

“Our Holy Curiosity”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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My title this morning is taken from the Rev. Bruce Marshall’s book of the same title. Through the stories of many different people, seeking diverse perspectives, he explores the big religious questions that have always confronted humanity:

Who am I? What can I trust? How can I live knowing about death?

Why do bad things happen? How shall I live? What brings me hope?

Were these the questions that brought you to Unitarian Universalism? Or, was it more a vague or profound longing than a specific question? Were you seeking a little comfort in the midst of grief or despair? Did a friend invite you to come and share what they had discovered? Or, did your child ask a cosmic question for which you had no confident answer?

We are drawn to that first visit to a new church for many reasons – more often a deep personal need rather than an intellectual quandary. Have you explored the depths of this tradition, investigated the history; unearthed the points of transition from Christianity to the religious diversity and pluralism we embrace today? Have you gotten to the surprise center of Unitarian Universalism?

A lot of questions for you to consider. I ask because most people who identify as Unitarian Universalists never discover the complex richness of our history and practice. One final question: Are you religiously curious?

Unitarian Universalist tradition is based upon a profound commitment to right relationships between and among human beings, between individuals and their understandings of the divine mystery, and within themselves. We offer an opportunity to explore what is needed to make life whole within a caring community. Ours is a covenantal tradition based on the promises we make rather than a common creed we all assent to.

In a covenantal tradition, the famous question of the Hebrew prophet Amos is always relevant: “Can two walk together save they be agreed?” Contemporary Unitarian Universalism is based on the premise that we are agreed on the covenant that binds us together, and that promise frees each of us to conduct an individual, responsible search for truth and meaning. It gives each of us a context within which to refine our thinking, share our most profound experiences, and learn from one another.

Often congregations confine the notion of covenant to the assumption of a mutual promise among members and friends in their congregation. While even that can be a challenging promise to make and keep, I think it is far too small for our values. A more accurate reading of our history reflects a covenant with life – with all existence and all that is life affirming.

In the second half of the 20th century, after the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America, our religious commitment to community and right relationship was overshadowed by the culture’s blind and arrogant

pursuit of rugged individualism – a misguided notion that the individual is somehow separate from or above the interdependence that allows life happen for each of us. The focus was on individual accomplishment and power rather than an understanding of the common good. In many congregations, their dedication to individualism resulted in no covenantal language, minimal civility and no shared expectations of one another; they debated rather than conversed; they wanted to win rather than be understood. Our affair with individualism cost us mightily. We lost something of profound historic and contemporary importance: a sense of our human and ecological interdependence.

We are shifting again toward the great founding principles of our early tradition: aspirational and communal covenants acknowledging that each of us has much to teach and much to learn, a more accurate understanding of congregational polity, and devotion to the historic roots and responsibilities of a free faith. Unitarian Universalism isn't about a gathering of like-minded people. It is all about a gathering open-minded, like-hearted people who want to learn from one another, who actively want to explore what it means to be human in this place and time, who are always ready to change their understandings as new experiences and insights present themselves. It is all about a practice of holy curiosity.

The most recent issue of *The Atlantic* magazine gives us some insight into the benefits of curiosity. I found the article titled *The Peculiar Blindness of Experts* quite fascinating. The author, David Epstein, reviews the track records of economist, biologists, psychologists, political scientists, intelligence officers – PhDs all – in predicting the future course of human events. He reports that the experts are “comically bad at predicting the future”. He concludes that “Insight into the future requires a style of thinking uncommon among experts.” It turns out the experts know one “big thing” very thoroughly. They were voracious consumers of information that confirms their “big thing”, opinions, biases and systems. They are almost impervious to contradicting information. These deeply and tightly focused experts were labeled “hedgehogs”, based on the work of Russian-born, British philosopher Isaiah Berlin from his book *The Hedgehogs and the Foxes*. Those better able to predict future events were natural integrators of great volumes of diverse information, finding wisdom and truth across contradictory perspectives. These were labeled Foxes. In 2011 the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA) – gotta smile at that one! – funded a research project on research. They authorized five independent researchers to gather teams for the purpose of making very specific and difficult daily predictions. There were no constraints on who could be on a team or what size the team could be.

The winning team – by a wide margin, was composed of 3,200 lightly screened volunteers with no special professional education or experience but with an interest in the project and a habit of reading across disciplines. Within the 3,200, the lead researchers identified a smaller group with “extremely wide-ranging interests and unusually expansive reading habits.” They weighted their daily predictions toward this smaller group and were amazingly close to actual events.

In addition to the wide-ranging interests and expansive reading habits this smaller group was uniquely able to collaborate – BECAUSE they were curious about everything. They viewed their teammates as sources of learning rather than peers to be convinced. They were looking for the new, different, unexpected, the co-causally linked. They were not

seeking confirmation of their own genius. The results confirmed that the capacity to collaborate, to really listen and integrate another's perspective AND the willingness to change one's mind with new information were the keys to solid predictions. Hmmm. How would your life be transformed if you recognized that everyone you meet has something to teach you, a new perspective, a new awareness; a profound life experience that cannot be denied. Can you imagine regularly changing your mind about significant issues? Are you willing to get lost with confidence in a new topic, relying on your curiosity to navigate. This is the what Unitarian Universalism can offer.

It is only together, relying upon the strength of each other that we will be an effective voice for liberal religion. It is only together – exerting a little pressure on one another: a little pressure to be present, a little pressure to be vulnerable, a little pressure to be faithful and forgiving, a little pressure to be curious about all that is emerging in the world and why. It is only by exerting a little pressure on one another that we bless one another into a community of faith. It is – actually – not possible to be a Unitarian Universalist all by yourself. Ours is a commitment, a practice and a discipline: it is only in community that one actualizes this tradition; only by remaining open and eager; learning and collaborating will we fulfill our covenant with life. We could be the foxes of the world religions.

In one of our New Mexico congregations the minister was asked rather plaintively by an eight-year old boy why he had to come to Sunday school. The minister responded, “We come to Sunday school to grow our hearts.” Yes, we all come to church to accept the discipline and practice of growing our hearts. We are growing our hearts to better respect and care for everything on our planet. “It is a moral aesthetic, an ethical alchemy. If you behave in a certain way, you will be transformed.” (Karen Armstrong) Some call this third-order change – the kind of change from which you cannot go back, change you cannot unknow. For some of us parenthood was a third-order change and we will never again be without a parent sensibility. The work many of our congregations are doing to deeply understand the role of white supremacy in systemic racism will prompt third-order change. We will never again think that racial injustice is rooted in individual prejudice. When an authentic and holy curiosity informs your life, you will be transformed. And we are in the transformation business – just like every other congregation, church, mosque, meeting and synagogue.

I'm never sure how much members know of the history of our founding traditions. Are you aware that both Universalism and Unitarianism are Christian heresies? Each word was initially used to denigrate the early movements. Our American forebears, after considerable struggle to be understood, simply embraced the slur and accepted the names thrust upon them. I imagine it was hard for them because they were earnestly trying to reform the Christian church. They thought that fundamental Biblical truths were being ignored.

Our forebears were Christian reformers. They professed the unity of God and the universal salvation of humankind. We began as a movement grounded in scriptural authority. The Universalists believed that God's promise of salvation through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as the Christ was ultimate and universal – it extended to everyone, whether they knew it or accepted it – human salvation was accomplished. The Unitarians believed in the unity of God because they did not find

reference to a triune Godhead in the Bible. Together the Universalists and the Unitarians believed in the perfectibility of humankind – that education, culture, discipline and reason would refine the baser human emotions. By my reading of our history it was this last notion – the perfectibility of humankind – that really caused the trouble between Unitarians and the state church of the day. This notion was a real threat to the power structure and the historic understanding of why people were able to live in community. According to the historic dominant theology it was only the fear of God, hell fire and damnation that restrained human beings and kept community from exploding. While I am not ready to advocate for the perfectibility of humankind, I will witness to the ongoing possibility of the improvability.

I think it is appropriate that we are named for two heresies, each pleading for unity and solidarity. I would add curiosity as another heresy – the constant concern for why things are as they are and how they might be different or better – our tendency to test authority for righteousness. The word heresy is derived from the Greek word meaning “to choose”. That is exactly what we are still charged to do almost daily: choose what is true, what is right, what is loving, what is helpful, what is of lasting value, what is faithful. And from these explorations we build a personally transforming faith based on what we have found grows our hearts and liberates our spirits.

We have promised to walk together through all of the joys and struggles and sorrows that life brings us. This is a powerful statement. It is especially powerful because we have not promised to agree on anything more than walking together. We do this because we acknowledge that TRUTH is a very large matter. Seeking truth, growing in wisdom is a profound exploration, not an exercise for the faint of heart. Wisdom requires finding truth in many perspectives and integrating that knowledge to serve humankind. It is these various angles of vision on the truth that we promise to share with one another. It is a promise of authenticity and action. It is the primary challenge of our tradition. It is this promise of relationship, of thoughtful engagement that spurs us to support the decisions of the congregation even when we have advocated for another path. The congregation does not exist to serve our individual wills. As part of the covenant we are all called to graciously and generously accept the will of the congregation, even when we remain curious about “what they were thinking”.

The bumper sticker theology “To question is the answer” was very popular for a time. It summarizes our commitment to continuous revelation, to the realization that our answers are always provisional – standing until we know or understand more fully. We encourage people to ask the difficult and painful questions about the human experience and the impact of this experience on others. The power of our way in religion is that we companion one another through the search for answers knowing full well that we will not all find the same answers. We affirm that there are answers. These answers will save your life – from bitterness, despair, and meaninglessness – and surely that is a saved life. To question is essential. To find meaningful answers is the goal. The ability to change our answers as new information or experience is presented is the very soul of our faith and critical to spiritual maturity.

Each of us needs a place to be sustained in our search, supported on our journey; a place to be our truest selves simultaneously wounded and wonderful. We need a congregation in which we can agree to disagree without fear of someone leaving; a congregation that

values personal experience as well as academic learning; a congregation that believes everyone has a story of truth to share. Until each of us is looking for wisdom and truth in another's experience, the heart of this tradition remains elusive. Are you curious? Are you pursuing your faith this way? This is the most important and most rewarding work we can do. Let's do it together – open and eager to understand more fully. Amen.