

THE QUESTION IS THE ANSWER

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First Unitarian Church of Saint Louis

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The narrator in Tom Robbins' book *Still Life with Woodpecker*, compares the author to a famous French existentialist, saying: "Albert Camus wrote that the only serious question is whether to kill yourself or not. [and] Tom Robbins wrote that the only serious question is whether time has a beginning and an end. Camus clearly got up on the wrong side of bed, and Robbins must have forgotten to set the alarm." But then he tries again to ask well. He says: "There is only one serious question. And that is: Who knows how to make love stay? Answer me that and I will tell you whether or not to kill yourself."

It is often argued that intellectuals, like me, and the UU faith in general, tend to come up with many questions, but no answers. Thus the old Mort Saul joke, that if you want to drive a Unitarian from your neighborhood you burn a question-mark on his front lawn. In fact, I insist that we have all sorts of answers. We draw them from the Jewish prophets and wisdom tradition, and from the teachings of Jesus. We also draw answers from Buddha and the Bhagavad Gita and Chinese sages. We uphold the guidance of reason and the results of science. We draw answers from the good earth, the Great Mother, and the web of life.

We answer that human existence is meaningful and human progress possible and that all life is connected. We say that we must work for peace and justice, that we can create communities of equity and compassion, using democratic process and defending the rights of conscience. We say that an answer to the troubles of today's world is the continuing struggle to create true community, by working for love, decency, tolerance and harmony in our selves, in our church and in the world. We have answers a-plenty!

But the sensibleness of these answers depends utterly on what sort of questions are being asked. "Jesus is the answer some say." I like that this church has a long history of people who have looked to Jesus for answers. But, if the question is "Who has won more World Series baseball games than the Saint Louis Cardinals," the answer is not "Jesus." Questions matter. Likewise, if your question is "Does God exist?" the most common UU response should be a clarification of the question. If by God you mean an all-powerful, human-like being who created the universe and who decides if people will go to eternal punishment or not, then the obvious answer is "No; how can anyone believe that?" But, if by God you mean the shaping power of all creation that liberates souls, ends slavery, makes birds and bees, humans and trees what they are, which paints the sunsets all golden and purple, and if God is that power which "sings in our hearts all the stirrings of compassion" well then the obvious answer is "Of course."

So, the question is, in a sense, the answer. And what is more, questions themselves, or the questioning and seeking, is an answer, at least to the question, how should we live. The search for truth is not hopeless; it is the essence of hope. Yesterday, at Tower Grove Farmer's market I saw a man with a Star Wars T-shirt. But then I saw that I had misread it because the letters were shaped just like the movie logo. The shirt actually said, "Stop Wars". I liked how it used a

well known title about conflict to ask for “a new hope”. Now, if you are one who asks “How can we stop wars?” I hope you will continue to ask that question.

But know this: you will not ever come to one ultimate and final answer. I once was in an argument with a conservative Christian about the justness of the Iraq war, and I said I was trying to end all wars. He said that only if everyone believed in Jesus, in the same way that he believed in Jesus, then the world would be at peace. This is a perfect example of how an answer does not really answer the question but blocks it instead. Such an answer is no answer at all. The end of war will not happen, in that way, until after time has furled its sails and God has written the last line of the Book of life. But we want peace now.

On this earth and in time, unity of belief usually happens only through violent coercion or radical tolerance. But, if you keep asking the question of how to make peace, if you keep seeking an answer to how to end war, truly and actively, then in the asking and in the seeking you will find more of what you seek than if you wait for miracles. I think our UU statement on conscience on Peacemaking is a perfect example of that. It is not a set of pat answers, but a set of principles and practices that guide the unending struggle to make more peace, to extend peace, to find peace in our hearts, in our relationships in our communities, in our nation and in our world. This is what we mean by saying The Search is the Answer. The search for Truth, or peace, or justice gets us closer than comforting answers that block the questions.

As the poet Rainer Rilke once wrote [my emphasis],

“Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, **because you would not be able to live them.** And the point is, to live everything. **Live the questions now.** Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

I have long loved this quote, but it has a tendency to make the search for truth all misty and lovely. A more troubling evocation comes from the main character of Ann Rice’s novel *The Vampire Lestat*,

“Very few beings really seek knowledge in this world. Mortal or immortal, few really ask. On the contrary, they try to wring from the unknown the answers they have already shaped in their own minds -- justifications, confirmations, forms of consolation without which they can't go on. To really ask is to open the door to the whirlwind. The answer may annihilate the question and the questioner.”

Religiously, 'the Whirlwind' is the answer to Job’s question in Hebrew Scriptures when he demands to know if God truly upholds justice. Some paraphrase God and say “just don’t ask, because such questions are too big for mere mortals.” But I think the Bible, and especially that book, is a celebration of seeking and asking. They are there to encourage us in our struggle. Most of “Job” is a series of theological discourses struggling with a mystery that is always greater than our answers. At the end, the voice from the whirlwind does not say “don’t ask” but “Be in awe at the wonder at the vastness and beauty and mystery of life.” That is why the book of Jonah ends with a question, to encourage us to struggle with the question, to try and answer it. This week we are wondering if the person who shot a bullet at a member of our church is

one of those who, as God says “cannot tell their right hand from their left”, and what should we do about it? Questions drive the religious, intellectual, spiritual and moral life. That is why I spend time each year focusing on your questions. My answers may be valuable, your answers are important, but more to the point, the question is the answer.

So, this year I received ten questions. I always read every one, even though this first does not sound like it came from someone well informed about the subject:

“If God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for homosexuality and other things how is it promoted here? And what about Lev 18:22, Lev 20:13? [Which are both scriptures about a man having sexual relations with a man “as one has with a woman.”]

Now there are many bad assumptions in this question: many, many, and I could talk about them for some time. But my basic response to this sort of "biblical" question is this: **if** you are going to take these scriptures as divine prescriptions, and **if** you are going to accept reality as it is, not as you wish it were, and **if** there is to be integrity between the two, then you must accept that these Biblical passages are not condemning healthy, committed, consensual relationships between caring adults. They are condemning a form of promiscuity and abuse that we could not condone, or promote, because we affirm decency and love, justice and compassion, in all human relationships. I want us to promote the dignity of each person.

This leads us to the next question which is about my leadership and preaching:

- Interim ministers seem to have a curriculum to develop a healthy congregation. Do we have a curriculum or a continuing them or ministry now? How do you decide on continuing sermon themes throughout the year?

The simple answer to this is, ‘no’ I do not have a curriculum. Instead I listen to you, your issues, questions, sources of hope and sources of struggle. I listen to the needs of society and finally, I listen to the teaching of great religious leaders and guides. Then I decide intuitively where the needs of the people of this congregation and of the larger society intersect most vitally, and then I choose a guiding thread or theme. This year it was “True Community.”

The next four questions continue to ask about our religious identity and purpose:

- Many philosophers of religion consider categorical imperative part of the definition of religion. Is Unitarian Universalism a religion?
- Rev. Starr King said the difference between Universalist and Unitarians was “universalists think God is too good to damn anyone and Unitarians think they are too good to be damned.” It seems that modern UUs think God has no power to damn or save. How do modern UUs serve the concept of universal salvation?
- Why are we here? (Collectively, as Unitarians, why come together? Generally as individuals in the universe?)
- Why should we come to church services each week?

These are all very interesting questions. I will pick them up in individual sermons in the Fall, but for now let me be on record as saying this: If you want to bring more decency, love, justice and compassion into your life, and into the world, then this is the religion for you. It builds on the categorical imperative that we work for peace and justice and decency in human living; that is the reason we are here; this is what Jesus wanted and what universal salvation demands. And finally, if you want to effectively counter the voices of hate, division, oppression, and selfishness in your heart and in this world, to encourage others who want to do likewise and strengthen yourself in the process, then joining together here in weekly worship!

As an aside, I must note that the actual Thomas Starr King quote, from the mid 1800s on the difference between Universalists and Unitarians goes like this: “The one thinks God is too good to damn them forever, the other thinks they are too good to be damned forever.” Reverend Starr King also said back then that the only reason the Unitarians and Universalists did not merge was because they “were too near of kin to be married.”

Speaking about family differences, we have this question:

- Why do people feel moved to interrupt a mood of reverence, created by our Choir or instrumentalists, with the noise of applause?

This question speaks to a deep cultural difference about how to approach worship. I do agree with the implication of the question that there is something intensely beautiful about sacred music that is accepted in reverence and silence. I also know there is also something of great spiritual power to have music that gets us involved with worship, by making noise and increasing our enthusiasm. As always, when given two good options, I go with both. We do not want to be like Emerson’s “corpse-cold” Unitarians, we also don’t want to be all sound and fury, signifying nothing. In the future I will be clearer about when I think music can be applauded and when it should be received in reverent and silent bliss. But, as always, if you feel moved by the spirit of the music to applaud, go ahead.

The next two questions are about metaphysical questions, frustrations and theodicy.

- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Why doesn’t knowing or deciding on a course of action leading to humane outcomes make the performing of the action any easier? [Or, to paraphrase: “Why do good things not come easily from good people?”]

These remind me of what Reverend Martin King Junior said about the story of the Good Samaritan: “The first question which the Priest and the Levite asked was: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But... the Good Samaritan reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’” Both as a response to personal tragedy, to bad things happening to good people, as well as to the resistance in himself to do good, King said the great question was always, “What am I doing for others?” But that is not a complete answer. How can we deal with the fact that the world is not fair or always kind? What is it that

moves us to do more good? I promise I will use these questions as seeds for sermons in the Fall. Let me know what you think about them in between now and then.

Finally, as we are talking about injustice, I share with you the last of the question box questions, submitted by the same person.

- "Why do liberals not rise up in anger and activism against warrant-less wiretapping, assassinations of US citizens, drone wars, and the continued imprisonment of people without trial in Guantanamo?" And "Should we be honestly concerned about potential arrest for opposing the surveillance-security state?"

The short answers, to these are "It is complicated" and "No". The longer answer requires that we talk about the relationship between religion and politics, and ask what is religious about these questions, and also say exactly what is meant by opposing the culture of government surveillance. Religious liberalism is not the same thing as political liberalism. They are often conflated, to our detriment.

One key to politics and religion I have long found in words of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Junior, in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (which I include in the category of sacred and inspired writing),

"So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? ... The nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists."

To be creative extremists we must not get locked into dogma or ideology. To be creative requires that we keep asking questions. To paraphrase Rilke, let us live the questions. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, we will gradually, without even noticing it, live our way into the answers. Because, the question is the answer.

Postscript: I was given two questions verbally that I did not include in the spoken sermon but I include here. The first was "How many members does our church now have?" The answer is that, as of June 24, 2013, there are 338 Sustaining Members in this church.

The second question says, "If Jesus was born of a virgin, then only she would have provided all his genetic material. Does that mean that Jesus was in fact a girl?" One can take this as a silly joke, smile and move on. Or one can talk about miraculous conception and supernatural sources of genetic material. Or one can point out that there is in fact a serious theological thread in Christianity that argues that the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Wisdom in Proverbs (especially 8:22ff) and thus the Christ and Logos are all one being of female gender. I will talk more about this at Christmastime in two sermons about Immaculate Conception and Theotokos. Questions are often the root of wisdom, depending on how one takes them.