

A Curious Bunch! The Answer is to Question

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A popular cultural identifier about Jews that I experienced in my childhood goes something like this: "What is a Jew?" The answer being: "Someone who sits around arguing about what a Jew is!" Or, another version – 2 Jews, 3 opinions. Come to think of it, answering questions with questions is not only a distinctly Jewish trait, but a Unitarian Universalist one, as well.

We UUs come to our set point as questioners through history, through biology, and by choice. If you've spent even a wee bit of time around small children, you know that their favorite word, collectively, is "Why?" "Why is the sky blue? Why is there hair in your ear, Mister? Hey lady, why are you rolling your eyes like that? "

Children, especially here in our Religious Exploration programs, pose more introspective questions, too, such as: " Where does God live?; why does death happen?; and "why do I sometimes feel sad and sometimes happy inside?" "How was the world created?" "Why do people hurt other people?"

I was that kind of kid. Once , in a women's retreat, I had to finish this sentence. In 3rd grade, your teacher would have called you....my answer? "The curious one." This may explain why I wrote my undergraduate thesis on multiple perspective on truth in the works of William Faulkner and was drawn to Unitarian Universalism in the first place.

Curious children often grow into inquisitive adults who pose even more complex questions regarding the mysteriousness and the quirkiness of the Universe. Unless that zeal is squashed. There are the old chestnuts, of course: "What is my destiny?; Why is there evil? What is the meaning of life? Of death? How do I process the recent COVID experience? And so forth.

If you've ever read any of the series of books called, *Imponderables*, you've gotten a taste of the more eccentric questions, as well. Real live people send in these queries to author and answer-man David Feldman. For instance: "What is the difference between flotsam and jetsam?; if nothing sticks to Teflon, How do they get Teflon to stick to the pan?; Why do men's bicycles have crossbars;" and my personal favorite, "Why do you have to dry clean a raincoat??" Curiouser and curiouser!

Billy Collins exudes a passionate curiosity in the poem we heard earlier, Questions for Angels: He asks - "Do they fly through God's body and come out singing? Do they swing like children from the hinges of the spirit; do they sit alone in little gardens changing colors?" I love this!!

For decades, inquisitive researchers have been trying to figure out the science of our human "urge to know," and to decipher the way in which questioning happens. What they've discovered is that beyond programming us with basic instincts for survival, most of the brain remains asleep, awaiting the kiss of imagination or curiosity to bring it to life.

The roots of our peculiar human curiosity can be linked to a trait called neoteny. It means retention of juvenile characteristics. And, the lifelong capacity to wonder and to learn is the reason why neoteny has worked so well for our species. Cultivating curiosity benefits us in other ways, well. It helps us survive. Curious people have been shown to be happier. Curiosity boost achievement, it expands our empathy and strengths relationships and overall health.

Beyond that, what is unique about human beings is that at the heart of our DNA lies the necessity of freedom, the potential to become something not yet defined; to transcend old boundaries and surpass the imposed restrictions of instinct. Apparently, when the mind wraps itself in a security blanket of answers alone, the brain closes down the quest and ceases to expand its system of pathways. Thought enters a loop of received and recycled opinions, and the mind becomes captive to the closed circuitry of fixed ideas and secondhand experience.

The writer Sam Keen argues that, "The humble question is the divine spark that transubstantiates brain into mind and spirit. What shapes our lives are the questions we ask, refuse to ask, or never think of asking. The question is the helmsman of consciousness. The difference between Einstein and Hitler," he tells us, "depended on the questions they asked. What you ask is who you are. What you find depends on what you search for."

It's often said, quite rightly, that Unitarian Universalists are one of the most curious bunches around. As a group, we're passionate about the questions and we savor the *journey* towards the answers, even more than the answers themselves. As a religion, we possess half of a catechism -- the questioning half. Inquiry is valued over certainty. "Who made me?" (you may recall from the Baltimore Catechism of your childhood? Only one answer, right? "God made me." UU answer: "Heck if I know, what do you think? Let's ponder that together.

That said, some years ago, the Rev. Tony Larsen created an Adult Faith Development curriculum called A Catechism for Unitarian Universalists and the ponderables are as valuable today as a tool for spiritual clarification as ever. They beg for answer beyond yes and no...they invite further inquiry.

For example: Do UUs believe Jesus was divine? Do UUs believe the Bible was inspired by God? Do UUs believe in heaven and hell? Sin? Reincarnation? If not, why do UUs believe one should live a righteous life? Do UUs have sacraments or rituals? Confession? And my personal, but cringe-worthy, favorite: "Do UUs have to follow what the clergy says?" Hmmm??? Nope. You can answer the "calls"

in my sermons or let the message go to voicemail.

These are the type of questions that will deepen and broaden your identity as a Unitarian Universalists, taking you beyond the shallow exchange that goes something like this: "What do UU's believe?" Answer; "Anything they want to believe." In reality, we need shun intellectual laziness and spiritual shoddiness in order to reason our way to our beliefs, test and temper them, and then live them. Blessed be for the opportunity.

Our free faith is an evolving experience, a religious adventure in which you are born over and over again. This individual evolution within a communal setting is one of the great appeals of the denomination. And as the Rev. Victoria Safford wisely admits, "It's a lot to ask of people on a Sunday morning." But I am asking anyway. Answers optional.

Of course, the opportunity, nay the *responsibility*, to develop one's own beliefs within a flexible framework may be intimidating, and even seem downright bizarre, to come-outers from religions with fixed theologies and clear-cut answers.

UUs, with our giddy zeal for questions, may seem bewildering if you've been raised to adhere to a catechism of any sort; in an environment where questioning was subversive and discouraged, and the answer to everything was prescribed. Many have left these religions when they grew into young adults who wanted to grow spiritually through questioning, but were reprimanded, threatened with damnation, or expelled.

Jesus, the most famous come-outer of all time, didn't fare too well with the old guard Pharisees himself, did he? Yet, his embodiment of the inquiring mind is rarely celebrated in the Christian Church, is it? I read a factoid somewhere that in the New testament, Jesus asked 200 questions, was asked 300 questions... and offered only 8 answers. Impressive leadership there.

On a blog I read occasionally, I found this story about a Christian pastor who was using squirrels for an object lesson for the children. He started with, "I'm going to describe something, and I want you to raise your hand when you know what it is." The children nodded eagerly.

"This thing lives in trees (pause) and eats nuts (pause)..." No hands went up. "And it is gray (pause) and has a long bushy tail (pause)..." The children were looking at each other nervously, but still no hands raised. "It jumps from branch to branch (pause) and chatters and flips its tail when it's excited (pause)..." Finally one little boy tentatively raised his hand. The pastor quickly called on him. "Well," said the boy, "I *know* the answer must be 'Jesus' ... but it sure sounds like a squirrel!"

In Unitarian Universalism, we call a squirrel and squirrel...that's a fact, not an opinion, after all. But this religion, at its heart and soul, values curiosity over certainty, and offers both a launching pad and a sanctuary for questors.

Our liberal, open-minded path is marked by trail blazes, but not clear point-to-point directions. There is no one way street to enlightenment or truth; no creed to recite. Just the promise of companionship on the quest, and clergy to shine a flashlight on the path so you might not trip quite so much. That's why I came to these doors. How about you?

And it's even ok to change your mind and embrace new questions and new answers. One lifelong UU explains: "I started as Unitarian Christian, followed by agnosticism, then naturalistic theism. Now, at the close of my journey, I'm a religious humanist, yet I never had to leave Unitarian Universalism. Hallelujah!"

No less an icon than Ralph Waldo Emerson, by the way, used to pause during his sermons to remark, "I no longer believe that," and then returned to his text. We cherish our doubt. As the Rev. Richard Gilbert reminds us: "When we doubt, we affirm the importance of reason and the seriousness of the religious quest, that truth was not engraved in stone 2,000 years ago, and that our understanding of truth is imperfect." ‘

It's important remember, though, that doubt and skepticism are only starting points. When our doubt is met with an internal know-it-all rigidity, we can't grow. We hit a brick wall. But, when it is transmuted by curiosity, then we open a gate and bring zest to this lifelong quest. Freethinkers are rethinkers. The open mind is a clogged mind if it never changes. Whenever we "arrive" in our spiritual quest, we ossify, and turn, like Lot's wife, into useless pillars of salt." (Tom Owen Towle)

The poet Maya Angelou once remarked that when people tell her they are Christians her response is: Already?! In her view, becoming a Christian is a lifelong endeavor. And the same holds true for Hindus, Muslims, Unitarian Universalists. I had always assumed the tendency to answer a question with a question was just a Jewish cultural thing until I came across the following dialogue between a Seeker and a Taoist Master.

The Seeker states, *"I came here to find the True Master."*

The Master asks, *"Why wander around? Why do you neglect your precious treasure at home?"*

"What do you call my precious treasure?" asks the Seeker.

The Master replies: *"That which asks the question is the treasure."*

"All these mountains, rivers, this whole earth, where does it all come from?" the Seeker inquires.

"Ah, where does your question come from?" asks the Master.

Questions are alive, and we are more alive when we are actively involved in the quest. Sages tell us that to love the great questions is to be reminded that life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be explored. So, where do *your*

questions come from? and where might they lead you ? -- inquiring minds want to know!

A foot and lighthearted, let us take to the open road together to find out.
Amen.

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