**Back in the Urn** by Lee Barker, minister of the Unitarian Church, Montclair New Jersey

This is a time to speak of the purposes of religion. This is a time to center on those aspects of life which are most important and worthwhile. This is the time to address the greatest possibilities of humanity. This is a time to address cynicism!

Cynicism is not what it used to be. The first-ever cynics were different from the modern-day cynics. The first ever cynics had a broad vision. They had a broad purpose. The first-ever cynics were concerned with the whole of life.

They came out of the ancient Greek school of philosophy called cynicism, appropriately enough. Its founder was a man named Diogenes. He believed that virtue and moral freedom were attainable only through liberation from desire. He disdained anything material, decried any activity that appeared to be a pursuit of success.

In his quest, Diogenes showed himself to be a bit of a character. It is said:

*That when he saw a child drinking from a pool with cupped hands, he tossed away his own drinking cup, claiming that he had just learned a lesson in moderation.*

*That when Alexander the Great asked if he could serve him in any way, Diogenes requested only that Alexander step out of the sunshine in which he was bathing himself.*

*That he begged from a statue in order to practice feeling comfortable even while being rejected.*

*That he made his home in a large earthenware urn. He lived as simply as possible so that he might attain virtue, so that he might moral freedom.*

It wasn’t long after the death of Diogenes in the third century BC that the school of cynicism became popularized in Greece. And when it became popularized, it began to change. No longer did cynicism teach abstinence from the material objects of the world. Instead, it taught that one should merely by indifferent to the material objects of the world. And with that turn, cynicism began to lose its broad purpose and vision and began to take on its present day myopic quality. Eventually, the cynics became not just indifferent to wealth, but indifferent to everything. That is the cynicism we know today.

AS for me I am a creature of modern-day cynicism. I confess I can be a cynical cuss.

Ask my wife, Marsha. Ask my friends. They will tell you I can take true delight in mocking and sneering, in being negative and pessimistic. I can be a cynical cuss especially when I am frightened. It surfaces especially when my knees are knocking together. I’ll give you an example:

A few years ago, through a church auction, Marsha and I bought a guided trip through a cave. This was one of the worst mistakes that we have ever made in our marriage. I assumed there would be tour guides, electric lights and paved walkways. But this was a natural, wild cave. There wasn’t even a concession stand. But, I gave it a chance. It wasn’t until after we scaled the side of a cliff, slid through a tiny, choking sewer pipe, and descended into absolute darkness that I decided this place was no fun.

The worst moments of this six -hour ordeal came when a particular crevice needed to be traversed. When I say we had to traverse a crevice, I don’t mean we had to jump over it. I mean we had to proceed along it, while we were inside it! It was about four feet wide and twenty feet long. The drop could not be estimated. It was merely a pit of blackness. I am convinced the bottom was scattered with skeletons.

The trick was to place one’s back on the wall of the crevice, extend the hands and feet to the other side and edge the body along the entire twenty feet.

One problem was that the crevice couldn’t be seen until one had actually entered it, which was accomplished by standing on a six-inch ledge and flipping into it blindly.. Marsha went before me, and I could only hear her, inching her way across. At one point I heard a sliding sound and then I heard her scream. I was sure I was a widower. I was sure she was now just another skeleton at the bottom of the crevice. This was not fun. This was not a pleasurable experience. This was awful.

So how did I cope with the situation of being on this terrifying journey? Was I courageous? Hardly!Was I cool and collected? Not me. No, I descended into the worst kind of cynicism imaginable.. First I was sarcastic, wondering aloud why I had paid good money for this experience. Next, I was downright pessimistic, expressing my conviction that there was no purpose in going any further. My death was now immanent. Finally I began to mock, asking our friends why on earth they would take the minister on such a trip ( a question they never answered to my satisfaction)Yes, I can be, in modern day terms, a cynical cuss. My cynicism emerges when I am afraid. It shows itself when I despair of my condition.

This is the time to speak of the most important purposes of our religion. I raise the issue of cynicism on this occasion for a particular reason. That reason is this: the impulses that give rise to cynicism go far beyond the kind of fears that come from a nightmare in a cave. Pervasive cynicism is rooted in the dark soil of human despair. Therefore, I believe it is the mission of liberal religion to maintain a relentless attack on cynicism. I believe it is the mission of liberal religion to drag us modern day cynics back into Diogones’ urn not to be encouraged to disdain the material necessarily, but back into the urn where there is broad vision and purpose, back into the urn where we are encouraged to reckon with the whole of life. I believe it is the mission of liberal religion to grab hold of the despair which gives rise to cynicism and transform it into faith and hope.

Despair is more serious than my story about a cave might suggest. There are days when we read the newspaper, when we scan the headlines, and it seems as if there will never be a world where peace is normative and justice has fully bloomed. We humans have allowed our problems to become too advanced. They’re too enormous and malignant. Often the reaction is despair. A friend is ill. A job is tedious, feelings of loneliness set in, a parent dies, financial problems emerge, a child is troubled, and life just seems so hard – as if it will never be better. Often the reaction is despair.

Because there are great and overwhelming evils in this world, because there are personal difficulties that face each one of us face as we proceed from birth to death, despair is one dimension of human life that cannot be avoided. The occasional cynical remark is harmless. It is entertaining, even, but as a total life response, it is hollow. It eases the pain of despair, but only for a moment. It produces a sense of superiority and sophistication, but only for a short time. It brings a feeling of cleverness, but the despair always returns.

III think of Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of JD Salinger’s novel *Catcher in the Rye.* Poor Holden Caulfield*,* such a sensitive teenager, such a vulnerable soul. Life is so painful for him. He sees all of its phoniness and its ugliness. He feels so alone and afraid about his future. He tries to cope by engaging his wonderfully acid tongue, accusing one of his student friends of being “ about as sensitive as a toilet seat” describing another as “majoring in perverts”. For a moment, after the utterance of each cynical remark, it is as if he can breathe again, as if he finds some freedom from the despair. But it always returns. The despair always reemerges.. The mission of liberal religion is to offer amore lasting antidote to the despair. I’ll say it again, the mission of liberal religion is to offer hope and faith.

How do we carry out that mission? By proclaiming the possibility for restoration, that built into human life is the possibility of renewal.

It is true. Restoration and renewal are possible. Human beings are capable of holding back the encroaching cynicism. I’ve met so many people who have accomplished this task. Just in the past year U have been brought into contact with

-a 25 year old woman whose husband of two years died in a climbing accident on the cliffs of New Jersey overlooking the Hudson River. His body was not discovered for two days. It is a tragedy that lives on within her. Her pain is enormous, but she did not give into cynicism. She decided to continue the adventure of her own life. She still lives a life of wholeness.

- a man who was always deeply moved by the thought of all who are hungry. When he returned home from a trip to Israel, where he had witnessed the possibility of growing food in the desert, he created an organization devoted to addressing the issue of hunger. He did not give into cynicism. He lives a life of wholeness and hope.

It is true. Restoration and renewal are possible. All these Unitarian Universalists, plus many more, tell me so.

Every once in a while I am asked what is the first thing I would do if I learned that a nuclear war had just been initiated. What would be the first thing I would do if I heard that bombs were coming and would be at my doorstep in a matter of minutes. My answer had always been a rather cynical one. “The first think I would do,” I have consistently said,” is to look for the nearest cigarette machine.” ( This was written a while ago) I would definitely start smoking again. That is me.

But, I recently heard of a man who has a much different answer to the same question. Pat Matheny, leader of a jazz fusion group, was interviewing for a new drummer for his band. He mad his final decision when he asked that same nuclear war questions and received this answer: “If the bombs were coming, I would go home and practice.” The man didn’t say he would go home and play the drums, he said he would go home and practice. He would seek to be a better drummer. That is hope. That is faith. That is the real antidote to despair.

*In devotion to broad purpose and vision, I pray for liberal religion. I pray that it can deliver the world from its cynicism. I pray that it offer hope to the world. I pray that it offer faith to all people. Let our religion cause hope to triumph over hopelessness, faith over faithlessness optimism over cynicism. Let our religion offer a lasting antidote to despair.*