will come at the cost of throwing out huge swaths of reality. Instead, try to embrace paradox. To quote English author, G.K. Chesterton:

Ordinary persons have always been sane because ordinary persons have always been mystics. They have always cared more for truth than consistency. If they see two truths that seem to contradict each other, they take the two truths and the contradiction along with them. Like physical sight, their spiritual sight is stereoscopic: They see two different pictures at once and yet see all the better for that. (from his essay, "The Maniac," in Orthodoxy)

5) And, fifth and finally, reason and emotion belong together. Too long have they been thought to be separate. Thus, embrace both. And, particularly, in this season of the human heart, don't be afraid to embrace the values of the heart. As French philosopher Blaise Pascal said several centuries ago, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing."

So, if something once touched your heart and fired your imagination, don't let the coolness of reason talk you out of it. You may let the coolness of reason talk you out of the particular frame in which the feeling of the heart has been embedded, but don't allow your rational self to dampen or destroy the feeling of the heart or the wonder of the imagination. Rather, let the coolness of reason send a message back to the underlying framing shop, saying, "This frame is not working. Please send back another frame, for I don't wish to lose the feeling of my heart." This was something poet John Keats had a "feeling of certainty" about, for he said, "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination."

Spoken Benediction

And now may the faith we nourish here
And the memories we gather here
Give us hope for the future.
May the love that we share
And the companionship we feel
Strengthen us and bring joy to our hearts.
And may the blessings of our fellowship rest upon us,
This day and forevermore. Amen.

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service of The Reverend Bruce A. Bode given at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on the First Sunday of Christmas, November 29, 2009. The spoken message may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)