

“To Believe Or...”

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The idea of Belief is not something we often get into in Unitarian Universalists Sunday morning services, at least not in the normal sense of the word like a belief in Jesus or Mohamed or the Koran or scriptures. And actually I guess it's not often the topic of those other traditions either, as belief is assumed as a precursor to whatever the message may be.

But belief in a larger way than this literal use is where I want to start from this morning. Belief can be like a walk on the beach, nourishing, comforting and warm. It can also be profound and precious. Belief in one's self can be life sustaining -- or it can be very risky and even destructive as we can see in some one like Dick Chaney, who I believe actually believes that torture is OK. So understanding how it is we believe and in what ways we do so 'I believe' is very important.

Building and reshaping belief is not only a process we humans share generally as we travel through life, but a common trait in our liberal religious world. We all do it to some extent or other and it has the ability to take each of us on our own personal adventure

into our inner selves; something that at times may not be an easy journey. But in the end the experiences that hold our beliefs are held together and understood in each of us as a 'self'. And nobody knows 'self' or believes in it better than the one to whom it refers, you.

We all have self-belief and present it as "ME" as if it were singular rather than a composite of complex experience and history. Actually we are made up of a combination of relationships and experiences. In this way we are tied to one and other by common threads. We all hold memories and experiences in common though they are not identical. It's ironic in a way to feel so sovereign in our self-belief which is such an aggregate in its manufacture.

We are in these ways packages of countless parts and pieces, sharing common experiences and understandings that form connections, each holding a piece of the other inside. It is in this way I believe as a body Unitarian Universalist we come to share common beliefs.

Some of these are:

Freedom, diversity, reason and love are overarching values.

There are many scriptures, which include Moby Dick and beyond.

We place our faith in the here and now, not in some hereafter.

Our theology is evolving; the emphasis changes.

If we are saved, we are saved by our efforts and by love.

If we are holy, we are made holy by character.

And those are just a few.

So we have much in common in this way actually and indeed have created structures, language and institutions to deal with fellow seekers and believers in this common journey. That's what this temple, this hall is about, a place where we can gather to understand better our common ground in the face of deep mystery and questions. We do this because we know in some inner place that we are composite not singular.

In a way we are all like good recipes in the same cookbook.

Although not identical we all have common ingredients, or experiences of this thing we call life: Three years of this, a decade of that, sift in as many books and articles as you recall, mix in a periodic week or six of "on vacation", add a little free time lazing round in the yard - some deep abstract conversations with good friends, two cups of laughter while watching a kitten chase a bird shadow across the lawn - A pinch of any other spice of life to your

taste.

After mixing these - fold in the emotion, the stuff that welled up inside you when you looked at your children and realized that they were no longer 1, 4, 8, 12, 16, and/or any other equivalent experiences. Pour into a well greased very large pool of life and simmer on low for the remainder.

Here in the cookbook of life is where we find the roots of our belief. We all believe in, trust some part of our experience. We become adherents to a set of beliefs that can, and often do define us not only singly but in common. So it seems to me no big stretch to think that we might all believe things in common because we experience things in common ways.

But even for us Unitarian Universalists who use the same ingredients, like our covenants to affirm and promote “The inherent worth and dignity of all people, a free and responsible search for meaning,” we find a multitude of differences right here, just as there is an unmistakable difference between a soufflé and an omelet; a cookie and a dumpling even if they are in the same cookbook and made of mostly the same ingredients.

This is all to say that I believe that we are the sum of our experiences and that belief is or should be in some way a totaling of that accumulated experience of life.

When asked about what I believe, and I am asked this now and then as a clergy man, I respond often that I believe in everything and that for me it would be foolish not to. I believe in ocean storms, and hidden magic. I believe in the human potential in each person and the importance of community. I believe that language has deep and hidden potential. That in the end it is how I believe and not in what I believe that makes the difference. And this is why I go to the house of worship I do rather than to a Pentecostal, a Seventh Day Adventist or a Muslim gathering where believing is something one does “in” rather than about.

IN fact most people who are tied to another religious heritage than Unitarian Universalism have come to understand belief by what I call the “gift perspective.” For them, belief is like some kind of grace, a gift in some way, a gift from some higher source.

The message is that you need to believe in, for it to truly be believable. Such fixed belief is mortar for many folks. Adherence to a dogma or creed like this makes a difficult world easier for

some and gives them a direction to emotional content I would guess.

On the other side of the coin however, it also can give permission to close out or dismiss the other, and whatever gifts they might hold that await there.

For a believer such as me who lets the wave of life's experiences wash over them to join truth and birth belief, this kind of thinking can seem difficult and even impossible. That is because it assumes someone or something else knows better what one should believe in. When the world is so full of wonderful things, this kind of self censorship seems, well like a sin.

For a Unitarian Universalist, at least one like me, it makes more sense to view belief, not as a gift, but as an invitation—an invitation to be engaged and empowered in life and its mysteries. We are all called by our deeper inner voices to participate in the ethical, moral, and just -- the reasonable, knowable and the yet to be known-- the esthetic, emotional, spiritual magic of living, and to do it in community as a model for a better and evolving world!

There is responsibility here as well. Each of us must be willing to

explore, learn and make sense of what we gather and to do it in the context of a courteous and caring community. It is no easy task. Belief must be born through the fire of experience, not always pleasant, discerned through reflection and deep questions, not always answered. It takes patience, balance and real harmony, and certainly love. Belief in this way can change but at the same time be solid.

All this said, I ask you now to share here with each other what you currently believe in, and what questions you have about that belief if any.

As an example I believe that my young grandkids will be able to handle the challenges of their world to come, but, do I truly understand what issues they may encounter? And if so have I done all I can to help them get ready?

So what is your truth, your belief and the questions it brings? The microphone will be passed for your sharing.

Share:

‘To believe or not’ is not the question. Rather, to question what it

is you believe is key to Unitarian Universalist values. As you go forward in the development of your particular beliefs remember that in the nature of life, we are first expressions of the environment in which we live and then of how we change it.

And that happens largely by what we believe, we should can and must do. We use our ability to discern and understand existence and to evolve and become more human. And this is not just about trusting science and our reason, but also about engaging the joy and beauty of life as well, and the holistic nature of our world, and most importantly to engage with the questions that lie on the edges of mystery and in the houses of our belief; to do this with one and another along a trusting and safe common journey.

So may we first believe, and then question why we do, and then take the next steps ahead in this grand adventure, together in joy and deep engagement. To believe or not, really isn't the question. It is how we believe, and when.
So be it.