

What Is Religion For?

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Last November I attended the Harper's Ferry Ministerial Study Group at the Cacapon State Park in Berkley Springs, West Virginia. This year's program theme was "A Faith to Believe In." We were invited to explore how we, as ministers, are called to make Unitarian Universalist theology pertinent in these times. The featured speakers, Beverly and David Bumbaugh, grounded their presentations in the ecological crisis and its economic implications, reflecting on religion's failure to effectively address the serious questions of how we will be able to live together on a planet severely limited in its ability to sustain us in the style to which we have become accustomed.

This stimulated many lively responses and discussions, and suggestions for more effective activism in a variety of areas. As I pondered my responses, however, something emerged that I hadn't expected. Although it seemed likely that the urgency of my work might increase, its nature did not. I feel called to help people to the ancient but still unfinished work of loving one another, to help Unitarian Universalists to engage social and environmental justice through activism and action, but without the corrosive emotions of anger and panic.

This led me to step back and try to look at the situation from the broadest perspective I could manage: that of evolutionary biology and psychology. What emerged surprised me. It seemed that our present situation is rooted in the nature of life itself as it has been played out over millions of years.

My revelation concerning our destruction of our earthly habitat was, essentially, "Duh! This is what species do!"

Every species from the beginning of time has reproduced and consumed until it filled and overfilled its ecological niche, depleting its resources until it can no longer maintain the numbers and comfort earlier generations enjoyed.

One of the simplest examples can be seen in a Petri dish full of nutrient. Place a swab of bacteria on the agar, cover and wait: they'll reproduce to fill the

dish, eat all the nutrient and die. Presto! A tiny ecosystem has been turned into a dish full of dead bacteria.

More complex ecosystems involve an interactive balance of more than one species, predator and prey, for example. Prey animals might follow the bacteria's example by eating all the vegetation in their ecosystem and dying, but the introduction of predators helps to moderate this by keeping the population within manageable levels. The predators, limited by the availability of prey, attain a stability of population as well.

Even top predators, animals that have no fear of being eaten by other animals, are limited by the capacity of their ecological niches. I recall an inlet of the James River I used to hike around a couple of years ago when I lived in Newport News, Virginia. It had a surprising number of very big turtles, often sunning themselves on logs all around the shore. Turtles can live a long time – many of these were a foot or more in diameter – and they seemed to fill every corner of the environment. But I didn't see any little, baby turtles. There wasn't much room in that niche for them and I imagine that it was the rare baby that managed to grow into one of those large adults basking in the sunlight.

We're certainly not surprised when rats overpopulate and destroy their environment. If we see 6 million rats in a valley that can only support 3 million, we shrug and observe that half the rats are going to have to die. We're far less sanguine when we're considering the fate of human beings, though. We're not rats; humans are us.

And humans are truly remarkable creatures. We represent an unprecedented evolutionary leap. Humans are so incredibly intelligent and adaptable that we've eliminated the relevance of the idea of ecological niche. We dominate every ecosystem on the planet, so when we, like every other species, reach the limiting point of ecological toxicity, we're not merely polluting our nest or our valley – we've overtaxed the whole planet. Global warming and resource depletion on a grand scale are producing planetary consequences that are hostile to human life.

But, like I said, this is what species do. And we're a species, too.

All this led me to reflect on human nature as it developed during the human evolutionary epoch, the way people lived for a couple of million years on the way to becoming *homo sapiens*.

We lived in small groups: families, communities, tribes. We used our intelligence and adaptability to compete for survival in a world that was, as Tennyson put it, “red in tooth and claw.” We were dominated by anxieties of survival in a hostile world. Fear, greed, anxiety, and competition for limited resources determined who lived and who died. Even then, we had instincts and abilities for cooperation and affection, but these tended to function in a tightly circumscribed role, with fiercely possessive relationships serving to define and unite the family or tribe, quickly identifying outsiders to be outfought or outfoxed.

But even during this evolutionary epoch there were individuals who noticed that another side of human nature had made huge evolutionary advances: affiliation. That we had capacities for a deeper connection with others, and the environment, capacities for a broader, more inclusive bonding of selfless love that were different from those of competition and survival. They found capacities for experiences of transcendent relatedness that seemed to come from beyond the realms of struggle and survival, competition and appetite. This seemed so different from their earthly lives that they tended to give it a name that placed it beyond normal experience: they often called these human capacities for loving, transcendent unity by the name, “God.”

And when civilization began, some 10 to 15 thousand years ago, religion was one of the first things to appear. The most important thing about civilization is that it signals the end of humanity’s evolutionary epoch. We stopped evolving. When we stopped evolving, our evolutionary survival instincts ceased to be the most important strategies for life. We needed learn how to cooperate, to collaborate, to live together in peace.

Civilization brings a new adaptive challenge that wasn’t so great when we were wandering tribes. And religion appeared to teach us how to meet that challenge, how to adapt to the end of humanity’s evolutionary epoch. From the very beginning, religion has sought to teach that there is a greater fulfillment

than survival-based appetites can offer, and that it is to be found in relationship and attachment: in love.

As I discussed last year, recent advances in psychological research have revealed attachment as the primary factor in human life. We've become so familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs that we tend to accept, as a matter of course, that survival and security are the fundamental needs which must be met before any considerations of friendship, love, or intimacy could be possible. But we now know that Maslow got it wrong! We now know that attachment is our primary need, that we need secure human connections more than we need food or shelter or even breath. This gives us a new understanding of what has been called "altruism." Apparently selfless behavior, subordinating our own well-being for the benefit of others, turns out to be related to our actual, primary need: attachment, connection, love.

There's been a tendency in our culture to think of love and generosity as luxuries available only when our more basic needs are met. The amazing thing is that love and generosity are actually more basic than survival!

None of this overturns our survival side, of course, although some religious approaches have been confused about this. Our appetites are still important. Of course we need to breathe, to eat, to reproduce. But this understanding helps to place them in a new perspective. When Tina Turner sang, "What's love got to do with it?" the answer is, "Everything!" Love is not secondary to sexual desire. Believe it or not, love is the primary path to human fulfillment, a path that may well include a joyful sexuality, but love is primary, nonetheless.

So what is religion? Religion is the teaching of this truth. Religion exists to teach us to live in a post-evolutionary world of cooperation and connection. Religion teaches us about the destructiveness of negative emotions, that people motivated by compassion and connection are happier and more fulfilled than those motivated by fear and defensiveness. And that lives and communities based in compassion and connection are richer and more nourishing to human potential than those based in fear and defensiveness.

As Albert Einstein said, "You cannot prepare for war and peace and the same time." We can choose which kind of world we want to live in. Our dual

nature gives us that choice. We can compete, fight, and punish our enemies; or we can cooperate, embrace, and reward those with whom we share the planet. It's not just religion. Psychology has shown that humans respond far better and more fully to positive reinforcement than to negative feedback. Love trumps hate.

All this is not new. It's been with us for at least tens of thousands of years. But we haven't learned to live it. We've lived using the survival motivations of evolution by which every species tends eventually to destroy its habitat if it can. And, oh, we humans certainly can destroy our habitat. And we're doing it.

By all means, work to save the planet. Use all the strategies and techniques our science and ingenuity can devise. Use all the political might we can muster. But, beneath that, I call you to understand, even as you fight for the survival of the species, our true survival and fulfillment lies in the essentially religious dimension of the humane values of attachment, love, compassion and understanding. If we, as a species, truly lived these values, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in. We face technological challenges, but the answer we seek is essentially religious. This is what religion is for. It teaches us that there is a capacity for transcendent connection at the core of human nature which we ignore at our peril.

But religion is only a tool. It can help, but any tool can be misused, and religion has been misused so often that many have decided we'd be better off without it. But misusing a tool doesn't mean that it couldn't be useful if properly used.

Religion is a tool, like a shovel. Now, a shovel is really good for digging holes. There's nothing like it – really useful. But shovels have been used for other purposes, like weapons. You can hit somebody in the head with a shovel and do some real damage. Religion has often been used like this kind of shovel. Legalistic arguments about right and wrong, wars, crusades, murders, persecutions of people with different ideas or beliefs: these are all examples of using religion to hit people on the head. That religion can be used in this way doesn't mean that's what it's for.

Or once we grow to a more mature understanding that we don't hit people with the shovel, there are still other ways to misuse it. We can place food on the

blade of a shovel and put it into the fire. The food cooks, we pull it out by the cool handle, and we are nourished. This is not a bad thing, but it's still not what a shovel is for. This is like using religion to help ease people's anxieties about death. It's not a bad thing; it's often helpful to reduce anxieties that can lead to irrational or impulsive behavior. We want people to feel as peaceful as possible in the face of life's existential uncertainties. But that's not what religion is for.

Shovels are for digging holes. Religion is for teaching us to place the humane values of love, connection, understanding, and compassion at the center of our thinking and doing. Religion teaches us that we are heirs to a transcendent connection that is more powerful than survival.

And, historically, the word, "God," has been useful as a name for this transcendent connection, for the spirit of life and love and wholeness. It has been less useful when it's been invoked as an authority for rules, anger, and violence.

But the variation and variety of human nature requires that many approaches to this be available. There is no one way to achieve the goal of humane development. The Buddha said that there were 84,000 ways. The Hindu religion has at least five major pathways: service, love, learning, mysticism, and wisdom. The Unitarian Universalist minister, Fred Campbell, posits four: humanism, naturalism, theism, and mysticism; while Peter Tufts Richardson's four spiritualities describe paths of unity, devotion, works, and harmony.

I believe that all religions can be invaluable tools to help us on our evolutionary journey. We may have ceased to evolve biologically, but we still have far to travel to fulfilling the potential of human nature. We can truly be as gods creating a world where justice is compassion in action – compassion for one another, for our communities, and for all creatures sharing this marvelous planet together.

We all need to participate in this journey of human evolution. We all have work to do in moving beyond fear, greed, and defensiveness. That is what religion is for. But, if religion is a tool that can help us get there, there's something we need to remember: tools only work if they are used. Religion isn't merely something to learn about, to think about. Religion is something we need to do. Together. Remember to dig!