

Steel Traps in Faith and Science

"The transformations of today's scientific vision enrich our faith, and our church honors our members who answer God's calling with careers in medicine, science, and engineering." That's a line from a new pastoral letter on science and faith from our national church -- from the Reverend John Thomas, our General Minister and President, along with the UCC's Science and Technology Network. You can read the letter in full online at ucc.org, and there are also some paper copies out front that you can pick up on your way out. It's a really great letter. It thoughtfully engages some of the toughest questions raised by modern science, questions involving evolution, the brain, genetics, computing, medicine, and ecology. I'm proud that our church, the UCC, welcomes everyone -- yes, even including scientists like me. I'm proud that our church engages scientific issues with an open mind. I'm proud that our church recognizes that science and faith belong together.

I've spent most of my life in school, and most of that studying computer science. I've been a professor. I've written textbooks. I'm proud to call myself a scientist. It's sometimes been a bit awkward for me, being a person of faith on a science faculty. And now that I'm a seminary student, I sometimes find it a bit awkward being a scientist in a seminary. But the conflict between science and religion has always been, for me, something external: it's a problem other people seem to have that I get to help them work through. It's never felt like an internal conflict; I don't feel like a split personality,

with my inner scientist and my inner person of faith constantly at war. For me, science and faith are sister and brother. Today, I'd like to tell you why. In particular, I'd like to tell you about a common goal that I think science and faith share.

Do you know the expression, "a mind like a steel trap?" It's meant as a compliment; it's meant to suggest a person of quick intelligence. It's an expression that has been used in America for a long time. You can find it in books going back at least to the early 1800's -- back when there were a few more trappers around, and more people knew what a steel trap looked like. Now, I don't really like the expression, "a mind like a steel trap." In the first place, it's a violent image, and in the second place, it doesn't sound entirely flattering! To be honest, though, I have to say that this violent and unflattering expression is actually pretty accurate for all of us. We all have minds like steel traps. That's human nature. We have minds that tend to snap shut around any idea that happens to fall into them. And it feels so good when it happens! There's nothing like that good old snap-shut feeling: the feeling that you've got it all figured out. You learn, say, the old Ptolemaic idea that the earth is the center of the universe, and the sun and planets and stars all revolve around it. And then *snap!* That feels good. Don't bother me with any other ideas, Galileo. I've got it all figured out.

Or maybe you learn a Genesis story about creation: God made everything, just as it now is, in six days, just a few thousand years ago. And then *snap!* That feels good. Don't bother me with any other ideas, Darwin. Don't bother me with your fossil record,

paleontologists. Don't bother me with your continental drift, geologists. Don't bother me with your finds on prehistoric man, paleo-archeologists. And don't bother me with the story of how the Bible was written, historians. I've got it all figured out.

Or maybe you learn one of the ideas of prejudice and bigotry. There are many such ideas in the air, like airborne pathogens. Maybe one of them falls into your trap, and it snaps shut. Don't bother me with getting to know anyone who's gay, or black, or Muslim, or whatever. I know what *they're* all like. I've got them *all* figured out.

It's just something about human nature. We have innate curiosity, it's true, but we also have an innate tendency to snap shut. We get hold of a few ideas, we get a sense that we have it all figured out, and then *snap!* It feels particularly good, that feeling that you have it all figured out, just as the discovery that you've been wrong about something feels particularly bad. It takes a special kind of effort to resist the urge to snap shut, and to seek out the experience of discovering that you were wrong about something. And that's exactly what I think science and faith have in common: at their best, they both fight the urge to snap shut. They both work to pry open people's steel traps.

In our faith tradition, the snap-shut impulse has a special name: we call it idolatry. It's that feeling that we have God all figured out. And oh my, that's a delicious feeling! The Old Testament is full of stories about the people of God making this mistake, not just once, but over and over and over. The first two commandments (no other gods, no idol

worship) speak directly to this weakness. But in the Exodus story, even while Moses is up on the mountain getting God's commandments, the people are already falling back into idolatry. Under Aaron's leadership, while Moses is on the mountain, they make a golden calf to worship. Here's the story, from Exodus, chapter 32:

Moses said to Aaron, 'What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?' And Aaron said, 'Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil. They said to me, "Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So I said to them, "Whoever has gold, take it off "; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!' (Exodus 32:21-25)

There are a lot of lame excuses in the Bible, and that might be the lamest of them all. Yet I think it also points to an important truth. We *do* slip into idolatry so easily -- it *is* almost as if the golden calf just comes out by itself. "I threw the gold into the fire, and out came this calf!" And then *snap!*

Idolatry is alive and well here in Princeton. I don't mean that we have a lot of Baal worshippers here; we don't have trouble with people setting up Asherah poles, or sacrificing to idols under every green tree, as in parts of the Old Testament. And I don't just mean that we spend too much time thinking about getting and spending, though of course we do. I mean that we Christians frequently fall into the trap of thinking that we have God all figured out. For example, there's that bumper sticker I sometimes see around town: "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." And then *snap!* You can almost

hear the trap closing on that one. It's popular with people who think that everything in the Bible is literally and inerrantly true. To my mind, this is just another snap-shut -- just another idolatry. I cherish the Bible, but reading it doesn't make me feel like I have God all figured out. To me it is less like a book of answers, and more like a book of questions.

Even a very orthodox idea about God can become an idolatry. Take, for example, the idea of the Trinity: the orthodox Christian idea of one God in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Now, be honest: how many of us have trouble understanding the idea of the Trinity? I know I do. To me, the difficulty of the Trinitarian idea is part of the beauty of it. It's an idea about God that, for me, refuses to become all figured out; it remains mysterious; it refuses to melt down into a golden calf. But even the idea of the Trinity can become an idol, if you start to believe that you understand it perfectly, and therefore that you have God all figured out. In some religious artwork, for example, it looks like a simple idea: the Father is an old white man, the Son is a younger white man, and the Holy Spirit is a dove. That's it, that's God; we've got God all figured out! God is two men and a bird! And then *snap!* No, my advice is this: any time you think you have God all figured out, you're probably slipping into idolatry. Any time you think you have God all figured out, look for the golden calf.

It's too bad that so many people think you can't have faith unless you do have God all figured out. If that's how you feel about faith, let me suggest another way. If you have

questions about God -- if you just can't figure God out -- then I think you're in the right place, and welcome to the club! Faith does *not* mean having a particular set of authorized beliefs, beliefs to which no challenge is permitted. Faith is *not* about poking an orthodox set of beliefs into the old steel trap, and letting it snap shut. There's nothing admirable about having a strong faith, if by that you mean having a tightly closed mind, because we all have minds like steel traps; it doesn't really take that much effort to hold them closed. Keeping your trap open -- now, that would be a real accomplishment. Faith has many dimensions; it isn't all about the particular things you believe. And even in that dimension, we can hold the things we believe lightly and humbly, hold them without narcissistic certitude.

Now I've spoken about some of the ways in which people of faith suffer from this tendency to snap shut. But I don't mean to let people of science off the hook. The impulse to snap shut doesn't discriminate: it hits people of faith and people of science alike. The history of science is littered with people who have proudly proclaimed that they now know everything. In 1888, the astronomer and mathematician Simon Newcomb said: "We are probably nearing the limit of all we can know about astronomy." 1888! Yet most of the things astronomers now learn in school were discovered after that time. Or take Lord Kelvin, the famous physicist and engineer. In 1900, Lord Kelvin said, "There is nothing new to be discovered in physics now; all that remains is more and more precise measurement." 1900! Nothing new in physics since then, unless you count relativity and quantum mechanics, Einstein and Heisenberg, and the physics that

lies behind some of the most useful inventions of the modern world, along with some of most horrible.

The scientific version of the snap-shut impulse is visible every day. There are scientists who assume they know it all. There are medical experts who think that makes them authorities on ethics, and there are economic experts who think that makes them authorities on social justice. There are scientists who become attached to their own pet theories, and are unwilling to give new evidence a fair hearing. And, of course, there are scientists whose minds snap shut whenever God is mentioned. Some of these scientists have steel traps that have closed around a prejudice: they think they know that all people of faith are superstitious idiots. Others suffer from the same hubris as Lord Kelvin: they believe that the catalog of science is essentially complete. If God isn't in that catalog, there is no God. And then *snap!*

What I've noticed, standing in between these two camps, is that each side accuses the other of having minds like steel traps. On the science side of the divide, we say, "We're all about questions. We pride ourselves on keeping open minds about everything. You want people who have decided that they have ultimate answers, go talk to someone over in Religion." But on the religion side, we say, "We're listening for the voice of the still-speaking God. We're comfortable with mysteries. You want people who are obsessed with mere facts, go talk to someone over in Science."

In fact, all people of faith, and all scientists, are subject to the same human tendency to snap shut. And all people of faith, and all scientists, are at their best when they struggle against that tendency. That struggle is what I find most attractive about science.

Science is an ongoing trial of the truth, and no verdict is final. Every theory is open to question; there's always the possibility of new information, and there's always the possibility that we'll recognize old mistakes. The scientific quest is the quest to keep our steel traps open. The history of science teaches us that we will fail repeatedly -- we will fall prey to the snap-shut impulse. But when we fail, we will pry open our closed minds and try again.

And the faith quest works the same way. As people of faith, we are committed to listening for the voice of the still-speaking God. We are committed to the second commandment: we will have no idols. It's hard work. We know that it is difficult to distinguish the leadings of the Spirit from the leadings of our own prejudice and self-interest and superstition. We know that we are fallible. Our biblical tradition reminds us that we will fail repeatedly: we will slip into believing that we have God all figured out, and we will open our eyes one day to find that we are once again on our knees in front of some ridiculous idol. But when we fail, then we will ask for God's help, and we will pry open our closed minds and try again.

Science and faith share this goal, to keep the mind open. And I believe they can help each other do it. They can help each other avoid their particular temptations to snap

shut. Science can help faith avoid superstition; faith can help science avoid pride. May it be so. Spirit of God, help us to understand your creation, to hear your music, to see your light, to taste your abundance, and to feel your embrace. Spirit of God, help us to pry open our steel traps, today and every day. Amen.

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