



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

Are You a Faitheist?

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If you want to test how evolved you are as a person, the holidays often provide an annual testing ground for spiritual maturity. It's easy to be blissful while sitting on the beach, hiking by yourself in the woods, or pausing to savor a sunset. But as the saying goes, "Our family can push our buttons the most, because our family members are the ones who sewed our buttons on in the first place." Our various complexes and neuroses are often forged in our childhood family systems.

Or, even if your family is a supportive tribe with whom you strongly identify, as a nation, we're facing problems on multiple fronts right now that regularly divide us into factions: the New Jim Crow vs. mass incarceration, the epidemic of mass shootings vs. multiple interpretations of the Second Amendment, Climate Change deniers vs. the Paris Climate Summit. We can't even agree as a nation on the appropriate times and places to wish one another "Happy Holidays" and "Merry Christmas."

As a way of addressing this divide, I would like to share with you some insights from Chris Stedman (1987 -), an interfaith activist who is also the Executive Director of the Yale Humanist Community at Yale University. In his mid-twenties, he published a memoir titled Faitheist.

Prior to encountering Stedman's book, I had never heard the word, "faitheist": imagine the word "faith" and the word "atheist" merged together into *Faitheist*. When Stedman first

heard the word hurled at him, it was *not* intended as a compliment. He was attending a public forum on how “atheists, agnostics, and other nontheistic, nonreligious people should approach religion” (2). When he tried to make a point about how religion had helped sustain the work for peace and justice of figures like Mahatma Ghandi and The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., someone quickly retorted: “Oh, I get it. You’re one of *those* atheists. You’re not a *real* atheist. We’ve got a name for people like you, You’re a *faitheist*” — which also sounds a bit like a “fake atheist” (4). As a young, burgeoning secular humanist, these were stinging words that reminded him of all the people who told him in his childhood that he couldn’t be a real Christian because he was gay.

The late astronomer, cosmologist, and public intellectual Carl Sagan (1934 - 1996) wrote in his book The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark that,

The chief deficiency I see in the skeptical movement is its polarization: Us vs. Them — the sense that we have a monopoly on the truth; that those other people who believe in all these stupid doctrines are morons; that if you’re sensible, you’ll listen to us; and if not, to hell with you. This is nonconstructive. It does not get our message across. (1)

Stedman writes that as a young person who had been alienated from traditional religion, he sought out secular humanism “hoping to find a community bound by ethical and humanitarian ideals. Instead, [he] felt isolated and sorely discouraged” (3).

I will confess, however, that when confronted with the ways that fundamentalist religions continue to inspire racism, sexism, and homophobia around the world — as well as to embolden climate change deniers and in extreme cases inspire terrorist attacks — there is part of me that can understand the motivation behind that ancient rationalist dream of the Enlightenment that, humanity “**will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.**” Stedman challenges us to consider that such violent, reactionary approaches tend to sow the seeds of their own defeat by turning off even would-be supporters.

And although Chris Stedman is not a Unitarian Universalist, it is not surprising that Beacon Press, our own UU press, published his book. Unitarian Universalist is a big-tent religion. We draw explicitly from six diverse sources. Fascinatingly, both Christian theism

(Source Four) and Secular Humanism (Source Five) are still *only two* of our Six Sources. Even together, Christianity and Humanism only comprise one-third of the big tent that is Unitarian Universalism. The other two-thirds include direct experience, the words and deeds of social justice activists, wisdom of the world's religions, and Earth-centered traditions.

And although Stedman remains convinced of his atheistic worldview, his humanism has led him to be involved in interfaith circles — as well as to come to see that criticism of “Faitheist” as a compliment. One of Stedman's biggest critics is the scientist and popular atheist blogger PZ Myers, who promotes a hard-edged approach to all religion, not just fundamentalism. Myers writes: “I say, screw the polite words and careful rhetoric. It's time for scientists to break out the steel-toed boots and brass knuckles and get out there and hammer on the lunatics and idiots” (150). Stedman, in contrast, believes in a different way forward into a better world: “I want to live in a world where love is more commonplace”—and that the way to create a more loving world is through a more compassionate engagement with those with whom one differs.

Stedman continues with some wisdom that is highly applicable to us as Unitarian Universalists as we seek to grow together in one big tent amidst all our diversity:

Religious pluralism is neither coexistence nor consensus.... “Religious pluralism is the active engagement of religious diversity to a constructive end. **Diversity is a mere descriptive fact; ‘pluralism is an achievement’**...[with] three essential components: respect for individual religious or non-religious identity, mutually inspiring relationships, and common action for the common good. (163-164)

That vision is strongly akin to what we seek to achieve here at UUCF: a place every person's inherent worth and dignity is respected (Stedman's “respect for individual religious or non-religious identity”), a place where we come together to support and learn from one another (Stedman's “mutually inspiring relationships”), and a place in which we join together to work for more peace and justice in the world (Stedman's “common action for the common good”).

Stedman writes: “In my youth, being ‘right’ held ultimacy. I valued precision and accuracy, and was sure to correct anyone I felt was ‘wrong.’ I thought I was doing people a favor by correcting them. Now, I strive to lead with listening instead of lecturing” (180). Or to again quote Carl Sagan, this time on the need to respect all human life from a purely secular humanist

perspective: **“Every one of us is, in the cosmic perspective, precious. If a human disagrees with you, let him [or her] live. In a hundred billion galaxies, you will not find another”** (168).

In a similar spirit, the late Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000) writes:

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the Spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plough.

And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

I encourage you in the coming days and weeks — as we approach Winter Solstice, the darkest day of the year, to experiment with sharing, not from the place where you are right — but instead, **risk sharing the stories of your doubts and the stories of what you love, and then listen to the stories of other’s doubts and loves.**

In Stedman’s experience, an authentic, robust, engaged religious pluralism (as opposed to a mere descriptive fact of diversity) is achieved through sharing personal stories (164).

And I’ll conclude with one example. As an atheist and a humanist seeking to make the world a better place, Stedman was working in an assisted-living home. One day, a resident named Marvin that he was assigned to asked Stedman to read a book to him, which he often did. But this time, the book the Marvin pulled off his shelf was a prayer book.

Stedman was hesitant, but as he began to read, Marvin visibly relaxed and his gratitude

was clear. Stedman writes,

An unexpected feeling overtook me: relief. I had participated in a religious act with Marvin and I **felt neither a strong desire to return to my Christian beliefs nor a disdain for his beliefs**, as I so often had from seeing any form of religious expression since I left Christianity. In a way, reading the prayer felt like a conversation experience. It was profoundly different than simply “doing my job.” It was entirely unlike previous times when I had read to Marvin. I could tell by the way he sat on the bed, instead of pacing the room as he usually did, that the prayer meant something very profound for him. I realized that though I couldn’t decipher why the prayer was so important to him, it was. It touched him in a profound way. And because I shared in this significant element of his life, our relationship was more honest and real. (113)

May we increasingly offer such graciousness, compassion, and hospitality to one another. And as we are becoming more authentically present to one another, may we allow our hearts, our minds, and our spirits to be transformed.