

## ***“Learning for Our Whole Lives”***

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As I worked on the sermon for this week, I realized the challenge of trying to think of something to say about the incredible importance of education here in our Community—something to say that has not already been said.

I looked over sermons from the past and saw that this theme has been a major one over the years. We have spoken of the significance of our Coming of Age program, for instance, many, many times. And this morning, once again, we have witnessed our Lighting the Flame service which marks the beginning of this year’s program.

And then there’s our OWL class, “Our Whole Lives” sexuality workshop, another incredibly important thing we do around here to help people know about and understand the world around us.

We cannot list the many adult religious education opportunities here, but there’s always something going on. If you look at this week’s Stewardship Campaign’s insert, you can glimpse the breadth of our intentions.

So what else can I say?

Please allow me to take a different approach to the subject and shamelessly quote from my favorite newspaper columnist, Mark Morford, at the San Francisco Chronicle, in his article this very week: *“Insatiable rats blow up the moon: What does it say about us that we must always poke and query and explode?”*

He begins this way:

“Let us hypothesize for a moment that you have everything you could ever need: Loads of love, great sex, good food, shelter, cash, affordable health care, good teeth, shiny car, kids who don’t hate you, the works.

“In short, your basic needs are more than met, your essential desires perfectly sated, the impulses that many say drive the human animal to do anything at all are, once and for all, finally quenched. In terms of everything we say we value as a culture, you want for nothing.

“What would you do? Kick back and chill? Smile and order another drink? Are you all done? Is there anything else? Does it matter?

“Recently I heard the tale of a classic Harvard study performed not long ago on some very happy rats to analyze this very scenario. What do you do when you don’t really need to do anything at all?

“The rats were placed in a first-class rat maze. They had all the conveniences a modern rodent could possibly desire: sexy mates, good grub, great rat toys, plasma TVs tuned to the *Rancid Garbage Channel*, you name it. Pure rat heaven all around!

“Ah, but there was a catch. At the far end of the maze, the scientists built a little hallway with a small electrified grate on the floor that led to another, completely empty room that the rats could not see otherwise. To get to this room, the rats would have to walk across the grate and endure a relatively painful, totally unnecessary jolt of electricity.

“The question: Would they do it? Would the happy, satisfied rats get painfully zapped for no clear reason? After all, they already had everything they could possibly need. Why go through torture for something unknown and

seemingly superfluous?

“You can guess what happened. After a few weeks of luxuriating in rat heaven, one by one the rats began to poke around the grate, and eventually *every single one* chose to endure the pain of crossing over, just to see what was on the other side.

“So we ponder: What’s going on here? What were the rats’ deeper motivations? What lies beyond mere curiosity and the need to know? And why do we humans seem to have even more of it than the rats?”

The Adam and Eve story comes immediately to my mind. Here are two people who have everything handed to them on a silver—no, a *golden* platter—and they’re still not satisfied. They end up doing the very thing they were told not to do, in order to gain knowledge.

Let us remember that *the forbidden* knowledge, according to the myth, was reserved for the gods. So, human beings, from Day One, have yearned for knowledge even if that yearning puts them at risk, to find a deeper and even divine understanding of themselves and of the world around them.

The Eve and Adam story is the way the Hebrew people, and later the Christian people, explained what’s going on with us rats—er, humans. But there are explanations from other religious traditions.

Let us look, for instance, at what the Hindu wise ones call *spanda*, “that ever expanding/contracting meta-awareness of the universe, a flowing energy pulse that is always seeking to discover and rediscover itself in new and variegated forms.”

You might say, therefore, the *real* reason the rats endured the jolt and the real reason humanity is willing to risk everything, even though we have no real need to do so, even though we have pretty much everything we need to survive—at least for now—and be happy right here, is due to *spanda*, the “never-ending need our inborn consciousness has to redefine and reconfigure itself, to constantly seek new shapes and identities and vibrations.”

So, what does Shoreline Church have to do with all this?

Like the rats and like Adam and Eve, we are ready and willing *to take the risk* to know more than we do now, even if it means that we might suffer along the way. What do I mean? I mean that every time humans being have attempted to move beyond their current understanding of the world, there have been enormous, sometimes painful, consequences.

A brief look at human history reveals that entire civilizations have turned around because of new knowledge. Look at the Roman Empire when Christianity became the state religion. Look at the Middle East when Mohammed brought the literal word of God (the Qu’ran). These cataclysmic changes happened in nearly every culture and every religion.

At the heart of the danger of seeking a finding new knowledge is the confrontation between the comfort of what we already know and the challenge of what we have discovered. It took the Roman Catholic church hundreds of years to admit that Galileo was right.

We’ve spoken many times of our “Principles and Purposes” statement and its importance. The “Purposes” part of it begins with the words: “The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources:” Among the various sources is this statement:

“Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science...”

From early on, our faith tradition has reverently respected the value of science, otherwise known as “knowledge seeking”. In today’s world of anti-science, with a near majority of people doubting the fact of evolution, for instance, this is an extremely important facet of *who we are* as a religious people.

So it is that right here at Shoreline Church, we seek to develop programs and curricula and other pathways toward finding knowledge and understanding of ourselves and our world. This desire is not quite common in the world of religion, which tends to devote its intellectual energies toward the old scriptures, the idea being that everything we need to know has already been given to us by the gods.

The beloved community of memory and hope that is our church and the religious, spiritual education we receive there is what helps us find transform our everyday suffering, our pain, our triumphs, and joys, our failures our struggles in to meaningfulness. We attempt to transcend our troubles with the help others and with the personal time to reflect and listen in the deep discussions of an adult re class or a small group chalice circle or the stillness of prayer on Sunday or the days of reflection on a thought provoking sermon.

In other words, it is *our identity*—may I say, *our mission*: “to explore strange new worlds, perhaps even to go where no one has gone before...”

May your “live well and prosper...”

May these things be so.

Sources:

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/g/a/2009/10/09/notes100909.DTL&nl=fix>