

Living With Uncertainty

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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My problems with uncertainty began in eighth grade English class. I was a sensitive fourteen year old, accustomed to doing well in school, when within one week of a particular lesson plan I discovered, to my horror, that there was something terribly wrong with my brain. And even worse, all my fellow students could see it, as well, plain as day. Mr Erikson sure did, and my grade that semester reflected my shame. My problem was that I could not debate. And I still cannot debate, in the classic fashion. Give me almost any subject and I will not be able to take the side of one absolute opinion and stick with it. Unfortunately I can usually see something of worth in what the other side is saying. And debating teams are not looking for that special someone who can inevitably chime in with “Oh, I see your point!” In a world that has traditionally, at least for the last few hundreds of years, valued black and white opinions, I can usually be found swimming around in the rainbow of colors in between.

It has been a curse! Or perhaps, I thought, some rare recessive gene that first expressed itself in an eighth grade girl who loved science *and* liked to talk about religion. I have spent most of my life wondering why *I* had to be the one who could see both sides of everything. Why did *I* not always need the definite opinions that most people felt were so important? Wishy-washy was the awful phrase that came to mind.

I literally lived with this mistaken notion – that I was lacking some preferable dimension to my mental faculties – until rather recently. The change came in one of those “light bulb” moments when a whole new way of understanding yourself becomes possible. We were studying (in Seminary) about communication and the subject was Martin Buber’s concept of the narrow ridge. The narrow ridge, according to Buber, is that idealized place to be in all our relationships with others. It is a place to which, yes, we bring our preconceived notions, but also a place from which we are open to hear and maybe be persuaded by what others bring to the conversation. From the ridge we can travel a little bit down the hill to the right and then a little bit down the hill to the left, returning not necessarily to the same ridge we came in on, but perhaps to a newly modified opinion or viewpoint. The light bulb went on in my head. I recognized this place. This was my very own wishy-washy fence/ridge that I had despaired ever knowing. I was not cursed after all! I was, while hopefully retaining some humility about it all, in fact, blessed!

I am indebted to Martin Buber. “One must be open,” he said, “to the other’s viewpoint and willing to alter one’s position based upon appropriate and just cause, if necessary.” (Arnett, p. 36) It’s the kind of relationship that helps marriages survive, for example; a relationship “in which both partners recognize the need for equality, shifting leadership, and a willingness to follow the other’s advice when appropriate.” (Arnett, p. 35)

I rather despair the seeming need for many people to remain frozen in their absolutes. Here are just a few examples of absolutes that bother me. Jesus Christ is the only path to salvation. Life begins at conception and must be preserved without regard to the quality of that potential life or that of the parents or that of the world as the population rises beyond the sustainable capacity of the earth. The civil rights of and religious significance of marriage should only apply to the committed relationship between a man and a woman. These days I can often be heard talking back to George Bush and others on the television, telling them, in John Kerry debate fashion, “But it’s more complicated than that.”

When it comes to absolutes I think there are very few. The emerging evidence from physics is that the very basis of our existence is, in fact, rooted in uncertainty. “In 1927, the German physicist Werner Heisenberg, a theorist, showed that quantum physics and the wave-particle duality of nature forbid the precise measurement of a particle, or anything else. Nature has an essential indeterminacy and can be pinned down only so far and no farther. It’s called the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, and is one of our most important statements about the intrinsic property of nature.

It is also a very difficult concept to comprehend! Amazingly, even Einstein refused to believe it at all, as he was convinced that “the Old One,” as he put it, “does not play dice.” (Lightman, p. 237) Today, after hundreds of years in which western society has thought of our world in a very mechanistic and exacting way, the notion of uncertainty leaves us, well, uncertain. Many people refuse, like Einstein, or perhaps are just unable to grasp the value in this way of thinking. Perhaps Einstein did not fully comprehend his own piece in the uncertainty game, as the theory of relativity posits that even time does not flow at an absolute rate. (Lightman, p. 277) Will we, as a human race, ever be able to incorporate this inherent notion of uncertainty and process into our philosophies and religions and from there into the ethics of our everyday lives?

It does seem as if the once popular model of a machine to represent our concept of existence is changing of late. The philosopher-scientist Arthur Koestler suggested in 1978 that a new model might be found in the idea of a holon: “a whole made of its own parts, yet itself part of a larger whole. Each holon has two opposite tendencies: a self-assertive desire to preserve its own autonomy...and an integrative tendency to function as part of the larger whole, hence the notion of [community].” (Omurchu, p. 58) I see the model of a holon as applicable well beyond the world of quantum physics. In fact it sounds a lot like the tension inherent in our very own religious institutions! Our lives and our relationships are always in process.

“Trust doubt, doubt certainty,” say the Zen philosophers. In the ancient Eastern parable of the uncut stone it was said that when the sculpter makes that first cut and begins to bring a particular definition to the artwork at the same time a sadness emerges as the infinite possibilities of the stone are no longer. Lao Tzu, in the Tao Te Ching, wrote that “the best carver does no cutting.” (Patton, p. 10) There are many examples from thousands of years ago of people who already understood, in some intuitive way, the value of the uncertainty in which we live.

I believe that when we hold fast to any kind of certainty, possibility itself is diminished. We don’t usually think of it this way, but the original Jewish concept of god allowed for a great

deal of uncertainty in that the name itself was unpronounceable and was meant to speak of a deity that was neither completed nor finished. “This God [was] literally not yet,” writes Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. (Kushner, p. 144) I think the significance of this insightful ambiguity has been lost over time as God took on more and more specific definition. And when Moses carved out the ten commandments on those stone tablets history was significantly changed in that absolutes became established for ethical behavior. “But Moses,” I still find myself wanting to say, “sometimes it’s more complicated than that.”

We are having a difficult time coming out of this very long period in human history in which certainty has been thought of as not only a good thing, but as absolutely the best thing. I do see signs that this is changing. In our country today I see a schism between what appears to be those for whom absolutes are necessary (i.e. Fundamentalists of any sort, conservative or liberal) and those who are able to somehow live complete and ethical lives even if they don’t know all the answers. Sharon Welch calls this an ethic of risk which she describes in her book, *Sweet Dreams in America*. Key, she writes, “is a nondualistic understanding of good and evil and, correspondingly, images of hope that can counter cynicism and despair without relying on utopian expectations or millennial dreams.” (Welch, p. xi) She is advocating finding our power in the gray areas, where we might not always know that what we do will have any positive results, but we know nonetheless that we must do it. “It does seem infinitely better than standing still.” (Richard Gilbert, from *Living on Paradox Drive*)

No one way of thinking, no one ideology is going to be without problems. In an essay on *The Postmodern Soul*, Sam Keen both criticizes and extols living with uncertainty, or, in his words, postmodernism. “Postmodernism is completely indifferent to the questions of consistency and continuity,” he writes. Keen laments that the postmodern man (his sexist language) “has given up the quest for a single identity, a consistent point of view or triumph over tragedy.....He is a blank page, a tabula rasa, upon which the moment writes its tale.....He samples religions and salvation schemes.” But in the end, following even more scathing remarks, Keen ends with “Without an organizing center, postmodern man is lost, wandering in a wilderness of confusing plurality. But paradoxically, being bereft of set moral landmarks, he is in a unique position to undertake a new journey.” (Cousineau, p. 114)

This is what I, too, am trying to say this morning. I agree with John Shelby Spong that “our own peculiar [human] destiny is to wrestle with the new issue (as in increasingly obvious issue) of potential meaninglessness.” Without a new way of thinking that becomes systemic, unconscious, part of a new human dynamic there will be no progress out of the ills that dualistic black and white thinking has caused for us all. Until more people can stand on Martin Buber’s narrow ridge, in their own particularity, and not only admit but appreciate the diversity all around them, the divisiveness of the absolutist and the fundamentalist will continue to tear us apart. I fervently hope Victor Hugo’s words are true: “There is only one thing more powerful than all the armies of the world, and that is an idea whose time has come.”

Looking back on my tortured life as a fourteen year old, I should have noticed that my so-called debating problem was not an issue with my fellow LRY youth – or even the adults at the UU church where my family spent much of its time. I have since come to realize that Unitarian Universalists live, breathe and eat in and from that gray zone. The very core of our existence is

rooted not only in the lack of, but also in the impossibility of absolutes. We in the liberal religious tradition believe that revelation is ongoing; that our understandings of reality will and should change as we learn and intuit more about ourselves, each other, and the world around us. We do not see our perception of Truth as something that is static but rather as something that is, and will always be, in process. Ideally, we try to see our conversations about our diverse theologies, for example, as illustrations of the more complete people we can be if we let our personal evolution include the input of ideas we might not otherwise have thought of. We are less likely than most to know of concise labels that do justice to our complex natures.

There are a lot of reasons, in our world today, to be talking about this subject. Our human psychology is beleaguered by the results of our ability to worry about a future over which we know we do not have total control. Our particular fear of death would probably top the list. Wendall Berry names it “forethought of grief.” It is very human.

Much of which I am speaking this morning, however, is about that fear of the unknown that leads some people to a belief system that divides us, born of what I think is a mistaken certainty that something or other is an absolute. We call it fundamentalism and it is possible at either end of the spectrum from conservative to liberal. What is our responsibility, then, as Unitarian Universalists, people who may have a bit of a head start toward an openness to uncertainty? Without absolutes of our own to use as rhetoric it often appears difficult to catch the attention of, much less persuade absolutists to a more open attitude. There has been much talk about just this topic of late, particularly since the last presidential election, with suggestions that the liberals or progressives develop a new and more powerful/influential language. I think this is also the gist of UUA president, Bill Sinkford’s, call for a language of reverence within our religious tradition. The danger I see is that in putting specific names to our reverence, our Truth, (putting knife to the sculptor’s stone) we may only bring limits, more divisiveness, and not new possibility. We should tread carefully.

Perhaps the answer, then, as we often conclude, is not in words, but in how we exemplify our faith in the lives we live. If we are comfortable within our non-creedal, non-dual, Unitarian Universalist uncertainty – love life and show compassion for our neighbor – perhaps our actions will speak louder than words ever could. Perhaps that potential doubter on the other side might find hope merely in our kind and reassuring presence in their life. The emotional freedom we visibly exude, at peace yet without specific answers, could be the example that someone else desperately needs.

I heard a wonderful story about one of our UU covenant groups that illustrates my point. There was a men’s group that had been meeting for some time, and as happens, they became to each other a community of support and encouragement. When one of the group became ill and was hospitalized, naturally some of the other men began visiting him on a regular basis in the hospital. Well, the family of the patient in the other bed watched this over the course of many days and finally asked if the visiting men were family. No, they said. Well you must be chaplains then, assigned to visit? No, they said. We are just friends from church. What church is that, the other family asked, and when told they replied, “Well, we never heard of Unitarian Universalism, but if what you do there leads you to become this kind of person, we want to come

too.” It is the Karmic notion that “we are heirs to the results of our actions, to the intentions we bring to every movement we initiate.” (Kornfield, p. 235)

I am suggesting that we live as if it matters, even if we don’t know exactly why. The poet Rilke called us to “cherish the questions themselves, like closed rooms and like books written in a very strange tongue.”

There is an art to living within the existential nature of our world. We may indeed be “the chance inhabitants of one planet on one edge of a solar system in a universe that is endless,” (Charles Stephens, p. 19) but we can love this world nevertheless. “Just because the universe is indifferent to us,” wrote Charles Stephens, “is no reason for us to be indifferent about it.” (p. 19) “The art of living with uncertainty is the ability to love the world the way it is as much as the world we wish it to be.” (Rob Eller Issacs, from a sermon on the subject)

When I was fourteen I wished that I could be like everyone else and know for sure what was real and true and right. Now I know I *am* just like everyone else, but the world as I see it, has not limits, but possibility. Now, as Vanessa Southern wrote in *This Piece of Eden*, I try to “dance with the madness of the cosmos and not against it. My door is open and my heart is ready for anything.”