

*Godliness and Godlessness***A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****Delivered on September 17, 2017****By the Rev. CJ McGregor**

This past week brought us confusion, concern and indecision as we watched or listened to news bulletins as hurricane Irma approached Southern Florida. Some of us left town, some of left town and then needed to evacuate from where we sought shelter, some of us remained in our homes, some in shelters, and some right here in this building. When we thought a category five hurricane, the most intense hurricane in documented history, would hit us we panicked, we fled, we held onto each other, we protected our pets, we shared fear with one another, we cried and trembled together. We didn't know what would happen to our community, our homes, our lives. We were helpless and in control of nothing. I wonder if you, like many of us, prayed, reached out to God, the universe or something or someone you thought would hear you and intervene, would spare us. I wonder if you, like many of us, were surprised that in the moment of desperation and fear turned to someone or something you might have never turned to before and felt hopeful and comfort by reaching out. I wonder how you felt reaching out to a possibility or new truth. What did it feel like to shut everything else out and focus on the moment at hand? Do you remember where you were and how you felt when you realized that you and those you love were safe. Do you remember how you felt when you returned home and your home was a bit banged up, but it remained sturdy welcoming you back. What or whom did you thank?

Growing up my spiritual life had a single story. That is, my spiritual life had only a fraction of the truth, only one perspective. My mother was an ultra-Catholic and my father couldn't have cared less. Catholicism won out in our house. The single story was dogma. Jesus was the son of God, he died for our sins, rose again, and would someday return to take me to heaven where I would live in the clouds with no worries forever and ever. If ever one of us in the family would stray from this single story my mother would say, "That's blasphemy!" I knew what blasphemy was before I memorized my home address. There wasn't a gray area in this single religious story. There was no chicken or the egg line of thinking allowed, and there were no other possibilities, period. This made my growing extremely difficult. At the age of twelve I took notice of Kevin Snell, the boy who sat in front of me in my fifth-grade classroom. I sharpened his pencils for him, I never hit him with the ball in dodgeball, and when valentines were handed out he may have gotten a better valentine from me than my other classmates. It was that year that I realized that I fancied people of the same gender. I convinced myself that I would simply need to accept that I would be alone in life and would be just fine. This is what my single religious story told me. There wasn't an alternative in this single story. As I grew older and started to question, to engage all that was forbidden, and create my own religious story, I waited for my Catholic God to reject me or even worse condemn me. I literally would look up into the sky looking for the disappointed and vengeful eye of God. I would physically cower as a way to possibly avoid punishment. I had to accept that I was a spiritual failure, that I was not worthy and if I was condemned, I deserved it. The culture raising me reinforced this.

Some time ago I listened to Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie's TED talk about how our lives, our cultures, are composed of many overlapping stories. Adichie warns that if we hear only a single story we risk a critical misunderstanding. When talking about being Nigerian and how the west thinks of Africans she says, "If I had not grown up in Nigeria and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think: that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves, and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner." To insist on only these negative stories is to flatten her experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed her. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. And so as for Adichie's experience with how the west experiences Africans, how my and our spiritual experiences are reduced to a single story, we realize that our location is not the only story or the only truth. Our view and belief or the view and belief of the other is not the only, not the correct or most logical way of thinking. Perhaps through the evolution of our stories and fluidity of our Unitarian Universalist theologies we realize that we do not own the truth and that others that make this claim are sadly mistaken. This is where Unitarian Universalists, where we, are falling down. We don't walk the talk. We claim we are open to everyone's truth but we really know ours is the right one. Those of us here who embrace God to those who are atheists among us do not own the truth.

Sam Harris, a neuroscientist and best-selling author who famously took a buzz saw to major world religions and whose book is an example of an atheist evolving from his single atheistic story of godlessness to the consideration of godliness. Midway through the book, *Waking Up*, he paints a scene that will shock many of his fans who know him as one of the country's most prominent and articulate atheists. He describes a walk in Jesus' footsteps, and the way he was touched by it. Harris describes when this evolution happened. It was on an afternoon on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, atop the mount where Jesus is believed to have preached his most famous sermon. Harris writes. "As I gazed at the surrounding hills, a feeling of peace came over me. It soon grew to a blissful stillness that silenced my thoughts. In an instant, the sense of being a separate self — an 'I' or a 'me' — vanished." Some asked if Harris had finally found God.

Hardly. Harris is actually up to something more complicated and interesting than that. He's asking a chicken-or-egg question too seldom raised publicly in America, where religion is such sacred and protected turf, where God is on our currency and at our inaugurations and in our pledge and unfortunately is being written into legislation as a way to exempt the worshipful from standards that apply to everyone else. That [chicken or the egg] question is this: Which comes first, the faith or the feeling of transcendence? Another way to ask that question is: Is faith really an elaborate attempt to explain and romanticize the feeling of transcendence, rather than a bridge to it? Mightn't religion be piggybacking on the pre-existing condition of spirituality, a narrative constructed to explain states of consciousness that have nothing to do with any covenant or creed? Reflecting on the high that Harris felt by the Sea of Galilee, he writes: "If I were a Christian, I would undoubtedly have interpreted this experience in Christian terms. I might believe that I had glimpsed the oneness of God or been touched by the Holy Spirit." But that conclusion, in his view, would have been a prejudiced, willed one, because as he writes in his book he had felt similar exaltation and rapture at his desk, or while having his teeth cleaned, or in other circumstances where he had slowed down, tuned out distractions and focused on the

moment at hand. In other words, there are many ways of flight from commonplace worries, many routes of distraction. They include prayer, but they also include meditation, exercise, communion with music, immersion in nature.

A growing number of people around the country and the globe who are increasingly comfortable claiming that they aren't finding the comfort they desire or the truth that makes sense to them within organized religion. Twenty percent of adults in our country fall into this category. That's significant. Interestingly of this twenty percent one out of three labelled themselves atheists or agnostics. However, more of these people had a belief in a higher power. They aren't looking for a church, but may want some of the virtues — emotional grounding, psychic grace — that are associated and sometimes conflated with one [a church] and that many Americans are looking for a different kind of scripture, for prophets purged of doctrine, for guides across the vast landscape between faithlessness and piety. In a country with freedom of worship, they deserve it. Harris brings that to them—a guide to spirituality without religion. Recently, however, part of Harris' evolution to finding himself between godlessness and godliness, between faithlessness and piety, is his understanding of what a mistake it is to forget the goodness of religion and only harp on the cruelty done in the name of religion. You can have spiritual experience and understand the most thrilling changes in human consciousness in a context that's secular and universal and not freighted with dogma. We must advocate for unfettered discussion, ample room for doubt and a respect for science equal with the loyalty to any seemingly divine word.

How do we live then as Unitarian Universalists falling somewhere, everywhere, on the spectrum of spirituality and our view of organized religion? Where do we fall as the self-described nonreligious on the spectrum of godliness and godlessness? Do we believe that we can evolve, like Harris one of the most noted atheists of our time, experience transcendence and slide up and down the scale or do we really and secretly believe we own the truth? We're friends here. We can share that we may as religious liberals think that we've cornered the market on the truth and that the Christian sitting in front of us, the Muslim sitting next to us, or the earth centered pagan in the next row is lost and simply need to find us, find the real truth. But it's like a family secret—it's gauche to talk about or claim our ownership of the truth. Instead we may outwardly reject. These are challenging questions and ideas for sure. The real truth is that there is more to understanding reality than science and secular culture generally allow. How we pay attention to the present and recognize and be open to transcendence largely determines the quality of our lives and the quality of the lives of those we serve, support, and advocate for.

Spirituality remains a great hollowness in secularism, humanism, rationalism, atheism, and all the other protective postures that reasonable people strike in the presence of unreasonable faith. We know the single story doesn't serve us well. These postures may serve some of us well but not in isolation and not in the place that denies the evolution of one's own spirituality or the acceptance of another's. Let us be open to sliding forward and backward on the spectrum, open to the fluidity of our intellectual and spiritual understanding. Let us live as authentic Unitarian Universalists with not only working for freedom, reason and tolerance for others but also for our own minds and spirits. Let us remember what we grasped for in the wake of disaster and revisit it in order to understand it. May it be so.