

EMBRACING LIFE WITH INQUIRY  
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg  
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough  
February 9, 2014

**OPENING WORDS**

~ Krista Taves (*adapted*)

Whether you have come here with heart full or heart empty, with spirits high or low, rested or tired, hopeful or despairing,

Whether you have come here out of habit, conviction, loneliness, or curiosity,

You belong here because you are here, and all that you have and all that you are is welcome here.

This morning we are, together, the heartbeat of this congregation.

**STORY FOR ALL AGES**

*Oh, the THINKS You Can Think*

~ Dr. Seuss

**RESPONSIVE READING**

*Cherish Your Doubts* #650

**READING**

*from The Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism* ~ James Luther Adams

James Luther Adams was a Unitarian theologian, working in Chicago during the middle of the last century. This reading is excerpted from one of his books, from his chapter on the *Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism*. Adams used imagery from the Hebrew Bible, from the story of David and Goliath, to talk about that which we carry with us as religious liberals...just five smooth stones... stones that both define us and give us strength. Here's some of what he wrote about the 2nd stone...which might be paraphrased as "Nobody ought to force other people to think things they don't want to think."

The second major principle of religious liberalism is that all relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual free consent and not on coercion. [ ]

All responsible liberals recognize the necessity for certain restrictions on individual freedom. They also recognize that "persuasion" can be perverted into a camouflage for duress. Nevertheless, free choice is a principle without which religion, or society, or politics, cannot be liberal. [ ]

Historically, the more profound forms of [religious] liberalism began in the modern world as a protest against ecclesiastical pecking orders. [ ] This protest often found its sanction in the basic theological assertion that all are children of one God, by which is meant that all persons by nature potentially share in the deepest meanings of existence, all have the capacity for discovering or responding to "saving truth," and all are responsible for selecting and putting into action the right means and end of cooperation for the fulfillment of human destiny.

These religious affirmations are thus the basis of the liberal's belief that the method of free inquiry is the necessary condition for the fullest apprehension of either truth or justice, and also for the preservation of human dignity. This method of free inquiry and

persuasion is the only one consistent with both the dignity and the limitations of human nature, and it is the method that yields the maximum of discovery and criticism.

Now, it should be clear that if some people wish infallible guidance in religion, they are not going to find it in liberal religion. Of course, orthodox mentors will claim that this is the reason we need a divine guide, in a book or church doctrine. [ ]

In contrast, the liberal seeks...in the words of prophets, in the deeds of saintly men and women, and in the growing knowledge of nature and human nature provided by science...meanings that evoke the free loyalty and conviction of people exposed to them in open discourse.

### **MESSAGE**            *Embracing Life with Inquiry*

There's a lovely little essay by T.H. White, written in the voice of Merlyn, teacher to the young King Arthur.<sup>1</sup>

"The best thing for being sad," said Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then - to learn. Learn why the world wags and what it wags. That is the only thing which            the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you."

Learning is the one thing that never fails, says Merlyn, who was known for his supernatural powers and his magic. Learning never fails, no matter what we're facing.

Classically, the tune we just sang<sup>2</sup>, Jerusalem, is set to William Blake's words..."And did those feet in ancient time, walk upon England's mountains green...and was Jerusalem builded here, among these dark Satanic Mills?" Hearing it, I cannot help but feel that holy and melancholy longing for heaven on earth. But in the version in our hymnal, set to the words of Don Marquis, that longing is interwoven with hope...and a reminder that even in the darkest time, there is spread out before us a beautiful and magical world that we can 'know' and see...if we but turn on our curiosity and wonder.

Learning, questing, knowing...a treasure-trove of richness that is available to all simply by virtue of having been born human. Just the other day, one among you described to me a time when she had come face to face with her shadow, and was thrown, or pulled, into a difficult place. That is, until she remembered to be curious. "Fascinating," she said to herself, "why did this happen, and why did it happen now?" And her curiosity opened her eyes and her heart to much more than the darkness she was feeling.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.uusocietyamherst.org/Portals/0/Documents/Minister/Sermons/InquiringMinds.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "Have I Not Known", SLT #337

And yet, our questions and our curiosity are so often and so early squelched. A young child's 'why' is likely to annoy rather than charm us. Traditional early schooling is designed to provide answers...so much so that I don't remember being introduced to the concept of critical thinking until university...although I am quite sure that education has evolved since I was young.

In the spirit of inquiry, here we call our children's programming "Religious Exploration", not "education." Here we want to explore together, walk our journeys together, and along the way, we tell our stories to one another, often the stories of our religious upbringings. Sadly, many of those stories include having been shamed or even shunned by 'religion' simply because of asking questions.

Unitarian Universalism is the religion of questions, not answers, or at least not final answers. We welcome questions. We bask in questions. We embrace life with inquiry.

How did we get this way?

The history of religious liberalism is resplendent with questioners, or put another way, heretics. The root of the word 'heresy' means to choose, so heretics within the religious world are those who have chosen to believe something different than the establishment's doctrine. Our history is resplendent with heretics; this room is resplendent with heretics. It's who we are. Our questioning is not an irreligious act, but rather a deeply religious one. It's how we find meaning.

Here are just a few stories of our ancestors...<sup>3</sup>

In the 3rd century - Origen was a heretic because he believed that God would accept everyone into heaven, not just the chosen. An early Universalist.

In the 4th century - Arius chose to believe and teach that Jesus was more human than divine. An early Unitarian.

There was lots of heretical activity in the 16th Century, that century of reformation.

- Michael Servetus was burned at the stake for the heresy of teaching that there was no trinity apparent in the Bible.

- King Sigismund II of Transylvania issued a heretical edict of religious tolerance which contained the words, "in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve." (We still practice this understanding in our congregations, commonly referred to as 'freedom of the pulpit'.)

- Later that century, Faustus Socinus, working in Poland, wrote a first draft of the Racovian catechism, which was introduced with these words: "When we publish this catechism we do

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<sup>3</sup> <http://cuc.ca/here-i-stand/>

not impose anything on anyone. Let everyone possess freedom of opinions on religious matters." Pretty heretical among catechisms, usually meant to provide answers.<sup>4</sup>

In the 18th century - Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, perhaps the first Unitarian in America, taught freedom and tolerance. He was not invited to join the ministerial association in Boston and no minister would trade pulpits with him. He thought that no speculative error, however great, could keep a good person out of heaven.<sup>5</sup>

In the 19th century - William Ellery Channing preached that "Unitarianism is Christianity stripped of those corrupt additions which shock reason and our moral feelings. It is a rational system, against which no [person's] understanding, or conscience, or charity, or piety revolts." Like many of his contemporaries, he began to explore and find wisdom in other religions...beyond Christianity.

Then, at around 1879, Fidelia Gillette, a Universalist, became the first woman of any denomination in Canada to serve as a minister of a church, in Bloomfield, Ontario. Heretical!

Early in the 20th century, John Dietrich, was stripped of his ministerial authority within the Protestant Reform church for preaching against the infallibility of the Bible, the virgin birth and the divinity of Jesus. He turned, where else, to the Unitarian church. Believing that the scientific method was the only method for arriving at truth, religious or otherwise, he came to see God as a creation of people rather than people being a creation of God, and was among the first Unitarian ministers to boldly preach that humanist thinking was the true foundation of religious liberalism. He was a signer of the Humanist Manifesto in 1933.<sup>6</sup>

I could go on. I could tell other stories of heretics among you and gone before. The point is, we are the church of the open mind. And if you really open your mind, you never know what may enter in!

But of what value is inquiry? How does it serve us?

Last month, we held a 'worship salon'...a time of appetizers and appetising conversation... in preparation for today's service. Those present reflected on the role of inquiry in their lives, specifically in their spiritual lives. What most struck me was the way that embracing life with inquiry seems to provide a purpose...a path...a guiding light. Inquiring can bring both satisfaction and peace in that a bit of life's puzzle is put into place...or because it guides us toward wholeness, and gives us momentum in moving through our life experiences. To inquire is to care, to show interest...and on the most basic level, to matter. Inquiring brings us into the larger conversation about life and meaning, say you, a conversation that is often laced with adventure, and wonder, and humility.

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<sup>4</sup> Atkinson, Joy "Freedom's Flame" <http://www.mountainvistauu.com/sermon-archive/sermons-2011/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.uuff.org/old/fs\\_boston\\_heresy.shtml](http://www.uuff.org/old/fs_boston_heresy.shtml)

<sup>6</sup> <http://uudb.org/articles/johnhasslerdietrich.html>

Foundational to this, I believe, is a core insistence that as individuals we matter, and that we can use our questioning minds to make a difference and to contribute to the ongoing evolution of creation. It's as if each of our minds is a tiny but important cog in the great machine of the cosmos, and that the very act of using our minds imbues us with a sense of our place in it all. We are the universe becoming conscious of itself.

And, of course, we also mess it up sometimes. I believe a place where we can err, as Unitarians, is in making too much of our intellect, putting our heads on a pedestal, while ignoring the wisdom of our hearts. Sometimes this gets expressed as the tension between science and religion, a tension that needn't exist. We have both heads and hearts, and both serve us brilliantly, and both are necessary to create and to connect.

Anything...mind or head, heart or wonder...can be dangerous if made an idol, because making something that important leads to believing we hold the final and ultimate truth, and doors start slamming all around. We can, and must, hold provisional truths and opinions...we couldn't function without them...but we must hold truth without clutching. Inquiry works best if it is accompanied by humility.

It surprised me, sort of, that at our worship salon, no one mentioned that inquiry was useful because it led to truth, or even to answers. I'm glad of that...actually, proud of it. Inquiry can, maybe should, lead not to answers but to more possibilities. There's a story told by Rev. Gail Seavey<sup>7</sup> about quantum physicist David Bohm; he developed the implicate theory, which posits that the totality of existence is a part of each fragment of space and time, and therefore everything in the universe affects everything else because all are part of the same unbroken whole. He wondered what the implications of this theory were for human learning and consciousness and spent years conversing about this with a spiritual leader from India, J. Krishnamuti.

Eventually Bohm wrote about these conversations as a transformative dialogue process in which new understandings arose that neither of them had known before. He spelled out a set of principles that people could intentionally use to practice dialogue, and got scientists at Bell Laboratories to use this process...sitting in a circle, beginning with silence. Scientists. Imagine. Bohm's sixteen principles can be distilled to these: Listen, Suspend Certainty, Hold the Space for Difference, Slow Down the Inquiry, and Speak from Awareness.

Listen, Suspend Certainty, Hold the Space for Difference, Slow Down the Inquiry...a great guide for fruitful and collaborative inquiry. It assumes that we don't know the answer...listen, and suspend certainty. It assumes that others have very useful input and perspectives...hold the space for difference. And, slow down the inquiry. Not, don't inquire. But slow down. Inquire and then listen. Wait.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.firstunashville.org/sermonblog/?p=5>

As a religious community, we can offer this great gift: to hold a space for difference. To offer a place where one can rest and listen, explore and ask questions, and feel safe and affirmed in their asking. This is a place where we can build our own theologies. Such an open space is at the center of Unitarian Universalism.

Unfortunately, we can be rather elitist about education and learning. We have a tendency to ridicule those who would swallow spoon-fed doctrines without question. Our education levels are documented to be among the highest among religious traditions, and this can, unfortunately, create a culture that might not feel very welcoming to those who are not as highly educated. Being more welcoming and inclusive is something we've improve on. Holding an open space that allows for differences of all kinds is something we are called to do. I hope you all can commit yourselves to creating that open space. I hope that you each feel welcome today. And if not, let's set our minds to inquiring about that...why not? What can we do about it?

The quest for knowledge is as old as humankind. You know the story told about a woman named Eve. She was living in a beautiful garden, an Eden, where everything was provided and nothing was required of her. It was bliss, ignorant bliss. But it was not enough for her. One day she saw an apple and her mind, the mind of all people, opened. She had been told it was off limits, but she wanted to know what an apple tasted like. And so, she reached. She tasted. The rest is history. I am so thankful for Eve.

In building my own theology, I have used the foundation of process theology, a basic understanding that we, that everything, is constantly unfolding. There is always more for me to learn, always some door that I haven't yet opened, always some tasty apple that you might offer to me. How truth and understanding unfold for me is greatly influenced by those who accompany me on the journey. And that's why I'm a Unitarian Universalist.

You see, while the responsibility for defining and acting on our own faith falls to each us, we need to 'be religious' in the company of others. Here we get guidance from one another...and prompting...and challenge...and courage. Here, in community, we test what we have found to be true, and if we find it lacking, we let go of our certainty, and listen, and re-build.

Unitarians are united, not by requirement, not by creed, but because having used our free and open minds, we have come to similar conclusions...<sup>8</sup> That the desire to inquire is an intrinsic human need. That open and unfettered minds serve us, and all of creation, best. And, that when we gather in community, in a welcoming and diverse space, our inquiry and wonder flourish.

I close with this words of David O. Rankin, slightly altered...

"We are religious because we are conscious and reflective human beings. We are religious

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<sup>8</sup> <http://dmuuc.org/aboutworship/dr-a-powell-davies-bio-sermons/the-unitarian-faith/>

because we are required, even forced, by our very nature, to frame a response to the ultimate questions of life. Religion is a given, an inherited condition of being human, for we are a singular species that needs the structure of meaning."

May we continue, ever and always, to make meaning with our beautiful inquiring minds. So be it.

**READING**                    *It's Not Easy Being a Unitarian Universalist*                    ~ Charles Magistro

I'm amused by the view that it's easy to be a Unitarian Universalist. It's as easy to be a Unitarian Universalist as it is to be persistent, courageous, and curious. It's as easy to be a Unitarian Universalist as it is to search the murky waters of life without sure charts to guide us or any guarantee that we will find a safe port to put down anchor. It's as easy to be Unitarian Universalist as it is to overcome the natural fear of the unknown and venture forth with nothing to sustain us save our zest for living and hunger for new experience and knowledge.

Our way in religion is not the way of ease. We are called to be sailors; for many worlds exist waiting to be discovered. And not the least of these worlds are within ourselves. It takes as much persistence, courage, and curiosity to look into our own depths, to come to terms with the twin mysteries of being alive and having to die, to see ourselves in new and larger ways without being dishonest about our limitations as it did for Columbus to sail thousands of miles into an unknown ocean until he found dry land.

**CLOSING WORDS**                    ~ John W. Brigham #687

And now, all you free spirits...

Go your ways, knowing not the answers to all things, yet seeking always the answer to one more thing than you know.

Amen.