

“How Do We Know What to Believe”

Diane and Rich Elliott
Old Ship Church
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“To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is religiousness.” Albert Einstein

CALL TO WORSHIP Diane Elliott

Each of us is familiar with solitude.
We have looked up into the night sky and felt our insignificance.
We have been lost in a crowd of strangers.
That is why we have come here today.
Here there is the possibility that we might share memory and hope. Here there is the possibility that we might touch and be touched; that we might be encircled by love and sharing.
Here there is the possibility that we might meet with others who also know what it is to be alone and as we worship, we rejoice in our being together.
Linda Whittenberg

HYMN Shall We Gather at the River, #1046

RESPONSIVE READING It Matters What We Believe #657, Sophia Fahs
STORY FOR ALL STAGES: So You Want to be a Nun Diane Elliott

When I was 12 years old living in Lubbock, Texas, I stayed up late one night to watch the movie *The Nun Story* starring Audrey Hepburn. This was a story about a woman who had chosen to become a nun, entered a convent and after some time began to study medicine. As time passed she was allowed to go to Africa where she was assigned to work with a charming and very handsome doctor who was working to save TB Patients. Day after day they worked long hours together and of course romantic feelings began to stir and in time her passion for being a nun began to fade. She began to question her life's purpose and wondered if she had the dedication required to live this type of religious life. Due to health issues she was forced to return to the convent. After several months with time on her hands to do some soul searching and discernment she realized she needed to leave the convent and return to Africa to her work and to her love.

This movie had a powerful impact on me and had my young idealistic brain churning. I turned off the television and headed for bed. When I crawled into bed I began to cry and then I began to pray asking God to make me a nun. I was ready to join the convent and dedicate my life to serving God and humanity.

This of course is a very strange image as I was raised in a Unitarian family and as far as I know not many UUs want to grow up to become nuns. Years later I watched the movie again and what I realized was that the nun had changed, she had outgrown her desires to be a nun and realized she was not called to that life after all. She had believed that her purpose was to serve God and humanity and the way to do that was within a convent.

Perhaps she still had a strong faith in God and she still believed in the teachings of the Catholic church, but the discipline of convent life no longer suited her sense of purpose. She had changed and had outgrown that particular lifestyle.

So maybe my Unitarian teachings were subconsciously at work unbeknownst to me.

The point of this story for me is that as we grow and develop and experience new and different events we change and along with that growth our beliefs can change as well.

And so here Rich and I are today asking the questions, "How Do I know what to believe? How do we know what to believe? What is it that causes us to believe in the things that we do believe in?" And Where does faith enter into our journey?

And now I ask you to please remain seated as we lift our voices in song and sing Spirit of Life number 123 in the gray hymnal.

HYMN: Spirit of Life, #123

PRAYER AND MEDITATION: Diane Elliott

And as the candles of joys and concerns burn may we pause for a time of prayer and reflection.

At this time and in this place we seek to know more deeply what it means to love one another

We know so well our own needs. We know that we ourselves need understanding, affection and recognition

Why is it that so often we are hesitant to extend these precious gifts to others? The cost of a kind word is small.

The moment that it takes to listen could hardly be better used.

A gesture of forgiveness can mark a new beginning.

An embrace or a note of appreciation can convey crucial encouragement and comfort.

And yet., so often we fail even within our own families to live by the sacred command that we should love one another.

O Spirit of Life and Love, strengthen our faith, increase our resolve to give more generously of ourselves.

We pray for the courage to take the risks of love.

We pray for the insights to see ourselves and others in perspective. We pray for humility and understanding that we may always stand ready to forgive and to begin anew.

Amen

ANTHEM: Both Sides Now, Sarah Gaut, violin, and Joni Nahigian, keyboard

FIRST REFLECTION Rich Elliott

I'm looking for some recommendations. I think I need a trashy novel to read. Ever since we decided on a title for this service people have been sharing books and ideas relating to our topic and each exciting discovery leads to several more. It's been really stimulating and a lot of fun, but, by now, it's about time to lighten up

But, even with the books, today mostly comes down to two of us sharing parts of our spiritual autobiographies with you in the hope that you will hear some things which might touch on some awareness or sense within you which will be valuable.

A couple different people told us about a recent book by theologian Harvey Cox, entitled "The Future of Faith." It seemed to provide a useful framework for making sense of our spiritual travels. His book is primarily about Christianity and he identifies three phases of Christianity's development. The first, Age of Faith, is mostly about the impact of awe-inspiring experiences, for instance, being a witness to the historical figure Jesus of

Nazareth.

After the death of Jesus, a movement took shape and a clerical caste emerged which instructed followers on what to believe, and eventually Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Empire about 400 years after Christ. Cox calls this the Age of Belief in which dogmas, creeds, conformity and exercise of power dominate. In his telling, after about 1600 years the Age of Belief is now giving way to an Age of Spirit .

When we look at our personal journeys we see the presence of these same stages although not necessarily in orderly sequence, more like overlapping qualities. So, Diane described an episode of her “faith” experience when the movie “The Nun Story” made such a powerful impression upon her.

My initial childhood experiences of awe and wonder in nature formed the foundation of my “age of faith.” But, like many UU’s, I grew up in a Catholic Church, memorized the Apostles Creed, studied the Catechism which claimed to answer all my questions about this life and about God. This was my Age of Belief. Along the way I became progressively disenchanted and left the church after high school.

Now, in Harvey Cox’s model, the Age of Belief, with its dogmas and controlling tendencies, eventually gives way to an Age of Spirit in which religious faith may become more of a matter of embodiment, how do we live with spirit, what do we directly experience, more than creeds and rules. Thus we frequently hear people today say they are “spiritual but not religious.” Religious institutions are very man-made and increasingly flawed, so we might seek something more divine, something we can really feel.

In the chaos of the 1960s when I was coming of age, institutions were quite suspect, not something I considered a reliable source. Music was a huge part of defining my generation. Musicians at times spoke for me and I naively looked for clues in the lyrics of songs like I Am the Walrus. Before psychedelic drugs became widely abused, they were promoted as tools to expand consciousness, something akin to instant mysticism. “Break on through to the other side” was the motto.

Psychedelics could take me through the so-called “doors of perception” to altered states, experiences of “spirit,” but unfortunately they didn’t help me translate those adventures into reliable ways to live my daily life in more aware, more connected, more spiritual ways.

It took me 10 or 15 more years of wandering, but I found the 12 step programs, first Alcoholics Anonymous and then Alanon. Although they are grounded in Christianity, they had a compelling language about a higher power, a power greater than ourselves and they spoke openly about spiritual experience. A few years later, Diane dragged me to through those doors here at Old Ship Church. I wasn’t clear if Unitarian Universalism was really a religion, but it was an approach which made sense to me, questioning dogma, embracing many expressions of faith and sources of wisdom and providing a framework within which I could continue my explorations. Summer religious education retreats at Star Island next provided a much more powerful immersion in this approach to spirituality. I felt goose bumps singing Spirit of Life in the candle-lit stone chapel at Star. Or, to borrow from one of today’s hymns, “some ancient ministry of stars had made my spirit whole.” I was hooked.

READING: Letters to a Young Poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, read by Elaine Gomez

..I would like to beg you dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

REFLECTION Diane Elliott

In 1986 I became the Director of Religious Education here at Old Ship. I took the RE job knowing that I wanted to work with children and I thought that the job would be fun. I do remember stating that I would do this job as long as I didn't have to talk about Jesus.

Little did I know that that innocent step would take me on a 25 year journey that would bring me to this moment. I also have to tell you that when Ken asked if I would do the service today he did not mention it was Palm Sunday until after I said yes. He does have his ways.

In 1987 I attended my first Star Island Religious Education Conference. Star Island is a UU conference center 10 miles out to sea from Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I had signed up to take a class called Cakes for the Queen of Heaven. A class for only women where we learned about the influence of the patriarchal teachings on women's spiritual lives. It was during this week that my eyes were opened once again and a new age of faith began to emerge. With a sense of passion and commitment I returned to Hingham and in the winter of 1988 I co-led a class on Cakes for the Queen of Heaven. I know we have some graduates here today.

In thinking about what this age of faith meant to me I read a chapter in Chet Reymo book "Skeptics and True Believers" where he describes that within a vital religious faith there are three components.

One: There is a shared cosmology: a story of the universe and our place in it.

Two: there is a sense of spirituality where one has a personal response to the mysteries of the world.

Three: there is a liturgy or a public expression of awe and gratitude.

It was in reading this that I realized I had all three of those aspects when I participated in the Cake's course. The shared cosmology focused on the Goddess, The Great Mother, Gaia. We read myths from different cultures which supported this cosmology. Not only did we have the cosmology of the Great Mother we also had the cosmologies that related to stories of oppression from the ancient religious patriarchy. Through the sharing of our own personal stories we were able to relate to the silent voices of the women that were found within the Bible.

Through this sharing and learning my personal sense of spirituality began to reshape itself. There were times when I would confess to friends that I felt like a born again. The goddess language was working and my faith was alive. The curriculum provided us with readings and rituals. The rituals that we created by lighting candles, singing, sharing, crying and working with one another helped us to peel back the layers of the patriarchal teachings. Through this course I discovered my hidden voice, I was awakened to a whole new way of living. It was freeing and wonderful.

What I have come to realize is that Cakes for the Queen of Heaven offered me a theology and provided me with a language and an experience that helped me to grow spiritually. The language and the experience of sharing stories helped me to expand my faith. I

realize that it allowed me to think about the big picture of religion and I was able to learn to listen to the patriarchal language in a way that began to take on a different meaning.

I know there was an age of Belief that went into this period of time, but as Sophia Fahs states in today's responsive reading, "Some Beliefs can become like walled gardens," and I began to take the teachings I had gained from the goddess plus my work in the religious education world and expand on them. It was through the process of being able to see religion through different eyes that I was able to redefine the patriarchal pieces that had turned me off and to create new meaning. There was a time when I wouldn't discuss Jesus, but once I reframed him and began to see him as the rebel he was, who was working to bring change to the world, I came to appreciate him and to see him as a great teacher.

So from my brief age of belief I entered the age of spirit where I went seeking and searching. Eventually I ended up at Andover Newton Theological School, a predominately Baptist Seminary, where the voice of the patriarchy was strong and at times challenging. It was through my personal experience with feminist theology and some wonderful professors that I was able to reframe the teachings and to make them have meaning in my life and ministry. I was able to see that there are many forms of theology, not just one, and that many of them can offer one more side of a truth.

Even though I know religion to be created by human needs and that many religious institutions have caused pain and far too many problems there is a basic religious instinct within much of humanity where there lies a deep curiosity about why we are here. I think we need religions that will encourage people and to allow them to grow their spirits, to find their place in the world.

Religious institutions can provide a community that offers moral and ethical teachings where we find ourselves free to ask questions and to focus on the mysteries in life. When we are in community we can help one another to grow in spiritual and loving ways. We also get to have the opportunities to continue a sort of spiritual practice of helping each other over and over again. Many of us want to find some existential truths to live by and if we are able to search and seek with like minded people it can be so much better than trying to do it alone.

And so today and at this time in my life I will tell you some of what I believe. I believe there is a cosmic energy that swirls all around us and the universe and we are all part of that energetic system. I believe in service and the power of love, hope, wonder and awe.

I have faith in the passage of time, humanity and myself.

How do I know what to believe? I know that by being present to being alive everyday has offered and continues to provide me with experiences that help to shape my beliefs and help me to find my place in the world. I know most importantly that I need a sense of faith to make it work.

HYMN I Brought My Spirit to the Sea (#4)

READING: "Praying" by Mary Oliver, recited by Ding Smith:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try

to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak

SECOND REFLECTION Rich Elliott

Thank you, Ding.

So, how do we know what to believe?

It seems evident to me there is no conclusive, reliable truth about a lot of things, even things that we can research and examine. The arguments are endless and have been for years and years, whether it's politics, economics, science, human behavior, music, art, and so on. So, objective facts alone are often not enough.

It seems to me that we form opinions based upon our experiences, upon the predispositions and filters through which we experience life, and upon the emotions which those experiences generate. Then we assemble so-called facts to buttress our conclusions. Feeling certain is a mental sensation, rather than evidence of fact.

Then we get to religion and big questions like is there a God? what is the purpose of my life? why is there suffering? is there something I am meant to do? is there an afterlife? Does God really care if the Red Sox beat the Yankees?

So, in my Age of Spirit, I am no longer shackled by beliefs of the Catholic church. Those musicians I admired turned out to be quite fallible. My chosen denomination, Unitarian Universalism, offers no dogma, no salvation story. So, then what can I believe? I need to believe something or the anxiety is just too much and my whole life might seem pointless.

God has never spoken to me, or if He did He didn't speak very clearly. Maybe I haven't been listening properly. But, Einstein was a pretty smart guy and his remark at the top of your order of service works for me. Rilke says "live the questions." The notion that "life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved" fits for me, too. Personally, I found more guidance in many poems by Mary Oliver than what I've heard from the Bible.

Maybe there is some sort of Supreme Being but I don't believe that He/She/It has plotted my destiny and is monitoring my thoughts and actions to see if I've been naughty or nice. Maybe some spirits or guardian angels have been assigned to my case. I don't know. But, just as there certainly appear to be many Laws of Nature I conclude that somehow those Laws also include how certain energies and realities in the universe are manifested in our lives.

Which brings me to Mother Teresa. In 2007, after her death, many of her journal writings were published and shockingly showed a deep disillusionment and despair. She had evidently lost her sense of the alleged presence of God. A theology student from New Jersey named Krista Hughes wrote to the New York Times, a contribution which sounds like wisdom to me:

"It is worth considering," she wrote, "that faith's opposite is not doubt. Faith that is genuinely healthy has the courage to doubt and ask questions, especially in the face of the

world's suffering... Mother Teresa's life ... exemplifies the living aspect of faith, something sorely needed in a society where Christian identity is most often defined in terms of what a person believes rather than how he or she lives. Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

In a similar vein, American Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield asserts, "The true task of spiritual life is not found in faraway places or unusual states of consciousness. It is here in the present."

So, can I find some trustworthy guidance on how to live? I think so.

For me, a major guide is my emotions. Although emotions are often misleading and they certainly can shift with time and experience, they are too powerful and pervasive to ignore. Most of our behaviors are automatic, meaning we are not making particularly conscious choices most of the time. But, most of what we do is repetitive. Therefore, we have plenty of opportunity to learn from our own experience which emotions tend to lead us to positive, healthy, joyful outcomes -- and which ones lead to regrets. Some emotions are, in most cases, worth embracing when they occur and they are worth cultivating when they may be lacking.

I think that what Sophia Fahs said in our Responsive Reading about beliefs applies to emotions as well: I want the emotions which are expansive, lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies, gateways opening wide vistas for exploration. Then there are those other emotions which tend to function like walled gardens, that are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction, emotions like resentment, fear, shame, greed. They tend to get us to shut down, to isolate, even to cause others suffering. They are very challenging and potentially destructive and we need to learn to work with them and transform them.

So, with those guidelines, for starters I can firmly declare that I believe in compassion.

Compassion seems to emerge from some awareness that we are a lot more alike than different, that we are all in this together, all of us imperfect. Emotionally, most of the time I feel more separate than connected. But intellectually the notion we are all fundamentally one makes sense to me and when I can feel it in my bones, when the boundaries dissolve between you and I, even briefly, it is beautiful. I love the Eastern greeting, Namaste, "I bow to you. The divine in me acknowledges the divine in you." I want to remember the advice from another Mary Oliver poem, when she says, "walk slowly, bow often."

With those same guidelines, I can also firmly say that I believe in love.

I believe in gratitude.

I believe in forgiving.

I believe in creativity.

I believe in curiosity.

I can't precisely define or locate the spirit of life, or the divine or God, but I am increasingly certain that when my actions come from a place of love, of compassion, of gratitude then I am living in harmony with the holy.

These emotions, these qualities, these practices are sometimes difficult to access or sustain. Our culture, our wounds, our insecurities can certainly get in the way. So, here's another thing I believe in. I appreciate the Unitarian Universalist communities which I have found at Old Ship and at Star Island which have challenged and nurtured

our family in our questions. I appreciate twenty years of Ken's thoughtful sermons in this room which help me to refine my thinking about how I want to live my life. I appreciate the many similar conversations in the Parlor across the street in classes about religion, philosophy and poetry. I appreciate the opportunities to be in meditation, the Buddhist study group, the Men's Breakfast, the Coming of Age program and even in the committee meetings.

So, finally, I believe in this community.

HYMN: When Your Heart is in a Holy Place 1008

BENEDICTION:

May we experience what we do not know not as an individual failure but as an invitation to community.

May we seek not the true answers so much as the true questions, knowing that true questions make of our lives meaningful if sometimes restless journeys.

May we be good company to one another in our questions and our journeys.

Amen and Blessed Be