

Genetics and Spirituality

A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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I wonder who among us has their mother's eyes? Their father's nose? Not literally. I wouldn't expect you to be carrying around your mother's eyes or your father's nose in a ziploc, or would I? No names mentioned. What I mean to say is who, here, can claim their eye color, hair color, skin tone, nose, ears, and other physicalities as identifiably inherited traits? Just think about the variations of inherited characteristics. Growing up I wondered about genetics. It was usually prompted by my parents claiming who I take after when I was in trouble. Do you remember hearing that? "Well, he takes after you." As an adult when I became noticeably frustrated or lost my temper my grandmother would lean over to Richard and tell him, "That's his mother in him." She, of course, was my father's mother and offered this disclaimer to save her side of the family.

We all have traits passed on by the generations before us, behavioral and otherwise. The basic laws of inheritance are important because they can reveal how a genetic trait of interest or a disorder are passed from generation to generation. But what about our spirituality? Is it possible for our spirituality to be a genetic trait passed from generation to generation? This is hard to imagine because didn't many of us run from the faith of the previous generation. Some of still have sneakers on and haven't stopped running. I've read studies that ask and attempt to answer the question of our spirituality being a genetic trait. One major theme to emerge from the study of behavioral genetics and religion is that internal and personal aspects of religious life (e.g. belief) are more influenced by genetics and less influenced by shared environment than are external and impersonal aspects of religious life (e.g. religious affiliation...). It has been suggested that genetics exert greater influence on internal aspects of religious life, what we believe, because religious beliefs express internal wants, needs, and wishes. The assumption that people become religious solely through environmental influence is also the basis for atheist arguments that if people were only better informed about science, they would know enough not to be duped by religious myths. But research shows that a person's spiritual convictions and emotions won't be dispelled so easily, rooted as they are in our basic temperament.

Last month I read a New York Times article by science reporter Nicholas Wade. He tells us, "it is easier to see from hunter-gatherer societies how religion may have conferred compelling advantages in the struggle for survival. Their rituals emphasize not theology but intense communal dancing that may last through the night. The sustained rhythmic movement induces strong feelings of exaltation and emotional commitment to the group. Rituals also resolve quarrels and patch up the social fabric."

He also tells us that the ancestral human population of 50,000 years ago, to judge from living hunter-gatherers, would have lived in small, egalitarian groups without chiefs or headmen. Religion served them as an invisible government. It bound people together, committing them to

put their community's needs ahead of their own self-interest. For fear of divine punishment, people followed rules of self-restraint toward members of the community. Religion also emboldened them to give their lives in battle against outsiders. Groups fortified by religious belief would have prevailed over those that lacked it, and genes that prompted the mind toward ritual would eventually have become universal. A propensity to learn the religion of one's community became so firmly implanted in the human neural circuitry, according to this new view, that religion was retained when hunter-gatherers, starting from 15,000 years ago, began to settle in fixed communities. In the larger, hierarchical societies made possible by settled living, rulers co-opted religion as their source of authority. Roman emperors made themselves chief priest or even a living god, though most had the taste to wait till after death for deification.

Religion was also harnessed to vital practical tasks such as agriculture, which in the first societies to practice it required quite unaccustomed forms of labor and organization. Many religions bear traces of the spring and autumn festivals that helped get crops planted and harvested at the right time. Passover once marked the beginning of the barley festival; Easter, linked to the date of Passover, is a spring festival. I was on holiday for the past two weeks and one of the books I read titled *The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge* by Jeremy Narby talked about how we, who bask in our sophistication, discount the knowledge and beliefs of primitive peoples. We rush in to save cultures thinking we know better when cultures have survived without us for thousands of years. The knowledge and instinct of these cultures may not be modern but are time tested, successful, and perhaps innate.

Could the evolutionary perspective on religion become the basis for some kind of agreement between religion and science? If we hold respect for evolution and its workings, and if we regard religious behavior as an evolved instinct we might see religion more favorably, or at least recognize its constructive roles. Religion is often blamed for its spectacular excesses, whether in promoting persecution or warfare, but gets less credit for its staple function of patching up the moral fabric of society. But perhaps it doesn't deserve either blame or credit. If religion is seen as a means of generating social cohesion, it is a society and its leaders that put that cohesion to good or bad ends.

I've told you that I am a theist with strong humanist leanings. I believe in a greater spirit. I truly think there is something bigger and more powerful out there that is guiding me. I can't call this higher spirit, "God," but I can refer to spiritual leadership. Having come out as a theist I hope I'm still invited to your parties. As I explore my feelings of spirituality, I remember some teachings and discussions with some Mohawk Tribal Elders. Mohawk Native Americans are an Iroquois people with origins in Ontario, Quebec and New York State, the area where I grew up. They belong to the Six Nations, formerly known as the Iroquois or Haudenosaunee Confederacy. They call themselves the People of the Flint. I grew up beside the Awkwasasne Mohawk Reservation and part of my middle and high school education was to understand and interact with the Tribe. I learned that how I think and feel about a Great Spirit is consistent with their form of spirituality. I believe in the importance of maintaining harmony with nature and fellow humans; having a spiritual reverence. I believe that, like Mohawk Native Americans, I have inherited this reverence as evolved instinct, just as my ancestors.

Arianna Huffington writes, "Many now believe that spirituality has an evolutionary purpose. This is the thesis of *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes*, by molecular biologist Dean Hamer. "Human spirituality," Hamer says, "has an innate genetic component to it. It doesn't mean that there's one gene that makes people believe in God, but it refers to the fact that humans inherit a predisposition to be spiritual -- to reach out and look." Part of being Unitarian Universalist is the search for truth and meaning; to reach out and look.

Humans are inherently spiritual. Let me say that again, but this time don't think of spirituality as a belief in God but an innate, inherited predisposition to search. Humans are inherently spiritual. The problem is that they should have called us human doings, not beings. For us, as Unitarian Universalists, we are not stuck in dogma to affirm our spirituality. No, we live, we live, our faith and spirituality which makes us human doings. It is not God that motivates us to build a world we dream about. It is the search for truth and justice, our goodness and the moral imperative that moves us, that marks us as doers.

The 13th century Persian poet Rumi knew this to be true. He once found spirituality in a human doing. In 1244, Rumi met Shams Tabriz, a dervish "God-man" who had taken a vow of poverty. Their meeting is considered a central event in Rumi's life. Though accounts of their meeting differ, one story claims that Rumi was teaching by a fountain, and Shams walked up through the crowd of students and pushed Rumi's books into the water, including his father's spiritual diary. "You must now live what you have been reading about," Shams told Rumi. Rumi believed both his real life and his real poetry began when he met Shams. "What I had thought of before as God," Rumi said, "I met today in a human being."

In our reading this morning Gloria Steinem told us, "I no longer believe the liberal message that children are blank slates on which society can write anything. On the contrary, I believe that a unique core self is born into every human being -- the result of millennia of environment and heredity combined in an unpredictable way that could never happen before or again." And so there we have two suggestions from Rumi and Gloria that our spirituality could be innate. If you're ever asked who you would like to have dinner with you can now say Rumi and Gloria.

We live in a time where it is difficult to speak seriously about one's spirituality. There was a time in Unitarian Universalism when it was difficult to suggest something beyond the intellectual. As Unitarian Universalists we believe that everyone should be granted freedom of belief. All things considered, wisdom requires not only the investigation of many things, but contemplation of the mystery.

May it be so.