

BOB: But some people use the word “spiritual” to mean thoughts and values that guide their thinking and their lives. Even just the pleasure that comes from the community and rituals that we do here some think of as spiritual. Or what important things move them.

PB: OK then. Go ahead and light the candle.

BOB: We light this candle as a symbol of the acknowledgment and respect for the diversity of beliefs and ideals of all.

PB: Wait. Blow out that candle. Do you mean that I have to show respect even for people who believe in supernatural things?

BOB: Well, I don’t think you have to, but I thought you did.

PB: OH, yea. Now I remember that UU bumper sticker that said, “We believe in tolerance and cannot stand intolerant people.”

BOB: Can I light this now?

PB: I think you should.

BOB: I light this candle in the hope that even the most closed-minded, rational-thinking, science bigots may enjoy our continued spiritual fellowship.

PB: Well said! Thanks, Bob. I needed that.

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## 1. WHAT is SuperNatural?

**Jesus Christ is Risen Today!** What a joyous message! What a wonderful way to connect with the Christian heritage that many of us share. Song, joy, emotional memories. ....What a strange belief!

From John, Chapter 6, beginning at verse 4: When the Passover Feast of the Jews was at hand....Seeing that a multitude was coming to him, Jesus said to Philip, “how are we to buy bread?”...One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many?” Jesus said, “Make the people sit down. The men sat down, in number about five thousand. Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples to gather up the fragments left over, and they gathered them up and

filled twelve baskets. And when the people saw the sign which he had done, they said, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

Along with the declaration which we sang earlier, that Jesus had risen from the dead and that he magically multiplied the order of fish and chips to a truckload - or a boatload, these are surely things which we do not personally experience today. More to the point, taken literally, they are actions which we would assert cannot happen as described.

These Christian images and icons of faith are ones with which many of us have heard and been taught from childhood. We believed them. We defended them. We lived them. Even though we knew even then that these things do not and cannot happen within our observed natural world, we accept that they happened anyway, but by SuperNatural means.

Here in a church building, it is perhaps not surprising that we might be preoccupied with profound questions of religion. For now, however, I want to make clear that what I am talking about today is much broader than that. A religious belief, when it includes that which is not physically possible, is only yet another example of the broader classification of beliefs and claims that are SuperNatural.

But what do we mean by SuperNatural? For purposes of the discussion this morning, I shall take that to mean anything which cannot be described or explained within the context of the generally accepted understanding of physical and biological processes.

Physicists, biologist, neurophysiologists, and other scientists have a consistent model with which to understand the universe, – from the vastness of outer stars and galaxies, to geology, to biology, and by extension to psychology and the emotions. It is a very elegant, reductionist description. It includes from a physical description, all of the structures and interactions that result in the existence that we experience. This understanding can be reduced to only four fundamental physical forces: gravitational, electromagnetic, strong nuclear and weak nuclear. Through electromagnetic forces, all of geology, chemistry, biology, the mind, psychology, emotion and the capacity for belief are included. One might argue that such knowledge is incomplete. But we live our lives by basing our beliefs upon assessing probabilities. There is a massive amount of experimental

observations and coherent theories which give consistent, valid and meaningful results when these physical principals are applied to the real world. (The only qualification might be the new discussion in astrophysics about dark matter. That is a topic for another time.)

Whether or not we are trained to collect data in a scientific manner, we are each and everyone constantly collecting “data” in the form of experience and emotional responses to our lives.

Most of us believe that airplanes can fly, not because we necessarily understand aerodynamics, but because we have witnessed and experienced airplane flight over and over. We are convinced that there is a high probability that heavier-than-air flight is possible. Even so, most of us would not now believe that Santa can fly in a sleigh, even on Christmas eve. Just because neither we nor anyone else have ever observed or experienced it, can we conclude that it cannot happen? Coupled with what is known about flight, and the lack of any evidence that it occurs, there is a very high probability that such flight is not possible. Therefore we consider it to be a reliable conclusion that it cannot happen. Reliable enough, that is, to believe it. That is, we come to believe it is not possible. Belief, as used here, is a conclusion, not a decision for unquestioned acceptance.

More about this later.

As a UU, I wish I had the UU bumper sticker which says: GIVE ME AMBIGUITY...OR GIVE ME SOMETHING ELSE!

I want to make my personal belief (my conclusion based upon experience, evidence and education) about the SuperNatural clear and absolutely unambiguous:

**I DO NOT ACCEPT THAT ANYTHING SUPERNATURAL HAPPENS OR IS POSSIBLE.**

That is my personal position for which I will advocate this morning. I will be interested in hearing about yours sometime.

First, let me just recite a laundry list of claims and beliefs which are described or well accepted to be supernatural. Your list may be slightly different.

**My list includes: Ghosts, poltergeists, haunted houses, possession by the devil, telepathy, astrology, channeling, ESP, mind over matter (levitation, spoon bending), remote viewing, mind reading, other psychic powers (psy effects), precognition, remote healing including the remote prayer experiments, psychic surgery, all forms of causative superstitions (if I wear my red tie, the Red Sox will win again), homeopathy, energy medicine which is putative (that is, cannot be measured), prayer, reincarnation, existence of a volitional and responsive god, resurrection of the truly dead, bodily assumption into heaven, the existence and work of Santa Clause, The Easter Bunny, The Tooth Fairy, etc.**

**Some interesting questions would be on a list of things which sometimes seem to be SuperNatural but are probably not would be: For example, maybe Elvis is alive (again), but if so, we don't actually know that he was dead. Others would be energy medicine which is veritable (can be measured), the mind-body processes in which stress and emotional condition and beliefs can affect serotonin and the immune system, and the neurotransmitters endorphins in the placebo effect. Also, if one is really sensitive to subtle visual and other physical clues, such as interpretation of body language, that is natural, not supernatural. If it is ever possible to conclusively show that brain waves can be detected by another person, that would be natural, not a psy effect.**

**On an adjunct list of not really superNatural beliefs, but treated similarly by investigators, would be alien abductions (that would be natural, of course if they exist, but the reports and belief of such occurrences fall well within the highly improbable), Lock Ness, Sasquach, etc.**

**One central question is: Why would one care what others believe? The UU bumper stickers which reads: "We believe in tolerance and cannot stand intolerant people" is amusing but not the whole story. We give pretty good lip service to acceptance of the beliefs of others. Of course, we do not really mean it in all cases in real life. We are not tolerant, accepting, respectful or happy about some practices of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, no matter if the imprisonment of children and pedophilia is based upon religious teachings. We are not sympathetic about the sale of fraudulent items or subprime mortgages even if the victims truly believed and trusted their salesperson or broker. We are unimpressed when clergy, caretakers, teachers or others use their positions of authority and persuasive powers, including religious**

beliefs, to convince victims to act in opposition to their own interests. Governments, acting through the legal system, and presumably UUs, are reluctant to support the withholding of medical treatment to children of parents who sincerely believe God is all the medicine they need, and so on.

Down through the ages, priests and other religious leaders (presidents?) have claimed a special privilege of knowing God's will. They have used this in order to control, exploit, assume power and carry out religious wars, ethnic cleansing, witch burnings, and other atrocities in the name of and with the fear of such SuperNatural beliefs. This is true in so-called civilized European and American societies as well as in the world of other tribal customs and rituals. It is true today. It is true here and now. We do not issue a blank check for tolerance, even tolerance for some beliefs.

In an age when we have the opportunity to understand more about our natural world than ever before in the history of human existence, some numbers are interesting: Over 90% of Americans say they believe in God (Pew survey). Atheists have recently rejoiced in that the recent poll showed that the number of Americans who reported that they were atheist, agnostic or had no affiliation with any religion had risen to 16%. ([www.atheists.org/latestpr.php](http://www.atheists.org/latestpr.php)) In East Germany, that number is 80% (Newberg P. 217, 1991).

In his book, "Why People Believe Weird Things", science historian Michael Shermer debunks extraordinary claims of popular superstitions and claims, and explores the very human reasons we find otherworldly phenomena so appealing. He also reveals the more troublesome side of wishful thinking by confronting those who take advantage of people's gullibility to advance their own, often self-serving agendas. By "weird" he means a claim unaccepted by most people in that particular field of study, a claim either logically impossible or highly unlikely, or a claim for which the evidence is largely anecdotal and uncorroborated.

Shermer describes some surprising results of a number of surveys and experiments. For example, intelligence and education do not protect one from belief in supernatural or weird things. Such people are just better at selecting the data and making arguments to defend what they already believe. There seems not to be a gender barrier to weird beliefs either, They just choose to believe different things. For example, women hold more superstitious beliefs such as

precongnition, but it is a guy-thing for men believe in UFOs, Big Foot and the Loch Ness monster. A Gallop pole a couple of decades ago showed that older people are more skeptical than younger people, but the results of other studies are mixed. Younger police officers, for example, are more likely to believe the misconception that there is more crime under the full moon.

Carl Sagen, in his book, “The Demon-Haunted World” laments the lack of basic science education. How, he asked, can we make intelligent decisions in this increasingly technology-driven age if we don’t understand the difference between the myths of pseudoscience, New Age thinking, and fundamentalist zealotry on the one hand and the testable hypotheses of science?

The tendency to reinforce what a person already believes even in the face of new evidence is powerful. In Jamie’s Vesenks’s research in college physics instruction, he and others have found that students will re-interpret the newly learned information to reinforce their previously held misconceptions about forces and motion. Surely in the experience of Ian, Rich, Dean, myself and anyone else who has taught the basics Newtonian physics, there is evidence of this pattern. This is an important test case, so to speak, because there is virtually no debate (among scientists) about what the “facts” about force and motion really are.

Shermer mention a 2001 study of students at three colleges. They discovered that there is no relationship between science education and belief in the paranormal. That is, having a strong scientific knowledge base is not enough to insulate a person against irrational beliefs.

There is no argument with those who would advocate or sincerely believe what they wish, or more correctly, their right to hold such beliefs. They can do it on their own terms. The offense to others occurs when a matter of blind faith or supernatural beliefs is falsely wrapped in the language and presumed methodology of the scientific method.

The notorious remote prayer study is a dramatic example. A group of participants were to pray for favorable medical results (increased fertility in one example) for non-informed patients at a remote location. The results purported to show that the subject patients fared better than other patients. Never mind that the study at Columbia which got so much publicity was fraudulent, There have

been others. It is, however, literally impossible to do such a study with sufficient controls to credibly claim that the study gave results obtained by the scientific method.

To name a few issues (see for example Newberg, P 251), the experimenter cannot know that those praying are actually doing so. Is a Christian's prayer more valid than Hindu meditation? Does a priest have more pray power than a lay person? What if someone else, for example a radical Muslim group, were to be simultaneously praying for infidel patients around the world to remain ill? Can the negative prayer of a hateful relative or one who will benefit from an insurance policy taint the results? Would the prayer of an atheist count? What if he lied about being a believer? What if the patients were hoping that someone was praying for them and so benefited from a placebo effect? Maybe their family routinely prayed for the patient but was preoccupied the day of the experiment. Does that get subtracted? You don't have to be a trained scientist to make your own long list of experimental design flaws in any such study. That does not even address the ethical issues. Suppose remote prayer did work, Do the persons praying have the right to interfere with someone who is hoping for death as relief for unbearable pain? If believers of supernatural phenomena wish to play the game of advocacy, they should kindly not do it with false claims of verification by scientific methodology when that is not the case if there are not adequate controls. Some New Age claims suffer from the same misguided reliance on anecdotal or improperly measured evidence.

None of this is to suggest that there may not be benefit from prayer in some form. It may be a wonderful way for the person praying and another to form or reinforce a bond, confirm mutual values, share in communal rituals, benefit from mind-body (placebo) effects, etc. The "effectiveness" is just simply not measurable in the manner in which it is often described.

What has been the effect on supernatural beliefs of the educational movement during the last three decades to teach students how to think analytically and critically? Polls show that paranormal beliefs continue to rise. A 2001 Gallup Poll reports a significant increase in belief of paranormal phenomena since 1990, included haunted houses, ghosts, witches, communicating with the dead, psychic or spiritual healing, that extraterrestrial beings have visited the earth, and clairvoyance.

It is no wonder that the struggle for separation of church and state, the tension between the creationists and the evolutionary scientists goes on. Churches and cults often take from those who can least afford to send their grocery money. Psychics make up scenarios that put gullible victims through unnecessary grief - or give false hope and manufactured comfort.

Thus, it is obvious and clear that there is a consistent, persistent and perhaps insidious tendency for humans, both ancient and modern, to believe in that which is irrational, unsupported by credible evidence and even impossible.

Some of these beliefs may be comforting or have other benefits. As we have seen, for some there are implications that can only be described as civil rights or consumer fraud concerns. Some SuperNatural beliefs may be unnecessarily frightening or even dangerous, as when medical intervention is denied.

As we will see, there are also a number of understandable factors which nurture such supernatural beliefs.

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2. WHY Do We Believe Such Things?

WHY Do We Believe Impossible Things? Why would modern, educated, analytical, thoughtful people – such as us – believe in impossible or, in Shermer’s words, weird things?

Well, we were taught. It also feels good. We often are the victims of intellectual momentum – it is hard work to think, evaluate and change. And, we want to be accepted, to be social, to please others. Of course, we have hope and we have fear. And, we are at the mercy of our body chemistry, just as surely as the brain of an infatuated lover is flooded with serotonin and other chemicals.

Some of you may recall that last year in a lay service I mentioned the work of theologian Feuerback. His premise was that it was natural for humans to seek out certainty and hope, and so God became the invention of the human mind to satisfy that need. We now examine a more complete model of that theme in the context wider than just the existence of God or a god.

In their book, “Born To Believe” (Free Press, 2006), Dr. Andrew Newberg, and Mark Waldman make a compelling case for explaining how we come by our

beliefs, whether or not what we believe is impossible. I highly recommend the book. In paperback, it is only the price of a sandwich and a beer.

Dr. Newberg is a neuroscientist. He brings that expertise to the question of belief. He carefully cautions us to discern between destructive and constructive beliefs.

Beliefs govern every aspect of our life. Not just religious or supernatural beliefs, but in every moment we are faced with multiple decisions. We form belief models to let us survive and accommodate daily life. At the earliest days, we believe that our parents will provide for us. As we walk about Kennebunk, we believe that the sidewalks are strong enough to support us and that cars will actually stop at a red light. We believe that our food is safe to eat.

In the context of medical research using brain scan technology, starting with the truth and measurability of the placebo effect, this allows Newberg and Waldman to trace the neurophysiology of belief. Essential elements in the construction of any type of belief include the mechanisms of perception, appraisal, attention, emotion, motivation, conditioning, expectancy, and verbal suggestion. Fear, anxiety and doubt also contribute negatively. Newberg and Waldman say this: “Science cannot yet verify the existence of consciousness beyond the brain, but we do have evidence that such beliefs can generate a sense of peace and equanimity within the brain”. Beliefs serve a myriad of purposes that help us survive and flourish, such as:

They help us to organize the world in meaningful ways

They give us a sense of ourselves

They help us take action in specific ways, accomplish goals

They help us regulate the emotional centers of the brain, allow us to socialize with others

They guide our moral and educational pursuits

They heal our bodies and minds.

Beliefs can also be used to suppress others and justify immoral acts. Our task is to choose the tools of belief which give us inspiration and hope.

There is not time here to discuss the fascinating background materials on brain structure and functioning set out in “Born To Believe”. Suffice it to say, for our purposes here, that what is real to a person is what that person’s brain says is real. From optical illusions to the notorious unreliability of eyewitness testimony, especially if coached, when the brain reaches a conclusion, for that brain, that is the reality.

One common trait involved with acquiring beliefs is that we tend to believe what we want to believe. Also, our expectations greatly influence what we perceive and what we conclude. It turns out that most of us are also not very good at math, specifically determining what is highly probable or not, even though this type of quantifying of the world is an integral part of how our brain works.

Newberg explores how beliefs are formed. There are six cognitive functions – abstractive, quantitative, cause-and-effect, dualistic-oppositional, reductionist, and holistic. These functions work in conjunction with other neural processes to form beliefs. Some beliefs will have strong emotional value and thus will be deeply embedded in our memories; other beliefs will elicit only a mild response or reaction.” and will probably not reach the level of consciousness.

They use a familiar case in point: most American adults believe in God but not in Santa Claus. Young children usually believe in both until the age of 4 or 5, at which time Santa and fairies and elves and goblins are nothing more than myths. How does this transformation happen?

Most Christian parents introduce their children to the idea of Santa Clause, which is reinforced through cartoons, movies, storybooks, filled with emotional excitement. With Santa, there is an even stronger emotional incentive to believe: all those presents under the tree. The combination of pleasure, mystery, excitement and anticipation becomes fused with the image of Santa. There is also a causal reinforcement: if I leave cookies for Santa, I get the presents I want.

By age five, most children have developed the neural capacity to distinguish between reality and fantasy, so six-year olds continue to believe primarily because their parents encourage them to, even though in one study about the

Easter Bunny, 47 percent still believed in the E. Bunny even though their parents discouraged it. For six-year olds, societal influence along with parental teachings and the ability to intuit the physical laws that govern in the world combine to determine beliefs. In older children, where the parents do not believe, this non-belief is communicated in subtle ways to the children.

This is one of the important differences with belief in God: the majority of parents who introduce their children to spiritual beliefs usually believe deeply themselves.

Invisibility and ambiguity, coupled with an acceptance of reality from the community at large, seem to be essential elements for maintaining many beliefs. As long as God remains a mysterious concept, seekers will be drawn to what they do not understand, questioning and imagining what the reality or truth might be.

So how do SuperNatural or spiritual beliefs become real? The neurologist suggests that one way that thoughts create a sense of reality is through the regulation of emotional responses. A pleasant or optimistic thought can stimulate a relaxation response which causes the release of dopamine. At that moment, your brain assumes that the world is safe. A pleasant or intense religious experience pumps dopamine into the brain and the hook is being set.

When there is a strong emotional response, we pay more attention to it because emotions are perceived as real. If you have a vision of a ghost, spirit or saint, it does not matter if you are awake, dreaming or in a newly described state of “wakeful sleep”. It does not matter if you believe in ghosts or spirits, As far as your perceptual and emotional centers are concerned, the visual experience feels real.

We are also intensely affected by language. Newberg and Waldman tell us that brain scan studies find that it takes less than 1 second for a word or phrase to trigger an emotional reaction in your brain. If you want to maintain a sense of well-being, you have to work at it by continually reinforcing positive feelings and beliefs. This is one of the benefits provided in religious rituals, presumably including prayer. Meditation may produce the same result.

Unfortunately, this process also works for negative values. It is frighteningly easy to make a terrorist. Take a child, isolate him from family or friends, teach him

that their country or cause is great, that they are superior to others and that their enemy is determined to tear them down. Throw in the idea of a vengeful god who will reward them if they act in violence against the enemy. Repeat this meditation several hours a day, month after month. The ideas will feel utterly true, and the belief will take on a reality of its own.

Advertisers, political campaigns and coaches know and use repetition on us all the time. The moral is this, they caution: be careful what you pray for, mediate on, or obsess about, because it may eventually become your personal truth. Whatever is the central part of your life, focus on these ideals as often as you can.

So, finally, how do we arrive at our beliefs? By the time perceptual information reaches consciousness, each individual has transformed it into something new and unique. This reconstruction of reality is the foundation from which we construct all of our beliefs about the world. Logic, reason and social conscience also play critical roles in shaping our beliefs, but these factors bias the way we understand the world. Newberg and Waldman (P. 253) go on to describe 27 biases which are helpful for evaluating our perceptions and beliefs if we are aware of them. I will mention here just a few of these:

Family bias (eg., you were born a Lutheran);

Authoritarian bias (we tend to believe people in positions of power and status);

Attractiveness bias;

Confirmation bias (we tend to emphasize information that supports our beliefs and reject that which contradicts them);

Bandwagon bias;

Projection bias (we often assume, without checking, that other people in our group hold similar beliefs);

Probability bias (we tend to believe that we are luckier than others, that we can beat the odds);

Cause-and-effect bias;

Perceptual bias, and

Emotional bias, among others.

By recognizing these biases, Newberg and Waldman assert, we can become better thinkers and ultimately better believers in that which is most important to us.

Does this help us to determine what is real? They say that our sense of reality depends primarily on three criteria: the subjective vividness of an experience, the continuity and duration of the experience through time and space, and the consensus of others on what is considered real.

As we seek to continuously evaluate and reconstruct our spiritual lives, ultimately the process is personal and subjective. With an open mind and a better understanding of how our brains and our brain chemistry does that for us, may we find our enhanced comfort, joy, peace and personal authenticity, We may also then find that our personal reality will be closer to the objective reality, that which we call the natural. That is, we will no longer need to construct or believe the SuperNatural.

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### 3. **HOW do we reach acceptance and celebration?**

To understand that a teenager's job is to rebel is not to love them any less. We understand that the earth rotates on its axis even though we still say that the sun rises in the east. We are no longer offended, as was the church in the time of Galileo, to suggest that the sun does not revolve around the earth, where we happen to live.

The physical sciences, biological research, in particular neurophysiology, and rational thinking give us a whole new tool chest for understanding our world and reality that Galileo and his fellow churchmen did not have. We can now also begin to understand how we believe what we believe.

Even so, if we are inclined to question, debunk, dismiss or skeptically examine a superstitious, paranormal or supernatural claim or belief held by ourselves or others, can we also endeavor to respect the paths by which such beliefs are reached?

We might first ask ourselves if the belief appears to be a sincerely held one or is it an intentional scam? Is it based upon long held and culturally reinforced values? If so, are there societal benefits that outweigh a critical debunking? Even if we believe that we have an understanding that SuperNatural beliefs are actually based upon the very Natural workings of the brain and our societal existence,

ultimately someone's path to a set of beliefs is personal, even that path founded upon something SuperNatural .

We can strive to learn to be aware of the multitude of biases which can lead us to conclusions that seem attractive, even though they can't stand the test of objective reality.

Finally, we can learn to practice a caring and contemplative or spiritual life without relying upon beliefs which are irrational or impossible. It would be a service to ourselves and others, especially the younger generations, if we practice, teach and model such a spiritual life without the need for supernatural beliefs. Virginia, take heart.

Santa, we love ye, but we won't wait up.

#### **SUPERNATURAL PARTING WORDS 4/13/2008**

Each of us is a history. We have a heavy load of parental and institutional indoctrination.

Each of us also has a complex script of beliefs, values and behaviors, some of which are ingrained and automatic. We also have a mind capable of rational thought and analysis.

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May we go forth and mindfully sort the natural from the supernatural. Let us blissfully carry in our hearts those beliefs which give us both a moral compass and peaceful comfort.

May we also grow beyond those irrational beliefs which brought us to this point in our journey, but which no longer serve our mind or our spirit,what ever that is.

Go in peace.