

This I Believe
Rev. Dave Hunter
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville
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I was in the waiting room of a doctors' office about three weeks ago. The doctor was behind schedule, and the selection of magazines was especially bleak. In this literary wasteland I came upon an article on ice boating. We don't have much ice boating down here, but up in the North, in Michigan, where I grew up, lakes freeze in the winter. An iceboat has a sail, like a sailboat, but it runs on skis. The article mentioned that iceboats can go as fast as 100 miles an hour. That is fast.

The article took me back more than a half century ago. T. Kenneth Haven was my father's friend and mentor when my father was a student at the University of Michigan Business School. This was around 1929. Ken Haven and Herb Hunter remained close friends the rest of my father's life. The area just to the north of where we lived in suburban Detroit is filled with small lakes, and Ken Haven and his family lived on one of those lakes, Cass Lake. Our families would get together there from time to time.

The memory triggered by the ice boating article was of a visit to the Havens on a cold winter day. The ice by then had had enough time to get firm and safe, and Carl, the Havens' son, took my brother and me out for a ride in his iceboat. I had never been on an ice boat before.

Soon the boat was going fast, probably not a 100 miles an hour, but fast enough. On a small lake you can't go in a straight line for very long, and Carl eventually took the boat into a turn, and I had a physics lesson – a lesson on the nature of centrifugal force. The boat was going around a curve to the left, but I was convinced that I was going straight, that I would fly out of the boat and go crashing onto the ice, head first, and that would be the end of my story. Somehow, with strength I didn't know I had, I managed to hang onto the boat and stay safely inside. As I look back on that scary moment, I see it as my decision to choose life. Not a decision made after deliberation, but a decision based on instinct, when the most primitive part of my brain took charge, and I survived.

Eventually I got to see the doctor – I'm back in the present now – and he told me that I needed a pace maker. It would make sure my heart didn't play any nasty tricks on me. Once again, I chose life, and the pace maker has been successfully installed. And that's why we sang hymn #6 this morning, "Just as long as I have breath, I must answer *yes* to life. Just as long as I have breath, I must answer *yes* to life."

Back eight years ago, when I was a seminary student – and also still a Department of Justice lawyer – I was studying the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. Every so often I would come across a passage or a story that really spoke to me, that became a familiar part of my world, indeed, a powerful part of my world. What came to mind as the doctor told me about the pace maker plan was the passage from the thirtieth chapter of Deuteronomy. The Israelites have

been wandering around the desert for quite a few years, and Moses is giving them a message from their God. Whatever its source, I believe it's a message that can be universalized:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.
[Deut. 30:19, NRSV]

That's the choice that has been set before us – life or death. The road to death involves hatred and intolerance, immobilizing fear, unchecked global warming, force and violence as the solution to problems. The road to life involves love and understanding, seeing our earth as a loving mother, realizing that we're all in this together, striving for a world of peace and justice. I choose life, that humanity – and the rest of our interdependent web of existence – may live, and thrive.

I read something in the New York Times Sunday Magazine last month which gives me hope, hope for humanity, hope for our future on this planet. The issue contained brief articles on the *ideas of the year*.

Energy-harvesting floors, that's the idea that caught my attention, energy-harvesting floors. With each step we take we generate about eight watts of energy. (Keep in mind, by the way, that I've had one high school course in physics, that's all, and it was a long time ago. I don't know anything about centrifugal force or watts.) Up until now, the article explained, that energy, the eight watts we generate with every step, it's been wasted. But special floors allow the energy to be harvested and put to use. If you have 30,000 people passing through a busy subway station during rush hour, you've got some serious energy. [New York Times, Dec. 10, 2006, Sunday Magazine, p. 47]

I'm sure that there are many of you in this room who can evaluate this idea better than I can, but here's what I took away from reading this item: If we have people clever enough to think such things, and not only think of them but also to make them practical, then I have faith that we'll be able to develop the technology we need to prevent or overcome global warming. The article gave me hope.

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You've all heard by now about the short *this I believe* essays on National Public Radio, on KUAF during Morning Edition and All Things Considered. As I mentioned earlier, a collection of them has been published by NPR, and we've used some of these essays in our readings this morning. It's hard for a minister to listen to these essays without thinking "I should be able to do that." So this morning I've accepted the challenge. But there are two differences. NPR gives you three minutes. Now, while I've never heard of anyone complaining that a sermon was too short, I don't think I could get away with three minutes – especially on a Sunday when there's no story for the kids and no anthem by the choir. The other difference is that

ministers are expected to come up with something new week after week. I can't give you the whole thing on one morning. I've got to hold something back for the next time.

The NPR website has a helpful list of Frequently Asked Questions. Here's an obvious one: "How can I improve the chances of my essay being broadcast?" Their advice is as relevant for preachers as it is for essayists: "First, make sure your essay is framed in a concrete belief or conviction." I interpret this advice to mean, among other things, that we should be positive rather than negative, telling the world what we *do* believe rather than what we don't. NPR continues: "Then, tell us a compelling story about how you came to hold that belief, or a time that belief was challenged, or how that belief shapes your daily activities." Stories are important. Stories bring life to what we're saying. Their third pointer is to "try sharing one belief instead of composing a list of all of your beliefs." So this morning I won't give you the Nicene Creed, with negations and annotations strewn about liberally.

The original "This I Believe" series was broadcast in the 1950's, by Edward R. Murrow. The Thomas Mann essay, from which I fashioned our responsive reading, is one of those early ones.

You might find it interesting to note that one of the current essayists also had an essay included fifty years ago. Here's part of what Elizabeth Deutsch Earle wrote the second time around:

The "simple faith in the Deity" expressed in my teenage essay has faded over the years. Still, after the events of 9/11, I returned to the Unitarian Church, the same denomination in which I was active when I was sixteen. I've come to appreciate once again that communal reflection about life's deeper matters is sustaining and uplifting and provides a consistent nudge in worthy directions. [p. 56]

That's not a bad summary of what we try to do in Unitarian Universalist congregations – "communal reflection about life's deeper matters." Not just individual reflection but communal reflection. As she says, it sustains and uplifts us, and it provides a consistent nudge in worthy directions. No promise of miracles, no promise of otherworldly salvation, no promise – or threat – of divine intervention, but "a consistent nudge in worthy directions."

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Let's choose life, I've said. But then the question surely arises, sooner or later: what should we do with this life we find ourselves in. Well, one thing we humans have been doing for at least a few thousand years is to speculate on what it all means.

In that speculative spirit, here's how I see the world – I mean the whole thing, the cosmos, the universe.

First, I don't know why or how it's here. But on the other hand, I don't know how to imagine the absence of our universe. Possibly if I had studied physics as an undergraduate rather than philosophy I'd have a handle on all this, but I don't think so. We've got a mystery on our hands. I can't solve the mystery; I can't imagine how *anyone* could solve the mystery. The Big Bang, string theory – they may be helpful, but they can't answer the ultimate question: why is there something, rather than nothing?

I see the universe as an empty place – not literally empty, there's a lot of stuff, but it's just stuff; there's no point to it.

There's a story – I may have misremembered it, or there may be different versions of it – but as I remember it, it's about Bertrand Russell, the great British philosopher of the first half of the 20th century. He was giving a lecture to large audience of non-philosophers, and he was explaining why we are unable to prove God's existence, and why we are unable to account for the existence of the universe.

But in the midst of his philosophical arguments a woman toward the back of the auditorium stood up and said, "Just a minute young man," – Russell was probably in his sixties by then – "Just a minute young man, you've got it all wrong." Russell was in a generous mood and was a little curious about what the woman might say. "All right," he said, "how would you explain it all?" "The universe," she responded, "rests on the back of a turtle." Russell knew how to disarm her. "And what, dear madam, is that turtle standing on?" "Another turtle" was her response. Russell knew he had her now, he just had to be patient. "And what, may I ask, is that *second* turtle standing on?" "Save your breath, sonny," she said, "it's turtles all the way down."

It's turtles all the way down. You may not find that completely convincing or sufficiently satisfying. But I'm not sure I've ever heard a better explanation.

I had a dream a long time ago. I may have had it a number of times, or maybe it was just so vivid, so alarming, that one showing left a permanent mark in my memory. In the dream, I'm traveling in space, in outer space, a long ways away from our solar system, a long ways away from our galaxy. I'm with others on this voyage, in some suitable vehicle. But then I get separated from my companions. I'm all alone, countless light years away from any other living creature. I'm forever marooned quite literally in the middle of nowhere.

That's my metaphor for how we are in the universe. We're alone in the middle of nowhere, on our own, insignificant, lost.

But there's hope. We humans provide the universe with consciousness and a conscience. We humans can hear the tree that falls in the forest. We can appreciate the beauty that surrounds us. We can create mathematics and music. We can draw meaning out of meaninglessness. We dream of gods and goddesses, and we bring religion into the world. We embody love. We marvel at the square root of negative one. We can be inspired by turtles. We have each other – we are *not* alone.

We humans provide the universe with consciousness and a conscience. What an outrageous, hubristic claim. How could one ever prove that this is the case? But let's just accept the idea for the moment, let's try it out, see how it feels. We humans provide the universe with consciousness and a conscience. This gives us quite a responsibility. It's not clear that we're up to it. We might wipe ourselves out, leaving no one behind to shed a tear.

Now, it's possible, of course, that there is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe, or that intelligent life may evolve elsewhere. It is possible that not all the eggs are in our basket. But I don't think it's prudent to rely on such a premise.

It's also possible that our understanding of the universe is fatally flawed. We understand it as having three dimensions, four if you count time. But maybe there are a few others that we cannot detect. In fact, for all we know, our universe is just a science fair project by a not very talented adolescent god.

But *this* is the only world I know. It's enough. It has to be enough.

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Enough metaphysical speculation: let's return now to the idea I started with, "choose life." This is the message that Moses, speaking on behalf of God, delivers to the Israelites:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.
[Deut. 30:19, NRSV]

There's a catch here, a big one. God has promised the Israelites prosperity and a bright future on the other side of the Jordan River. But God has also told Moses that he would not go there with them. He's 120 years old; his time is almost up. Moses will die before his people have reached their destination.

And isn't that how it always is? We don't make it all the way ourselves. We have to pass the baton on to the next generation.

Kerry and I have been busy planting trees on our relatively barren quarter acre. (Or, to be more accurate, we've been paying someone else to plant them for us.) Someday, many years from now, those trees will be tall, providing shade for the house, providing a home for countless creatures. Will we be there to sit in their shade, to rake their leaves? Of course, we don't know; no one knows. But we expect the trees to outlive us, to be there for the next generation – for many generations, I hope.

Death is a necessary part of life. To choose life means to accept death. I'll admit that I'm not entirely happy with this arrangement, but I can't think of a better one.

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Now that I've come out in favor of life, some of you are probably waiting to hear what I'll say about abortion, or perhaps you're waiting for a pronouncement on vegetarianism. Important topics, but I can't throw everything into one sermon.

Instead, I'd like to remind you that living is something that we can't do on our own. It takes cooperation with others – including the millions of bacteria that live in our gut.

I mentioned my dream – the dream in which I'm stranded way far out in space, totally isolated. One cannot live like that, totally cut off from everything.

My recent surgery reminded me of my dependence – don't raise your left arm over your head, don't lift anything over ten pounds, don't drive a car. I've needed a lot of help recently. And I'm thankful that Kerry and others were there to provide it.

Of course, we need the most help in our earliest years. A young mother rushes out of the room. And then I realize that a sound that had provoked no reaction in me was her son's cry of distress in the next room. She's out the door before I know there's a problem.

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So here's how I see it. We're alone in this big, mostly empty, incomprehensible universe. We don't know how it got here. We don't know why we're here. It's up to us to provide meaning to it – there's no one else, after all. We've come to realize how precious life is. It's up to us to sustain it – there's no one else, after all. We've painfully learned, over thousands of years but especially in recent decades, that we're all in this together – all of us humans, all of us living creatures, the whole interdependent web of existence – we're all in this together. Let us choose life, again and again. Amen.