

What I Believe — by Frank E. Hanson — Unitarian Universalist PEACE Fellowship, Raleigh, NC 2010

I think it was Kierkegaard, an existential philosopher, who came up with the idea that beliefs should be grounded in personal experience. To talk about beliefs then, I need to decide what personal experience I want to explore. Sometimes when my mind is still, I have an awareness of just being alive. It is this experience I want to try and examine.

I will use some of Baruch Spinoza's ideas to explore this experience. He looked around and saw how animals express an essence. Cows, horses, our cats and dogs all have their own unique essence and spirit. Each individual express the essence of a cat or dog or some other creature. He reasoned that there had to be a single essence for the whole universe that gives expression to the individuals that we see. This single essence must have infinite attributes because it gives expression to all that will ever be in the universe

He also recognized the complex web of causality in which we live. He reasoned that this single essence was the first cause of this web of causality of the universe. Perhaps someday scientists will create the mathematics that will explain the big bang and describe this first cause.

Such a belief is not grounded in my own experience, so I am interested in how this essence of the universe affects me. I am a finite individual but in some way I encapsulate the essence human beings and also the essence of the universe. This essence of the universe creates within me the structures that allow me to understand the world I live in. It erodes away these structures so that I can create a new and better understanding. I use these structures to try and grasp the infinite essence of the universe. I believe that it is spirituality that guides me in this creative process. Those things that make me feel good guide me in what direction I must go. It is spirituality that gives me the energy to act in the world.

This creative process is unending. As a human I am finite. I try to fulfill the essence of being a human and I grasp something of the infinite essence of the universe. Although I always fall short, I come to better understand myself in the process. This experience of being alive comes in the moments when I fulfill the essence of being human and capture the essence of the universe.

There is picture that captures this idea. It hung in Rabbi Mailgram's office in the Hillel center on the campus of the University of Minnesota. It shows an old man. You can see the suffering of Jewish people in his face. He is reaching out with his hands and holding some filaments of light. These tendrils of light are slipping through his fingers. In his eyes you can see a look of wonder. For a moment, he has captured the essence of the universe.

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