

Five Steps to a More Perfect Atheism

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Opening Words

The opening words were written by Robert Ingersoll, an American lawyer of the nineteenth century, who was known as “The Great Agnostic.” This an excerpt from his 1899 essay *What Is Religion?*

I would like to read the excerpt and then ask for a moment of silence as you contemplate your own response to Mr. Ingersoll’s questions.

It is asserted that an infinite God created all things, governs all things, and that the creature should be obedient and thankful to the creator; that the creator demands certain things, and that the person who complies with these demands is religious. This kind of religion has been substantially universal.

The questions are:

First—Did an infinite God create the children of men?

Is an infinite God the governor of this world?

Is he responsible for all the chiefs, kings, emperors and queens?

Is he responsible for all the wars that have been waged, for all the innocent blood that has been shed?

Is he responsible for the centuries of slavery, for the backs that have been scarred with the lash, for the babes that have been sold from the breasts of mothers, for the families that have been separated and destroyed?

Is this God responsible for religious persecution, for the Inquisition, for the thumb-screw and rack, and for all the instruments of torture?

Did this God allow the cruel and vile to destroy the brave and virtuous?

Did he allow tyrants to shed the blood of patriots?

Did he allow his enemies to torture and burn his friends?

What is such a God worth?

Remarks

Good morning. My name is Alaine Davis and I am an atheist. It has been over twenty years since I last believed in God.

But wait—I'm already getting ahead of myself. It has been a journey, a progression of small steps, if you will, that has brought me to the point where I can stand in front of an audience and say that I do not believe in any kind of divine entity. No God, or gods, or goddesses, or spirits, or even “the great mystery.” I think some things are a mystery only because we haven't been able to figure them out yet. Some would call me a nonbeliever, a heretic, skeptic, a doubter, an infidel. I accept these labels.

In some places on our planet, a statement of atheism would be enough to guarantee incarceration, possibly even death. I think about that sometimes. I certainly thought about it as I was preparing this talk. It is a sobering reality. Even in this country, atheists are regularly shunned, discriminated against, and even threatened or attacked. A man living in Gainesville, Florida was bold enough to get a vanity license plate reading “Atheist” and drove around with it on his car for years—until a group of neighbors complained, and the Department of Transportation decided that his license plate fell into the category of “obscene

or offensive” and would have to be recalled. After a series of appeals, this decision was eventually reversed, but the publicity this man received resulted in many threats and unpleasant phone calls from that point forward.

I find it amazing that those who would claim to be “godly” would demonstrate their supposed godliness by attacking someone else. It reminds me of a bumper sticker I saw recently, one of my favorites in a long time: When Jesus said “love your enemies” I’m pretty sure he didn’t mean “kill them.” Pretty sure. I love that.

Our society has come a long way with respect to accepting different religious beliefs, but most people are still more accepting of *other* religious beliefs than they are of *no* religious beliefs. Approximately 3% of Americans describe themselves as atheists. That’s one of the lowest percentages of atheists of any country in the world. To put that number in perspective, three percent is about the same as the proportion of women who are over five feet ten inches tall.

Three percent is about the same as the percentage of the U.S. population that identify themselves as biracial. It’s the same as the percentage of women who have given birth to five or more children. But, I remind myself that I’m just an atheist. I’m not special enough to be a six foot tall biracial woman with five children. That helps me put things in perspective too.

So why am I here, in a fairly public venue, admitting something, which is rare and also potentially dangerous to admit in today's society?

Granted, this is an unusually welcoming, understanding, and accepting audience. According to a congregational survey, about a quarter of our members identify themselves as atheists, agnostic, or secular humanists. That is a big deal to me.

I've never been part of a community like that before, and I never imagined that community would end up being a *church*. Most of my family members have figured it out by now, but only a few of my friends know that I "don't believe." I have found that a person's true beliefs are often not discussed in otherwise close relationships. We are discouraged from talking about religion in polite society: and who wants to listen to an evangelical atheist, anyway?

I'm not yet sure which surprises me more: That I am telling a large group of people, some of you strangers, that I am an atheist, or that I am actually a *member* of something called a "church". Both of these seemed equally improbable just two years ago. And yet, here I am.

I'd like to explain my personal journey to you. I know that even if many of you are atheists, or agnostic, most of you are not. Maybe you have wondered *Where do all these atheists come from? Or what's the point of atheism?* I wonder myself. I think about my own religious path in terms of five chronological stages. From believer to nonbeliever in five easy steps! Anyone can do it! This is how it happened.

Step One

I like to refer to my first stage as "Indoctrinated Belief." Most people are, as children, exposed to a belief system which they generally absorb without even realizing it. My mother was Catholic and my father Jewish, but neither was very enthusiastic about their faith. I would never have even guessed my father was Jewish if he hadn't told me, around age nine, and I never heard or saw him do anything more Jewish than eat matzoh from time to time. My mother's family was traditionally Catholic, second-generation immigrants from Poland. I remember lots of pictures of Pope John Paul II on the wall in my grandparents' house.

Years later I tried to figure out why they had allowed their good little Catholic daughter to marry a Jew. I imagine my grandmother especially pitching a fit. I know what you're thinking, but I wasn't born until two years after they got

married, I checked their marriage license just to be sure. I do know that their marriage was only permitted on the condition that any children be raised Catholic, and my first coherent thoughts about religion were related to the randomness of this arrangement. If I hadn't been born into *this* family, if my mother hadn't made such a deal, if I had lived in a different place or at a different time, I would not have been baptized, would never have gone to Sunday school, would probably have been an entirely different religion, just based on who my parents were. What did my religion have to do with *my* beliefs, *my* values, *my* philosophy of life? It seemed to me, at around age twelve, that the answer was "nothing." The way I saw it, I had been duped, indoctrinated with the belief system that was handy at the time, and that suited the purposes of my family. What a rip-off!

And if *my* religion had been assigned to *me* in such a seemingly random fashion, it stood to reason that other people were born into their religions equally capriciously. Therefore I entered...

Step Two

Step two was my agnostic phase. That I call it a *phase* is not in any way intended to imply that agnostics are stunted in their theological development, or that in some way they haven't completed their journey to atheism, or that they

are wishy-washy, indecisive, prone to dithering, afraid of commitment or have poor personal hygiene.

It just so happened that agnosticism suited me for a while, and then, like the little black dress hanging in the back of my closet, it didn't fit any more.

Agnostics are generally described in one of two ways: either they aren't sure if God exists or not, or they think that the question itself is unanswerable. In the second case, some agnostics think that whether or not God exists is simply a question beyond knowing: it can't be proven one way or the other no matter what.

Well, I'm a science teacher, and it doesn't sit well if people start telling me that there's something I'm not capable of knowing. So let's just say I never fell into the camp of saying the question is unanswerable. No, what I thought through my teens was: how the heck am I supposed to know if there's a God or not? I'm just a kid. I mean, really, if all the philosophers and scientists and religious experts can't agree on something this basic, who am I to decide?

I did all the sweet, silly things I imagine teenagers wrestling with questions of faith do, like asking for a sign. "Okay, if you're really up there, God, make it snow today. Yeah, I know it's August, in Georgia, but you could do it if you

really wanted to.” Or praying at night—sometimes, just in case—but prefacing my prayers with “Dear God, if you really exist, I’d like to ask you...” I never had those prayers answered. I didn’t witness any miracles. I never felt God’s presence, nothing like that.

Some of my church-going friends would say things like “you just have to have faith.” “You just believe, you don’t *ask for proof*.” But I required proof for just about everything else I believed in. I would ask a friend: “Do you think Jason likes me? How do you know?” I’d ask my high school counselor: “Will I get into a good college? Why do you think so?” If I was going to have standards about what to believe in, why *no* standards for something that important? I didn’t have a good answer.

By senior year, I would stand for the pledge of allegiance (as required by school rules), but I wouldn’t say the words. How could our country, which I respected in so many ways, force its citizens to express a belief that our nation was *under God*? What about separation of church and state? Freedom of religion? How about freedom *from* religion? I was disgusted. It took college to push me to the next step.

Step Three

Step three was part of the whole college transformation, the natural result of being at a left-leaning private university, taking philosophy and biology and sociology and history and thinking and talking about how it all fit together. I learned a little bit about a lot of religions and I decided I was a secular humanist. It sounded good, and was unlikely to offend anybody. I mean, how could anyone object to someone who was a *humanist*, for god's sake? We're all human, and most people are in favor of that. As for secular, well, that just meant I didn't go to church, right? That part was easy enough. I could live with this. It's not surprising to me now to find out that many UUs are secular humanists. One of the principles of humanism I still find inspiring. This is from a humanist website:

We believe in optimism rather than pessimism, hope rather than despair, learning in the place of dogma, truth instead of ignorance, joy rather than guilt or sin, tolerance in the place of fear, love instead of hatred, compassion over selfishness, beauty instead of ugliness, and reason rather than blind faith or irrationality.

I believed in that too. I also believed that a lot of the world religions I was learning about gave lip service to these principles while actually getting caught up in actions that revealed quite the opposite.

It was also in college that a seed was planted. A seed that would eventually bring me here, to this church. In the early nineties, in Providence, Rhode Island, where I went to school, a gay couple wanted their minister to perform a civil union ceremony for them. This was way before legal marriage for gay couples was being discussed, and it was the first I had heard of any kind of public ceremony like this. I was about nineteen. The way I remember the story, the Christian church the couple attended refused to perform the ceremony, and other local churches they approached refused as well. I wasn't surprised. This was exactly why I didn't belong to a church.

But then, a minister came forward and said she would be delighted to perform the ceremony for the couple. She was behind them 100% and wanted to celebrate for them and with them. I don't think anyone here will be surprised to know it was a Unitarian Universalist church, but I was plenty surprised at the time. The words "church" and "open-minded" did not go together in my worldview. It was an interesting shock to my system. I filed that information away for later use. Much later.

Step Four

Step four is “Atheism,” plain and simple. I didn’t want to discard humanism, but that term didn’t quite capture the essence of my philosophy. I had full faith, if you will, in a philosophical tool called Occam’s Razor. Occam was a rather clever fellow, a Franciscan friar who lived in England during the fourteenth century. His claim to fame is promoting the idea that if you have several possible explanations for something, you must explore the simplest one first. Occam’s razor is an integral part of the scientific method. If the simplest theory fails to explain your observations, you may investigate something more complicated. However, more convoluted arguments are less likely to be correct, and the simplicity of a given explanation is to be highly valued.

As applied to theology, the conclusions were obvious. I have never seen, heard, smelled, or otherwise felt the existence of God. Therefore, the simplest explanation is that there is no God. As a fearless college student, I was willing to apply the same line of reasoning to any number of phenomena. Unicorns, leprechauns, the Tooth Fairy? Hadn’t seem ’em, never met ’em, so why start hypothesizing? The simplest explanation was that the absence of evidence was evidence of absence.

Granted, most people do not claim to have a direct experience with God, but they believe nonetheless. In my mind, the question is not “Why don’t I believe

in God?” but, given the lack of direct evidence, “Why *do* most people believe in God?” Maybe someone else can give a talk on that one.

Over the past several years, a variety of scientists have led studies to investigate the efficacy of prayer. Prayer is invoked by many believers, often as a way to express sympathy during a difficult time, as in “I’ll pray for you.” Presumably, many of these well-wishers actually follow up and send their mental messages into the ether. The implication is that praying will make things better. God will hear you and will respond appropriately. Sort of a big Customer Service center in the sky. (“Relationship problems? Press One. Financial difficulties? Press two. Please stay on the line. God or one of his representatives will be with you shortly.”)

At many churches, those who are sick or otherwise in need of divine intervention are put on a prayer list. The congregation is asked to pray for these people, with the hope and expectation that God will respond by helping them. If he isn’t going to help, why bother?

Well, a number of scientific studies randomly assigned sick individuals to either a prayer or a non-prayer group. Christian church members volunteered to pray for the individuals on the prayer list, and prayed a certain number of minutes per

day. The patients did not themselves know which group they had been assigned to. Researchers kept track of how many people got better, or worse, or died, in each group. The studies found no differences between recovery rates in the two groups. However, other studies have shown improvement *if the patients knew they were being prayed for*. To me, this is strong evidence of a psychological, not a divine, effect of prayer. Sure, it works, but not for the reasons you think. Praying shows the same pattern as the placebo effect: people's minds have a powerful effect on the rest of the body, including its ability to heal itself.

Ideally, I figured, you should tell someone you were praying for them, but then do nothing. The fact that they think they're being prayed for is what really helps them get better. I know—that's not very nice. That's why you won't hear me saying, "I'll pray for you." But I'd be glad to bring you dinner, or hold your hand, or cry with you.

To top off my reasonable approach to the subject of God, I was a science student—later a science teacher. I knew way too much science to discount evolution, astronomy, paleontology, and physics in one fell swoop. On one side, what I thought of as the rational side, the pieces all fit together. Sure, there were some gaps, but wasn't human history all about the triumph of knowledge over ignorance? Didn't humans once believe the sun was driven across the sky by a

golden chariot? Little by little, didn't science chip away at mythology after mythology? It was an inexorable process, with the sum total of human knowledge increasing every century, every generation, every *year* revealing the answers to more and more of the mysteries of our universe. The ability of humankind to discover the truth and beauty of our world was awesome; it was breathtaking. It was enough, all by itself, without tossing God into the mix.

I knew that some people believed in all the same scientific principles I did, but also believed in God as well. There are people who think God got things jump started, but since then has just sit back, watching events unfold across the universe. These people are called "freethinkers." So, let me get this straight. God spent a couple of *seconds* getting the Big Bang started and then took a *13 billion year* rest? That might even beat the ratio of work days to vacation days taken by our current president.

Okay, so I was an atheist. I knew it set me apart, but at least I felt like I had thought things through. I didn't just accept the faith I had been born into. I had considered the options. I had all this information: Occam's razor, evolution, all of that great scientific evidence on my side.

But that didn't mean I wanted to tell anybody.

I made choices that reflected my beliefs, without having to come straight out and say “I don’t believe in God.” I was married by a judge in a civil ceremony.

When people mentioned the word “church,” I cringed inwardly while nodding politely. If I got stuck in Sunday morning traffic I shook my head, pitying the poor souls on their way to waste time with their imaginary God when they could be doing something more important. And, in my mind, *anything* was more important than that.

I followed the story about the atheist scout leader who was kicked out of Boy Scouts because he wouldn’t profess the belief in God that was necessary to participate. Another legal case showed that it wasn’t any better, from the Scouts’ point of view, if you believed in God but were gay. I was appalled at such overt discrimination. Our family made a decision then that our children would not be part of Boy Scouts. It was a little bit sad, but how could I put my child in an organization that did not respect his, and our family’s beliefs? We had a good conversation with my then-six-year-old around the dinner table when this news story was playing out. Although he knew some of his friends were joining Cub Scouts that year, he was completely behind our decision.

So here I was, an adult, and an atheist. It was comfortable, finally. I felt like I knew who I was. I had it all worked out. I would be the best, most morally superior atheist anyone had ever met. I would single-handedly prove that an atheist could stay married, do good deeds, and be a wonderful mother. I would be a well-rounded person, too: intelligent, compassionate, thoughtful, kind, and charitable. I would be funny, athletic, witty, sparkling and maybe even a size six. I wasn't asking too much, was I? That would show everyone about atheists, wouldn't it? Boy, wouldn't they be surprised to find out such a great person did it all without God's help? No divine intervention here, no God-given gifts, I'm a do-it-yourselfer! Best of all, I wasn't doing any of these things because I thought God wanted me to, or because I was afraid of going to hell. I was doing them just because they were the right thing to do. I did get a *little* tired from patting myself on the back all the time, but that seemed a small price to pay.

My older son was, and still is, very interested in atheism. He's not shy about talking to his friends about it, either, and I have the feeling at least one of those conversations got back to his friend's parents. Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but I'm pretty sure we got dropped on the playdate circuit by one fairly religious family. At least, I know that I overheard a heated exchange about God one afternoon between our two boys, and they never invited my son over after that.

That was when I started to think again about that church, the only church I had ever heard of that actually seemed, well, *liberal*. The church that, twelve years earlier, in Providence, Rhode Island, had taken a stand I agreed with, and set themselves apart. What kind of church was that again? Were there any churches like that around here? Were there other people out there we could relate to, other islands of reason in the ocean of insanity? Could my children meet other children whose families had values we could identify with?

It hardly seemed possible.

I thought again about my distaste for churches. I didn't even like to say the word church. It had been so entertaining making fun of people "wasting" their Sunday mornings in this way, how could I toss in my lot with the likes of "them"? The answer, of course, was simple. I was doing it for my children.

I wanted my children to have more than "atheist" to fall back on as a moral compass. If, in fact, they even grew up to be good little atheists, like I hoped. I wanted a community that would accept them, no matter what. I wanted them to have friends they could discuss the big issues with openly, be mentored by caring adults who would listen, teach, and be nonjudgmental. No matter how

much my husband and I were in agreement, we couldn't provide these things all by ourselves. Of course, we ended up here, at WUUC. I liked everything about it here, except the fact that it was called church. That's been a hard one for me to overcome. Couldn't we call it the Woodinville UU *Gathering Place*? How about The UU Liberal Community Center? No? I guess I'm a little late to have a say in that one. But again, I was willing to go through it, for my kids

I wasn't prepared for...

Step Five

Step five, of course, has brought me here in front of you. Step five is realizing a more perfect atheism, one that includes both humanism and the principles of UU. How could I have known, when looking for a community for my children, that I would also find a place for myself.

It is extremely meaningful to me to be here. It is a sign of how comfortable I am with this community. It is a measure of trust that I have never experienced before in a group this size. This is a place that is safe, and welcoming, but that also challenges me to go beyond my comfort level sometimes. I don't need to be the best atheist. I don't even need to say what I am. Just being here is good enough. Is actually much more than good enough.

So I must end by saying thank you. Thank you for showing me that I am not alone, that I can be a UU and an atheist, and whatever I want to call myself, it's okay. If you are this room today, you are part of my community, and your very presence in this building—okay, this *church*—makes me more confident in the choices I have made, about my own beliefs and the way our family is choosing to raise our children. You don't have to agree with me—even in UU circles, I know I'm still a minority—but it means a lot to know that even *some* of you agree with me, and the rest of you will still let my children come over to play with your children.

I am happy to be here on step five, perfectly happy to be an imperfect atheist here among you: my friends, my community, my family. Thank you.

Closing Words/Extinguish Chalice

I have arrived.

I am home.

In the here.

In the now.

I am solid.

I am free.

In the ultimate I dwell.

-Thich Nhat Hanh.