

When I was a child, my family never engaged in theological discussions around the dinner table. This was one of those areas that you just didn't ask about. I recall the first time I hazarded to ask a question of theological significance. I was 8 years old and, having recently suffered the loss of our family dog, had questions about heaven for dogs. Unfortunately, I chose to ask those questions at 2 in the morning, and my parents quite reasonably told me to go back to bed. The next time I recall daring to venture into questions of a religious nature didn't arrive until I was in college. My parents and I had been to Minneapolis, visiting my brother, who was there doing an internship. During the car ride home, we somehow started discussing the Bible. I expressed my doubts as to the inerrancy of the scripture, to which my parents could readily agree. I went on to say that I doubted the historical reality of some stories; again they agreed. Then I said I had some doubt as to how useful the Bible was in today's world—that was too far. The red mist set in, and I was told that that was not an acceptable area to question. It was the way in which they shut off the conversation that let me know I'd crossed a line.

I found similar resistance in later years regarding questions about the afterlife, the existence of God, and the humanity of Jesus. Each time there was a line beyond which no doubt was allowed. I've struggled with this line of doubt a lot over the years, first feeling that my doubt was a sign of failure, then letting my doubt lead me to a kind of nihilism. Now I see doubt as an integral part of my faith, a way of being in the world that isn't dismissive but engaging.

Doubt can be a tool that will lead us to deeper places, deeper understandings, deeper insights into how we can live in the world in the midst of life's uncertainty. But doubt doesn't always function this way. There's a story of the Buddha's enlightenment that tells of his sitting under the bodhi tree doing battle with Mara, Lord of Illusions, who tried to distract him. After reaching enlightenment, he spent seven more days offering his thanks to the tree for sheltering him. Then, as he stepped away from the tree and onto a nearby path, he met a man in the road. The man, seeing this odd look on the Buddha's face, asked him, "Are you a god?" to which the Buddha replied, "No, I'm awake." That's as far as I'd ever heard the story, but I recently learned that there is more. After hearing the Buddha's reply, the man said, "Huh, we'll see"—and walked away. So the first person the Buddha met was a doubter.

But this doubter of the Buddha represents a particular aspect of doubt that we now call cynicism. His doubt didn't lead him to ask the Buddha any questions: "Whattya mean, 'awake'?" Instead, his turning away represents a refusal to engage with his doubt. Doubt can be a tool or a road block. Doubt can be an excuse to keep us from digging deeper, learning more, engaging with the multiple ways of being in the world. Doubt can be a wall—or it can be a candle. It can either block us from learning or light our way into unseen places.

From its beginning, doubt has challenged those who purported to know the world through both religion and science. Doubters questioned the ability of both divine revelation and human observation to really know what was true. But during the earliest stages of human history, doubt wasn't a very big threat to society or to the lives of the doubters. For instance, many schools of doubt existed in ancient Rome and Greece, giving us many great doubters whose names and works

would surface in the future to renew doubt's influence. Theological consistency wasn't demanded, but adherence to authority was. Doubters weren't persecuted for their questioning, except when they went afoul of the civil authorities. While accused of atheism, Socrates was really executed for being disruptive of the social order. Socrates used questions to illuminate the truth, believing that doubt, rather than certainty, was the better path. The lesson of Socrates' trial is that doubt can challenge established social order.

Many of these ancient doubters resolved how to live with doubt in what are called graceful-life philosophies. These philosophies center on living lives of moderation but enjoying life, as well. Writing his meditations two centuries before the common era, Marcus Aurelius resolved his doubt with a tentative conclusion that seems very modern. He wrote, "Whether the universe is a concourse of atoms or nature is a system, let this first be established: that I am a part of the whole, which is governed by nature; next, I am in manner intimately related to the parts, which are of the same kind with myself." His doubt led to convictions that we humans, regardless of the actual state of reality, are here for one another. These graceful-life philosophies, usually the alternative to the religion of the state, offered doubters the ability to continue to question and live creatively within the tension of their uncertainty. Uncertainty was accepted, even valued, as part of a philosophical life.

Official attitudes toward doubt changed with Christianity's rise to power. In her weighty book, *Doubt: A History*, philosopher and poet Jennifer Michael Hecht describes the difference Christianity introduced into the realm of doubt. While still having some wonderfully ambiguous books in its canon, such as Ecclesiastes (which reads like a treatise on living with uncertainty), Judaism of the second century B.C.E. increasingly adopted certainty of faith as a criterion for God's grace. This, combined with the dualism of Zoroastrianism and the Neoplatonic ideals of a transcended God, mixed Jewish and Greek religious and philosophical ideas, creating the backdrop for Christianity.

In Christianity, not doubting became a central tenet of faith. Doubt was a sign of weakness and a threat to salvation. Acceptable doubt was expressed as one's inability to fulfill the human side of the God—human relationship. Augustine's *Confessions* eloquently speaks to this struggle. Once he settled on the truth of the Christian faith that his mother had called him to, he didn't doubt God's existence or Jesus' salvific powers; instead, he doubted his ability to live up to those expectations. In this new milieu of doubt, the stakes were high. When Christianity became the official church of the sprawling Roman Empire in the fourth century, the new definition of acceptable doubt changed the range of persecution. Hypatia of Alexandria exemplifies this change. A teacher and philosopher in the early fifth century, she caught the attention of the local bishop, Cyril. To Cyril, Hypatia's philosophy and understanding of doubt was a threat. After he had her murdered, teachers and philosophers left Alexandria, and the graceful-life philosophies were banished from Europe.

The great works of doubt from the past were burned or became Latin grammar tutors in the monasteries. There, they were not to be studied—but copied for calligraphy practice. In the Western world, the tradition of doubt was not lost, but severely stifled. To doubt any component of the churches' teaching or theology was seen as doubting it all. While Christians at that time had been persecuted not for their beliefs but for failing to render unto Caesar, persecution now focused on their doubt. Christianity is not unique in this tradition. In varying degrees, most religions have engaged in persecution of those who doubt and those who threaten civil order. To demand loyalty or

to enforce patriotism with the jaws of a lion are signs of a despotic state. Also, to kill out of a fear that a person's doubt could be infectious is equally unjustifiable.

As the power of the church became the only thread holding together the old empire, doubt changed again. A variety of factors—the Little Ice Age, the Black Death, and the rise of nation-states—led to a new phase of doubt. People such as Luther and Calvin had doubted the integrity of the church of their time. Now it was the institutional church and some of the practices it required that were in doubt. So these doubters formed new conclusions and then started their own religions. Once formed, their doubt was sated, and they built walls.

Many times, doubters are those who question the prevalent worldview of their societies, which is why doubt differs in different parts of the world. Many of these doubters assert alternative views with equal certainty. They may have begun with doubt, but they often ended with certainty and became as dogmatic as those whose views they rejected. This has even been true within Unitarian Universalism. When William Ellery Channing and his contemporaries in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were faced with the next generation of doubters, often led by transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Theodore Parker, they reacted with a fundamentalism that would surprise us today. Reformers who doubt the truths of those they seek to reform often become equally unyielding when they establish the new truth.

If we explore the impact Eastern thought had on doubt in America, we're drawn back to the controversy between the first and second generations of Unitarians. During the fourth century, when certainty was becoming a pillar of religion in the West, Zen was making a religion of doubt in the East. Centuries later, the influx of Hindu and Buddhist texts brought about a changing understanding of what religion meant. The earliest transcriptions of those texts were in the hands of those Transcendentalists, leading to their doubt of the God of their fathers.

Shunryu Suzuki brought the Soto Zen tradition further into mainstream America. The tradition he taught is a religious affirmation of doubt, doubt as a spiritual practice, and doubt as a way of being. This way of being isn't cynical, but open. Doubt in this form challenges us to let go of our preconceptions, all of them. Released from these preconceptions, engagement with what is becomes possible. In these teachings about doubt, we hear the wisdom of the reading by Robert Weston that appears in our hymnal (No. 650). Cherish your doubts. Instead of seeing them as an enemy to our faith, welcome the creative opportunity. This is why there are stories of the Buddha and his nemesis, Mara, in which the Buddha welcomes Mara as a dear friend. In these stories, there is the attempt to help people see that that which challenges us is not to be feared, but embraced, as a friend who can help us to deepen our faith

Sufi poet and mystic Rumi tells a story that echoes the difficulty we have with such a task. He tells of a man who caught a bird in a cage. The bird spoke to the man, saying, "Listen, with all the cows and sheep you've eaten in your life and you are still hungry, how is the little amount of meat on my bones going to offer you any satisfaction? If you let me go, I will give you three pieces of wisdom. One I will say standing on your hand, the second from the rooftop, and the third from the branch on that tree." The man was interested, so he took the bird from the cage and placed it on his hand. Once there, the bird said, "Don't believe an absurdity, no matter who says it." Then the bird flew to the rooftop. Once there, it said, "Do not grieve what is past; it's over. Don't regret what has happened.

By the way, in my body is a pearl the size of 10 gold coins. It was to be the inheritance for your children, and now you've lost it." The man began to wail and cry. The bird said, "Didn't I just say not to grieve for the past? And also not to believe an absurdity? My entire body doesn't weigh as much as two coins; how could it hold a pearl that heavy?" "All right," said the man, "Tell me number three." "Yes, you've made such good use of the first two!" the bird said as it flew away.

In the Western tradition, one philosopher who unflinchingly followed his doubt was David Hume. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Hume called to question the growing confidence of all other philosophies. He didn't deny the existence of an outside world but pointed out the fallacies in others' certainties about how to describe it. Reason and religion both fell to Hume's doubt. Using his doubt to purge his mind of misconceptions, Hume sought to create an ethics based on how human beings really acted, as social animals whose interests are best served by working together. His impact on modern doubt is significant as he challenged the validity of understanding reason without emotion and our own bias in our perceptions. These teachers want us to see that doubt can lead us somewhere, can be that candle. Many times, doubters' questions have led them to see injustice, especially in the roles of women and treatment of our fellow human beings. Now we are seeing questions about humanity's perception of being at the top of the evolutionary chain, leading us to seek environmental justice.

How we doubt matters. This was evident in the difference between two 10<sup>th</sup>-century Islamic doubters, Ibn al-Rawandi and Abu Bakr al-Razi. They both questioned Mohammad's exclusive prophecy and the concepts of how Allah could be omniscient and just, among other details of Islam. But the difference lay in how they channeled their doubt. Ibn al-Rawandi was hated for his sarcasm and chose the role of the outsider. Abu Bakr al-Razi, on the other hand, chose to create a better world. He was known for his kindness and generosity and was called one of the "most creative geniuses of medieval medicine." Just as Abu Bakr al-Razi's questions led him to seek a better world within his doubt, so, too, these questions have influenced Unitarians. Our questioning of salvation for the few and our belief in the inherent worth of people led to our engagement in the women's suffrage movement, in making conditions better for the mentally ill, in education for children, and in abolition movements.

Today, I continue to seek a balance between certainty enough to act and doubt enough to continue learning. As UU theologian Paul Rasor writes, "Religious liberalism often involves a willingness to affirm faith without certainty. This is not the same thing as faith without conviction. It does mean that religious liberals tend to hold faith claims with a certain tentativeness. This is partly a result of a mindset that is always testing and second-guessing itself and reflects a commitment to open-ended inquiry and the realization that truth is not given once and for all." My faith convictions tell me with certainty that how we act in the world can make a difference. My doubt reminds me that truth has at least three forms: what I think, what you think, and what actually is. This means we must follow the candle of doubt, not allowing our skepticism to wall us off, but following the illumination our questions provide.

It's hard to think for ourselves; it's hard to follow the questions in our own lives. That's why Augustine was so torn, wanting security rather than doubt. That's why people kept returning to a Hasidic rabbi who had told them to think for themselves. He grew so tired of their going to him for answers that he wrote a sign: "Any two questions answered for \$100." One of his richest followers had two questions that he just had to get the answers to, so he went to the rabbi. As he handed over

the \$100, he said, “Hundred dollars— isn’t that a bit steep?” “Yes,” said the Rabbi, “and your second question?”

Our questions are beyond price. They do not negate our convictions to live lives of meaning but encourage our connection to what is and our striving to reach for what is possible. Let us cherish our doubts by following the prophetic light they provide, allowing that light to lead us toward a deeper sense of faith in what is possible, as well as stronger conviction to make it so.

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