

Jefferson Unitarian Church
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“Cherish Your Doubts”

Plato said, “The truth is in the paradox.” If you are not seeing the paradox, you are not seeing the whole truth. This is a challenge to look further, look deeper, look at all sides and no side. Think outside the box, question if there is even a box. Consider the quote from our reading which says, “A belief which may not be questioned, binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief.”

I have been questioning my beliefs about the notion of God for at least three decades or more. When I went to seminary, I figured I should at least have a solid understanding of my own beliefs! It caused me a fair amount of angst being in seminary and not knowing what to think or say about God. Is there a God, or isn't there? How many Gods? What's the nature of God?

Somehow, it seemed logical that if I was to have a degree of Master of Divinity, I should somehow know these things!

On the one hand, the notion of God seemed a bit ridiculous. There were the usual childish definitions and descriptions of God that made absolutely NO sense to me. I simply could not buy in to some old guy in the sky watching and judging our every move to measure out if we deserved to go to heaven or not. Something was clearly lost in translation.

There were other concepts of God that did make more sense, though. Notions that there is something beyond oneself, something beyond ordinary observable reality, some unifying force, some loving presence, somehow seemed to ring true. Clearly there is much more beyond me and there is much more to our existence than just what we can see. But is that “God”?

And yet, the worldview of my dad, the scientist and science teacher, also seemed incomplete. He told me that science had all of the answers and that religion was nothing more than old

superstition. This too made sense in many ways, but it just didn't seem like the whole story and I had my doubts. I probably had doubts because he taught me to question everything. He taught me to use the scientific method and always keep looking below the surface.

In fact, I suspect my whole spiritual, religious explorations began in elementary school when my dad began asking me,

“Dana, what is real?”

“What do you mean, dad? Real is all that we see around us.”

“How do you know?”

Exasperated and confused I answered, “I know because I see it and hear it and taste it and feel it.”

“Can you prove that it is real?”

“Dad, it isn't pretend!”

“Are you sure? How do you really know?”

Ah, here was the beginning of doubt and the long path of widening my perspective over my lifetime.

Little did I know that I would be confronted with the same question during my studies at seminary when studying the work of the great 18th c. philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Kant's questioning of what is real, led him to observe that everything we see and experience in life is filtered through ourselves, our physical perceptions and our cultural perspectives, so we are shaped by reality which causes us to shape our perception of reality since the moment we are born. So we can never fully experience anything from a purely objective experience, just as it is.

Kant explains, "It always remains a scandal of philosophy and universal human reason that the existence of things outside us ... should have to be assumed merely on faith, and that if it occurs to anyone to doubt it, we should be unable to answer him with a satisfactory proof." This was my dad's whole point.

In other words, the observer is always a part of the equation and we can never get out of our own heads to experience objective reality. This is why any source of wisdom, whether it is science

or religion or philosophy or an astute observation from a child, is only wisdom if it resonates with our own inner perceptions and experience.

In seminary, whenever anyone put forth some notion about God, for some reason, I felt compelled to argue the opposite perspective. Any definition simply was too limiting. One moment I was mostly convinced that I DID believe in something I would call God and another moment, I was pretty convinced that there was no such thing.

So maybe God is just a human construct? That makes sense. We, as humans, commonly experience the world from a dualistic perspective, with good and bad, right and wrong, and us and them. And, life is quick to teach us that we are not in control of how things work out, so there must be something else out there, beyond ourselves, causing things to happen out of our control. This something else needs a name, so let's call it "God". This particular word "God" that we use in the English language comes from German. And, as we know, there is a long list of

other names of God, some are male, others female, and others neuter or neither, from all the faith traditions from around the world and from the past.

But what do these God-names mean? If these God-concepts and words are just a human construct, made up from our imagination, then on some level, isn't everything just a human construct? Isn't every word just an auditory symbol that we have assigned to things so that we can communicate with language? Chair, carpet, piano, etc. Seeing this combination of wood and fabric and padding as something we call "chair" is a human construct. I don't need to believe in it or not. I do have faith that it will hold me up, however.

Clearly throughout time, people all around the world have been having spiritual experiences and trying to put it into words that ultimately fall short of what they are trying to explain, because they are describing something that is indescribable and beyond words. Perhaps the word "God" is just shorthand for "that which is indescribable". One must experience it for oneself. So

religious words and labels, treatises, myths and sutras can only point a seeker in the right direction, it can't create the experience. Kant was right, we must experience reality and make sense of reality from within our own skin.

The Peach and the Onion

For some of us we have a theology that is like a peach. At the very center there is a core. There is something at the center of existence, the center of reality. It might be defined many different ways and it may be indefinable, but there is something there, in Hinduism this would be called the Atman or the Self with a capital S. Not individual selves, but the big unified Self - Atman. This is the perspective of one supreme organizing intelligence, a unifying force of which we are all a part that could be called God.

Then some of us have a theology that is more like an onion. There are many layers of insight and understanding, but when you peel back, layer after layer after layer, eventually there is absolutely nothing at the center. In Buddhism, this would be the

Anatman or No-Self. This is the perspective of no-God or no supreme organizing intelligence in the universe.

As I wrestled with all of this, I realized that any definition that tried to pin down that which is both within and beyond myself just would not work. It would be incomplete and inaccurate. So, in that regard, no, I don't believe in God. But I can't be completely convinced that there is nothing beyond what my senses perceive because reality is so unfathomably vast and *I am* convinced that in some way it is all interconnected.

I do experience a deep mystery of life that weaves us all together throughout all of time - past, present and future. We are star-stuff, and we are each a movement, a motion, a unique sound blending with all the other sounds that have ever occurred or will ever occur and we are all together creating this grandest of ever unfolding symphonies called Life.

So, is this God? Well, no. I mean, yes. I mean – that question just doesn't make any sense any more! Yes and No, I

simultaneously believe in God and do not believe in God equally and neither can be true if the other is untrue! Oh how I have looked forward to sharing this paradox with you!

So you can understand my sheer joy when I was taught the deeper definition of the word “Allah” the most important Arabic name of God. In English, we just translate that word as “God” imposing all of our baggage of that word. But Al-lah is a mirror image of itself. AL and LA. Al means “yes” or affirmative, and La is its opposite meaning of “no” or negative. Allah means the Yes-No of all reality! Exactly what I have been saying! The truth is in the paradox! It is both a particle and a wave, it is the Tao that cannot be named and the 10,000 things, it is the great mystery that transcends our dualistic perceptions. It isn't one or the other is it both and all. Yet even now, language limits this understanding because I have to refer to it as “it” or something. So it is something and it is nothing simultaneously!

Now, please understand, I am not trying to convince any of you of anything with these theological ponderings. In fact, I delight

in knowing that we have a church full of many differing points of view, and isn't that wonderful!? What rich conversations we could have if we all shared our latest doubts and questions! As our Seven Principles remind us, it is up to each of us to pursue our own search for truth and meaning and there is no one truth that we must all believe in. Thank God (the God that we may or may not believe in) that we are all free to think for ourselves and it is not my job as a UU minister to tell anyone what to believe!

So, why even bring all of this up? Having talked with many of you over the course of the past year and a half, you too have your doubts, which lead to many questions. You are thoughtful and deep - exploring many different sources and ideas.

And yet, have you ever noticed that we are also really nice people and we tend to avoid talking about God and theology and beliefs very much because we don't want to risk offending someone who doesn't think or believe the same that we believe.

Do you get offended if you talk with someone who holds differing beliefs? Most of us don't unless someone is expecting us to conform to his or her thinking. In fact our third principle of the Seven Principles clearly states that, "we agree to affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." There is no qualifying clause stating only if others agree with my perspective.

Leaving an old belief system, such as a religion that *does* tell you what to believe, and where there is certainty in the teachings, for a life filled with doubt and questioning can feel like waking up to a world that no longer makes any sense. It can feel like all meaning for living has evaporated and there is nothing to replace it. It can be a very dark and painful and depressing place to be. And that is often exactly why people walk through our doors.

We come here as seekers. And we come here sometimes as religious refugees needing a safe and supportive sanctuary where we can wrestle with our beliefs and our doubts and our emerging

questions. We each need a community that is willing to listen, converse, and explore these thoughts and feelings with us as we discern our own understanding of truth and meaning. We need an environment built on trust and acceptance where we can lovingly hear perspectives that are quite different from our own.

These conversations can be the most profound and life-changing conversations we have ever experienced, truly. These are the conversations that ease away old narratives built on fear of damnation. These are the conversations that spontaneously heal old wounds of shame. These are the conversations that help us rediscover hope through new beliefs that actually make sense to us and that we can fully and wholeheartedly embrace because they are life giving not life depleting. Oh how we are all so enriched when we engage in these conversations!

As thoughtful, open-minded human beings, and as UU's, I have no doubt that each of us is filled with doubts. Cherish your doubts because they are the open door to questioning.

Questioning is the crucible of discernment and clarity. If

something seems true for us, it may or may not withstand our most intense questioning. If it is not a truth, it will burn away, if it is a truth, it will be strengthened and we will be left with clarity and deeper understanding.

So what doubts are you carrying around with you? What are the questions you haven't dared to ask? What would your life be like if you had friends in your life that you trusted to discuss these thoughts? That is what this faith community is capable of and that's what we are here for. So I challenge us to live our faith more fully by embracing, cherishing, celebrating our doubts and welcoming our questions. Let this place be your sanctuary of exploration. Grounded in acceptance and welcoming our differences, we each become enriched and transformed.

As a big fan of Star Trek, I end with a quote from the final episode of *The Next Generation*, *All Good Things*, written by Brannon Braga:

“An entity named Q: The Continuum didn't think you had it in you, Jean-Luc. But I knew you did...We wanted to see if you had the ability to expand your mind and your horizons. And for one brief moment, you did.

Picard: When I realized the paradox.

Q: Exactly. For that one fraction of a second, you were open to options you had never considered. That is the exploration that awaits you. Not mapping stars and studying nebula, but charting the unknown possibilities of existence.”

My friends, Let's make it so. Amen.