

UU's From Another Planet No Wonder We Feel so out of Place

By

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Do you ever find yourself feeling like Colonel Taylor, from *Planet of the Apes*, wanting to scream, "It's a madhouse! A madhouse!" I know we all have days like that, but I think it's especially true for Unitarian Universalists. In fact, the original *Planet of the Apes* screenplay was written by a famous Unitarian Universalist, Rod Serling. And I can't help but wonder if this story, about a man who finds himself isolated in a strange world dominated by talking apes, doesn't reflect Serling's own feelings of being out of place, especially as a UU. This is, after all, a usual theme depicted in his iconic TV series, *The Twilight Zone*. The series premier itself, titled, "Where is Everybody," which first aired October 2, 1959, was about a man who wakes up completely alone in a small town. After desperately searching everywhere for another human being, he gets stuck in a phone booth and works himself into a panic trying to escape. In the end, it turns out he's an astronaut who's been asleep in an isolation chamber the entire time.

There's a great line in a *Seinfeld* episode in which Jerry says to Kramer, "This is like that *Twilight Zone* Episode where the guy wakes up and he's the same, but everyone else is different."

Kramer asks, "Which one?"

To which Jerry responds, "They were all like that."

Although this may be a bit of an overstatement, being isolated in a strange world was certainly one of Serling's recurring themes, and he himself admitted that they were often stories that came from his own experiences. Indeed, the name of the character in "Where is Everybody," was named Bill *Self*. Serling later explained, "I got the idea while walking through an empty lot of a movie studio. There were all the evidences of a community—but with no people. I felt at the time a kind of encroaching loneliness and desolation, a feeling of how nightmarish it would be to wind up in a city with no inhabitants."¹ As for having the episode end with Bill Self locked in a phone booth, Serling admitted, "That's dummy me. The reason I put that in was because I was once in a phone booth, trying to catch a plane, and I heard the loudspeaker and I started to push on the door and I couldn't get out and I got panicky. I started to yell at people, 'Could you do this?' Suddenly, some guy comes along and kicks it with his foot. I wanted to die."²

¹ Zicree, Marc Scott, *The Twilight Zone Companion*, Silman-James Press, Los Angeles, CA, 1982, 1992, p. 25.

² Ibid.

Serling, not only used his medium as a forum to, in his words, “make dramatic note of social evils that exist,” but, like many Unitarian Universalists, he became a social activist, publically speaking out against Joseph McCarthy, not after, but during the McCarthy error, and later, becoming a leading spokesperson against the war in Vietnam. So the sort of stories depicted in *The Twilight Zone* and *Planet of the Apes* not only reflect the personal experiences of Rod Serling, but of all of us who share his values—his vision of a different world, a better world, the world for which each of us longs, and to which we know in our hearts we really belong.

For when we are awakened to those common values, those principles and purposes, shared by all Unitarian Universalists, we soon come to feel, like Colonel Taylor, that we have awakened to a madhouse—to a world in which we cannot belong, precisely because it functions so contrary to those values. It may not be a *Planet of the Apes*, but it is an equally oppressive society that commands us to keep our mouths shut and our minds closed. Just as Taylor would have been perfectly fine if only he did not speak, and, worse, his companion, Landon, would not have been lobotomized if he could no think for himself to begin with, we find ourselves in a culture that demands we remain silent when speaking up is needed most, and warns that we must never question the status quo. Although there may be no scars to prove it, we live in a lobotomized culture that fears, most of all, those who speak and think for themselves.

As psychologist Erich Fromm wrote in 1941, in response to fascism, “It seems that nothing is more difficult for the average [person] to bear than the feeling of not being identified with a larger group.”³ The horror stories Serling gave us play upon this common fear of being isolated and alone—excluded and ostracized from the companionship of others. The only problem is that in order to avoid this horror we undergo a cultural lobotomy so that we can no longer speak an authentic word, or have an authentic thought. In order to avoid being stuck in a phone booth with no one to call, we must give up our individuality and succumb to, as Fromm put it, *automaton conformity*, by which, in his words, “the individual ceases to be [oneself] ...adopts entirely the kind of personality offered... by cultural patterns; and... therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect [him or her] to be.”⁴

Indeed, these horror stories, of being stuck, isolated and alone in a world gone mad, are more horrifying to us as Unitarian Universalists than to others because they are our horror stories—that is, they are the stories we live out! Certainly our lives are filled with joy and companionship, particularly in our UU congregations and communities, in which we do find belonging and solace among likeminded companions. But too often our churches are but a refuge from the world at large, a oasis in an otherwise hostile

³ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965, p. 234.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208f.

wilderness, a safe harbor and haven from which we can retreat from the isolation of a world gone mad with greed, and oppression, and hatred, and violence. For we have chosen, above all else, to be individuals and to express our own authenticity, despite the threat of being abandoned by the larger culture. Like Taylor, we know what it's like to be muzzled when we try to speak our minds; like Bill Self, we understand what it means to somehow live alone in a society that shows all the evidences of community; like Rod Serling, we know what it feels like to get stuck in a box with no one to let us out. We know these horrors for we cherish the freedom of speech and the freedom to think for ourselves above our own comfort and security. We would rather live under threat of losing our friends, our homes, our jobs, than to live without our authenticity!

“To be or not to be,” may be a question for others, but for us, “to be,” is the only answer, the only choice we have. 45 years ago now, Rev. Jack Mendelsohn, a renowned UU minister and scholar, wrote his pivotal work, *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age*, which he begins by saying, “For me the fundamental question of life is not why but how. How shall I live while I live? This is the bedrock question.”⁵ It is because we remain determined to ask this *bedrock question* that Mendelsohn rightly describes our faith as “depth religion,” that is, as a deeper kind of religion than our world is accustomed to—not because we merely ask *why*, which any child does, but because we routinely ask *how*? Ours is a religion of action, a religion in which our beliefs must mature into behavior, a faith that must be lived out. As Mendelsohn goes on to say in his final chapter, entitled, *The Courage to be*, “We have to incarnate love within our skins.”⁶

But again, at what cost comes this incarnation? What is the price of seeking out depth while living in a superficial society? Why is freedom so expensive? Why, in being myself, must I be so alone? “At our present point in civilization,” Mendelsohn writes, “many forces militate against a realization of depth religion. Organized religious bodies are frequently the worst offenders, treating communicants not as spiritually creative beings, but as objects to be ‘saved.’”⁷ He goes on to explain:

To use Martin Buber's phraseology, the individual is dealt with not as a *Thou* (a person), but as an *It* (a thing). The natural tendency of most people is to behave as they are treated and to treat others in a similar fashion. Thus people come to think of themselves as functioning according to the same mechanical laws as their material possessions. If something goes wrong with your computer, you go to a service center to have it set right by experts. But persons are not computers. They become like computers when they lose faith in their own unique inner capacities. Then they click and buzz and whir along, machines in a world of machines. Religion is external to them. It “fixes them up.”

⁵ Mendelsohn, Jack, *Being Liberal in a Liberal Age*, Skinner House Books, Boston, MA, 1964, 1965, p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. x.

But Unitarian Universalism is not a faith that “fixes” us up. Rather, more often it “breaks” things down. It breaks down the imaginary walls that separate us from others, flimsy walls made not of brick and mortar, but of race, gender, sexual orientation, beliefs, and class. But as soon as we put our thoughts into action; as soon as we exercise that right which others only pay false homage to—our freedom of speech—in our attempts to live out our faith by taking down these illusionary walls, our own lives and livelihoods become threatened. Taylor may be the only human in a world of monsters, but he’s treated like he’s the monster.

As UU’s, we know what it is to be vilified for speaking up and living out our values. In 1971, for example, although the Unitarian Universalist Association was nearly bankrupt, it decided, as a matter of our commitment to a free and democratic society, to publish the controversial *Pentagon Papers*, which proved extremely detrimental to Nixon’s efforts regarding the Vietnam War. At the time, the Justice Department had already successfully forced the *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* to stop publishing leaked portions of the report. The day after the UUA defied this order by fully publishing all 7000 pages of the report, the FBI showed up at our bank demanding to see our financial records. The case made it all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled against us. Fortunately the matter was dropped shortly after when the Watergate scandal erupted.

More recently, when ours was the only major religion openly speaking out against the War in Iraq, attempts were made to have our legal status as a religion revoked. In 2004, for example, Texas Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn, made the decision that the Spindletop Unitarian Church, in Beaumont, Texas is not really a religious organization because, in her words, “it does not have one belief system.” She then attempted to tax the church. Fortunately the Comptroller’s decision was not upheld by the courts.

As an individual, I know personally what it is to be misunderstood, ostracized, maligned, and, to have actually been fired from my job for taking a public position contrary to that of the majority. Indeed, the only community in which I’ve ever felt comfortable is my UU community. Otherwise I am a stranger in a strange land, an alien abandoned to a world I do not understand or recognize. The world I am from is so much different than this world. The home my heart belongs to includes everyone, regardless of their different ways, beliefs, and backgrounds. It is a planet without borders, or races, or nations. It is a world where there is enough for everyone, but never too much for anyone. It is a world without war, or prejudice, or oppression; a world with clean air, and fresh water, and living soil; in which the relatedness of all creatures is considered sacred, and the differences between us are not only tolerated, but celebrated.

Yes, I often feel like an alienated alien, all alone on a strange planet. But I know that, in truth, this is my planet, and if I’m going to help terraform it into the world I know it can be, I have to continue to put my faith into action, to “incarnate love in my skin.” And so Unitarian Universalism is my chosen faith, my depth religion,

through which I can at least connect with others who share my values and are determined, like me, to make our world a better place for all beings. Though I may be a stranger in a strange land, trapped in a community with no communion, my church is my mothership, the hearth where I find warmth in a cold world. "As a Unitarian Universalist," Mendelsohn wrote, "I dedicate my life to the creative religious behavior of seeking persons, who learn to live in close touch with their times, who refuse to be psychically numbed by its problems, and who undertake to resolve them both with themselves and in their activities in the world."⁸ Or, as the Puritan John Winthrop said, "We must love one another. We must bear one another's burdens. We must look on the things of our sisters and brothers. We must rejoice together, mourn together, labor, suffer, and overcome together."⁹

⁸ Ibid. p. xi.

⁹ Ibid.