

ENLIGHTENMENT THROUGH FICTION, PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

A Sermon By
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I was looking up the definition of “enlightenment” and I found this quote by Thomas Jefferson: “Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppression of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day.” Thomas Jefferson was a Unitarian at times in his self-reflection, but since there was no church near his home in Monticello, he resigned himself to being relatively alone in his practice. In 1822, he predicted that “there is not a young man now living in the US who will not die an Unitarian.”
(www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/thomasjefferson.html) During his presidency he cut up the gospels, deleting the miracles and virgin birth, and compiled them into a book called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, which we now call the *Jefferson Bible*. This Bible was presented to members of Congress every year in the first half of the nineteenth century.

It is ironic that this quote is in the dictionary, this quote about enlightening the people to dispel tyranny and oppression, because Jefferson believed that dark races were inferior to light, and didn’t free his own slaves until he had died. It was his policies regarding the removal of Native Americans that led to President Jackson implementing the Bill for Indian Removal and the terrible tragedy of the Trail of Tears.

Beneath every story there seems to be another, for better or for worse, all the way down through history, through religious history, scientific exploration, and political agenda. What we think we know about any particular person or point may be completely wrong, twisted by those who first told the stories and reshaped them, mistranslated them, made them safer for the people to hear and understand, or purposely forged a different path of deflection.

There are people who claim we are a Christian nation, but they really don’t know what they are talking about. Or, they know, but if you say a thing is true, how many times do you say it before people pick it up as truth? Like the reasons for going to war in Iraq! Do they remember that there were no weapons of mass destruction? That it wasn’t Iraqis who bombed the World Trade Center? No. Not many do.

I remember that, about the time Dan Brown wrote the *Da Vinci Code*, I was beginning to despair about the school boards who were trying to prevent the teaching of evolution, the prevalence of what I feel is an inappropriate use of religious language in politics, including being guided by God, and the numbers of political servants speaking about our Christian Nation. Liberal views have been lambasted as something almost evil, or perhaps truly evil, and I wondered if any of my preaching ever made a difference.

We can say that all we need to do is preach exciting things and the people will come. Well, that may be so, and it may not be. I’ve spoken with many people over the years who were so burned by religion that they would not step foot in a church again. I spoke with someone just

this past month whose history was such that she could not conceive of a religion that might truly be open, or a preacher who might speak words that inspired instead of defeated. There are many such folks who will not open the doors of a church for any reason, except maybe for a wedding or a memorial. And they believe that there is no hope in religion for them.

These people will, though, open the pages of a book. And that is how Dan Brown is educating the world, creating a sea-change that people are responding to in waves. His new book *The Lost Symbol*, has barely been out and people like Matt Lauer are interviewing him on PBS, trying to discern what new insights he is revealing, and what is truth in this new work of fiction.

Don't stop up your ears! I'm not going to give anything away! But I do want to reflect on a little of what Brown is uncovering in this book, at least as it pertains to spiritual growth and enlightenment.

This time Brown is not uncovering the hidden secrets of our Catholic heritage and theories of Jesus' marriage and family. He is focusing instead on the hidden, or not so hidden, secrets of our political heritage, the story of the founders of our nation, and the influence the Masons had on who we are today as a free land.

Did you know that Washington D.C. was originally named "Rome," and that many of the buildings were patterned after the pantheons and temples of the Roman gods and goddesses? They even built an Egyptian obelisk as a tribute to the ancients, which we call the Washington Monument. Brown tells this story throughout the book, while revealing what lies beneath the claim of "Christian" to this nation: that the Masons had more to do with shaping us than probably any other group.

I know virtually nothing about the Masons. They've always been a mystery to me, although my dentist is a Shriner and is a real live clown for their fund-raising events. Dan Brown describes Masons this way: "Masons make no promises of salvation; they have no specific theology; and they do not seek to convert you." (p. 30) Sound familiar? I must say that based on Brown's definition of religion, Unitarian Universalists are not a religion, because we do not assure salvation, believe in a precise theology, nor convert non-believers, either. I don't know where he got that definition!

Masons are very much like UUs in the way of being tolerant and open. But Masons *must* believe in a higher power, and that is a very big difference. Brown writes that, "Masons do not impose a specific definition or name on a higher power. Rather than definitive theological identities like God, Allah, Buddha, or Jesus, the Masons use more general terms like Supreme Being or Great Architect of the Universe." (p. 31) This way men of all races, colors and creeds can participate.

Women are excluded. There's always a limit to open-mindedness, isn't there? But the women created their own organization in 1703, called Eastern Star.

Along with all this information about the Masons and the beliefs of the founders of our nation, Brown has another thread of insight for us, and that regards the research of the Noetic

Sciences. Just as there are secrets within all of history, going back to the ancient mysteries which Brown says still inform our current faith practices, there are secrets within each of us, as human beings, and Noetics is concerned with trying to understand the abilities of which the ancient wise ones spoke and some believe today, such as trying to answer the question of whether thoughts can affect matter, a question those who hold healing circles or prayer groups are interested in. It is a science of faith and belief, of focused conviction and intention, as Brown puts it. So he is once again comparing and contrasting science and religion as they explore the same human questions and ideas.

In the interview on TV with Matt Lauer Friday night, Dan Brown said that in researching Noetic Sciences for his book, he came to believe that their research is real. I haven't spent the time to find that out for myself, although I have heard of Noetics, and it's fascinating. There is cutting edge research going on which I love to read some about in my monthly *Discovery* magazine, but there is far more than I could ever track or understand. But I'm so hopeful that with people like Dan Brown writing books that call to the regular Joe, so to speak, and give us some taste of the ideas and questions and revelations in the world, the peoples of the world will grow more open rather than closed, more willing to consider what lies beyond any particular theological or philosophical viewpoint.

You can find a lot of books now that have the words "secrets" and "hidden" in them. My daughter, Kat, gave me one for my birthday called *The Golden Section: Nature's Greatest Secret*, by Scott Olsen, a professor of Philosophy at Central Florida Community College. This little book tries to explain the amazing phenomenon of Phi, the golden ratio which is found in so many places in life. It's the one where a line is divided into two unequal parts, wherein the ratio of the shorter portion to the longer portion is the same as the longer portion to the whole. We learned it in Geometry, but it takes on a mystical shine when someone like Dan Brown puts it into his mystery, which he did with *The Da Vinci Code*. Suddenly, people wanted to know more, which is wonderful.

Da Vinci coined that term, the "golden section," for phi, and he illustrated it for one book. This ratio is found in DNA and many places in the universe. It was taught as far back as Plato, and leads one to wonder about how things evolved, what laws govern existence, and whether there is a higher power in the universe, somehow, somewhere.

That is the conclusion that Masaru Emoto came to as he studied ice crystals. His book has the word "hidden" in it: *The Hidden Messages in Water*. Our keynote speaker at Ministry Days last General Assembly told us ministers how moved she had been to read his work, so I made a note and bought the book. Emoto is a Japanese doctor of Alternative Medicine, and in researching the properties of water, he made some amazing discoveries.

His basic premise is that, since humans are seventy percent water, water ought to give us some insight into our nature as human beings. He studied the formation of ice crystals in different types of water, and found that words and music can influence the crystals, to the extent that bad words and Heavy Metal music cause the crystals to be deformed, and good words and classical music create beautiful crystals. There are photos in the book of the crystals he has witnessed.

I will need a lot more time and reflection to understand his interpretations of the crystals, to which he applies a lot of philosophy. He also writes that, “the more you understand water, the more difficult you will find it to deny the existence of a god.” (p. x) He came to the same conclusion Dan Brown did in believing that the mind can affect the world around us. One thing he said that I have experienced is this: “When your heart is open to possibilities, you start to notice small things that can lead to enormous discoveries.”

One of those connections that I noticed is that my recent thoughts about love and gratitude as being the foundation of faith is also in his book. He writes that when he exposed water to the words “love and gratitude,” it formed the most beautiful crystal he had seen, and it changed his life. (p. xxvi) Coincidence? Or awareness? Or perhaps the hidden messages in water are resonating our thoughts throughout the world like a cosmic consciousness - which I think is a very interesting idea, something I had never considered or come across before. I love new ideas and possibilities to think about, food for thought, as they say.

After Dan Brown explored the theology of The Word, which in Genesis was the Beginning, and in Christianity was used to stand for Jesus, and in our modern lexicon can represent our highest principle, he concludes his book with one word: Hope. Masaru Emoto concludes his explanation of that most beautiful crystal that changed his life with the statement that ““love and gratitude”” are the words that must serve as a guide for the world.” (p. xxvii) Scott Olsen pulls from our Christian heritage when he writes that “Nature holds a great mystery... [for those] who have attuned their eyes to see and ears to hear.” (p. 1)

These explorers of the universe hold that we must be open to new ideas. How can we do this when we so often reject whatever doesn't fit our current boxes of thought? How long did brilliant people believe the world was flat? How long did we teach that there was nothing out in space between the stars? How long did we believe that a solid was truly solid?

So much of life is dealing with misinformation, watching our boxes crumble around us. At least, when we're reading something like Dan Brown, it's fun. Maybe that's the theology of secrets and mysteries, to tempt us to remember that we don't know it all, and there is great satisfaction in thinking we have learned the truth. *Thinking*, not necessarily *knowing*. Slowly, truths dawn on us, and we move ever onward towards enlightenment.