

QUESTION #3, "HOW DO I KNOW WHAT I KNOW?"
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, March 6, 2005

This poem is entitled "Lament for a Wavering Viewpoint" and is by the late American poet, Phyllis McGinley.

I want to be a Tory, and with the Tories stand,
Elect and bound for glory with a proud, congenial band.
Or in the Leftist hallways, I gladly would abide,
But from my youth I always could see the Other Side.

How comfortable to rest with the safe and armored folk
Congenitally blest with opinions stout as oak!
Assured that every question one single answer hath,
They keep a good digestion and they whistle in their bath.

But all my views are plastic, with neither form nor pride,
They stretch, like new elastic, around the Other Side,
And I grow lean and haggard with searching out the taint
Of hero in the blackguard or of villain in the saint.

Ah, snug lie those that slumber beneath conviction's roof.
Their floors are sturdy lumber, their windows weatherproof.
But I sleep cold forever, and cold sleep all my kind,
For I was born to shiver in the draft from an open mind.
Born nakedly to shiver in the draft of an open mind.

My conservative Baptist minister dad used to say to me, "Honey, don't be so openminded that your brains fall out." He'd say this on the many occasions when I'd defend some--to him--indefensible act or position, such as my summer crushes on the handsome young men who came to town for pea harvest. Or that living with one's future mate before marriage might be a good idea. Or that the war in Vietnam was crazy.

I never brought up my religious opinions, because I was pretty sure I'd get the same response, and yet it seemed to me that there was something worse than being so openminded that my brains fell out. It seemed to me that being so closed-minded that my brains dried up was worse. But saying so seemed tantamount to accusing him of dried up brains, and that didn't feel so good either.

As a child, I depended on my parents and other trusted adults to tell me the truth, whether that truth was about religious beliefs or grammar principles or historical facts or Spanish vocabulary. They knew more than I did, it was clear, and I trusted their knowledge. I trusted them to be right.

As I grew older, I gradually began to realize that my parents and other adults were telling me the truth ONLY AS THEY SAW IT. Though I knew that they had my wellbeing in mind, I also began to understand that they had received their version of the truth from still other persons. Filtering this received truth through their own experience, they had passed it along to me. How many people were there in this line of truth-telling? Where did the original people get the truth?

You know how adolescent minds work--always questioning, wondering, considering alternative answers. Despite all the good advice available for free from parents,

teachers, police, doctors,--- adolescents prefer to work out their own truth. “ Yeah, but, I’d rather figure it out myself” became my refrain, as I sorted through the sources of wisdom that I knew about and searched for others that made more sense. Which of course gave my dad a chance to use his other favorite stock phrase--”a yeah but is a half-brother to a halibut...”

I loved the romance and the tragedy of the ancient Christian stories: Mary Magdalene’s anointing of Jesus’s feet and Jesus’ acceptance of this loving act; the commandeering of a donkey for a triumphal ride into Jerusalem; the overturning of the greedy vendors’ stalls in the temple; the clever answer to the trick question, “is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar?” the chilling words spoken at the Passover supper with his disciples--”this do in remembrance of me”; the betrayal by a kiss from Judas, a trusted disciple; the arrest in the garden and the subsequent series of denials from Peter, another trusted disciple; a kangaroo court, a condemnation, a beating, a savage public execution in front of Mary, Jesus’ mother, and all his friends.

This was all completely believable to me. As thrillers go, it ranks right up there with some of our best modern stuff. It displayed human nobility and human frailty in extremely clear detail. Shakespeare had nothing on the Gospel writers when it came to drama and tragic endings.

But that famous story as told in the Gospels of the Christian scriptures ends with a twist-- a twist which turns a human tale into a ghost story. Jesus’ body disappears from the tomb in which it is placed. Angels appear to the women who are searching for his body to cleanse and wrap it. Jesus the living person reappears to his friends in several places, vanishes, and then reappears to offer them advice about evangelizing the world, building an institutional church, and living what he has taught them.

This part of that story bothered me. A lot. I didn’t know what to think about it. All the ghost stories of my youth notwithstanding, I didn’t believe people could rise from the dead. Surely there was another explanation.

In studying the Bible as literature in college, I discovered that there were actually several different versions of this story in the Gospels. Either it happened several different ways or it didn’t happen at all or somebody made it up or at least embellished it. Or maybe people dreamed it. In any case, the entire Christian tradition in all its many variants seemed to be built on a supernatural foundation. Never mind the perfectly sensible and inspiring events of Jesus’ life.

My sources of authority--how I knew what I knew--began to shift dramatically as I dealt with the ramifications of a possibly-fictional Easter.

I met non-theistic friends who told me that Easter was proof that the concept of God is absurd. What loving parent would send a beloved child to be killed as a sacrifice? This God didn’t make sense.

Nor did the Hebrew Bible seem any less fantastic in its authority. Laws which mandated that wool and cotton not be combined in fabric? Which recommended death for a myriad of seemingly minor offenses? Which dictated laws of diet that collided with modern science?

“You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free...”--one of Jesus’ most famous sayings. We want to find truth, to believe the truth, to be able to trust the truth we hear. We want to find reliable sources of authority. But we are hard pressed to find those reliable resources.

In the daily news, we hear conflicting reports about international events, domestic issues, political situations. Even the best medical research offers us thousands of studies proving both sides of any given subject: that butter is bad and butter is good, organic is good, organic is bad, estrogen works, estrogen harms, fiber is good, fiber doesn’t work.

If we followed all the studies available, we’d go nuts. So we sort things out according to our own experience. Uncle Bill had a heart attack and ate lots of red meat and dairy products; therefore, too much of that kind of stuff is probably not so good. We grow our vegetables organically and have few pests or diseases and all we have to wash off is the dirt, therefore organic is probably good.

The jury is still out on many issues, but we’re wary--if the market says it’s good, they’re probably saying so out of economic self-interest. Therefore, it might not be so wonderful.

Religion is a little tougher subject to sort out. Many of us were raised to revere certain texts and authority figures as sacrosanct, infallible, or at least true, if not factual. The Hebrew Bible, the Christian scriptures, the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita, Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths--these are all sacred bodies of knowledge, revered by humans world-wide, accepted by many humans world-wide as absolutely true.

Now we have come to Unitarian Universalism at least partly because we have a problem with accepting a sacred written text or body of knowledge as absolutely true. We have come to Unitarian Universalism because we believe that our actions toward each other and toward the universe are more important than certain beliefs about God or the creation of the earth or the lives of the Buddha or Jesus, or Muhammed.

Yet we still need authoritative sources of knowledge. What will they be? How will we decide?

As a religious humanist, I am convinced that human experience and wisdom can be an authoritative source of my knowledge. My own experience and wisdom are authoritative for me, but may not be authoritative for others. I am willing to accept the experience and wisdom of credible others, but I insist on filtering it through my own experience and wisdom.

I accept certain texts as authoritative--the Declaration of Independence is, for me, an authoritative text, as is the Bill of Rights--imperfect as they may be, they establish principles of democracy that I believe to be right. The Constitution---with the challenges it’s getting these days and the current membership of the US Supreme Court---well, who knows?

As a Unitarian Universalist, I find great wisdom and credibility within most sacred texts. I do not consider them historical documents and would not use them as the basis for a history lesson. Yet, these poetic literary works offer me a great deal of universal wisdom: to treat others as I would be treated; to act with justice and mercy toward others; to be

generous with the poor and downtrodden; to love freely and unconditionally; to express compassion and to work for freedom.

Our Unitarian Universalist principles are based upon the universal wisdom of many religious and many secular thinkers.

My friend and colleague, the Rev. Harold Rosen of Vancouver, B.C. in his book "Universal Questions: Exploring the Mysteries of Existence", lists his methods for arriving at useful truth and declares that each balances and complements the others.

He lists as his sources of authority, how he knows what he knows, the following methods: See what you think.

The scientific method, the combination of reason and experience applied to an idea.

Common sense--a personal and practical understanding of reality.

Tradition-- accumulated patterns of thought and behavior, often of enduring usefulness and patterns which define a culture.

Intuition--a sense about the way things are that leaps ahead of ordinarily available information.

Artistic expression--a way of seeing, hearing, and feeling that is different from ordinary knowing.

Wisdom teachings--useful axioms and spiritual principles that can improve the human condition.

Revelation--direct communication of insights by prophetic personalities such as Martin Luther King Jr. and others, both ancient and modern.

In addition, Rev. Rosen believes that we are morally obligated to follow the laws of our government, except when those laws violate universal standards of justice.

So what do we use as our sources of authority? How do we sort out truth from fiction, hype from reality, ethical direction from self-serving manipulation?

Living in a multicultural world, we are always called upon to interpret and evaluate the sources of authority that bombard us. We are forced to rely upon media reports of national and international events that seem hysterical, inaccurate, and often evasive. We hear rumors and stories from friends and family about other friends and family.

We cringe at the proclamations of truth that we hear from certain groups--creation scientists, big corporations, cults and many political organizations, fundamentalist religions. We step carefully through our lives trying to live by our ethical and moral principles but always knowing we don't have enough accurate information to know for sure.

And so we often become like Phyllis McGinley in her poem--chilled by the draft from our open minds, hoping that our brains won't fall out but hoping just as much that our brains won't dry up from too little openness.

How do I know what I know? I find it helpful to look at the things that I know for sure and tease out from them the reasons that I know them with such certainty. And I find that almost invariably there are common roots to my sense of certainty.

For example, I believe with all my heart that Easter is a season to celebrate, that it is deeply meaningful, that its meaning has profound consequences for my life, and that I neglect its meaning to my detriment.

Fifty years ago, my conviction was based on my Christian upbringing. I believed that it was the day that Jesus rose from the dead. My parents and teachers had told me that this was the truth, and I believed them. I found the story inspiring and the great love and sacrifice it portrayed thrilled me to the core.

But picture Kit the teenager, sitting on a windy bluff early one gray Easter morning with other youth as a single ray of sunlight pierces the clouds, singing an old hymn: " His robe is the light, his canopy space, his chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form and bright is his path on the wings of the storm." and then.."It breathes in the air, it shines in the light, It streams from the hills, it descends to the plain and sweetly distills in the dew and the rain." My understanding of the truth of the Easter message changed at that moment, from a concentration on the death and resurrection of Jesus to the ever-present, all-embracing sense of the Infinite Divine which I saw at that instant portrayed in nature to be bigger than Jesus, bigger than I was, bigger than all the doctrine I'd ever heard. With its boundary-less, inclusive power, the Living Universe subsumed the Christian message. And I would never again be satisfied by a doctrine or a creed as my source of authority.

Today I find the truth of the Easter season even more embracing as I understand the true source of its meaning and power, the Living Universe that enfolds and connects us.

Our celebrations in the spring of the year, of the Vernal Equinox, of Passover, of Easter, all come to us out of the same source of universal truth, LIFE, the life which infuses us with strength and power and inspiration and is revealed most fully in nature.

Because we are human, we have developed specific ceremonies to celebrate our sense of mystery, of gratitude, of incredible awe at the meaning of life. We celebrate the renewal of the earth in Spring, we celebrate deliverance from our enemies, we celebrate the rebirth of love.

But all our celebrations, all our joy and passion flow from a common source--our recognition that life is sacred, in all its pain and all its triumph, that living things all die and yet continue to live, whether in the fertile soil, within our hearts, within works of creativity which outlive us, in our families.

Yes, we do use our reason to determine truth; yes, we do rely on human tradition for continuity and connection. We trust our intuition, we respect our artists' work, we use our common sense and our knowledge of wise words from various texts, and we pay

attention to the prophets we hear, to discern what truth they may offer us, even when we disagree. And we trust most of the laws of our land.

But I believe that for virtually all of us, LIFE is our final authority. If it is life-giving, we can trust it. Even when it hurts, if it enhances life in its greatest form, we can believe in it. We sometimes get sidetracked by the needs of daily living--money, possessions, luxuries, are these not life? No--they are only what we accumulate in our day to day living. They are not life itself.

Life itself is in the threads that connect us, in the relationships we have with one another, with our own souls, and with the Living Universe or God as we understand God. Life is indestructible, but it can be nurtured into a greater profusion of joy and passion by our careful attending to its growth, its needs.

And we will goof up! We will make mistakes about what is lifegiving, life-enhancing. So will those around us. Last election, our nation voted to continue the efforts of the Bush administration to force controversial US policies on the world.

Many of us disagreed, but we live in a democratic society, where the will of the majority calls the shots. During that election, the majority chose a path which has not proved to be life-enhancing, life-giving. Many of us thought it was a terrible, destructive path and have done all we can to mitigate the damage and protest the injustices in process.

Life continues, but in a somewhat different direction because of that choice. How will this choice spin out in the coming years and the coming elections? The political scene tends to be cyclical. When it is our turn to be the majority---which it will be again---how will we respond? Can we help those who disagree with us see our point of view? Can we see theirs? Can we forgive each other for the mistakes we each have made?

For forgiveness is life giving. It is never easy to let go of hurt and anger, and in many ways, the ancient human dramas of Easter and Passover are not ended. Jesus set an example on the cross when he prayed for his killers' forgiveness. Can the Jews forgive the enemies who have persecuted them for centuries? Can the Palestinians forgive the Jews? Can the Christians forgive those who refuse to believe and do things their way? Can the earth forgive the torture it has endured? Can we forgive those who have hurt us?

As we get ready to celebrate spring in all its glory, let us consider how well we use our sources of authority, whether we are true to LIFE and its gifts, or whether we ignore its call. May we rededicate ourselves in love to LIFE, for ourselves, for each other, and for the Living Universe of which we are a part.

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

Hymn #287 "Faith of the Larger Liberty"

BENEDICTION

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that though

we understand and know a great deal, we do not understand and know everything. May we carefully consider our beliefs and our deepest knowings in the light of reason and love, looking always to choose the path that is life-giving. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.