Raven, Coyote, and other Tricksters:
Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman
considers the philosophy of British writer, Alain de Botton,
as expressed in his book,
"Religion for Atheists: A non-believer's guide to the uses of religion."

[Editor's Note: first presented April 1st, 2012 at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax. Subsequently revised for May 2018 at Olinda (May 6th) and Sarnia-Port Huron (May 27th). Sermons transform over time. This sermon was born by a trick of the calendar—the overlap of April Fool's Day, Passover, Palm Sunday, and the release of a new book from public philosopher Alain de Botton.]

ORIGINAL INTRODUCTION, April 1st, 2012.

Spring. New life. Green shoots leap from the earth. The pagan goddess Oestra frolics with her hares and chicks and Easter eggs. The calendar dances, also. Vernal equinox this year, equal day and equal night, was Tuesday March 20th. The first full moon after equinox arrives this coming Friday, April 6th. Accordingly, the feast of the Passover begins at sunset next Friday, April 6th; the first day of Passover is Saturday April 7th. (I got it wrong in the order of service—I am the April fool, en français, je suis le poisson d'avril!)

Easter is a week away, the first Sunday after the full moon after spring equinox. For our neighbours who worship in the Christian tradition, Holy Week begins this morning, with Palm Sunday. During Holy Week, Christians re-tell the ancient story, a drama of rising and falling. Today, Palm Sunday, Jesus enters Jerusalem to acclaim and hosannas, palm leaves bestrewing his path. As the week unfolds, Jesus' followers will rehearse the story of his passion—his suffering—one more time: the intimacy of the last supper, the loneliness of the garden at Gethsemane, the cleansing of the temple, the clash with civil authority, the lonely death on a hillside, the devastation of loss and despair. Then new hope, new life, and resurrection, out from empty tombs, the morning of Easter Sunday. The light returns; the dark did not overcome it.

Given the dance of moon and stars, Passover and Easter do not necessarily overlap, but often they do. And so we have the dangerous irony that Jewish people celebrate their feast of liberation—their joyful Exodos from slavery in Egypt—at a time when the followers of Jesus taste the bitterness of death on the cross; Good Friday could easily become Black Friday, in the bad old days of pogroms. May we never see it again.

The calendar has a special trick for us this year—Palm Sunday falls on April Fools Day, a day for pranks and tricksters and turning the world upside down, a day to shake things up a little, and make room for new creations. And this year's tricksters include a British writer, Alain de Botton, who recently published a book entitled "Religion for Atheists: A non-believer's guide to the uses of religion". Let's take a look at what he has to say.....

[Ed. Note: What fit for 2012 does not for 2018. I am not comfortable issuing a trickster sermon for April 1st when that day is Easter, the most solemn day in the Christian calendar. I would feel glib and disrespectful to my neighbours, were I to do so. Although, admittedly, Jesus' rising from the dead and kicking in the gates of hell in a spectacular act of resurrection is indeed a fine jest and new creation! Further, the renewal of the Canadian social contract is focussed on the relationship with First Nations at this time. Accordingly, I re-framed this sermon, drawing on the raven and coyote trickster traditions of North America for May 2018.]

NEW INTRODUCTION for May 2018

If we were in Anchorage Alaska at spring thaw, as the icicles begin to melt, and we were walking along the road, we might here a *glock, glock* kind of sound; and looking up we might see raven, sitting on a branch in a tall tree, imitating the sound of the water dripping from the eaves. Raven is a mimic, and raven likes to play. Raven is one of the legendary tricksters of First Nations creation stories, out west, where I come from.

Animals have long inspired stories of explanation, of jest and play. Aesop's fables, from the old worlds, thousands of years ago, include mention of a crow who sees a pitcher of water. Crow wants a drink of that water, but the level of the water is low and the mouth of the pitcher is narrow. Crow proceeds to fetch pebbles and plop them into the pitcher until the level of the water is high enough for crow to take a drink! A fine trick, that!

If we were in London England, we might hear tales down at the pub of how cleverly the red fox has adapted to suburban life. Here, in the new world, especially in the south west, but also in the northeast and west coast, we hear of coyote. *[The story for all ages that accompanied this sermon came from Stephen DeStefano's "Coyote at the Kitchen Door", 2011 pp152-54.]*

Enslaved Africans brought their own trickster stories with them, as related in the stories of Uncle Remus. It's a short hop from Brer Rabbit to Bugs Bunny.

Coyote also made his way to the silver screen, with Wiley E. Coyote and his never ending battle of wits with the Roadrunner. But Wiley E. has been reduced to a simple cartoon, a caricature of never-ending futility. There's more to coyote than that.

Coyote has a fine cameo performance in Thomas King's CBC Massey Lectures of 2003, published as "The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative". Thomas King would remind us that the Trickster figure of First Peoples' trickster tales is "a complex arrangement of appetites and desires" (King 114), and not to be reduced to slapstick or hapless misadventure.

We've spoken of actual animals, and how their behaviour inspires human stories, legends, and explanations through the Trickster figure, be it raven, coyote, or some other. Let us now consider a human trickster, a writer who takes on the role of turning the world up-side down, an author who engages with a "complex arrangement of appetites and desires".

Alain de Botton's new book [2012], "Religion for Atheists", aligns with a school of writing one might call the evangelism of militant atheism. The critics have not always been kind—some note a certain lack of focus in de Botton's work; but he sells like hotcakes.

So what is his argument? He tells us, explicitly:

> "The premise of this book is that it must be possible to remain a committed atheist and nevertheless find religions sporadically useful, interesting and consoling—and be curious as to the possibilities of importing certain of their ideas and practices into the secular realm.
>
> One can be left cold by the doctrines [of any religion] and yet at the same time be interested in the ways in which religions deliver sermons, promote morality, engender a spirit of community, make use of art and architecture, inspire travels, train minds and encourage gratitude at the beauty of spring. In a world beset by fundamentalists of both believing and secular varieties it must be possible to balance a rejection of religious faith with a selective reverence for religious rituals and concepts.
>
> It is when we stop believing that religions have been handed down from above or else that they are entirely daft that matters become more interesting. We can then recognize that we invented religions to serve two central needs which continue to this day and which secular society has not been able to solve with any particular skill: first, the need to live together in communities in harmony..... and second, the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability to ... failure [loss, decay, and death].
>
> The error of modern atheism has been to overlook how many aspects of the faiths remain relevant even after their central tenets have been dismissed. Once we cease to feel that we must either prostrate ourselves before them or denigrate them, we are free to discover religions as repositories of a myriad ingenious concepts with which we can try to assuage a few of the most persistent and unattended ills of secular life.
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> (AdB 11-13)

De Botton goes on to engage ten areas of interest, itemized in his chapter headings as wisdom, community, kindness, education, tenderness, pessimism, perspective, art, architecture, and institutions. It might be useful to note at this point that de Botton is coming out of a largely European context, more specifically English, where formal religious observance these days is very low indeed.

It might also be useful to point out that the late Christopher Hitchins, a journalist and writer fierce in his atheist polemic, would eat this guy's lunch. Hitchins would likely counter that any good thing drawn from a religious context could just as well emerge from a secular context, that

god is not great, and that religion is a pox on humanity. So de Botton, whose style is provocative, has achieved the delight of annoying both the ardent theist and the ardent atheist. Certainly he annoys me. Annoyed me enough that I bought his book and read it at a sitting.

At this point I shall lift up three places where my reaction to this author is positive, and three places where I find myself troubled and uncomfortable with his work.

First, I like the way de Botton notes the strengths of religious practice where it encourages the repetition of both words and actions, how readings and sermons return again and again to the same lessons rather than assume we heard it once so we know it for all time. I like it that the author recognizes how repetition and reflection take us deeper as we learn to live our lives with understanding.

Second, I'm pleased by the author's recognition of the role of religious observance in making community out of intimate strangers, especially where one shares food and space, story and time.

Third, I admire the author's sensitivity to religious art and to the drama and meaning that underlie religious narratives. I am moved by his understanding that the contemplation of Jesus' suffering might lead us to compassion, might help us place our own inevitable deaths in context, might remind us that we are not the only ones to face this loss, to face eternity.

I am moved by his understanding that the contemplation of some image of the eternal tender mother might bring some sorely needed comfort.

And that brings me to my first negative response to this book. As a feminist I have read Marina Warner's analysis of the cult of the Virgin Mary. I recall Warner's demonstration that when the ideal of the Blessed Virgin Mary is most elevated, then the lives of ordinary flesh and blood female persons seem least honoured—I am uncomfortable with Alain de Botton's enthusiasm for Mariolatry.

On a larger scale, I find myself uncomfortable that so much of de Botton's appreciation appears grounded in aesthetics and charisma more than ethics and reverence. For me, the work of religion and worship is to make room for praise and gratitude, reflection, and commission. Religion is about recognizing our natural capacity for wonder and awe—for reverence. Religion is about reflecting on the miracle of our birth and the inevitability of our death, then coming to some sense of morality and purpose as to how we are to live our lives between the two great unknowns. Religion is about morality and hope. Perhaps de Botton does address this, and I do him wrong; but on first reading what I mostly take away from him is piecemeal aesthetics, and that is not enough.

Second, let us consider the fallacy of the excluded middle. I am annoyed by the dust jacket; specifically, the dust jacket reduces part of de Botton's argument to this: "For too long non-believers have faced a stark choice between either swallowing some peculiar doctrines or doing away with a range of consoling and beautiful rituals and ideas."

Poppycock! What am I, chopped liver? Unitarians and Universalists have been exploring the nuances of faith along a broad range of possibilities for hundreds of years, as have many other

communities of faith. Religion is constantly evolving, and religion does nuance, breadth, and depth. Religion speaks through metaphor and story, and not necessarily a literal reduction. Religion covers a continuum. Whole denominations, including the broad church of the Church of England, make room for a breadth of understanding. Rabbinic Judaism is founded on a community of conversation, seeking an unfolding of truth through discourse. Islam is shaped by no less than four schools of study, many sects, many nations, many cultures, some more sophisticated than others, some modern, some old world, some rigid, some more liberal.

Church carries culture. If I were a stranger in a strange land I might be more interested in surrounding myself with folks who spoke my language, shared my stories, dreamed my dreams, and sang my songs, than in details of doctrine. Many persons enjoy the blessings of religious community without getting lost in doctrinal extremes.

Third and to me most important: I find myself unconvinced by the very framework that de Botton states as a given, that there is only belief and unbelief. I believe we must have faith in something, if only that the sun will climb up out of the east each day. Each of us who made our way into this room this morning had some basic world view that gave us the confidence to put our feet on the ground and get up out of bed.

The writings of Viktor Frankl remind me that when all else is out of my control, I can at least control my own attitude, and that my work as a human being is to make meaning of my life. That is faith.

Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau implores me not to live an unexamined life, and when in doubt, go into the woods and reground in nature. That is faith.

Religious psychologist James Fowler reminds me that my beliefs, my faith, my perspective, my world view, will grow as I grow, evolve as I evolve. To be human is to be a person of faith, of belief, whatever that faith may be.

I believe that de Botton is missing the boat, that he has reduced belief to the dramatic allure of a Catholicism that exists only in high church, high days and holy days. Let him go out into the mission fields of South America, out into the trenches of third world Liberation Theology, before he reduces belief to a stroll through a Vatican art museum. Let him go to a simple country church where farmers go each week to meet their neighbours. Let him join some single congregation, for a year, and tell us then what he has learned there. Let him go to a mission in the inner city, committed to the service of the most vulnerable among us, and learn the face of faith.

I offer up as evidence, that de Botton has in fact forged from his commitment to atheism, a church of his own: he calls it “The School of Life”. It works out of a shop-front in Central London. For a mere one hundred and twenty-five pounds you can breathe the rarified air of Bloomsbury and attend a day-long workshop on self-improvement of some sort. Sunday mornings they offer secular sermons. And from time to time—I offer this as proof positive that de Botton is doing religion here—strangers meet to share a meal. Whether it’s catered or potluck I cannot say. In short, being dissatisfied with traditional worship, de Botton has founded his own church.

In conclusion, Alain de Botton has written a book about religion. It's readable; popularization is his gift. He argues that even to an atheist such as himself, religious practice has much to teach. I admire his recognition that the cyclical return to basic narratives and rituals again and again is of value. I was also struck by his attention to the impact of architecture. I find this one of his strongest chapters, that public architecture should make our lives better, that public space matters.

I find myself irritated by de Botton's disregard of the excluded middle, that he insists on making an either/or rather than leaving room for both/and. I find myself irritated at his willingness to lift religious art out of context; this disrespect for the culture that creates the artifact smells too much of cultural appropriation for comfort. And as a feminist I am not so sure about him either. I am annoyed that he seems oblivious to the pervasive role of faith in our lives, whether we name our faith with religious terms or not.

I am moved by his personal story: his is the birthright of a Sephardic Jew, raised as an atheist, but drawn to write about religion. His family background has its share of disruption; his most lyrical passages invoke the eternal tender mother.

I keep going back to where he speaks of how his father humiliated his sister concerning belief:

> "I recall my father reducing my sister to tears in an attempt to dislodge her modestly held notion that a reclusive god might dwell somewhere in the universe. She was eight years old at the time." (AdB 13)

The opposite of reverence is not irreverence, but arrogance. Irreverence—the trickster, the prankster—stirs up a little chaos and makes room for something new. There is much to admire in this book, and much to annoy. I may even read it again[—a trickster for Passover, a holy fool to lead us into Holy Week].

May it be so.

Bibliography:

Alain de Botton, "Religion for Atheists: A non-believer's guide to the uses of religion", 2012. Available through the Halifax Public Library system.

Wikipedia: see articles on Alain de Botton, with links to his family background, various publications, and some reviews, also his School of Life, homesite <www.theschooloflife.com>.

Stephen DeStefano, "Coyote at the Kitchen Door: Living with Wildlife in Suburbia", 2011. Available through the Leamington Public Library.

Barbar Ehrenreich, "Dancing in the Streets: A history of collective joy", 2007. I find myself uncomfortable, even offended, by de Botton's treatment of religious engagement with festivals of misrule: a little too much male gaze, male licence, and a juvenile reveling in naughtiness. I find Ehrenreich's treatment more useful, helpful, and compelling.

James Fowler, "Stages of Faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning", 1981. A useful summary will be found at Wikipedia, entitled "Fowler's stages of faith development".

Tom Harpur, "The Pagan Christ", 2004. Harpur makes the case that the story of the sacrifice of Jesus is consistent with other ancient stories of death and renewal, especially the death and rebirth of the Egyptian culture hero Osiris.

Thomas King, CBC Massey Lectures of 2003, "The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative".

Marina Warner, "Alone of All Her Sex: The myth and the cult of the Virgin Mary", 1976. A feminist history and analysis of Mariolatry.

Film: "Jesus of Montreal" is the best film treatment of the story of Christ's Passion that I know. Set in Montreal, a troop of actors is invited to stage a *son et lumière* of the Passion; soon, that story becomes their story….

Special thanks to my esteemed colleague, the Rev. Shawn Newton, who serves the UU tradition in Toronto. Shawn was kind enough to share observations from his visit to de Botton's "School of Life" in Central London, while visiting England on sabbatical earlier in 2012.

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