

Welcome to Your Theology

Pete Brokaw

June 20, 2010

Good morning.

I stand before you a self-proclaimed procrastinator, and a darned good one if I do say so myself.

Even my mantra (which I borrowed from a T-shirt) is “I have not yet *begun* to procrastinate!”

When faced with a project (such as writing a 10-minute speech on theology...), I don't set *out* saying “I wonder how long I can put this off before panic sets in” but that seems to be what happens.

My life, probably like yours, is full of projects and something is *always* due the next day or two and so it bubbles to the top of the priority list and that's what I work on. I've convinced myself that I do my best work under pressure.

I've been a procrastinator as long as I can remember and for a while, I denied it and then I tried to fix it and then I decided to just make the best of it.

When Sue Otto asked me several weeks ago about presenting this summer, I initially said “I'll think about it, but probably not.” To be honest she had caught me off guard: there was no clip board in her hand and I hadn't seen her making the rounds to the *other* people drinking coffee in Channing Hall. I *thought* that's how Unitarians looked for volunteers. Besides, I'd been a member of UUSIC for less than a year—I'm not sure that qualifies me to stand here and talk about theology.

Anyway, I've known Sue for a long time and I had just completed the “Building Your Own Theology” workshop during Welcome Home Wednesdays, so I agreed. I have to say it's been an interesting exercise for me trying to put some order to this stream of consciousness that I call my theology.

I put the topic in the back of my brain and let it percolate. It would get my attention at various times throughout the day, like when I was walking my dog or cooking something for dinner. But at some point I had to stop percolating and put pen to paper before the procrastinator's panic set in.

As I said, I'm a fairly new member of UUSIC so I'll give you a little history on how I got here.

I grew up in the 1960s in a Chicago suburb a lot like Iowa City except that Palatine doesn't have a university.

The seven kids in my family were raised Catholic which is my Mom's religion. I went to religious education and was an altar boy for a few years. None of it resonated with me, but I don't think it resonated with many kids. It was just something we did.

In high school, we moved to Virginia and then to Iowa City. I remained a Catholic, at least in name, until I moved into my first apartment in college.

At that point I became a "C&E"er attending Christmas and Easter services with my Mom, but not thinking much about religion the other 50 weeks of the year.

I think that makes me pretty typical as far as kids go when they move out of the house and start making their own decisions. I still considered myself a Christian because the question never really came up. Why *wouldn't* I be a Christian?

That worked pretty well for the next 25 years, and this procrastinator never felt a panic to worry about religion or spirituality. Besides, I had more pressing issues facing me.

I was learning to be independent, I was going to college, I was working, I was making new friends, I was having fun, and I was learning to accept myself as being gay.

And so it turns out that my life wasn't a journey, it was (and still is) many journeys, all going at the same time.

My day-to-day journeys kept me busy enough so that I could procrastinate (or maybe percolate) on the two most important journeys: my sexual orientation and my spirituality.

In my 30s, I finally got around to addressing my sexuality with the help of a great therapist, my friends and family, and me just dedicating some time to it. It's a journey that I've struggled with but wouldn't change for anything.

In my 40s, I started thinking more about spirituality and just like the talk I'm giving today, I found that my spirituality had been percolating within me and I just needed to give it some air.

A few years ago I joined Spiritual Seekers, a local GLBT group where a few of us meet to talk about spirituality and how it relates to being gay or lesbian.

I found myself at the first meeting listening to people really open up about how they found that connection. I think many of the people there would consider themselves Christian. A couple definitely not and there was me who hadn't really decided one way or the other.

A friend that I met at Spiritual Seekers and I decided to check out local places of worship just to see what was out there. Since we both had fairly traditional Christian upbringings, I think we were both curious but skeptical at the same time. We chose from the most liberal Christian churches to begin with and while they were more welcoming than what I was used to, I was definitely finding myself less and less comfortable with the Christian aspects of the services. None of them left me compelled to go back.

We were down to the final two from the original list—UUSIC and the Quaker House here in town. We started here and I haven't made it to the Quaker House yet, although I'm still curious about it.

I had some expectations that I'd find a connection at one of the two places. Twice over the past several years, I'd taken the "belief-o-matic" survey at the website beliefnet.com where based on the answers you give, you find out which denominations or faiths you're closest to, ranked 1 to around 30. I remember both times kind of holding my breath half-expecting that I'd find Roman Catholic as my best match. I was relieved to find that the top two matches were Unitarian Universalists and Liberal Quaker even though I was unfamiliar with either.

So on my first visit to UUSIC, we walked in to hear Joseph playing the piano and the atmosphere seemed very relaxed. To be honest, I don't remember what Benjamin's message was that day, but I felt like there was a connection between the pulpit and the pews. People seemed engaged throughout the service. And it was the first time that I actually wanted to come back for another service.

On the next few visits I learned more about the work going on between the weekly services and that really sealed the deal for me. I had been active in social causes for a long time, but usually by way of supporting my favorite charities with donations and occasionally by participating in person. The commitment of so many people to so many causes showed me how social activism can work.

As I've connected more closely to UUSIC, my new spiritual journey has taken me to places I wouldn't have predicted and yet if I'd been paying closer

attention the previous 20 something years, I really shouldn't have been surprised.

I've thought a lot about my religious upbringing and why I never seemed to click with it. Over the years I've talked to other "fallen" Catholics exchanging tidbits of what caused us to leave (like we were members of a special club). But once I was here, I was more interested in my new journey and less about my history. I also know there are people I admire who are Catholics—some may even be Republicans—and while I don't always understand why those choices work for them, I'm pretty sure they'd feel the same way about me.

One thing I do know is that the overall response from traditional organized religions to my sexual orientation is that they may love the sinner, but they don't care much for the sin—whatever *that* is. I wasn't interested in going somewhere just to be tolerated and at UUSIC, I found the right combination of spirituality and actual acceptance.

Early last fall, Benjamin talked about Unitarian Universalism and how our conversation about spirituality and social justice includes and welcomes everybody regardless of our religious or spiritual background. There's strength in our diversity. We each have a truth and who am I to say mine is truer than anyone else's? I started to actually look for my truth instead of accepting what I'd taken for granted all these years. That day I decided to actually sign the membership book and officially join that conversation.

This spring, I signed up for the Building Your Own Theology workshop at Welcome Home Wednesdays. It came at a great time—I was questioning everything and I saw it as a sign that I should stop procrastinating. Much like the survey I had taken a few years before, I was hoping to get more clarity on what it is I believe.

Dave Jepsen and Rob Dietrich were the co-leaders and introduced themselves and the workshop. There were 16 or 17 people at the table and I soon found out that we really were a diverse group—especially in our beliefs. We started with the very basics—the terminology. Words like "creed" and "religion" have a real life beyond their Latin and Greek roots. How would secular humanists deal with the title of the workshop? The word "theology" implies a deity and clearly that wouldn't apply to everyone there.

Before that night, I hadn't really thought about our differences. And then when I did, I was afraid we would get so caught up on that word that we would be at an impasse. Fortunately Dave and Rob led us straight into The Question: What

is your belief about God? I won't give you the rundown on our answers, but I was relieved that everyone seemed OK just saying where they fell on the spectrum without outward judgments and then we were ready to find out what was ahead.

Each session introduced a new building block for the ultimate goal, to write our personal theologies similar to the NPR series "This I Believe." Most of the building blocks contained terminology that I found a little troubling especially as I was learning to be a non-Christian. What things are holy or sacred to each of us? Who or what do we look to as our authorities on truth? How do we define sin?

Each week we each shared something we'd written for our homework assignments and I learned a lot from the others there, but I learned even more about myself. I found that sometimes my answers to the questions we were answering changed as I heard what others were saying. The beliefs I'd taken for granted all these years were really ingrained into my thinking and I really needed to challenge myself.

It was a lot to cover in six sessions and I struggled at the end trying to write my theology when I knew it was just being formed. I was excited that I was in a group (not only in the workshop, but here at UUSIC) where searching is encouraged, where there's room to change your mind. There isn't a creed to tell me what I believe. But that also means I have to be ready to take on that question at various times in my life and make adjustments hoping that I have the tools to do that.

And so at this point in building my theology, I'll say that while I don't have the Christian belief system that I grew up with, I do think there's a spirit that's bigger than me. Maybe it's the collective spirit that's in all of us. I don't believe mathematics and astrophysics can completely explain what's at the edge of the universe. When I see a spectacular sunrise or a harvest moon or my dog running through the first snow, or just hanging out with good friends, I'm in awe and I'm consciously grateful for the experience even though I don't know who—or what—I'm grateful to.

And while I don't worry if there's an afterlife like the one I was taught as a kid, I hope that there is something better waiting for people who struggle every day of their lives. And I have to say that when I do leave this world, I am kind of hoping I can fly out to the edge of the universe and see what really is there. In the meantime, I stand here as a procrastinator, grateful to have found UUSIC which says "Welcome to your theology, but what took you so long?"

