

Sermon
Delivered by
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September 25, 2005

**“WE HAVE COME HERE TO CHEW BUBBLEGUM AND KICK ASS.
AND WE’RE ALL OUT OF BUBBLEGUM.”**
UU Convictions

You might recognize the title of this week’s sermon as a line from the great 1988 John Carpenter film, *They Live!* The movie, of course, starring Rowdy Roddy Piper, is perhaps the best example of a science fiction political satire starring a former professional wrestler, an early cautionary note for what America would become.

If you’re unsure or, like me, spent much of the late 80s in a daze, let me remind you of the plot of *They Live!* John Nada, played ably by Piper, is a down on his luck sometime construction worker, sometime homeless man who accidentally comes into possession of a special pair of sunglasses. When he puts them on, the world suddenly opens to a different reality, one in which commercial billboards for men’s underwear read “Obey,” books and magazines read “No Imagination” on every page, television commercials say “Stay Asleep,” and money is imprinted, “This is Your God.” Additionally, he begins to perceive that some people are not people, but skull-faced aliens, the advance guard of an invasion force dedicated to lulling humanity into complacency and subservient roles in their own cultures. Most of these aliens are disguised as high-ranking members of government, the entertainment business, captains of industry, even landlords and small business owners.

Discovery of the truth behind the façade leads John Nada in a frantic search for the people who made the sunglasses, an underground band of people who lucked onto the reality of their situation and created the glasses for their assaults against the aliens, to ensure that their enemies were the aliens and not duped humans. The quote with which I've titled this sermon comes midway in the movie, before Piper has made contact with the movement: he's stepped into a pharmacy and says the line just before he begins blasting away with a sawed-off shotgun at the revealed aliens, which of course brings him to the attention of both the aliens and the underground movement.

Now, it's easy to sense a certain paranoid fantasy behind the more benign fantasy, not only that one is different but that the others, more different still, are evil, malignant creatures bent on, if not destruction of mankind, then certainly enslavement. And it's true the film sees Piper's and humanity's best hopes in the efficiency of big guns and bigger explosions.

But as someone has pointed out, it's not paranoid to recognize real enemies. The aliens in *They Live!* are real and really devoted to the overtaking of humanity, and not for benevolent reasons. It's never really spelled out, but suggested that the aliens come from a dying world where their race has destroyed much of the ecosystem and their solution is to conquer another world whose ecosystem they can exploit until it, too, shrivels. Even paranoids have enemies.

I'm going to speak for a moment as an English teacher. One of the beauties of interpretation is that it lends itself to any number of texts—which of course we recognize can be anything from the Bible to a court decision to the back of a cereal box, and could certainly be applied to an SF political fantasy starring a bulked-up ex-wrestler given to

wearing kilts in public—and can be read in any number of ways by any number of interpreters. One with an interest in, say, perpetuating slavery can read the Book of Leviticus with its explicit instructions on how one should behave toward slaves and come away from it with the lesson that the Good Lord approves of the institution in perpetuity. Similarly, one whose interest lies in finding a Biblical position on homosexuality can read David’s lament of Jonathon’s death in Second Samuel, with its assertion of Jonathon as his beloved and that his love was “passing the love of a woman,” and come away from that understanding that the Good Lord approves of, at the very least, incredibly close physical relationships between men, if not man-on-man love.

So it should be no surprise that I, as a Unitarian Universalist, should look at *They Live!* and see in it a scenario somewhat like the following: Our society, our government and culture, have been taken over by alien creatures intent on keeping us in the metaphorical and the literal dark, enslaving us to their ways and their beliefs. They do this in any number of ways, most of which involve the very cultural artifacts we enjoy and the necessities of living. Their reason? They’ve despoiled their own world and it’s time to pack up and move on and take over ours.

In this interpretation, it’s the advance guard of the dying ultra-orthodox religious community, Christian, Jewish or Muslim, which threatens to suffocate us under the weight of its messages, hidden and overt. It’s this invading force which seeks to inundate us with their “thou shalt” and their prohibitions, their “culture of life” which seems to end at birth—at least for the poorest among us—their worship at the teat of capitalism and the free-market—at least until that free-market begins to turn on them and then it’s all about who you know—their insistence that science bend to their dogma, and that their

definition of marriage, which is only about two centuries old, have the imprimatur of age-old, inviolable tradition. It's not too difficult to see, even without the special sunglasses, that they've managed to place themselves in high government and business positions, where they can best implement their agenda. How do we fight this?

Now I can't condone Rowdy Roddy Piper's solution which involves sawed-off shotguns and small arms fire and explosions. True, if we did that we would be brought to the attention of whatever underground might be out there, but we'll also be brought to a lot of other people's attention whose attention we don't really want. Besides, I have yet to find any of those special sunglasses and without them I can't swear who's a person and who's a skull-faced alien.

So do we simply sit back and allow these putative aliens to take over our culture, our world, our society? How do we fight back?

I've been present at several assemblies and convocations where it's been suggested that we engage in dialog with these people, and that we remove from our cars those magnetic "Darwin" fish that a play on the traditional Christian fish symbol. But never have I heard anyone suggest that they, in turn, remove from their cars their offensive magnetic "Truth" fish with crosses for eyes swallowing the "Darwin" fish. Or their bumper stickers saying, "It's not a choice, it's a child." Or their decals showing a kneeling Calvin in supplication before a crucifix.

And while we're about it, at what point do we get to note that, far from being beleaguered, the far religious right is quite firmly in control of not only their own destiny, but ours as well? Christian conservatives run the government, the same government they've decried for decades as the natural enemy of freedom-loving individuals.

Between Trinity Broadcasting, the PAX Channel, and even Fox News, they own significant television real estate. The *Left Behind* series has made pre-millennial predestinate apocalypse, if not a household phrase, at least a well-known concept. They've convinced school boards to ban *Harry Potter* novels from library shelves because it presents a view of magic not in line with their beliefs, as well as convincing other school boards to place Intelligent Design at least on a par with the theory of evolution, and to replace sex education with chastity pledges.

But what really gnaws at me is their self-righteous disregard of their own hypocrisy. Conservative Christians have the highest divorce rate in America—34%. Contrast that with the 21% of Atheists or Agnostics, who are supposedly drawing us down to hell. In a 2000 survey, the National Coalition to Protect Children and Families, a fundamentalist Christian group, surveyed 5 Christian Campuses and discovered that 68% of males responding admitted to having “intentionally viewed” pornography on school computers (leaving open the possibility of any number who felt less comfortable in admitting it). Focus on the Family’s Pastoral Ministries reports that about 20% of calls to its Pastoral Care Line involve porn addiction or compulsive sexual behavior. A study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that not only do the statistics for teens who pledge to remain abstinent until marriage and contract sexually transmitted diseases mirror those of teens who do not, but because they are far less likely to use contraception, their initial act is likelier to result in pregnancy. One researcher found that communities where at least 20% of teens took an abstinence-only pledge had, on average, an STD rate of 8.9%, contrasted with an STD rate of 5.5% in communities with few or no pledgers. What are we to do about these sex-crazed evangelicals in our midst?

But the question I've heard more often asked after just such a series of observations is "What are we to do about these sex-crazed liberal humanists in our midst?" Because that's the trouble with interpretation—it's a double-edged sword cutting a broad swath among foes and friends alike. Because the truth is, *They Live!* is more often held up by commentators on the religious right as a celebration of what they have done and of their continuing battle against the repressive forces of secularism. In place of the images I'm sure you've had in your mind of George Bush and Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, substitute Bill Clinton and Al Franken and Larry Flynt. For my statistics substitute similar ones pointing to a rise in abortions and teen pregnancies. For my comments concerning the rise of the Religious Right and their cultural predominance, substitute similar comments about the prevalence of self-avowed liberals on the faculties of major universities and on the reportorial staff at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. For my commentary about the free-market and cronyism, substitute one involving socialism and quotas. Because that is precisely what the religious right does when it looks at the same film.

That's the problem with arguing by interpretation. Any number can play. I've said a lot about their convictions, but what about our convictions? What do UUs hold to fervently?

Before I get into that, I want to make a quick distinction between my convictions and UU convictions. I want to do this because so often the people I've set up against make that mistake, that their personal beliefs are the same as the beliefs of their chosen religion. Herewith, then, are my own convictions: that it is better to be alive than to be

dead; that I would rather be happy than right; and that life is too short to waste it drinking bad beer.

Official UU convictions can best be described as synonymous with Miller's psychological profile. Timothy Miller studied two groups of UUs from New England and the Midwest and identified certain shared characteristics:

1. We have an openness to novelty. We are a deeply thrill-seeking people, even if more often the thrills are of the intellectual variety rather than the bungee-jumping variety.
2. We display a willingness to take risks. Again, this is often more an intellectual exercise perhaps than, say, it is about white water rafting, although there are a number of UU whitewater rafting guides.
3. We are creative. We are constantly on the lookout for creative solutions for our problems. Witness the banding together of any number of UU congregations in any number of small, conservative communities.
4. We can be intuitive. This does not displace our intellectual accomplishments. We are a people who, while we think a lot, think often with our guts.
5. We are spiritual types, often a mix of thinkers and feelers.
6. We have a desire for self-understanding. We see ourselves as people who think and choose, who love, practice compassion, and are interconnected. We experience and wonder.
7. We share an experience of the Outsider Syndrome. To quote Miller, "Although they are often past of the mainstream economically and socially, many [UUs] experience a persistent psychological lack of belonging." Hence the banding

together in groups in places like Kearney, Nebraska, whose congregation totals 10 members, and the new congregation in Decorah, Iowa, with 36 congregants.

To Miller's list I would also add the following statements about UU theology:

- We are a grounded faith.
- We are an ecological faith.
- We are a profoundly human faith.
- We are a responsible faith.
- We are an experiential faith.
- We are a free faith.
- We are an imaginative faith.
- We are a relational faith.
- We are a covenantal faith.
- We are a curious faith.
- We are a reasonable faith.
- We are a hopeful faith.

This last statement is echoed in a recent article by Doug Muder. “But though we must defend ourselves against the misdirected rage of the Christian Right, we lose if we simply oppose our anger to theirs. To give them hell is to fight the battle on their turf, not ours. Instead, we can offer a message of hope for which they have no answer. We know that the system of timeless templates and universal obligations is coming apart—but we have come out the other side of that tunnel, and there is light here...”

But, Bob, you've left us no place to stand. How can we fight a pitched battle with the forces of repression and self-righteousness if we can't use weapons? You've put us

in the position of the *Dilbert* cartoon in which a TV reporter asks a member of the tiny country of Elbonia why its citizens turned their weapons on each other, to which he responds, “Weapons? We can use weapons? No wonder it was taking so long.” How can we fight a battle in which our opponents have AK-47s and we’re using open hands? In which they select not only the field and the weapon, but even the rules of combat? How can we hope to win or even compete? How can we, in the words of your sermon title, kick ass? What do UUs stand for?

UUs don’t stand. We move. Pediatrician, anti-nuclear activist and humanist Dr. Helen Caldicott has said, “It is time for people to rise to their full moral and spiritual height, to take the world on their shoulders like Atlas...and to say I will save the earth...” What an incredibly aggressive thing to say, what an arrogant statement, what an obnoxious sentiment. That individuals take on a moral grandeur when shouldering responsibility and vowing to help the earth survive. Isn’t that precisely the sort of thing we castigate the religious right for when they display their bumper stickers saying, “Christians aren’t right, just saved”? Or when they carry signs outside Planned Parenthood that read, “What if Mary had aborted?” But how necessary a comment like Caldicott’s is. Rather than slinging mud and names at one another, we have to join the battle as if we were arguing with a loved one. That is, in its most fundamental way, exactly what we’re doing.

We must meet moral force with moral force. Don’t stay silent. Know what you believe and articulate it. Present a target. Speak up. You’re your t-shirt on your chest and your heart on your sleeve. Write letters. Attend meetings. Be a thorn in the side of the president, your congressman, your legislator. Better yet, run for office. Let them

know we are here. We are watching. We are listening. An aware public is an aroused public. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, “Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect, and touch, and greet one another.” We have to reach across the divide and touch one another because, intrinsically, we are all the other one has.

The Christian Right proclaims the primacy of its Good News. That if we submit to God by accepting his emissary Jesus the Christ we’ll have eternal life and will be taken care of in the here and now by people whose knowledge is second only to their compassionate visions. But we’ve seen how that works. It requires suspension of disbelief, suspension of suspicion, suspension of our right to ask the simple question, “why?” “Why should you be in charge and not me?” “Why should I trust you but you need not trust me?” “Why should you determine the correct interpretation of the text and not me?” We have to remember Rule Four of Saul Alinsky’s “Rules for Radicals:” “Make the enemy live up to its own book of rules.” To quote Doug Muder again, we must “broadcast [our] Liberal Good News loud and clear.” Unitarian Universalism may not be the future, but Unitarian Universalists are. We have a message of hope: “Our way of life works in this new world and does not demand that we roll history back.”

Christians were traditionally called upon to be in the world but not of it. Unitarian Universalists are called upon to be in the world. Period. Unlike Rowdy Roddy Piper, our way is harder. We can’t don special sunglasses to see reality, and when we do see reality, we can’t fight the lie with sawed-off shotguns. We have to live with the lie and with the people who believe the lie. It’s incumbent on us to hold out hope, not because we’re certain we’ve got the answer, but because we know which questions to ask. We have our faith, hopeful, inspiring, inclusive, and we have one another.