

# They go low, we go high

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Working at home on the slow, picky task of revising an academic paper and trying to make it conform to the detailed and idiosyncratic demands of a journal with a 3,000-word limit can produce in a person a need to be distracted. Maybe that's one reason that I am, these days, a reader of twice-a-day news feeds on my computer, active on Facebook, and a regular listener to the public radio interview program called 'Conversations' normally hosted by Richard Fiedler.

And, at the risk of driving some of you wild with envy, I have to say that I have watched, on TV, every minute of the three US Presidential debates. Since they started, here, at 11am on weekdays, I could watch for 90 minutes and have the rest of the day to calm down before trying to get to sleep at night.

In addition, I watched the entirety of Michelle Obama's 'they go low, we go high' speech, which she gave after the first debate. Fortunately, I am now feeling better about the chances that the United States will avoid electoral disaster on November 8th.

I can't yet, in all honesty, apply the glorious Australian phrase, 'no worries!' to that situation, but Kristi and I may soon be able to step back from our roles as commentators on US politics on Saturday mornings at the West End Market. Soon, I may be able to get back to worrying most about climate change instead, which is, of course, a related topic.

Facebook, email, and public radio have all contributed to what I've been thinking about recently and to what has ended up in this sermon about living in today's world as a Unitarian Universalist.

First, there was a Facebook entry by the Rev Meg Riley, who responded to someone's comment that 'Being Unitarian Universalist means you can do whatever you want'. I'm not sure I've ever heard anyone say that, exactly, but I have heard people express the belief that being Unitarian Universalist means you can believe anything you want.

Meg, is the senior minister of the Church of the Larger Fellowship of the UUA and someone I've known and respected for many years. Her response to that anonymous person's comment response to the idea that UUism allows one to '**do** anything you want' was direct. On her Facebook page, she wrote: "No, it does not... living out UU principles is actually a challenging and particular spiritual path' and then she went on to make several points, a few of which are directly relevant to what I want to talk about today:

- Living our faith means that we have to be willing to remain open and fluid instead of freezing up on our favourite ... beliefs.
- It means we have to always know there is much more we **don't** know than we (**do**) know, and that wisdom comes in many forms.
- Amazingly, given the arrogance with which (our faith) is sometimes held, (it) means deep spiritual humility, ... understanding that we're not the center of the universe, which in turn means that compassion and empathy can be more important than any cherished idea. new.
- It means ... looking beyond 'approved' sources of knowledge. It means that we are responsible for our beliefs and behaviour and the impact that they have on other people.

I read all this from Meg as I was girding my loins in order to sit through the third US Presidential debate on television so that I would be able say that I watched every minute of the three encounters of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump... a distinction which may leave me open to questions about my judgment if not my sanity. My excuse is that I was too worried not to do so.

At about this time, I got an email from another well-respected, long-time minister friend of mine, the Rev Glenn Turner who is now retired and living in Maine. I knew that his view of Donald Trump is much like mine, but I learned from this email that he was feeling uncomfortable about how some Unitarian Universalists have sought to use our faith in response to the Republican candidate's xenophobia, racism, sexism, lack of concern for the poor and the handicapped, and.... Well, we could go on and on, obviously, but I'm sure none of you, by now, need a list of the Republican candidate's outrageous statements or his boorish behaviour.

Surely our UU faith requires us to follow the lead of Michelle Obama, who recently gave a marvellous speech about the campaign in which she said words that Hillary Clinton cited during the debates: 'When they go low, we go high'.

I think that's great advice, particularly for a situation such as Clinton was facing in these debates. An Australian television reporter interviewed a Republican pollster and strategist a week or so ago about that advice and whether Clinton was wise to be following it. Being interviewed by Skype from his Florida home, this tactician who has helped direct many Republicans campaigns but has distanced himself from Trump, responded by saying something like, 'When you're challenged by a pig don't wrestle with him. You'll both get muddy, and the pig will enjoy it'.

Glenn Turner's email, however, expressed worry about someone wanting to be what he perceived to be too nice in response to Trump. He quoted a female UU minister who noted a somewhat positive response from Trump after Clinton had praised Trump's children. This colleague, according to Glenn, reasoned that Trump 'needs to be loved'. Perhaps so, but Glenn reasoned that other responses are more appropriate right now.

Saying that one of Trump's sons is equal to his father in his hatred of, and I quote Glenn, 'blacks, Asians, Latinos, foreigners, immigrants, Democrats, democracy, and women'. What about naming all that for what it is, Glenn

wanted to know: Evil. Instead, he worries, our UUist faith has opted for sunshine and eternal hope.

‘Everything is upbeat, onward and upward forever’ in our faith, Glenn wrote, and I do recall that a New England church in which I was a student minister in the 1960s was using a faith statement that included those very words, ‘onward and upward forever’. Glenn notes that such expressions were not very realistic for a faith statement, coming into use in our churches just in time for two World Wars and other conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East. Not to mention two atomic bombs dropping on Japan, continuing racism all these years later in our cities, both in the US and Australia. Not to mention the current Republican presidential candidate.

All this reminded me that the ‘no-hell Christians’, the Universalists in the early days of our religion in the United States believed that an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-just God would not condemn **any** of his creations to eternal damnation. In other words, they reasoned that all souls would be saved, and none would be condemned to burn in hell forever. However, some of those hopeful folks did express an additional belief: that some human beings, after death, **would have to wait quite a long while** for that promised salvation.

Both of these minister friends were writing about our faith and what it can provide to us in this year that is taking us toward the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Both viewpoints, I think, are related to our statement of principles and to the necessity, implied there, of facing hard truths. I agree. I think you probably do, too.

Still, what can our faith tell us about how to live? And more broadly, how should a religious liberal in 2016 attempt to live fully and responsibly? Assuming, as it now appears likely, that Trump will never get to put his finger on the nuclear button or to install his nominees on the Supreme

Court, assuming that it may be possible for life as we know it to keep on keeping on, how should we live?

Last week, my retirement-life practice of preparing my lunch between 11am and 12 noon on weekdays with our kitchen radio on and tuned to Richard Feidler's interview show paid off. His temporary replacement, Sarah Kenovski, interviewed a scientist (whose photo is on the back cover of today's Order of Service) on two consecutive days and I felt that, in doing so, she gave me a marvellous gift: the gift of coming to know a unique, courageous, and loving man who is deeply committed to saving the world.

And I mean that literally. After hearing Charlie Veron reply to questions for nearly two hours, I feel that I have been given a model for how one can face the darkest of possible realities while managing to fight against that darkness. He had dedicated his life to the study of coral, he fears that carbon dioxide in the atmosphere may soon destroy it and, therefore, the oceans as habitat for life.

Dire stuff. Even worse than politics, but a reminder of how important politics are now, here or in the US. And yet, hearing Charlie Veron tell his stories for nearly two hours has left me hopeful, as I trust this sermon, by the time it ends, will leave you.

I want to tell you about some of what I heard Charlie Veron say and I encourage you to go the ABC 612 web site to download both shows as podcasts or to listen to the recordings of his amazing stories about his life and what he hopes to accomplish yet.

He has published more than 100 scientific papers. He holds three higher degrees in science. He was the first fulltime scientist at the Australian Institute of Marine Sciences and, later, its Chief Scientist, but he hated secondary school.

He must have been a strange kid. From as early as five years of age, he was fascinated by the natural world and loved to spend time alone exploring at

the edge of the ocean, even in places where he now thinks a 5-year old should not have been allowed to go alone, given the risks to safety. The first name he was given by his parents was John, but the things he took to school for 'show and tell' caused him to be labeled Charlies Darwin. That was shortened to Charlie and it has stuck.

Much of Charlie's professional life has been spent scuba diving along reefs around the world, and especially at the Great Barrier reef. This way of doing research has allowed him to add new knowledge to coral studies and allowed him to publish several books on corals. One carries the same title as the name of a huge on-line research resource he and others are working on now: *Corals of the World*. At 71 years of age, he doesn't plan to stop working hard for at least another decade, although he has now come to dislike intensely much of what he has to do.

He has one simple goal now, he says, and he thinks it should be the primary goal of everyone in power: to save the oceans. 'It's gotta be about saving the oceans, that's the only way,' he said in his second interview on 612 radio's 'Conversations' program with Sarah Kanovski.

Looking back on his life, he feels that it has been purposeful because he has 'alerted so many people to the dangers of carbon dioxide'. He says most of the time he spent in meetings was wasted, but, overall, he has pushed himself to the limit. He told Sarah Kanovski:

I could have done more but I don't think I could have done more and kept the level of sanity I still have... I pushed myself to the limit.

Veron describes his professional life as having been a labor of love. He said he loves only his family more than he loves the reefs he has been studying for more than 40 years. He has always loved being alone, in the wilderness of the outback or underwater in the ocean at night. He described the joy he has felt on the frequent occasions when he has been alone under water, kilometers away from any other human being, floating near a light attached

to a buoy, watching the busy waters near a reef. He finds something like ecstasy then.

He does not fear sharks, although he was attacked at least once by a shark that tried to bite him, but he fended it off with a piece of coral and changed none of his scuba diving practices as a result. He feels that the sharks generally accept his presence as little more than a curiosity.

He has spent his lifetime doing work that he loved, although it was hard work. But he no longer loves his life. He told Sarah Kanovski:

It is so horrible for me. ... to be the guy who projects into the future all this doom and gloom. It is gut-wrenching, something horrible... not a work of love now. A work of absolute hatred. It really upsets me. It eats me up. ... I hate having to talk about this all the time... I do this a lot and it is really hard on me.

Asked about the source of his hopelessness, he said:

I've got young children and they're going to live in a hell of a world. We've got 2 degrees of warming coming up. Two degrees is a joke; we've got much more coming up. ... It is horrible for me to know what the future holds... I can't forget it. I can't put it behind me. I get reminded of it all the time. And I have to have this interview. I would really rather not. We're talking about the thing in this world that I love most except my family. I'm always talking about its destruction.

Kanovski asked what the future will be if current trends continue, and he replied:

I promised myself that I'm not going to answer that question ever again. So, I'm not.

Why?

Because I'm a scientist and that's all I am. I say what the science is and if I deviate from that it's personal opinion.... I'm a spokesman for the science and the science is looking very, very grim.

Veron recognizes, though, that he is more than a scientist and that he has no crystal ball. He recalled that the Ford Motor Company, at the start of WWII was able to create airplanes for the war effort within a year. He said:

Humans can move very, very quickly if need be. (And) ...they are moving quickly now. I come from one of the worst countries in the whole world. (Australia) is lagging behind just about everybody except America. We've even okayed more coal to be dug up. We're doing more than any other country to create conditions that will destroy coral reefs. ... On the bright side, we have some terrific technologies coming up. I mean, they really are smart. So, it's a race against time.

He says coral reefs have had major extinctions five times, but those events happened slowly, in geologic time. Ocean recovery has always taken millions of years. We humans, he says, have only the here and now: 'We've got only one go at it'. What is happening now is rapid, and can affect all oceans at all depths.

His opinion of the solution required is this:

It's gotta be about saving the oceans, saving the environment, and there's only one way of doing that: stopping carbon dioxide. That's the only way.

For a person traumatized by having to deliver such messages, Veron sounds remarkably optimistic. He is a father working to allow his children to have a decent life. He is a lover of the ocean who says that being alone at night in the middle of it 'is what heaven is all about'.

I deduce that Vernon's optimism is based on the realization that, although he is perhaps the best-informed scientist dealing with these grim realities,



he recognizes that his knowledge, like all knowledge, is incomplete and limited, that he does not have a crystal ball. And he knows that we humans have proved to be able to react quickly and effectively in the past.

What we know, even when it is well founded in science, is surely partial. That, in my view, is the main message to take from the video used as our Reading today, the video illustrating the vastness of reality, an unimaginable complexity that extends not only outward beyond human comprehension. It is, literally, astronomical, and, other scientists tell us, is matched by equally complex realities to be learned about if we turn to the inner workings of our bodies and minds and of the components of reality itself. There one finds a similarly intricate and unending micro-universe.

Hillary Clinton now seems likely to become the first-ever female President of the United States after running what Sen. Elizabeth Warren has described as a remarkably progressive campaign. Just last Tuesday, representatives of the European Union nations and six Eastern Partnership countries meeting in Luxembourg confirmed their joint commitment to step up cooperation on dealing with climate change. This was a result of the recent Paris Agreement, which becomes legally effective in next month. With luck, there will be fewer climate-change deniers in the US Congress soon. Alternative energy sources are becoming more accepted here in Australia. All is not lost.

There will be more bad news, more shocks, more worries. But there are people like Charlie Veron working on the problems and you and I are still here, able to lend whatever ounces of weight we may have to the side of justice, ecology, and kindness.

Our faith, rooted in the Enlightenment, requires us to pay attention to what science can tell us. It does so, however, without requiring us to take the extra step of assuming that what we know – even that what competent and committed scientists like Charlie Veron has learned – is all there is to

know. Our best mental maps are based on perception from within a narrow band of what is.

We should study, learn, and apply what perception guided by reason and science can tell us. We should recognize difficulties and name as evil that which damages the good. We should continue to remind ourselves of our Purposes and Principles as guides for decision making. We should never stop doing what we can, however small and individual that may be, to save the oceans and the rest of life on this earth.

We are limited beings on a tiny planet. By trying our best without claiming more knowledge than we have or depending on immediate results, we maximize our chances to live healthful, productive lives. Assuming that what is best is possible and working in that direction without expecting to know the result gives us our greatest chance of success. Furthermore, according to my own research into attitudes and health, assuming that the world is comprehensible, that we can find the resources to do what we need to do, and that it is all worth the effort provides our best bet for personal health and effectiveness.

Some people, like Charlie Veron, are at the center of vital work and deserve our respect and support. It is encouraging to me that he can be profoundly committed to being a scientist while also being able to, as he says, express his personal opinions. That may be another term for his intuitions. For balance, we all need to engage with this life through mind and spirit, body and soul. Let us make use what we have of life through caring and by applying to our challenges our whole selves.

