



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

The Uncertain Anthropocene & the Infinite Game

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Today I'm going to invite us into a conversation with our own uncertainty. I'd like to start with a little visualization exercise - make yourself comfortable, whatever that means for you. You can close your eyes if you'd like to, but just let yourself focus on what I'm describing.

Someone has handed you a present - how wonderful! It is an oblong box, wrapped in a smooth decorative paper. There is no bow, there is no card. What can it be? Pick it up, turn it over, give it a shake. Now I'd like you to unwrap the present. You can carefully preserve the paper or rip it to shreds! And inside the paper you see a plain gray cardboard box. Written on the top in only slightly darker gray letters is one word: "Game."

You open the box itself and see an array of cards, dice, playing pieces, and a foldable board covered in various markings. There are no other words on the board, or in fact on any of the cards or playing pieces or dice. There are no instructions. Everything inside the box is colorful and bright, quite different from the outside. The playing pieces are pleasantly shaped abstract forms. The dice are standard six-sided dice of different colors and sizes. The board seems impossibly complex. And now... you must play.

"Life is a riddle and a mystery," as we heard Scarlet sing earlier. Riddles and mysteries can be beautiful, intriguing, can feel like an invitation - "come, solve!" But what about the uncertainty? What about a game you don't have the rules for? What about the mystery that keeps building, whose solution feels more distant every day?

If life is a riddle, does someone hold a solution key somewhere? If life is a mystery, do we have any guarantee we'll be given enough evidence to solve it? What if I have a piece of the solution, and someone I do not know, who lives very far away, has a very important piece that only makes sense alongside my piece?

Much as we might be tempted to think so, much as it may sometimes feel like it, life isn't moving pieces around on a board, it's not a sporting contest ... or an escape room.

But does that mean life isn't a game?

Not all games are frivolous. One of the most formative pieces of popular culture from my own childhood was the 1983 movie *Wargames*. For those of you who aren't familiar with the movie, it is a Cold War tale of two teenagers who almost accidentally start - and then save the world from - global thermonuclear war. These are serious games indeed! A computer system which is in charge of launching nuclear missiles has been trained by playing game simulations, seeking the best possible outcome. At the end, in what is probably the movie's most famous line, the computer system shuts down all the launch orders and says, "A strange game. The only way to win is not to play."

As a child I longed for solutions, like the answers posted in the back of the math workbook. And many factors in my life contributed to and upheld this search for certainty - chief among them my Catholic faith and my family. Nuclear war was the largest uncertainty of my childhood, and my biggest fear. I wanted there to be answers. There were so many answers in my catechism to so many big questions, but in my church I found no certainty about the possibility of war. So one day I asked my parents what would happen if there was a nuclear war. They took my question seriously, and they answered seriously. "We are lucky," they said. "We live so close to Washington D.C. that we are likely to be killed instantly. We will not suffer." "Will we be together?" I asked. "Probably not," they answered, "But we will be together in Heaven, afterward." I nodded, and they went back to preparing dinner. Meanwhile, I hid under the coffee table and thought about my impending death until dinner, for which I no longer had much appetite.

Each of us has had our own unique faith journey. There are over [number] folks who are listening to this, and every one of them - of you! has arrived here through a series of choices, circumstances, challenges and coincidences which are uniquely your own. And yet, we come together to create community.

Shall we play a game?

James Carse, professor emeritus at New York University and for thirty years the Director of Religious Studies at NYU, wrote a book called *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*. I found this book through one of my theology courses at seminary, it was not an assigned text but showed up in my professor's lectures enough times that I knew I had to read it. (As if I didn't have enough to read!)

The simplest distinction between a finite and an infinite game is this: the goal of a finite game is to win. The goal of an infinite game is to keep playing. To succeed at a finite game, you need to know specific rules and master skills. To succeed at an infinite game, you must constantly learn more and open yourself to more possibility.

For me, the idea of life as an infinite game, whose goal is to learn, grow, perpetuate, and contribute to an ongoing larger story, larger whole - is not a frivolity. It is a form of theological liberation.

We have already heard glimpses of this, beautiful examples - like from Irene in her wonderful reflection, who observed, "We don't plan for the future if we don't think there's one worth having." And as James Carse asserts: "the finite play for life is serious; the infinite play of life joyous."

Does it feel wrong to think of play and joy in our world right now? How can we look at the crises of health, injustice, despair, poverty, inequity and speak of it as a game?

And my answer, my challenge, my invitation this morning, dear ones, is this: How can we sustain ourselves if we don't?

People come to faith communities for so many reasons, and I fear one that is easy to forget, especially in this time when it can feel so distant, is joy. The sense of celebration we feel as we pass milestones together, discover new ideas, new music, new relationships, new art - so many things that allow us to build brighter and more resilient lives.

"Joy is an act of resistance" is the title of a 2008 poem by Toi Derricotte, which has become something of a rallying cry in our current age. I wonder if she was thinking of ancestor Audre Lorde who wrote, "In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change."

Energy for change. To engage in the play of life, in its infinite game, requires energy - sources of power. Joy, celebration, and play are important ways to build and regain our energy when it is flagging. When we engage with life joyfully, we come in contact with one of the sources of our power. To be constantly held within a state where we cannot access, create, or sometimes even remember joy is to be held back from full participation in the glorious, ongoing, game of life.

Where is the ground of joy in our Unitarian Universalist faith, in our theology? Dare we claim a single theology that speaks to Unitarian Universalism, a vision of religious plurality and global community? Again: how can we sustain ourselves if we do not?

Here, I'll share a simple definition from the same professor who introduced me to James Carse's work on finite and infinite games. Professor of Theology, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion at Meadville Lombard Theological School, Michael Hogue was asked to give "a definition of theology that a 10-year-old could understand." This is not meant as a slight to any ten year old... or persons of any age. Professor Hogue has a tendency to use words that send most of us scrambling for the dictionary.

His response to this request was: “Theology is meaning-making, with a focus on justice, achieved through spiritual play.”

This definition is aligned with the current Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, most especially our 2nd and 4th principles upholding justice, equity and compassion and the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. It is also deeply aligned with the proposed 8th Principle, which UUCF adopted in an early wave of congregations seeking to address the harmful legacy of white supremacy culture. The 8th Principle invites us into a journey towards spiritual wholeness, as we take a searching look into ourselves and our institutions. What a way to model this for the culture at large. Who in our society is being held away from accessing, creating, remembering their own joy?

Any proposed Unitarian Universalist theology must focus on justice. Our world is unjust. If we want to keep our infinite game progressing, the game must be accessible, equitable, fulfilling for all who play. If we accept the concept of the moral arc of the universe “bending towards justice,” that doesn’t mean we all have to agree exactly who’s bending it or how. If we are playing together to perpetuate the game, then we make the bend of that arc OUR business - our work, and our play.

And what is spiritual play, exactly?

We live in an age where our information systems have grown sophisticated enough to create infinite games. The most popular video game of all time, which has sold over 200 million copies and boasts over 125 million active monthly players, is Minecraft. This is a near-limitless world where players can indeed engage in virtual battles with computer-generated foes... but they can also build. They can build houses and communities, they can change their surroundings, they can change gameplay itself. The United Nations has partnered with the game’s developer to allow for the re-creation of real-life environments, so that young people living in those environments can explore tools for change with active real-life parallels. Classrooms have been developed within Minecraft, which takes on a whole new real-world meaning as we continue to engage and struggle with the concept of schooling during the pandemic.

If we live in a world where we get to play - to feel liberated enough to take the world as it is and imagine it another way - then we also have a choice. We can choose to battle. We can choose to build. We can choose to work together.

We have infinite choices, in this infinite game. “If nothing means anything, then anything can mean everything.” This is what I understand to be the heart of spiritual play: Choosing where to place our care and our attention. It is a triumphal act of theological imagination to take the messy tangle of where we have come from - each of us individually and all of us together - and create a vision for justice, equity, and compassion. When our entire interdependent web has access to that vision, THAT is liberation. THAT is joy. THAT is “winning” ...by perpetuating the space for play for seven generations and more.

We must take care. Gameplay doesn't reward carelessness, whether it is a finite or an infinite game. We're on a tough level in this game right now. How do we find our way back to our sources of power, our energy, our joy? How do we ensure we are on the right track to making meaning that perpetuates joy AND justice?

We come back to our faith community. And this morning's invitation to conversation with our uncertainty.

We live in an age that many scientists are coming to call the Anthropocene. Not just a social or historical age, but a geologic age - though there is disagreement among geologists as to when this age began. "Anthropocene" means "human age," and stands as an end to the Holocene, the geologic age of relative stability that allowed for climate conditions where human beings could develop and thrive. By acknowledging humans' ability to bring about changes on a geologic scale, we must acknowledge for once and for all we are part and parcel OF nature, not any kind of exceptional creature standing outside this planetary system.

Let's think back to our mystery game, the one we unwrapped back at the start. The idea of a game with no explanation, no rules, and not much context might cause feelings of fear and dread - "How do I figure this OUT?!" or it might stir up excitement and imagination - "What rules can we come up with that make this make sense? That will make the game both fun and fair?"

If we humans have ended the Holocene, if the advent of the Anthropocene means we are in uncharted territory...where is our rule book? In Professor Hogue's most recent book, *American Immanence: Democracy for an Uncertain World* he strives to sketch out a way forward through multiple complex systems that are all in crisis. It comes as news to no one: This is a scary time.

Here's one of the biggest reminders when we are facing this new level - when systems are disrupted, when they are shaken up - there is a HUGE new energy and creative potential. There are reasons humanity has been able to make huge changes after huge upheavals, like world wars - the shake-up to the system has interrupted the certainty of "we have always done it this way." There is a huge transformative potential within disruption and uncertainty.

But what is our role within this uncertainty? If we don't have a rule book, if we are deeply committed to NOT doing things as they have always been done, then what's our next move? As we watch our society change and move and shift, we may not see a place for ourselves. Not all of us can protest, not all of us can legislate, not all of us can afford to donate much money to causes that are important to us. How do we situate ourselves on the field of play?

Dr. Hogue suggests four roles with deep importance to the perpetuation of justice-making, meaning-making play as we shape our new age. (Role-playing games are

ALSO infinite games!) First, there are agitators and disruptors. If this is a role that you feel prepared to inhabit, there is plenty of work to do! But if this is not the role for you at this time, there is also the role of innovator or incubator. Are you a big-idea person? Maybe you can help innovate or help others to grow their own amazing ideas. Another role is connectors and networkers. We've probably all known - or been - someone like this. The more people you know, the more people you can connect. We see this writ large in our social media platforms and profiles, but think how that can be amplified in the world of analog space in addition to and in enhancement of digital space! New connections mean new potential. And then: the amplifiers of ideas! Do you have privilege or a platform you can leverage to get the word out? A special gift for communication? From sharing about a justice campaign on social media to making decisions about representation in larger cultural spaces, people who can amplify the message of the agitators, innovators, and connectors can truly grow what we know. More players in the game. More of us working together to create, not a new rule book - no need to replace one "way we've always done it" with another - but to create the sound, touch, taste, smell, sense of the new world.

It is this immersion, this engagement, this level of play that makes our faith community so important. As Unitarian Universalists, we may not agree on who or what is bending the moral arc of the universe. We may come from a multiplicity of theological standpoints, or we may never have thought about theology before. But injustice stirs our hearts and minds. We feel called to the bold action of moving forward without the certainty of solutions in the back of the workbook. As I invited you into a conversation with uncertainty, I invite you also into curiosity, exploration, imagination, and a bold and rigorous dedication to spiritual play.

And for all those times when the next steps feel uncertain, when the play may feel dangerous, one touchstone may be to ask "Am I acting out of love? Or fear?" Moving away from fear and toward love is a great strategy... I hope you'll all join in at home as we sing together Hymn 131, "Love Will Guide Us."