

**February 21, 2010**  
**Shoreline UU Church**  
**“Whatever It Is, It Is”**  
**Mark Dubach, Guest Speaker**

Good morning. Before I get going here I'd like you to understand one thing. Bill Norton put me up to this. A couple of years ago we were chatting about faith and biology after church for five minutes. And now, on the basis of that flimsy evidence he has me up here to talk about whatever I believe. So if you find it tedious, or obvious, or full of ... holes .... Don't blame me. Talk to Bill. Seriously, Bill has done us all a great service, reading successive versions of the talk and keeping me honest. Thanks, Bill. And thanks to Susan Morrisson as well, for her steady assistance and perspective.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, I had no beliefs. At all. I got along fine without. But somehow, twenty-five years back, just before I turned forty, after a dinner party, after Thanksgiving, after a disturbing conversation, in which my friend called me intolerant because I wouldn't put up with the latest hippie nonsense he was into, I realized I needed some beliefs of my own, in self-defense, and for character improvement, and over the years they began to come to me, in the form of little five-word statements. Simple. Obvious things. I wanted something simple, something small. I have a literal mind and my faith skills are verra verra weak. I'm a biologist, so it had to be consistent with evidence. But I also wanted the goodies--afterlife, a sense of awe, maybe a miracle, a strong foundation for ethics, even for love, and freedom.

Over the many years between then and now, many five-word aphorisms occurred to me, along with commentaries to explain them. Most of them didn't make the cut. By now I have a set of just five surviving five-word statements, that I can believe, 25 words altogether.

I find reassurance in the Wikipedia entry for "Sutra". So I quote:  
 "Sūtra literally means a thread or line that holds things together, and more metaphorically refers to a aphorism or a collection of such aphorisms. It is derived from the root meaning to sew. ... [And] Since each line is highly condensed, another literary form arose in which commentaries were added, to clarify and explain." End of quote.

*So here is the basic idea, the first of five sutras, short and sweet, with several different intonations and several different meanings.*

"Whatever It is, **IT IS**." (no theological dispute here, room for everybody)

(1) -- It may be an old man up there or out there.

-- It may be love as a sort of gravity that affects everything.

-- It may be something we could call the Laws of Nature.

-- It may be a set of physical constants just right for permitting the universe and human existence.

-- It may be something indescribable, something people are more likely to feel than to understand.

But whatever It is, IT IS, and we can take solace at least in that.

(2) "Whatever It **IS**, **It is**."

You and I can't change Whatever-It-Is. It doesn't depend on our minds.

No. It is what it is, with or without gods, regardless of our beliefs.

(3) "**Whatever!** It is! It is!" (no discouragement here)

Why even think about it? Be happy. Let it be. Let it be natural, Mother Mary said.

It is! It is! The Good News! That should be enough, without spinning the wheels of the mind or the heart.

(4) Respectfully, it's even pretty close to the Bible: (Exodus 3:14)

Moses asked what's your name? God said "I am that I am."

Reading from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no less, perhaps a first for this pulpit, number 206:

"In revealing his mysterious name, YHWH ("I AM HE WHO IS", "I AM WHO AM" or "I AM WHAT I AM"), God says who he is and by what name he is to be called. This divine name is mysterious just as God is mystery. It is at once a name revealed and something like the refusal of a name, and hence it better expresses God as what she is -- infinitely above everything that we can understand or say: she is the "hidden God", her name is ineffable, and she is the God who makes herself close to men and women."

End of catechism. (Father forgive me for messing with your pronouns.)

(5) It is whatever it is. (a tautology)

A rose is a rose. Que sera sera. It's just a tautology.

But tautologies can be powerful. "Whatever reproduces most reproduces most." The essence of Darwin. It's just a tautology. It should be simple, should be obvious. But people have argued about that tautology for 150 years.

Whatever it is it is.

*But, wait a minute. What is it? We might be talking about a paper clip here. Or it might be the raccoons that roam around on my roof in the summertime. For some tribes back East, Raccoon is the major trickster, like Coyote out west. But...in the modern world, Raccoon can't even cross the street without...consequences.*

*So... We need another sutra here to sew onto the first sutra:*

Whatever it is it is.

"It gave us the Earth."

(1) OK. That helps. But it smells like a metaphor.

(2) Who's us? Those of us who came to church this morning? Americans? Earthlings?

(3) And what's the Earth? Just this little planet we're strangling?

(4) No. *According to my commentary:* This is a five-word creation myth. The Earth is shorthand for "nature" or "the material world", all of space, time, matter, and energy. It's what some religions dismiss as maya or illusion or mere matter, in favor of windier, more abstract, less obvious words, contrived by wise persons. From their point of view I would be a heretic. From my point of view, the denial of the one clear gift or message from Whatever-It-Is looks like blasphemy.

(5) What about "us" to whom so much is given? Humans? Sure. But I would hate to leave out the apes and monkeys, or the whales and dolphins, or the ravens and parrots, or the octopus. I don't know where to stop. They're all alive, all have big brains. But I'd hate to leave out the mouse or even the cricket on account of its brain size. I think what "us" means is "sentient beings" big or small, on this planet or any other. The point is that Whatever-It-Is provided a world which is somehow watching itself, or at least part of which is watching part of it. So "It gave us the Earth" also means "It made sentient life a property of matter".

Whatever it is it is.

It gave us the Earth.

*Beyond these axioms, how do we know anything about the world we live in? One way is by looking at nature, organizing and remembering what we see.*

"The Earth is our Bible."

(1) Uh-oh. Sacrébleu! Now I've done it. Sacrilege! But it seems obvious to me, that while the Christian Bible is anything **but** obvious, the Earth is what all people have in common. Even the parrot and the octopus can read the Earth. They adapt. People of the Bible, of the Koran, of the Torah, the Analects, the Vedas, the Sutras, the Tripitaka, the Zhuang Zi. All, all of us can read the Earth.

(2) The one way in which Whatever-It-Is undeniably contacts us sentient beings is in the form of the material world which it created – however that was done.

(3) It behooves us to honor this gift, to bring curiosity to it, to watch Nature, to test Nature, tickle Nature, and see what happens.

(4) This is a great human tradition. The youngest scientists are doing the same thing the most ancient cooks did, half a million years ago, try it and see.

(5) How does the material world serve as a bible?

If I know that the behavior of all sub-atomic particles is statistical and uncertain, I will not fall for a Calvinist theology of the elect and predestination.

If I know the Earth and the Sun are about 4½ billion years old I'll be more interested in Joseph Campbell and Immanuel Velikovsky than in Bishop Ussher and modern fundamentalist preachers.

If I know how much bigger and better the brain of a dolphin is than my own poor brain, maybe I can keep people from killing them.

But the Earth also speaks to us in another way, a symbolic way, that has nothing to do with science. Reality, the Earth's infinite set of true stories, occasionally presents us with objects or situations that seem radiant with meaning even if one can't say exactly why, not really miraculous but luminous, symbolic, illuminated like this book of Carl Jung. The King James Bible has its share of symbolism, goodness knows, but the Old Bible, the Earth Bible, has a much richer symbol set. The point of a symbol or of a luminous vision cannot be put into words. The point is the internal experience, within one's own consciousness, that the story or the situation or the object can evoke. That experience can be felt but not explained. It's the way dreams work. I'll tell you a story that illustrates the point at the end if we have time.

Whatever it is it is.

It gave us the Earth.

The Earth is our Bible.

"Earth's fundamental miracle is consciousness."

(1) Sentience, same idea. The experience of consciousness is a miracle because it defies all explanation, like the color red. I cannot explain the experience of the color red to someone who has been blind from birth. I know about consciousness only because it's what I am. Some things I know by seeing, and hearing and so on, other things I know by being.

(2) I **assume** that you also know what I mean by consciousness, more or less. This is the first real challenge to my meager powers of faith. *I have faith that each of you is conscious. Unless you've already gone to sleep. Anybody sleeping yet? Wake up! we're almost to the good part!* I have faith that most waking human beings experience a consciousness similar to my own. In fact, in spite of my faith-impairment, I actually have no trouble believing that dogs are conscious, different from us but not **too** different. And

squirrels, hummingbirds, shrimp, ants,

maybe even potato plants,

maybe even bacteria.

But I'll never know, and I must admit, my faith gradually recedes going down that scala naturae. For humans, I have no trouble believing in consciousness, even though it IS a miracle. The experience of consciousness is beyond the reach of science, known to me only because I AM that experience.

- (3) Along with the experience of the color red, there are many other things I know by being--all the other colors ... and feelings, thoughts, and actions.
- (4) The experience of thinking and the experience of acting can give rise to a belief in creativity and a free will.
- (5) At least within my own consciousness, which is the only consciousness I know directly, those experiences of thinking and acting are undeniable, like the experience of the color red. The actual existence and definition of creativity and free will, which seem to me to be so important to daily life, are another matter, which I have to set aside for now.

Whatever it is it is. It gave us the Earth. The Earth is our Bible.

Earth's fundamental miracle is consciousness.

"My consciousness is not unique."

*The last sutra in this set of five is a major challenge. I don't want to say anything about your consciousness. I can speak only for myself. But I believe, I have faith, that "My consciousness is not unique."*

*Big payoff, as we'll see in the final commentary. It's worth all the faith I can muster, and that's what it takes.*

(1) We Americans are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as individuals, unique. Well, maybe so. But consider this: What I'm thinking about is only the essential core of my being, without which I would be a different person. Now, if I lose my hair, am I a new person? If I get a knee replacement, losing part of my old knee? A heart replacement, losing my heart? I had a friend once, long ago, who had a major stroke, losing a sizable part of her brain. She couldn't talk, but she was the same person. It was unmistakable. It didn't take all of her to be identifiably herself.

(2) Take another tack on this thought: In meditation, we set aside all distractions, even thoughts, to attain the simplest possible core of consciousness. I propose that when we are deeply meditating, you and I are a little more similar to one another than we were before meditation began. That inner self, that core of consciousness, that essential being, without all the specific accumulated details of a life—that's what I believe is not unique in me. That's what I share with at least one other.

(3) Or, consider the large proportion of invariant genes, shared by all of us, and consider the possibility that only a few of the remaining genes that do vary may affect that essential consciousness. Or consider the vast similarity between one brain and another. In a real sense, I may be the same person as a little boy in Palestine, or a conservative rancher in Montana, or an old woman in Sichuan, or Hillary. Circumstances have made us very different in these five forms, me and the other four, but that small part of each of us without which we would be someone else, that part may be the same.

(4) Out of fifty billion people, at least, in the checkered career of our species, isn't it possible that my essential consciousness might have been here before? Or, out of seven billion, I might be here in duplicate now. Or I may come back later on? How much faith does that take?

(5) So now let's raise a big question, how many, how many different beings are there? How would we know...? There might be ten million, or ten thousand, or ten different beings, or even, possibly, only one, all the way back to that true Adam and that real Eve (who never met). Since we cannot approach consciousness scientifically, we will never know. But given the possibility that my doppelganger, my double, is sitting out there, or will be sitting out there in fifty years, I do believe in reincarnation, as well as co-incarnation and pre-incarnation.

That's close enough to an afterlife for me, still in this old Universe, part heaven, part hell. I also have a real, solid, self-interested basis for ethics, because my neighbor may BE myself. I have a strong motivation to preserve our planet—my afterlife depends on it! I have a persistent, wide-spread miracle

and a sense of awe for all that. And, although it's another story, I have a basis for freedom, and love. To use Paul Tillich's word, I am not estranged.

To wrap it up I want to show a little video based on a functional MRI. It was made by a neuroscientist, Marcus Raichle, at Washington University in St. Louis. Without going into detail, this is a high-tech way of looking at the activity in the brain, or in this case on the surface of the brain. What it shows is the relative amount of metabolic activity, basically the burning of oxygen, across the surface of the brain. The color red means more active here and the color blue means less active. It's a time-lapse movie, so the changes in activity occur faster in the movie than in reality. The person whose brain we're looking at was asked simply to rest quietly without doing anything in particular. So it's a description of resting-state activity, a description perhaps of the substrate of resting-state consciousness. In the resting state, the person is slowly shifting from one pattern of activity to another, and there are eleven distinguishable patterns in all. We have it set up to loop through the movie a few times.

While you're meditating on that, I'll tell you a true story that ends in one of those luminous situations I was describing earlier, from the inexhaustible Earth Bible, the Old Bible.

It started on the train, from Rome, to Trieste, across Croatia, to Budapest before the change. 1987. I was supposed to fly from Rome, but my travel agent blew it and my plane left an hour before I checked in. The best the Hungarian airline could do was to sketch a map and tell me to catch the daily train. So I rode a tram and ran a 5K to the station, bought a ticket on the run, with the last of my Lira, and I was still running down the platform as the engine was pulling away and the station masters were shouting encouragement in lusty Italian, and I hopped on at something less than 8 mph, my top speed at that point.

I collapsed in my compartment with my new mates, four Hungarian women, a Spaniard, and a Genovese Italian who got kicked off the train at Trieste because he had the wrong papers. Now this kind of train, in that era, papers or not, had no food or water for passengers and no use for traveler cheques and all I had was a few Italian coins. We played the European language lottery. One of the women spoke French somewhat better than mine. So I scored a ham sandwich and some water, which carried me through. After some pantomime and struggles with the lovely French language, she told me that she was a puppet. What? Politics? It turned out she ran a puppet theater for children, part of the old culture of Budapest, and she gave me a flier with the address and a schedule of shows.

Of course, there were nearly no signs in Budapest, and the ones I could see were all in Hungarian, which was useless to me. On the day off from the meetings I wandered around downtown among the grand *fin de siecle* buildings with cracks and pockmarks and potholes from all manner of battles for most of a century. The people looked like Chicagoans, only sadder, and they spoke something completely obscure outside Finland or Moldova. I found my way eventually to the Pest side of the Danube and as it began to rain lightly I found the playground near the puppet theater, on my sketch from the train. A little boy came up to me on the sidewalk, five or six years old, Mother trailing behind by half a block, and he asked for the time, pointing to my watch. I saw my opportunity to use the only words of Hungarian I had learned from the women on the train: "Nem bekelek Madyaru." Which means "I don't speak Hungarian." He still wanted to play with my watch though and we admired it together until his mother caught up and led him away on their errand. Maybe to a puppet show, I thought. Or maybe not. I didn't want to follow them on the off chance it might be. I walked along another block, still looking for a sign, until I came upon one of those urban tunnels that lead to a central courtyard in the midst of a square block of apartments.

Slowly, slowly, I walked in, checking out the tunnel itself, Madyar hieroglyphics on the walls, anticommunist? procommunist? Then I looked out and gazed into the court before me, through the mist, through the rotten yellow mist, hanging in the ancient air. I looked back through the tunnel at the other end, now far away, and all I could see was the sad little dime of gray weather at the other end, like an unfortunate childhood. I turned back to the brick-paved courtyard in pewter gold mist, and saw, finally, that which dominated its presence, under an old but respectable white shroud, under a cloud of golden light, with parts of the waspy polished black body showing, and the narrow white tires, even the spare, waiting out the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a Model-T Ford.

I couldn't begin to tell you in words what the Old Bible told me with that immortal buggy. There was no miracle, no magic ... just a luminous vision that came to stay, whatever it is.