

**“Is This All There Is?”**  
**a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore**  
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One of my favorite theologians, James Carse, loves to tell the story of his first and last infatuation with a car. Not just any car – a 1951 red Ford convertible with white leather seats and a chrome spare tire case. He and his brother, out for dinner with their father one evening, saw it sitting in a parking lot. The two young men were stricken feverish with desire.

They were still nursing their lust for the car a few days later when they came home and saw it sitting in their driveway. They ran inside and asked their father where the owner was. He said “right here,” and, tossing them the keys, added, “that would be you.”

An air of unreality hung over the remainder of the summer. The redness of the car was exceeded in intensity only by the greenness of everyone who saw them driving it.

At the end of the summer, Carse’s father unexpectedly asked him, “do you know why I gave you boys this car?” He thought it was simply an act of stunning generosity. But his father surprised him, saying “so you would never want it again.”

His father’s plan worked. Within a year the two brothers had grown weary of negotiating over care and custody of the car. When his father sold it, there were no objections. Carse reflected later that he had not seen a car like that one for many years. If he had, he thought he might have felt a twinge of loss -- not for the car, but for the feeling of desire in the parking lot that first night. It represented a brief connection with the possibility that there might be something in the world that could satisfy desire thoroughly, and yet somehow continue to be desirable.

This story says something important about why people go to church. Its message is very different from what some social scientists say. We are taking a hard look at some of their studies in the current Adult LFD class, which concluded its second of three sessions right before this worship service.

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart are social scientists who study religion. Their recentbook, Sacred and Secular, analyzes survey data to evaluate trends in religious participation. The starting point for their work is these assumptions about why people seek out religion:

“Virtually all of the world’s major religious cultures provide reassurance that, even though the individual alone can’t understand or predict what lies ahead, a higher power will ensure that things work out. Both religion and secular ideologies assure people that the universe follows a plan, which guarantees that if you follow the rules, everything will turn out well, in this world or the next. This belief reduces stress, enabling people to shut out anxiety and focus on coping with their immediate problems.”

People go to church, they assert, to alleviate such stresses. Under this view, the question they are trying to answer is “Is there a plan that governs human life in which my material security has been provided for?”

I want to ask you to ponder whether these assumptions accurately capture why you and those around you come to church, and what you believe humanity in general is looking for in religion? I pondered them. It took about two seconds. These assumptions don’t explain why I or anyone around me got involved and stay involved with religion.

The social scientists see churches as producers of sedation for stress, responding to consumer demand. It’s what Karl Marx meant when he called religion the “the opium of the people.” There may well be significant numbers of people who want this. I believe, though, that all humans have the capacity to seek out religion for reasons of a much grander dimension.

Those reasons are captured in a very stark, simple question that I believe many people are asking about their lives when they turn to religion today: “Is this all there is?” I believe everyone’s relationship with religion reflects where they are with this pivotal question.

The “this” in the question is each person’s experience of the material world. Whether he is materially secure or insecure, harboring big material ambitions or modest ones, the question “is this all there is?” is sitting there in his life, ripening.

It’s as if we are all driving through life along a highway dotted with signs like those ones with religious messages in some rural areas – messages like “Repent, the end is near.” Only the messages are much more direct and disturbing. One comes along that says, “IF THE RED CONVERTIBLE DIDN’T DO IT FOR YOU, WHAT ELSE POSSIBLY COULD?” And then a tenth of a mile down the road, another one: “IF BECOMING THE FIRST WOMAN PRESIDENT OF YOUR COMPANY DIDN’T DO IT FOR YOU, WHAT ELSE POSSIBLY COULD?” And so on, until finally we hit that stark and simple one: “IS THIS REALLY ALL THERE IS?”

For some people, a short film begins to roll in their heads, reviewing all of the “THIS” in their lives. They are exhausted by it, suddenly tired of these pictures and tired of themselves in them. Fearful of falling asleep at the wheel, they take the next exit and pull into the parking lot of a church, in the hope of finding an answer to this infernal question.

These folks can play a highly valuable role in a church. After amassing that much stuff and status, if these people are still asking “is this all there is?”, then others may say, “maybe I’d better not kill myself trying to get where they are. Maybe I should start asking that question now.”

In some churches, there are people saying, “we believe we’ve found the answer to this disturbing question, and no, this isn’t all there is. We believe there is something more, which we would call a spiritual life. We expect to spend the rest of our lives pursuing it, finding more and more depth and fulfillment in life with each new discovery. We are drawn to this kind of spirit-

centered life like moths to the flame.” This kind of talk makes some of the other people in the church nervous.

Meanwhile, back out on the highway, some people are reacting to these signs by saying things to themselves like, “I’ll think about that after I get my student loans paid off.” Some people keep driving, and before they know it the odometer has a really big number on it and they’re saying, “I’ll think about that after my children’s student loans are paid off.” Others react by saying, “no this isn’t all there is. There’s that red convertible I’ve been craving, the vacation in Fiji, and a lot of other stuff.”

And some people look at these signs and say to themselves, “my life is pretty darn good – good job, good family life, circle of friends. If this IS all there is, what’s so bad about that?” There was a “pretty darn gooder” in the spirituality program I led this summer. I told her that in religion sometimes the hardest thing is having an active enough imagination about just how good life could be. She replied, “I don’t think lack of imagination is my problem.” I said, “if it was, how would you know?” I wanted her to consider whether she had been keeping her imagination on a pretty darn short leash. One of these times when she says to herself, “my life is pretty darn good,” maybe she’ll see a roadside sign that says, “as compared to what?” From “As compared to what,” it’s only a short step to “Is this all there is?”

This morning’s opening hymn, “Morning Is Breaking,” depicts an answer to the “as compared to what” question. It celebrates a way of living in which morning breaks each day as if it were the first morning ever, in which birds sing as if they were the first bird ever, in which the dew falls on the grass as if it had never happened before. That world is the same as today’s world. What’s different is the person singing the song.

In moments, I have been that person. Sometimes for days or weeks. I can imagine being that person on a regular basis. This possibility is why I keep coming to church. This possibility is the only thing that both satisfies and remains desirable. It both grants my deepest wish and beckons me to wish even more deeply. It can do this because it’s not about mere sensation; it’s about how changed I am when I say yes to it.

So that’s my answer to the question, why do people go to church. With that in hand, the next question I want to ask is, should the mission of Unitarian Universalism be to support people in exploring the most life-enlarging answers imaginable to the question, “is this all there is?” So I’m asking you to ponder this morning, should it be our mission to support ourselves and everyone else in jumping into this exploration, before, one by one, we find ourselves lying on some hospital gurney running out time, finally awakened to the urgency of this question by the extremity of our situation?

How do we evaluate a possible mission like this? I say, first, by articulating our ultimate values; second, by asking what the world needs to move toward those values; and third, by asking whether the proposed mission is the best possible match-up between what the world needs and the gifts we bring.

On the values question, I believe the value of utmost importance in human life is the experience of wholeness -- of being a part of, rather than apart from, all with which we belong. This is the healing and reunion needed to overcome the separation from all with which we belong that is inherent in the human condition.

What does the world need to move toward this value? Wholeness is a spiritual value. To move toward it, we have to move beyond the material realm. This is the critical first step. The question "is this really all there is" points toward that step.

This doesn't seem to be the mission of churches that promise people an afterlife. If there were one, sooner or later I expect it would bring us to the point of asking, once again, "is this all there is?" Nor does it seem to be the mission of churches that tell people to turn their lives over to God and stop worrying; or the mission of whatever churches those social scientists were describing as managing material insecurity through the moral equivalent of tranquilizers. More than ever, we need religions that support mature people in trying to live meaningful, fulfilling lives in a complex world, rather than offering them magical thinking or the repetition of rituals that have ceased to be meaningful for many.

Do the gifts that Unitarian Universalists bring suggest that we should be one of those new religions? We expect religion to make sense. We are open to thinking about religion in a new way. Ninety percent of us "jumped ship" to come here, abandoning a big religion sinking under the weight of dogma and climbing into one the size of a lifeboat. The only saints we have are poets, like Rumi and Mary Oliver. We want answers, yes, but not final ones. Answers that keep changing because we keep changing, as our spiritual lives grow deeper.

To me, our gifts look like a good match for this mission. Even the things we need to work on strike me as a good match, like developing more meaningful rituals, like learning how to be eclectic and open to new wisdom, while still being people of conviction. But what do you think?

To take on a mission like this, we would need to be prepared to be considered unconventional, even strange. This mission inverts the priorities of the world around us, which elevates materialism over spirituality. What would people think if you told them the singing of the birds sounds to you like it is happening for the very first time?

Telling people that you are drawn to the spiritual life like a moth to a flame would certainly set you apart. Even telling people that you enjoy hanging out with moths like that would raise some eyebrows. This quality of estrangement is captured poetically in a dialogue between a cockroach and a moth in Don Marquis' book, Archie and Mehitabel.

"I was talking to a moth the other evening," begins the cockroach. "He was trying to break into an electric light bulb and fry himself on the wires. 'Why do you fellows pull this stunt?' I asked him. 'Because it is the conventional thing for moths, or why? If that had been an uncovered candle instead of an electric light bulb, you would now be a small unsightly cinder. Have you no sense?' "

‘Plenty of it,’ the moth answered. ‘But at times we get tired of using it. We get bored with the routine and crave beauty and excitement. Fire is beautiful, and we know that if we get too close it will kill us. But what does that matter? It is better to be happy for a moment than to live a long time and be bored all the while. So we wad all our life up into one little roll, and then we shoot the roll. That is what life is for. It is better to be a part of beauty for one instant and then cease to exist than to exist forever and never be a part of beauty. Our attitude toward life is come easy go easy. We are like human beings used to be before they became too civilized to enjoy themselves.’

“And before I could argue him out of his philosophy, he went and immolated himself on a cigar lighter. I do not agree with him. Myself, I would rather have half the happiness and twice the longevity.”

“But at the same time, I wish there was something I wanted as badly as he wanted to fry himself.”

When the moth says “beauty” I hear spirituality. This beauty is not mere prettiness, but rather, the beauty of truth itself, which has a quality of perfect enoughness. The moth knows that this is what makes being present to it so transformative.

The cockroach sees the moth’s behavior as suicidal. To me, it is a cry for the spirit-centered life, which involves dying over and over again as we outgrow ourselves.

This kind of life transcends the usual utilitarian calculus of pain and pleasure. Archie is earnestly doing the math, multiplying quantities of longevity by quantities of happiness, trying to calculate the greatest advantage. The moth, on the other hand, is describing a happiness that is incalculable.

At the end, Archie is hanging tough with his calculus of happiness and longevity; but he admits to a yearning – something to which he is drawn, like a moth to a flame. We can almost hear the infernal question getting louder in Archie’s ears. “Is this all there really is, a long life of half-baked happiness? A red roachmobile convertible that will make me the envy of the insect kingdom?”

Helen Keller said life is either a bold adventure or nothing at all. I think it is this way with religion. Church can be a flame of spiritual growth and repeated rebirth to which we return again and again. Or, it can be a pretty darn good roach motel. It all depends on how we answer that infernal question.

AMEN.

