

“Questioning Souls”

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse

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OPENING WORDS:

The instigations for the focus of this morning’s service are a recent seminary class on religious humanism and a set of conversations I’ve had with individual members and friends of this congregation over the past 19 years. A number of times over these years I have listened to someone share their feeling that this congregation or the service or the minister was too “theistic” for them, or too “spiritual” for their comfort, or that God was mentioned too often. Typically around the same time, I have listened to just as many people share their feeling that the congregation or the service or the minister was too humanistic for them, not spiritual enough, that God was not referred to often enough or that they did not feel safe telling other people they believed in God.

A rather typical UU congregation, I think.

These conversations almost always took place quietly, and the person’s thoughts and feelings remained otherwise under the table, since few people wanted to rock the boat, to risk surfacing divisions, or to navigate the strong emotions that might arise. Sometimes people simply left quietly. It has been an elephant in the room. But if we are keeping the differences in our perspectives, beliefs, ideas and theologies under the table, acting as if they are not there or are unimportant or too dangerous to acknowledge, then we are missing out on the vital opportunity to learn from and with each other. We are missing out on the opportunity to deepen, to clarify, to be challenged to grow, and to be affected by the insight and experience of others. We are missing out on the chance to be changed for good and for the better. And in an incredible counterintuitive irony, by tiptoeing around our theological differences, we are missing out on a chance to strengthen our bonds with each other, bonds that can empower us as individuals and as a religious community.

So I invite us to figure out together, over time, how to get our theological and other differences out on top of the table where we can work with them honestly and respectfully, if not always dispassionately, where, with kindness, openness and a compassionate spirit, we can wrestle with our different ideas and beliefs fully and to the benefit of all...because none of us has the final or complete answer, and none of us sees all that there is to be seen.

You may have heard the ancient story from India, of the blind people and the elephant... several blind people wanted to know, “What is this thing called an elephant that we’ve

heard about?” So they somehow get to an elephant and each person touches the elephant to see what an elephant is like. The only thing is, each person feels a different part of the elephant and since they can’t see the rest of the animal, they think the whole elephant is like that one part of the elephant...and then they argue and argue about who’s right.

Well, with the help of Marin, Emily, Kathy, Terry, Mai, Paul and Max, let’s watch the story...

Here it is adapted from a poem written by John Godfrey Saxe in the 1800’s.

He wrote that it is based on a fable that was told in India many, many, many years ago.

STORY FOR ALL AGES: “The Blind Folk and the Elephant” adapted by Kevin Tarsa
from “Blind Men and the Elephant” by John Godfrey Saxe

It was six folk of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy the mind

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against its broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
“God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!”

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, “Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me ’tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!”

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a snake!”

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
“What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain,” quoth she;
“ ’Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!”

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: “E’en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!”

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within her scope,
“I see,” quoth she, “the Elephant
Is very like a rope!”

And so these folk of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in their own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

Moral:

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!

SERMON

In his book, *Skeptics and True Believers*, Chet Raymo, divides our culture into two groups – Skeptics and True Believers. The difference between Skeptics and True Believers, according to Raymo, is that a Skeptic is willing (I would say, more important, a Skeptic is able) to live with a measure of doubt and uncertainty, willing to “accept the evolving nature of truth.” A True Believer, on the other hand, he writes, has “a low tolerance for changeable knowledge. [A] True Believer prefers” (a True Believer needs, I would say) “stable truths of faith, even if those truths run counter to a preponderance of physical evidence.”

The difference between a Skeptic and a True Believer is not in intelligence or inherent goodness or the capacity to be kind. The difference is in person’s emotional capacity to tolerate changeable knowledge. Being skeptical is not about being more smart or savvy, it’s about, for some reason being blessed and burdened with the ability to tolerate some uncertainty.

In the midst of our broad theological diversity in this congregation – with Christians, pagans, Buddhists, agnostics, humanists, theists, non-theists, nothingists, and not-sureists – we hold a skepticism in common, I believe, a Chet Raymo style skepticism, an ability to live with a measure of uncertainty and to “accept the evolving nature of truth.” We hold in common a knowing in our hearts - in our bones - that our current answer may not be the complete or the final answer.

This skepticism is common ground for us, I believe, and connects us to each other. We are kindred spirits not because we have arrived at identical religious beliefs or answers, but because at some point in our lives we have each been willing and able to change our perspective in response to new knowledge or a new understanding that challenged what we thought we knew to be true.

How many times have you had to let go of a once-solid, once-sure truth?

We here are kindred spirits because we have the capacity, if not always the willingness, to be changed by what we have yet to learn. We are skeptics, all across the theological spectrum and at very different places in our spiritual journeys, who have learned that at any moment our thoughts, our theology, our understanding of life, the universe and everything may need to be revised, yet again. If we were not able to tolerate that possibility, we would probably be somewhere else this morning, where more permanent beliefs are valued and relied upon.

In our tradition, permanent beliefs have always been challenged and we have become afraid to raise any beliefs at all. We UU’s are frequently accused of speaking about everything EXCEPT religion. It’s true, often and it’s understandable. We’re afraid that acknowledging our theological differences will be divisive. Many of the religious traditions in our Western culture are anchored in a creed, a stated set of beliefs to which members give assent. Belief is what defines who is a member of the community, who’s in, who’s out. That is why someone asks – What do you believe? To disagree with the

community's set of explicit or implicit beliefs, is to risk conflict, at least, and perhaps even banishment.

But our liberal faith, our Unitarian Universalist faith is not rooted in a creed. Membership here is not dependent upon assent to a specific set of beliefs and I suggest that our awareness of our own skepticism, our openness to changeable knowledge - can help us to risk engaging in respectfully challenging conversations with each other about our beliefs, and, perhaps eventually, to help us learn how to engage in respectfully challenging conversations with people who we perceive as "not us" in any number of other ways.

It is an openness to the continuous unfolding of truth that links us as liberally religious people; a willingness to live with a measure of uncertainty. I am saying that for better and for worse, we hold in common not the content of our current beliefs, but the flexibility with which we hold those beliefs.

It's not what we believe, but we believe that unites us.

I can imagine several objections to that statement, - It's not what we believe, but how we believe - I'll name just three:

One – holding beliefs flexibly is too wishy-washy, too lame, too uninspiring. If our beliefs are flexible and changeable, what is there to hold on to when the going gets tough? Flexibility of belief would seem to be a liability, not a strength.

Objection Number Two – there are plenty of religious liberals, perhaps even a few in this congregation, whose beliefs do not appear to be all that flexible....or flexible at all, in fact.

And Objection Number Three – if what we as a religious community hold in common is not what we believe, but how we believe, if we are always living with a measure of uncertainty, is there enough glue to hold us together as a religious community?

Good question! And one I'm working to answer for myself ...with no answer yet.

But I'll start with the second objection, the existence of illiberal liberals, or closed minds dressed up as open minds.

Of course we religious liberals are not immune to becoming rigid in our mindset, to believing that now, in our current theological, rational, spiritual location, we've landed on the REAL answer, the one true final answer, and that everyone else is sadly mistaken. Philosopher Ken Wilber and studier of religious journeys James Fowler both remind us that this is a trap within most of the stages of faith development. From where we sit in any given leg of our journey, it appears that we have the only right answer. But if we look back at the pattern of our lives and the ways we've changed over time, if we remember all of the times we thought we had the complete answer only to learn otherwise, why

would we now think that our potential to change our minds or expand our awareness has suddenly ended forever?

The personal experience of having had to alter our own thinking ought to teach us to listen to each other with openness and respect, to listen with a healthy humility, really, to the insight, knowledge, ideas and feelings of others, especially when they differ from our own. It doesn't mean we have to believe the same things or agree, it doesn't mean that we cannot challenge someone's beliefs, but it does ask us to listen and to challenge with genuine respect and without being patronizing.

Though we may delight in challenging other people's or other traditions' beliefs, we cannot with integrity ask others to remain open to the influence of our thoughts and ideas, while we remain obstinately closed to the possibility that their thoughts and ideas might influence us. We may not always be as open as we claim, but, based on our life experience, I say we ought to be. Having had to shift several times ourselves, we ought to be able to understand that everyone holds some piece, some partial glimmer of the light of truth – some piece of knowledge about the elephant. And that understanding ought to guide the tone of our conversations and our interactions with each other and with people of other faith traditions. (...or political persuasions, or.....you name the difference.)

As for the first objection, the lameness of skepticism:

If we do indeed hold our beliefs, our truths with a certain tentativeness, is our skepticism a strength, or a liability, or both? True Believers, who have a time-tested, solid rock of ages upon which to build a belief system, will typically perceive the skeptical approach as weak and inadequate to the task. It feels wishy-washy. How can you have rules for a stable society? What is there to hold on to when the going gets tough?

The operative attribute is flexibility - One supportive metaphor for flexibility of belief is, of course, the tree that is able to bend in the driving wind, or to give pliantly under the weight of wet snow. A rigid tree is more susceptible to breaking, a flexible tree more likely to endure the storms of life by being able to bend. In an ordinary storm, sturdiness seems the safer thing, but when the going really gets tough, it's flexibility you need for survival. Rigid beliefs are indeed strong, but they are also brittle under hard blows. They are all or nothing. Perhaps you yourself have faced a crisis of faith in your life, when some fundamental truth upon which you stood, crumbled beneath your feet and sent you into a free fall that, for all you knew, would never end. If you have not experienced such a crisis, that crumbling of belief under you, know that it is a painful and often terrifying experience. Not one that everyone can face.

A relative explained, in a very thoughtful conversation, her decision not to attend the ceremony when Paul and I were married. She based her decision on religious grounds and told us that she could not risk making an exception to her church's teachings in order to attend our wedding. To make this one exception would demand that she be willing to call into question everything her church taught, and she could not risk the possible consequences. She apologized for this reality, but said that question her church's teaching was too frightening for her.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman, who applied family systems theory to religious communities, noted that our ability to brave uncertainty, actually allows our responses to the challenges of life to have greater resilience, allows us to adapt and change to changing circumstances, gives us a broader repertoire of responses – gives us alternatives. Despite all cultural messages to the contrary, Salvation, he says, does not depend upon certainty, but upon clarity – Salvation depends upon coming to terms with the persistent reality of ambiguity and the perplexing paradoxes of the human condition. It sounds Buddhist, and, once again, counter intuitive. The futile search for rigid certainty, he says, sabotages our efforts to be healthy and whole because life is never certain. It is a message echoed by Buddhist nun Pema Chodrin who teaches that our attempts to escape uncertainty, block the wellsprings of our compassion.

It is not certainty that we need, but clarity.

In a related way, UU theologian Paul Razor points out that although “religious liberalism often involves a willingness to affirm faith without certainty, this is not the same thing as faith without conviction. For religious liberals,” he writes, “to say that truth is never finally settled is not to say that reality is meaningless or that there are no standards by which to seek and measure truth. It simply recognizes that truth is at least partly a product of our culture and that it will evolve and change over time.”

As UU minister Dick Gilbert put:

“It is not that we are not believers.
It is that our belief
Has to be passed through the fires of skepticism
And boiled in the crucible of doubt.”

A healthy Skepticism is not an obstacle to holding truth or an avoidance of substantive and substantial belief. Skepticism is, on the contrary, a potential path to truth. It helps us to sort out falsehoods and less complete truths from gradually more and more complete and complex truths, allowing us to hone in on the deep truths that we can hold with a strong conviction, if not an absolute, 100%, grade-A, certified certainty.

What keeps our individual search for truth from veering too far outside of reality is that we do not undertake this journey of discernment alone. We rely upon others to corroborate or challenge our beliefs, and they rely upon us to return the favor. We benefit from pooling our life experiences and perspectives because in so doing we have the best chance to reach the strongest and fullest sense of the elephant of truth. But as with the blind people in the story, trying to find a communal sense of truth among a group of rational, skeptical individualists is no small task, though a communal sense of truth is often what we social beings need and desire.

UU theologian Paul Razor writes that this is one of the inherent and critical tensions in liberal theology, one of the unresolvable tensions, (I’m sorry to report,) that a religious liberal lives with. We are committed to a free and responsible search for truth and

meaning, wherein each person makes her or his own judgment about truth claims, and yet we often yearn, he writes, for “more shared content, for a common understanding [of our] faith that is more specific. [We] don’t want creeds...but we want the search to lead somewhere.” I know that I do.

Razor continues: “This tension can especially affect newcomers. Many people come to liberal congregations to free themselves from what they often describe as the suffocating conformity of doctrine in other traditions. Yet once there, they sometimes find that the absence of a prescriptive belief system leaves them feeling adrift in the religious sea.

...which brings us to the third objection: Is our skepticism really a binding force?

You may have seen the UU bumper stickers, “Different beliefs. One Faith.” “How is that even possible?” one might ask. If we are holding different beliefs, what offers us communal cohesion?

Well of course there is more than one answer.

I’ve explained my view that amid our broad differences in theology, a tolerance for changeable knowledge is a defining attribute we religious liberals share. That tolerance for changeable knowledge however is not itself the adhesive that binds us together as a liberal religious community, as a community of faith. It is necessary, but not sufficient.

Skepticism’s value is that it makes real bonds possible - strong and flexible bonds possible - between liberal religious people, but the bond building and strengthening capacity rests in each of our hands and hearts.

Our communal strength must come through the ways in which we actually live our openness with each other, through the courage we evidence and the respect we offer others.

Our communal strength must come through our willingness to help each other ask and answer, even if just for the time being, those deepest, most troubling and most important life questions.

Our communal strength must come through the spoken and unspoken agreements we make with each other about how we will be together, about how we will pursue our understanding of truth together. It is not our current answers, but how we pursue them together that binds us, because as our knowledge continues to change and as mystery continues to break upon it’s shore, our answers will continue to change and so will we.

If our bonds with each other, if our sense of community (is) dependent upon the content of our current religious beliefs, our bonds with each other will be made and broken, made and broken, made and broken, again and again, rather than continually strengthened and stretched, worked like a muscle....in the heat of Bikram Yoga, perhaps.

We could make an effort to stay connected by making a pact not to change, not to grow, we could decide that we’ve arrived at the one and only truth that could possible make

sense, we could become True Believers....And I have to tell you, I find it very tempting....but, true belief – permanent belief - does not seem to be in our nature, however much we may wish it were. I expect that our vision of liberal True Belief Truth would, in the end, look very like... A spear.....or a fan.....or a rope...or a tree, or a snake, or a wall.....depending upon who you asked.)

Se here we have been, proclaiming our openness and our tolerance – but afraid to live it.

We each know what its like to leave behind a once-treasured truth. Such knowledge, such experience can help us. Theists, agnostics, non-theists, Christians, pagans, Buddhists, humanists, nothingists, and not-sureists, all under one roof, this knowledge can help us to engage our differences and to ask the deep and vexing questions with honesty, integrity AND kindness and respect. We'll all have to figure out together whether or not that is enough, whether or not Unitarian Universalism can contain such broad theological diversity under one roof, and still hold together – whether our faith can be so wide, and still offer enough depth and substance....enough solidity, enough to hold on to when the going gets rough. We'll have to figure out together whether and how all of this leads somewhere.

The answer to that question is not in any book, or class, or association publication or in my words or thoughts. The answer will be revealed in our attempt to live out this faith together.

So, rather than dancing around our differences, or holding them quietly, rather than ignoring the elephant in the room, which I've done at least as much as anybody, let's engage our theological differences with love and compassion, lets pool our resources, lift our beliefs out on to the top of the table and seek truth together with all of our heart. And lets not forget that the truth we reveal will not be etched permanently in stone, that down the road we may – we will, I am certain - be faced with a need to revise our understanding and leave a belief or two behind.

So what is my theology, you ask?.....I've been at seminary, desperately trying to figure that out so I can tell you. Let me give you today's label for myself.

This morning... I would describe myself as a humanistic religious naturalist. Okay, that's a whole 'nother service, but in a nutshell, because I want to start to put my conviction where my mouth is, let me say that:

I claim the label “naturalist,” because I believe that the natural world is all that exists, “that there is a single natural, [material] world” and that we and everything that exists are “completely included within it.” I have no sense of or belief in a supernatural realm of any kind, or of any life beyond life in this world, in this material universe. I do not consider myself a theist, even in the most liberal uses of that label.

I claim the modifier “humanistic” because my theology is centered in a commitment to human wellbeing and “the necessity for human beings to take responsibility for

[ourselves] and [our] world.” This responsibility is for me an extension of my naturalism. No force from outside the natural realm is going to come to the rescue, and efforts to actively and consciously influence fate or destiny will need to come from us. Though I move within an ethic that takes the well-being of the earth and all its creatures into account, I would privilege and commit to human well-being within that larger context.

I claim the adjective “religious” for a couple reasons– but these are more slippery.

I claim the adjective “religious” in part, because of the size of the ocean of mystery. Not that I expect that anything supernatural resides within that mystery, but I feel a deep sense of amazement, awe, reverence and gratitude for the natural world that does exist, and for the boundless shoreline that runs where the edge of our knowledge meets the infinite sea of mystery that surrounds it. Beyond my delight in scientific discoveries and nature, this is an intuitive and feeling-focused, non-verbal sense – it is anchored in my own visceral experience of mystery and connection that I cannot explain, but that I believe has a natural, physiological origin in within my being. I believe that it is an sensation that is experienced universally, but interpreted in a thousand different ways.

This intuitive sense informs a second reason I claim the adjective religious. I am coming to understand that religion addresses the realm within which (our) chemistry, biology, physiology, psychology, sociology, culture all come together in ways that, ideally, link the pursuit of our personal well-being, to the well-being of all. Religion, at its best, calls us out of our self-centeredness, and makes our sense of personal wholeness dependent upon our willingness to pursue the common good – so that when we are pursuing one, we are pursuing the other. Religion, at its best, creates an area of overlap between what’s good for me and what’s good for all. And it is in this realm that I want to be of greatest service to those around me, and to those who will come after. I want to help religion – for me, liberal religion - make a difference in our very ambiguous and paradoxical world, for the benefit of all.

So I am a humanistic religious naturalist...at least for now. But stay tuned, that could change, ...perhaps because of you.

So let our conversations deepen, because, religion is never a solo endeavor, even when we think we are going it alone. In services, in meetings, in study groups, in gatherings of all sorts, and In the hallway, at dinners, in the grocery store aisles, on canoe trips and walks in the woods, in phone conversations and lunches after services, Let’s risk talking about what really matters, Let’s risk talking about what we believe that guides our living and shapes our understanding, about what gives us something to hold on to when the going gets rough. Let’s talk about our attempts to answer those deepest questions. Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

As we journey forward with Chip at the helm, Let’s risk heading out on some open water together, risk leaving our safe, sheltered harbor to set sail on the trackless ocean of mystery that surrounds our knowledge. I know the harbor feels/is safer, and it is certainly

where I feel more comfortable, but safety and certainty are not what we need, though we may long for them.

Salvation depends not on certainty, but upon clarity.

There has been an elephant in the room...maybe even more than one.

Go ahead, touch it, examine it, walk around it, tell others what you feel, what you notice, what you see from where you are. Just don't assume that anyone else sees or feels the same things that you do.

Are you willing to share what you believe?

Are you willing to listen – really listen – with respect and compassion to what others believe?

Are you willing to be changed by the people around you?

Are you willing to pursue strong, yet flexible bonds with others, bonds that can survive someone else's changes and your own? ...

What do you believe?

And why? What is important to you?

I will speak for the kindred spirits in this room, your fellow skeptics, when I say,

We really want to know.

And we truly care.

For all our sakes.

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