

QUESTIONING AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
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The Zen parable may be familiar to many of you, since it is a popular choice for meditation readings on Sunday. A young man had gone for a hike in the mountains one fine day when he rounded a bend and found a tiger ahead of him on the path. The tiger snarled, pounced; the young man turned to flee, lost his balance, and fell over the edge of the cliff. Fortunately, he managed to stop his fall by grabbing hold of a small bush growing from the sheer rock face. Thanking the gods for saving him, the man began to breathe easier—until he felt the bush start to pull loose from the cliff. The man looked above to see whether he could climb up to safety, but the tiger had remained, watching and waiting to pounce. The man looked down, to see whether he could drop to safety, but the canyon over which he dangled was a deep one, with no ledges to break a fall. The man pondered his fate; another root of the bush he clung to broke free. Just then the man noticed two ripe strawberries on the bush. With the tiger menacing above, and certain death awaiting him far below, the man picked the strawberries and ate them. How sweet they tasted!

This popular Zen parable has a parallel in a lesser-known Unitarian Universalist parable. The setting is much the same: a person hikes in the mountains, comes upon a tiger, falls over a cliff while fleeing, breaks the fall by clinging to a bush only to watch with dismay as the bush begins to give way.

But here the stories diverge. The Unitarian Universalist, upon seeing the roots of the bush start breaking, resorts to prayer. “Say God, whoever you are—I am really in trouble here. In fact, I am about to be killed, either by a tiger or by a 5,000 foot drop. Could you please help me?”

Feeling self-conscious, for prayer was not a habitual activity, the Unitarian Universalist waited—but not for long. In fact, the response came almost immediately: a majestic, resonant voice spoke. “You must have faith, and let go.”

The hapless UU mountain climber pondered God’s command while another root of the bush broke, choked back an expletive, then replied, “Say, is there someone else I could talk to?”

And there it is again, that wonderful, oh-so-typical Unitarian Universalist attitude, the attitude that counters easy, self-important and divinely ordained answers with a penetrating question. No truth, however sacred, not even words direct from the mouth of the Most High God, gets accepted at face

value. Instead, the response is always scrutiny, careful examination, testing: is this truth for me? Does this answer fit with actual life experience? Who says? How do they know? Can I say it, with integrity? How do I know? We are a church of questioners, and we are not afraid to ask.

This sermon is the second in an ongoing series on themes in Unitarian Universalism. With each installment, I intend to add another piece to the spiritual puzzle of our path until I have developed an octagon, an eight-sided image of what being a Unitarian Universalist means. The first side of the octagon, considered in an earlier sermon here, was mystery: Unitarian Universalism begins with the assertion that our lives unfold in the midst of mystery, that experience—particularly spiritual experience—is too vast and too rich to be neatly summed up in creeds, dogmas, encyclicals, belief statements, confessionals, or any other tidy set of words that many traditions insist on as a standard for membership and practice. Unitarian Universalists do not accept such a position; instead of defining ourselves in a creed, we ground ourselves in mystery.

Today I offer the second side of the Unitarian Universalist octagon through the lens of our propensity for asking questions. Questions are rooted in another facet of our spiritual identity that my colleague who devised this octagon calls “ongoing revelation.” From the perspective of

many traditional religions, there came a time, typically in the distant past, when spiritual insight ceased once and for all, when truth could be considered complete. To use the traditional language, revelation, the experience of fresh understanding and new possibilities, was “sealed”: shut off and shut down, a closed door that would be opened no longer, the end of creativity in human engagement with mystery. This point, at which revelation became “sealed,” coincides with the time in traditional paths when a set of scriptures or sacred writings receive the official stamp of approval—and anything else, any further word, will be labeled heresy.

Once a tradition declares that revelation is sealed, it pronounces a death sentence on itself. For if no further truth can be found, if no more insight can be welcomed, then growth ceases. The path congeals, hardens, goes no further. If you enter such a tradition of sealed revelation after this cutoff point and have any interest in exploration or experimentation, if you dare to claim a new idea, then look out: you are likely to be silenced, cast out, excommunicated, even put to death.

Though declaring revelation to be sealed sounds stifling as I have described it, it also carries considerable attraction. Control of church members is ever so much easier when new ideas are discouraged and we settle for doing things the way they have always been done. And

explanations, certainty, answers exert an overwhelming appeal when life challenges become too much to bear and all one wants is a little clarity, a place to stand out of the storm for awhile.

I was raised in the Southern Baptist churches of Texas, where fundamentalism rules and acceptance of God-given truth is expected. But somehow the spirit of a Unitarian Universalist already stirred within me back then, for I remember being the girl in Sunday School classes who always had her hand raised, ready to pose a question that would challenge the validity of the teacher's words or the Bible lesson. And I loved to sit back, questions asked, wearing a self-satisfied smirk no doubt, and watch the adult in charge, typically a devout soul with no theological training, attempt to answer my question in circular fundamentalist reasoning, "The Bible says . . . Jesus says . . ." until patience and time ran out and I was told to go home and pray about the matter.

My questions and my smirking attitude received a blow when my parents sat me down one November evening to tell me that a young school classmate of mine had been killed in a car accident. Through the blur of shock and sorrow in the next several days, as I took my first look at a body laid out in a casket, attended my first funeral, stood by a freshly dug grave for the first time, and saw strong adults all about me dissolve in tears, I discovered the

limit of questions—and the power of answers. Over and over, from the Baptist preacher, in the reassurances exchanged with the grieving family, through the earnest comfort offered by my Sunday School teacher, I heard answers, powerful answers that silenced all rebuttals, answers to the hardest question of all, the question of life's end, of death.

“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away: blessed be the name of the Lord.”

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways.”

“I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he be dead, yet shall he live.”

When my classmate died, my game of asking questions died as well. From then on, I was not satisfied with raising a clever question: I wanted answers.

Now, years later, I am a Unitarian Universalist minister, a member of the group famous for its questioning attitude—and I still want answers. Oh, I enjoy the question game, and I can find something to challenge in every truth and teacher and preacher that comes down the pike.

But at night, when the lights are out and the mists rise; when the phone rings with a request for a pastoral visit from a family in crisis; when a wife rages over her husband's betrayal or a father despairs at a daughter's dangerous behaviors; when people I love are battered by loss and bad luck and more loss still; when I stand at a graveside pronouncing the ancient

words, “ashes to ashes, dust to dust”: then, I want answers, real rock-solid answers, answers that can support me, support any of us, when we can no longer support ourselves. But if all I have are a handful of questions, what do I have to stand on? Small wonder that so many who reach this moment in their lives abandon our path of questions for another tradition that deals in answers.

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Which comes first, the question or the answer? German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein looked at the usual sequence we expect in a conversational pattern of questions and answers, and claimed the sequence did not unfold as we might assume. I ask a question; you provide an answer: that is the order of events that I see. But Wittgenstein insisted that an answer is present at the outset, that in fact a question only becomes possible when there is a pre-existing answer. So my anticipated sequence, of question leading to answer is, in Wittgenstein’s view, reversed from the real sequence, which is answer leading to question. In order to pose a question, Wittgenstein believes, I must already, on some level, in some form, know the answer—not necessarily the literal, factual answer, but a deeper truth, a more profound answer.

If Wittgenstein’s insight applies to Unitarian Universalists, then our propensity for asking questions suggests that we also carry a sizeable

amount of answers, answers locked away in the heart of our questions, answers that enable us to examine and challenge and ask and scrutinize and ask again. Wittgenstein says we ask because we have already answered. So, what was that primordial answer that got us started asking questions to begin with? Push the questions aside for a moment: what answers can you see?

The first people to raise the sort of questions we ask today, our spiritual ancestors, the early Unitarians and Universalists, seemed to have been motivated by a belief that religious teaching and practice should make sense. If the Bible says to think a certain way; if the minister says to act a certain way; if church doctrine says we are made a certain way; then all of those ideas must have a rationale, a pattern, a meaning that I can discern. And if that meaning is not readily apparent, then I make the logical, inevitable response: I ask a question.

Religious teaching and practice should make sense: the insight is so commonplace that it almost seems a cliché. But at the time the first Unitarians and Universalists asked their first questions, much of religion did *not* make sense, was not *expected* to make sense, had little connection to actual experience. Ministers and priests and devout people, finding the truths they propounded at odds with the often brutal realities of life, simply waved the conflict away with pious disclaimers about God's mysterious

workings and humanity's sin-clouded vision. But the primordial questioners would not be put off, and they kept up the challenges undeterred by threats of excommunication or punishment or death. If revelation is ongoing, if new insights are always at hand and no one person or perspective or tradition has the final word, then we must ask questions. The questioning process is our primary spiritual practice, our prayer, our chanting, our purifying ritual because it keeps us open and vulnerable, and hopeful. A question pries open closed doors and closed hearts and closed minds, allowing the new revelation to enter.

Religious tradition and practice should make sense. The way of the spirit should make sense. That which illuminates the deeper dimensions of my life *should make sense*. A deceptively simple answer behind all the questions—but not so simple in its ramifications. For if religion makes sense then spirituality makes sense, faith makes sense, the Sacred makes sense, the deepest longings of our hearts make sense, good and evil, life and death, it all ultimately has a meaningful pattern, it all makes sense.

And if there is a sense, a pattern, to our experience, then we have to keep asking questions until that sense has been pulled up from its hiding places, the pattern laid out, for anyone to see. The questioning process may go slowly, run into dead ends, and have to start over. The sense it reveals may

not translate easily into words. It may threaten our cherished ideals, challenge our convictions, anger our gods, mock our ministers and teachers. But the pattern is there, and it waits to be known and it will, finally, give up its terror and its beauty to our questions.

It all makes sense. The words are so plain, four small words. Like a candle in the wind, easily snuffed out unless shielded by a protective hand—and even then the wind can still extinguish it.

But the next question, a sassy, provocative, hopeful, challenging, Unitarian Universalist question, restores the candlelight, defies the negating power of the wind a while longer.

God says, “You must have faith, and let go.”

Sometime, somewhere, a Unitarian Universalist asks, “Is there someone else I can talk to?”

And revelation begins once more.