

"QUESTIONS"
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You'll remember that tired old saw about how, when seeking to persecute Unitarian Universalists, the Klan burns question marks on our front lawns. I think the reason that cheesy one-liner keeps getting circulated in our ranks is the profound truth that questioning is nothing short of a spiritual discipline for religious liberals. Just as the Roman Catholic genuflects and the Muslim faces east, the religious liberal bows before the holy by way of revisiting timeless spiritual questions – questions like the ones we'll engage today.

This sermon is really my dialogue with those of you who took me up on my invitation to submit questions for today's service. The dialogue comes with two disclaimers. First, I wrestle with many of the same questions as you. And like every other honest soul in the world, sometimes my path is clear and easy to travel, sometimes it's barely discernible so thick is the overgrowth. That's just how it is.

Second, I also reserve the right to reverse myself on these and any of the other great questions that shake and soothe us. For the true quest affords us no long-term "un-askable" questions and harbors no clutching idolatry. The sacred-cow assumptions I make today may not stand the tests of time and experience; our minds are always being bent toward deeper truth and our hearts are always being shaped toward greater love. That's just how it is.

So, keeping in mind that I share with you this same terrible-yet-glorious existence, and having lifted up my right to change course in the face of new insights, let's explore some important questions.

I received seven questions in response to my invitation to help shape today's service. Paraphrased for brevity, they are:

- What is God?
- Is there an afterlife?
- Was Jesus really resurrected?
- Do Unitarian Universalists pray?
- Is there room for dissenting from UU support of gay marriage?
- Does emphasizing evolution mean total faith in materialism?
- What music inspires you?

What is God?

There is no limit to the number of approaches one can take to this, perhaps the most basic of theological concepts of Western spirituality. I'll touch on just three.

I'm convinced that supernatural deities were created by our early ancestors to help explain and manipulate those things beyond their control – things like the seasons, weather, illness and death.

As bands and tribes and armies sought to expand their influence over land and resources, so too did they impose their religious systems. Thus, when traced from early paganism through Greece and Rome, the concept of a single God comes to us freighted with a history. And that history is creative to the point of sheer genius in its ability to withstand the tests of time, reason and experience. But does a long and creative history, by itself, make the case for a supernatural God?

When the topic of God arises, I want to know what God is in play. If we're talking about the God that simultaneously loves and murders, punishes alleged sinners with hurricanes and treats human beings like flawed and helpless children, then I don't believe God is anything more than a projection of human anxiety carved in theological stone. And while I readily admit that the existence of a supernatural deity is not a testable thesis, reason and research don't support the God of orthodox faith.

Everything I just said comes from an intellectual approach to what God is. But what if God is, as John Spong suggests, not a being, but an *experience*? What if the sacred monotheistic texts are the embellished journals of persons who experienced an encounter with life so holy and transforming that, couched in the thoughts and beliefs of their day, produced a supernatural God? What if there exists outside the confining and intellectually indefensible bonds of orthodoxy an encounter with utter mystery? What if we were to stop

relegating God to the yellowed pages and empty rituals and bankrupt symbols of past days, and take notice of a holiness so present yet so transcendent? And what if we experienced a love so simultaneously frightening and desperately welcome as to call it God at work in and through us?

What is God? Our heads tell us that God is a concept from an era in which the supernatural world was taken as fact. And our hearts, what do they tell us? Our hearts tell us that God is the fire, the magic, the searing pain and sheer joy of being this side of the grass. Today. Here. Now.

Is There an Afterlife?

Perhaps no tenet of orthodoxy is at once as engaging and yet as potentially damaging to the human soul than absolute allegiance to a literal heaven and hell. It's the perfect either/or method for rewarding desired behavior and punishing variation from the group norm. It's eternal bliss, complete with mansions or virgins, depending on which book one makes idol. And it's eternal suffering, complete with gargoyles and fire, depending on which book one makes idol.

But, like God, the idea of an afterlife is more complex than the either/or crowd would have us believe. Quantum physics and science tell us that matter is diffused but not always destroyed. And even the

most hard-boiled existentialist comes up against a little mystery now and then, hinting at the possibility that the willowy energy we call soul or spirit may be something more than a flashback from a bad trip in 1972!

Is there an afterlife? Again, if there's an *objective* way to put this question to the test, we're yet to discover it. But the proverbial "jury" is still out. Our early Universalist ancestors were in many ways just like their orthodox Christian friends, save for one key difference: they were convinced that all souls would be restored to God in the afterlife. They believed in *universal salvation*. I say today that whatever the origins of these parts of us we call our souls, our souls yearn for *connection*. Despite the hateful, harmful exceptions from every era, I say, with the old-time Universalists, that our quest for connection just might continue beyond physical death. I say that the love that sustains and directs us in this life, leading us to risk all manner of things in its service, will most assuredly attend us whether we're reincarnated, crowned before heaven's throne or simply baked and scattered to the prairie winds! I say that love always has the final say. Always.

Was Jesus Really Resurrected?

At the risk of repeating last week's reflection on the Easter experience, the short answer is that Jesus' entire life is shrouded by

time, culture and language. We know that the Gospels are the products of generations of biased writers, not the eyewitness accounts of neutral reporters. We know that the messianic Hebrew tradition was invoked to explain the remarkable life of one who would not be bound by custom when custom violated human dignity. We know that human beings don't come back to life once they've been dead for three days. And because we know these things it's *reasonable* to say that the biblical tradition is not a trustworthy witness about a literal resurrection of Jesus, and thus the only answer to this question that is intellectually honest is no.

But, as I asked in last week's sermon, is there a more powerful way to talk about the life of the spirit than the notion of life springing from death? Think about it. Our souls will die a thousand different deaths before the body dies its one. Our plans will be wrecked, loved ones will leave us and disappointments will beset us – each and all a spiritual death of one sort or another – yet we choose to muddle through, putting one step in front of the other, *resurrecting* from the death of a dream the will to live. To borrow from a cliché, we choose life.

Was Jesus really resurrected? Bodily, no. But for those of us who are more concerned about what is *real* rather than what is provable, it's the paradigm of life-from-death that makes the Easter story *true*.

Do Unitarian Universalists pray?

If, by prayer, we mean the attempt to engage the supernatural in order to achieve a desired outcome, I can only think of a few UU Christians and UU Pagans who would respond with a yes. My experience has been that the vast majority of religious liberals reject that idea that a divinity, personal or otherwise, intervenes on our behalf.

But the idea of prayer as a petition to the gods and goddesses is just one way to think of prayer. Liberal Christians, most of whom are not Unitarian Universalists, of course, conceive of prayer as communication with that which they call God. The goal is to get beyond ego to a place that harmonizes the physical and psychological with the spiritual. We're wrong to minimize the power of such prayer, for when our minds, spirits and bodies are aligned we are better human beings and the world is not such a bad place after all. I think many a UU sees the value in that kind of prayer life.

I know Unitarian Universalists who are comfortable with prayer. Yoga, tai chi, mantras, labyrinths, prayer wheels, silence, incense, sweat lodges, sacred circles – we are as diverse in our understanding of prayer as with any other aspect of spirituality. Do Unitarian Universalists pray? Some do, some don't. Among those who do, there is at least one common theme: gratitude. Those of us who

pray, and those of us who don't - atheists, Christians, mystics, humanists theists – intuitively or by practiced discipline, we all understand gratitude. That's why that quote from Meister Eckhart is so popular in our churches and fellowships: If the only prayer you ever pray is 'thank you', it is enough.

Speaking for myself, prayer is my chance to be reminded that my soul is for real. It's an opportunity to shake hands with a world I can't see, yet can't deny. Prayer is an experience that is never imposed on me; it's my voluntary bow before mystery. It's my response to the fact that I am, as AA says, *not God*. Part of God, yes. God? No way.

Is there room for dissenting from UU support of gay marriage?

Heck, yes! Speaking for myself, the day that either our denomination - or even Nora Church - decides to override the principle of individual conscience will be the day I jump ship and ask you to follow me! What's at stake in this question is twofold: the issue of legal marriage for gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender persons and the right to disagree with the majority who call for equal marriage.

To my mind, liberal religion – the real thing, that is – puts the responsibility upon each of us to explore not only our inner life, but also the outer life we share. That means that we regularly encourage one another and sometimes challenge one another. We are not

required to be joined at the hip or the head, just the heart; at our best we not only tolerate diversity of opinion, we expect it. (Theodore Parker's timeless observation echoes as I write that line: We need not think alike to love alike.) But we also nudge one another to know *why* we've come to certain conclusions. What authority can we claim for our convictions? Who or what influences us in our decisions? And what are the logical consequences for our position?

I don't claim neutrality on equal marriage: I'm an advocate. But there is no shortage of things about Unitarian Universalism – national, regional or local – that get my shorts in a bind. (For example, I believe we ought to sell our headquarters and other buildings on Boston's Beacon Hill, some of the most expensive real estate in the nation. Friends, leave it to me and we'd sell the whole enchilada, buy respectable digs in, say, Kansas City – a place our staff could actually afford to live and work – and show that we're serious about modeling the world we say we'd like to see! All that history? I'm a history buff, but when does "history" become *idolatry*?)

Well, that little diatribe complete, the point is this: none of us gets the exact denomination or even church that we want; I'm yet to find the "First Unitarian Universalist Church of Me". Stick around any one of our congregations and it won't be long before somebody, somewhere, sometime is going to hold fast to a conviction that is

directly opposed to yours. And if the matter at hand requires a congregational vote, we sometimes have a majority and a minority. This is our polity. This is our way of discernment. This is our way of moving through decisions that must be made.

Is there room for dissenting from UU support for gay marriage? Yes, on this and every other issue related to conscience! We can expect nothing less of ourselves if we are the tolerant people we claim to be.

Does emphasizing evolution mean total faith in materialism?

If I grasp the point of this question, the word materialism is being used in its philosophical context. Materialism is a school of thought that comes to us through nineteenth century Scottish philosophers, although its roots go back at least as far as Greece. The idea is that the only truth that exists is that we can experience through our senses. Materialism is perhaps the most extreme form of rationalism, allowing little room for feelings or intuition. (Incidentally, materialism was vehemently opposed by Emerson and other Transcendentalists; while they couldn't abide the personal God of the mainstream Unitarian clergy, neither did they trust the rational approach of the secular intellectuals.)

I see a middle path between the Creationists and the Darwinians, but

it's not the "Intelligent Design" theory that some fundamentalists proffer. I find in Darwin's theory nothing less than the magic of Life at work. It's the same magic that moved Clyde Tombaugh, the late discoverer of Pluto, Unitarian Universalist and parishioner in a church I once served, when he looked at the sky. Clyde could identify stars, gaseous clouds and storms on the sun. He could explain in detail the collision known as the Big Bang. He looked through a telescope of one kind or another for six decades. And he did it all with the excited grin of a Cheshire cat, for the scope and mystery of it all never failed to stir his soul.

Sure, there is inherent in every theory the danger that its followers will torture truth for the sake of their particular doctrine, religious or secular. But we religious liberals have inherited a legacy that is forever searching for knowledge, yet secure enough to engage the wonder of not knowing all the answers and being grateful for sheer beauty. Does emphasizing the magic of evolution require us to surrender the magic of mystery? Not by a long shot! We need not adopt the either/or dualism of some faiths or most secular traditions. We can find in the theory of evolution a way to feed our souls while we meet the tests of our minds. Such a deal!

What Music Inspires You?

This final question may seem like an easy one, but given the range of styles, artists and lyrics that feed me it's not so simple. Some days I'm all about solo piano. Some days it's Sinatra. And some days it's Frank Zappa and the Mothers.

But, for today, this is what feeds me. I've chosen a piece I sometimes use to meditate, David Crosby's 1972 recording of "Where Will I Be". I recognize that you've been sitting for some time, letting me throw heady ideas and words at you. But if you will, get comfortable, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. And listen as Crosby asks three questions that lie at the heart of the spiritual quest:

(Play Recording)

Where will I be when I go back home?

Who will I see when I'm all alone?

And what am I going to do?

Keep in mind that the root of the word question is the word *quest*. Our lives are always in process, always a blessed brew of fear and courage. We're always about a quest of some kind or another. Our congregation is likewise a living cell, part respite for our spirits and part workshop for our growth; Nora Church is itself about a quest. Our questions – evidence of our continuing quest – are a source of deeper living and greater compassion. Keep *questing*, friends. Keep questing.