

Mystery Versus Belief
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At the expense of sounding overly simplistic, I think you can almost divide spiritually oriented people into two broad categories: There are those who claim to know who/what God is, and those who profess to have no idea. Those who claim to know will point to a sacred text like the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, or Koran. The God they claim to know brought the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, or was crucified, or was revealed to Mohamed. This God created the universe. This God sees all, knows all, and controls all events in the lives of all people, for reasons that seem difficult to understand. As an example, when I spoke by phone recently to my brother who lives in the New York City area, he opined that God had caused the coronavirus to spread for a reason, although he could not say what the reason was. In the same breath, he talked about the death of several people in his community. To him there may be mysteries about why God operates in the world as he does, but he has no doubt about who God is. I did not want to challenge him by asking the obvious question: "Why would God cause a virus to spread across the world resulting in the death of hundreds of thousands of innocent people? My brother prays to his God three times a day every day and says numerous blessings each day as well. I am sure most of us know people who are similarly convinced about, and devoted to, a God like this. To live with doubt that an omnipotent being controls the universe is intolerable to many who hold strong beliefs about the existence of a personal God. Erich Fromm said, "To some people return to religion is the answer, not as an act of faith, but in order to escape an intolerable doubt; they make this decision not out of devotion but in search of security." Many of these same believers fear condemnation to an afterlife of hell for the failure to believe.

The other group--I'll call them non-believers or agnostics—is the group in which I would include most UUs and myself. This group has more questions than answers. Members of this group would probably describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." They/we do not resonate well with dogma. Phrases such as, "He died on the cross for your sins," or "Believe in me and you shall be saved," do not inspire spirituality or religious devotion. In place of dogmatic belief, many in this group have a deep appreciation for "mystery." Referring to the sacred dimension of life as a "mystery" provides a frame in which to explore some of the ultimate questions for ourselves. We may not have a definitive answer to such questions as, "Why am I/why are we here?" but we find spiritual value and meaning in the process of asking the questions and seeking for answers. We in this group are open to explore the mystery. In fact if we already believe we know the answers to the big questions of life, would be open to wonder and mystery?

There are questions that science can answer, and those that religions are meant to address. Science is not designed to and can not tell us why the universe and

we exist. Religions can offer answers to such questions in the form of speculation. In other words at their best, religions cannot prove who made the universe or why, but religions can give speculations and encouragement that can help us live more meaningful lives. At their best, religions can guide our exploration and experience of mystery. However at their worst, religions can frighten us into being brainwashed and they can stifle our sense of wonder and appreciation of mystery.

We are living more and more in the digital age and the virtual world. We spend so much of our time with smart phones and tablets. We are able to control home appliances, order just about anything online, find an unlimited amount of entertainment, and so on. The digital age allows us to connect with others when we can't be together physically as is the case right now. We can cause many things to happen instantly by a touch of the finger, or a click of a mouse, or a voice command. I wonder if all this convenience and instant gratification has caused us to lose our capacity to wonder and to appreciate mystery? Have we traded the natural world for virtual reality? And with that have we also lost our capacity to appreciate the mysteries and surprises of the natural world? If so, that would be a terrible loss. The sense of wonder, awe, and mystery seems to stem not as much from what we are able to control and master, but rather from that which is greater and beyond us.

So we do have barriers and challenges in terms of being open to mystery, whether they are in the form of dogma or distance from the natural world. Rev. Nancy Bowen, the former lead of our Pacific West Region of the UUA, would meet from time to time with leaders of other faiths. She shared with me that when clergy from more traditional faiths they would challenge her about the lack of a specific belief regarding God in Unitarian Universalism, she would respond, "Your God is too small!" She was inviting her critics to look beyond their dogmatic beliefs. They were perhaps trying to save Rev. Bowen's soul from hell. She was inviting them to replace dogma with mystery.

Once Pablo Picasso was confronted by a man who challenged his Cubist abstract paintings. The challenger asked, "Why don't you paint people realistically?" Picasso replied by asking for an example of what was meant by the question. The challenger then pulled a photo of his wife from his wallet and showed it. Picasso looked at it and replied, "Your wife must be quite small!" The photo of the challenger's wife was no more real than a Cubist painting; each was a representation or a point of view. The more we cling to what we think we know, in other words, to our beliefs, the less open we are to exploring mystery and feeling a sense of wonder.

Rather than relying upon a single sacred text as the infallible word of God, Unitarian Universalism draws our faith and understanding of the sacred from six sources. The first of the six and maybe the most important, is, "Direct experience of that transcending **mystery** and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to

a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” Perhaps more important to us than any text or other source, is our own personal experience of the transcendent. The affirmation of this source of faith is one of the main reasons why I am a UU rather than an Orthodox Jew like my brother Morris. I also draw upon our fourth UU Principle affirming “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” The UU tradition means to me, we don’t take matters of faith just based on authority. We do our own experiencing and reflecting and we draw our own conclusions.

UU Rev. Kendal Gibbons pointed out that many people fix their religious beliefs in childhood and never question them again. This is partly the result of religious education programs that seek to indoctrinate children in order that they stay committed to the religion they are born into. As children grow and develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally should they not also grow spiritually? When we explore and question what we were given to believe as children we expand our imagination about the ultimate questions of life. We may come to doubt “all that we once held as true,” to quote Paul Simon.

When we do, we open ourselves anew to mystery and wonder. Many of us in the UU tradition find that we have more questions than answers. We may also find that the answers we were given as children to the ultimate questions such as where the universe, and where we humans, come from do not satisfy us as adults, if we are open to exploration. Gibbons also says that our sense of meaning and spirituality grows out of experiences of transcendence rather than from reading sacred texts or checking with Google I would add. The nineteenth century UU-oriented Transcendentalists encouraged the path of experience of nature as a source of spiritual awareness and openness to mystery and wonder.

Like many people, my wife Janet and I enjoy mystery movies and mystery mini-series.’ We are usually seduced by the red herring, suspecting the obvious character placed in the plot as a distraction. In so doing we overlook the unobvious but actual culprit. I find it satisfying to learn the solution to the mystery story even if we were wrong in our guess. I like the idea that I can be easily fooled and misled and that things are not always as they seem to be. How about the mysteries of life that we can’t solve? The ones we can never know the answer to? If you are like me you still like to ponder them and are willing to admit when wrong or that it is impossible to figure them out.

In preparing this talk on mystery I came across a book my sister-in-law gave me as a gift several years ago, and never got around to reading. The title is: *Why Does the World Exist?* I was happy to find it because it is so germane to this month’s theme of mystery. It is written by Jim Holt who writes for the New Yorker magazine and the

New York Times. The first chapter of the book is entitled, so appropriately for this month's theme, "Confronting the Mystery." Holt talks about being plagued from his teen years and throughout his life with the question of existence. As a teen, he checked out from his library the impossibly difficult text Being and Time by the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Most teens would never attempt to read it, and very few adults. Holt's lifetime quest was the inspiration for his own book. He says there are about three possible ways to approach the answer of why do we exist. One answer comes from traditional religions. The world exists because God made it. This is the answer for "believers." God, being eternal and all-powerful, is capable of making something out of nothing. For those who accept this answer, there is no mystery. The problem is solved. Some will point to the Book of Genesis and take the creation story quite literally.

As an aside, not every Bible reader takes the text literally. Many students of the Bible see the creation story not as a literal expression of the origin of the world but instead, as an allegory or myth intended to inspire a sense of wonder and--I believe--mystery. That is the way I like to approach the Genesis creation account. I would invite you to read it yourself again, as if for the first time, as an allegory. I can picture an awe-struck individual living in the Middle East 4,000 years ago pondering the mystery of existence and inspired to write this story as an expression of that experience. The dimensions that inspired that author included the polarities of creator vs. creation, light vs. darkness, order vs. chaos, living vs. inanimate things, creative action vs. rest, and humans vs. the rest of creation. You may not agree with this ordering of things in the Bible story, but you might still appreciate the creative approach to mystery and the awe for the world the author and we live in. You might want to imagine for yourself how we got here.

Holt states that atheists admit to being at a loss in explaining why the world exists and how it could come from nothing. Richard Dawkins, one of the most outspoken contemporary atheists, when asked: "What came before the "big bang?" His answer was, "I'd love to know." Astrophysicist Stephen Hawkins dealt with the "something from nothing" question with the hypothesis that the universe is a kind of feedback loop that always existed. Since the universe has no beginning and no end there would be no need to posit a creator or how something came out of nothing. Clever don't you think? But still, Holt asks, "Why does the universe bother to exist?" Holt introduces the philosopher Leibnitz' "Principle of Sufficient Reason." This principle asserts that if something exists there must be a reason for its existence. This principle has proven useful in scientific research. However, even If there is a reason for the existence of the world, it does not mean we will be able to discover it. We may simply be forced to conjecture.

If none the greatest philosophers, theologians, and scientists cannot prove convincingly enough to us why the universe exists and why we exist, that clearly leaves the door open to mystery as far as I am concerned.

Holt says, “No one can confidently claim intellectual superiority in the face of the mystery of existence.” For the traditionally religious, the universe exists because God created it. For some scientists the universe exists as a random fluctuation between matter and antimatter. Philosophers offer their ingenious speculations. For the Buddhist, the universe is a dream, an illusion, only a product of human consciousness. It is merely fluid but human minds conjure it into something solid and permanent. To believe the universe actually exists is an illusion the Buddhists say. So you see lots of ideas and speculations but can anyone say for sure why the universe and we exist? I told my sister-in-law that I was finally getting around to reading the book. She said, “When you are done would you please tell me why the universe exists?” I am afraid I will have to disappoint her. No one has provided incontrovertible proof. No one has answered the question to the satisfaction of all.

In his book The Wisdom of Insecurity Allan Watts said that people often mistake a word “God” for a defined entity rather than a kind of awareness. It would be like mistaking the word “water” for the wet stuff. Here is a quote from Watts’ book:

[We are]... hindered rather than helped by belief, whether one believes in God or believes in atheism. We must here make a clear distinction between belief and faith, because, in general practice, belief has come to mean a state of mind which is almost the opposite of faith... The believer will open his mind to the truth on condition that it fits in with his preconceived ideas and wishes. Faith, on the other hand, is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconceptions; it is a plunge into the unknown. Belief clings, but faith lets go. In this sense of the word, faith is the essential virtue of science, and likewise of any religion that is not self-deception.

If we decide not to lock on too tightly to a belief about the origin and purpose of the universe we can stay open to the mystery. If we decide we already know the answer to this big question we close ourselves off from the mystery.

Bill Moyers commented to Joseph Campbell in The Power of Myth about the purpose of myth. Here is what Moyers said and how Campbell replied:

Moyers: Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance....we all need help in our passages from birth, to life and then to death. We need life to ...touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are. Campbell: People say what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that is what we’re really

seeking. I think that what we are really seeking is the experience of being alive, so that our life on a physical plane has resonances within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.

My sense is that if we don't welcome the mysterious, we will not likely experience the rapture of being alive. Rather I think we encounter this rapture by being humble and courageous and admitting we don't know the answers to the big questions. Also if we take Bible stories and other myths as allegories that point us to the rapture of being alive, rather than as literal truth, they are more likely to guide us to the adventure.

As a child I was taught to be afraid of punishment in hell for being sinful. I was taught I had to believe in the literal word of the Bible including that God created the world in precisely six days. The consequences of not believing this and other dogma, the consequences of not following the laws of Moses as well, were very severe. I strived to be conscientious in following the beliefs and laws of Judaism. That path did not lead me to appreciate the varieties of ways that people across many cultures and religious paths approach the sacred. The answers to the questions about existence were already provided to me as a child. I just needed to study them and practice Judaism. It was only when I was able to let go of my childhood inculcated beliefs, that I was liberated to explore the sacred and profound as unsolved mysteries. Since then I can honestly say I do not know why the universe or we are here, or how something came from nothing. I have allowed myself to open to mystery and wonder. I have been fortunate enough to feel the rapture of being alive at least at times. I am not afraid of hell. I wish the same for you!