

HONK IF YOU'RE NOT SURE—
OR LEARNING TO LIVE WITH DOUBT
REV. RICHARD M. FEWKES

(Norwell 11-14-99, Nantucket 7-23-00, Vineyard 3-11-01, Uxbridge 5-22-05, P-Town 10-2-05,
Brockton 3-9-14, Chatham 5-31-15, **Bridgewater 5-12-19**)

In the Deep South where religious fundamentalism is the strongest you frequently see bumper stickers with religious slogans on them, like “Jesus Is The Answer”, and, “Honk If You Love Jesus.” Some years ago my late colleague, Don Marshall was waiting at a stoplight in Florida, when he noticed a car with the Honk If You Love Jesus sticker on the rear bumper. He thought to himself, “What the heck, I love Jesus in my own way. Why not give my horn a few beeps.” So he did. The woman who was driving the other car rolled down her window and cussed him out for being impatient while waiting for the light to change. So much for the love of Jesus.

There's a second story that has made the rounds on the Internet about a another clueless woman from Florida who put one of those Honk If You Love Jesus bumper stickers on her car. She reported that she had an uplifting experience while she was waiting at a busy intersection lost in thought about the Lord. She hadn't noticed that the light had changed. She found that the bumper sticker really works. There were lots of people who loved Jesus. The driver behind her started honking like crazy, and yelled as loudly as he could, like at a football game, “Jesus Christ go!” He must really love the Lord, she thought. Soon everyone else started honking too, so she leaned out the window and waved and smiled at all those Jesus loving people.

Then another driver started yelling something about a sunny beach and waved one of his fingers in the air, which her kids told her was the Hawaiian good-luck sign. So she leaned out the window, smiled, and gave it back. Just then she noticed that the light had changed, stepped on the gas, and made it through the intersection just before it turned red again. Praise the Lord for such wonderful folks she exclaimed to herself.

The Unitarians in one of our fellowships in Florida got tired of those particular Jesus bumper stickers and decided to make some of their own. They came up with two—“To Question Is The Answer” and “Honk If You’re Not Sure”, with the sub-caption, “Unitarian Universalist Churches and Fellowships.”

For my taste I like one produced by the Unitarian church in North Adams (no longer available)—“UU Church Where You Can Be You”, but the Florida bumper stickers say something about us that is true of UU’s everywhere, namely, that we are the doubting Thomases of the religious marketplace. We ask a lot more questions than we have answers for. When it comes to the deep existential questions about the meaning of life and death most of us would have to honk with those who are not sure about the answers though we may have some strong beliefs. When UU’s get together for a card party they don’t play bridge, they play “I Doubt It.”

It is a fact that most of those who are members of a Unitarian Universalist church today are come-outers from other denominations or no tradition at all. Many people are drawn to our church because they are troubled with the doubts about some of the traditional beliefs of fundamentalism and religious

orthodoxy. They have doubts about the inerrancy of the Bible, the Virgin Birth, the divinity of Jesus, the physical resurrection of Christ, the concept of original sin, eternal hell, life after death, even God. I can remember my theological school days when I was a Congregationalist having serious doubts about all of these things and wondering how I could be a minister and preach about such matters when either I didn't believe in them myself, or was quite unsure about them.

I was even more troubled by the notion, advanced by some, that if you did not believe these things you were liable for eternal damnation. It was utterly beyond my comprehension that a God of Love would condemn a finite human being for the sin of being honestly mistaken. I found I could not be comfortable with my doubts within a neo-orthodox framework and so I sought out another church and discovered Unitarian Universalism. Here I found that my doubts were equally honored along with my beliefs, that it was okay not to be sure, and that my beliefs might be expected to change from time to time over the years as some of them indeed have. I have learned to live with my doubts. They are part of who I am and they are part of what it means to be human. At least as a UU minister I don't have to pretend that I have all the answers even though sometimes I wish I did.

Someone somewhere has said that Unitarian Universalism is the Church of the Holy Agnostic. That may or may not be a fair characterization, but there is enough truth in it to own it as part of who we are. All the word agnostic means is, "without knowledge", which is to say very simply, "I don't know", or, "I'm not sure." Behind the confession of the agnostic is a basic humility and reverence for truth and the unwillingness to claim as true that which one

lacks knowledge of. The Zen Buddhists call this the beginners mind, which is the simple confession that we don't know very much about anything when it comes to ultimate questions. The theologian, Paul Tillich, once said, "the despair about truth by the skeptic shows that truth is still his infinite passion."

The ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, used to make a kind of game out of pursuing the truth from those who presumed they had it. He would trap them in the wiles of his Socratic dialogue with question after question until he exposed their ignorance. He soon discovered there where three kinds of people in the world—those who don't know, but don't know that they don't know—those who don't know but think that they know—and those who don't know and *know* that they don't know. Socrates considered himself to be one of the latter and sought the company of those who were likewise enlightened as to the limits of their human knowledge.

Socrates could well be the patron saint of the Church of the Holy Agnostic. He became a martyr, you will remember, because he asked too many questions. The governing leaders in Athens feared he would lead too many young people astray, and so they condemned him to death for fear that the younger generation would begin to question authority. Thus, the origin of the UU bumper sticker: To Question Is The Answer.

Doubt is often portrayed as the opposite of and even the enemy of faith. This is most unfortunate. Tennyson once wrote, "There lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds." Likewise, Robert Weston said, "Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the handmaiden of truth", and truth, I would add, is the

husband of faith. Those who would divorce truth from faith make their God into a false idol that cannot endure.

Tillich was one of the first of contemporary religious thinkers to say that faith and doubt were not opposites but expressions of the same reality—the state of ultimate concern about the meaning of existence. “If faith”, noted Tillich, “is understood as being ultimately concerned (then) doubt is a necessary element in it. It is a consequence of the risk of faith. Serious doubt is confirmation of faith. It indicates the seriousness of its concern.”

Faith is concerned with the great existential questions of human existence: Whence have we come? What are we? Why are we here? Whither are we going? Does life have any ultimate meaning or purpose? Is there a universal mind or intelligence within or behind the universe? Are there moral as well as physical laws? What can we know? Faith as ultimate concern says, “Yes” to life and affirms the goodness of being in spite of the negatives that are there.

Tillich put it this way: “By affirming our being we participate in the self-affirmation of being-itself.” And by affirming the gift of being we affirm God who is “the ground of all being.” We cannot force ourselves to have a faith we do not possess, but we can accept the doubt within us as an element of the faith we seek and ultimately an expression of it.

Basically there are three types of doubt—intellectual, religious and existential. Intellectual doubt is the methodological doubt of the scientist pursuing the truth about objective reality. Religious doubt is the questioning

of the truth of certain doctrines and beliefs. Sometimes scientific truths conflict with religious views as when Galileo refuted the earth-centered view of the cosmos as taught by official church doctrine, or when Darwin's biological theory of evolution contradicts the Genesis account in the Bible. The third type of doubt is existential doubt, which is rooted in the finitude and contingency of human existence.

We don't know when we drive to work in the morning if we or our loved ones will be killed or injured in an accident on the highway, or if we take the bus whether the bus driver will get us there safely. But in spite of this we continue to go to work each day. We don't know when we fly in an airplane whether we'll get back to earth in one piece, or plunge to our death in the sea, never to be found again dead or alive, as has happened to some.

In spite of the risks most of us will take our chances and fly anyway. We take some comfort in the fact that statistics say that it is safer to fly than driving our car, but still we wonder. We know that none of us will get out of this world alive, but we want to postpone that existential fact as long as possible.

We don't know when we marry that someday we might end up in the divorce court, yet we marry anyway, because our faith at the time is greater than our doubt, and we are willing to take a chance on love. Yet we know that life is a risk, love is a risk, and that there is no act of faith that does not involve an element of risk. But we go on risking and loving anyway.

We don't know when we have children if someday by a tragic twist of fate they will die before us, but still we continue to have children because something within us continues to believe in life in spite of the possibility of tragic loss.

I like what Kenneth Patton said in our Responsive Reading: "Doubting is but the forefront of faith, a faith in the inexhaustibility of growth and the illimitable extent and wonder of the universe....To doubt that we have grown to our full stature and knowledge is to express faith that we may develop into beings of such power and dignity that we cannot as yet imagine what we shall be." When we stop doubting we stop growing.

But doubt is a disquieting feeling and some flee the doubt within them by latching onto rigid creeds that give the impression of absolute certainty. It is this that leads to fanaticism, and there is no one more dangerous than a religious fanatic who knows he is right. But behind every fanaticism is a lingering doubt that won't go away. It says, "Release me and let me go so that faith can grow to larger dimensions of being. Your god is too small."

Just as there is a fanaticism of faith that flees the disquietude of doubt, so there is a kind of fanaticism of doubt that flees the commitments of faith. This is the doubt of total skepticism, cynicism and despair. The French philosopher, Descartes, once applied the test of doubt to everything he could think of until he came to the persistent fact of his own doubting consciousness. The one thing he could not deny was the indubitable reality of his questioning thoughts. "I think, therefore, I am", he concluded. Carried to extremes Descartes doubting game arrives at the proposition, "I doubt,

therefore I might not be.” Which Buddhists have been telling us for centuries—that our ego or sense of self is transitory and ultimately an illusion.

Those who have played the children’s game of “I Doubt It” know that he or she who doubts every player indiscriminately ends up with a growing pack of unwanted cards. So it is in the game of life. Those who doubt everything and everyone can be sure that life will give them a bad deal. There comes a time when doubt itself must be subject to the test of doubt. Somewhere along the line we have to make the leap of faith and trust in someone or something at sometime. It is all right to honk if you’re not sure, but to lean on your horn all up and down the road of life is absurd and a darn nuisance as well.

We have to learn to live with our doubts and not let them rob us of all joy of living. The universe *does* exist, life *has* evolved, we *are* alive and aware, though we might not know with certainty the why or how of it all. Being has triumphed over nonbeing and we are here with all our questions seeking greater truth and well-being. And while we are here we all can do what we can to make of that part of the world we inhabit a haven of love and justice, mercy and peace. The endeavor to do so will bring meaning to our lives. Eventually we learn that we don’t have to have all the answers in order to live the questions into being. Honk if you’re not sure. Honk again if you love life anyway.

Prayer: O Thou who art the source of our faith and the aim of our doubts, move us out of ourselves into the exigencies of life, there to meet thee in the midst of the mysteries of human encounters, wherein we may discover the true meaning of our lives. So may it be. Amen

Reading: From Paul Tillich – On Faith and Doubt (Adapted)

Every faith...is concerned about something or somebody. But this something...may prove to be not ultimate at all (but) a failure in its concrete expression....A god disappears (but) the quest for the divine goes on.

If faith is understood as belief that something is true, doubt is incompatible with the act of faith. If faith is understood as being ultimately concerned, doubt is a necessary element in it. It is a consequence of the risk of faith....One could call it existential doubt, in contrast to the methodological doubt of the scientist or the skeptical doubt of the agnostic.

Existential doubt does not question whether a special proposition is true or false. It does not reject every concrete truth, but it is aware of the element of insecurity(and mystery) in every existential truth. At the same time, the doubt which is implicit in faith accepts this insecurity and takes it into itself in an act of courage. Faith includes courage. Therefore, it can include the doubt about itself....

Existential doubt and faith are poles of the same reality, the state of ultimate concern....Serious doubt is confirmation of faith. It indicates the seriousness of the concern (and) its unconditional character.

(Adapted from *Dynamics Of Faith* by Paul Tillich)