

The Question Box
Sermon of June 2, 2013

By Reverend Gary Kowalski

What makes people cruel, deliberately inflicting pain, taking satisfaction in the suffering of others? Why do some people perish in life's fires while others survive to create joy and beauty from the ashes? What is faith? What accounts of the large influence of Unitarianism on Worcester and the country's public life earlier in our history? And should First Unitarian preserve its Christian heritage of worship or broaden its identity to be more inclusive of other religious traditions?

Wonderful questions. Questioning is practically a sacrament with us. Free inquiry is one of our core values as religious liberals. We have a deep-seated trust that if people are allowed to think for themselves with freedom to explore and unrestricted access to ideas and information they will eventually make the right choices. Intelligence will prevail. Ignorance and prejudice will gradually be replaced with broader sympathies and a more enlightened self-interest.

Of course, I only half believe that.

Thomas Jefferson enunciated the rule in his *Notes on Virginia*: "Reason and free enquiry are the only effectual agents against error," he said. "Give a loose to them, they will support the true religion, by bringing every false one to their tribunal, to the test of their investigation." So Jefferson, like many early Unitarians, was an advocate for universal primary education, as well as founding the University of Virginia as a center for higher learning. Historically, the founders of our tradition had confidence in the power of pedagogy, trusting in the enlightening influence of the schoolroom and academy. Thus Unitarians helped to found Harvard and Stanford and Cornell. They established the first free, public circulating libraries in the country. They founded newspapers like the *New York Tribune* and edited magazines like the *Atlantic Monthly*. They led the kindergarten movement. They replaced memorization and rote learning with new child-centered philosophies that encouraged students to exercise their own natural curiosity. And it's no wonder, given this past, that Unitarian Universalists today are among the best-educated denominations in the country. Our high schoolers have the highest SAT scores and according to PEW Research we have fewer Ph.D.s in our midst than Reform Jews but more than any other Christian churches. One ministerial friend jokes that Unitarians believe in "salvation by bibliography," which has a grain of truth, for I've visited any number of UU

congregations, all of them different, but never found one without at least one room full of book lined shelves.

So one of my questioners this morning ponders this. “When I am at Clark University, I see pictures of many founders of that school who were Unitarians as well as civic leaders and captains of industry. What was the appeal that made First Unitarian such a large congregation” in the early part of the 20th century?” In response, let me say that this church was at forefront, intellectually, socially and economically. Half of Clark’s trustees in the 1920s were from this parish. Figures like Stephen Salisbury III, whose vast fortune founded the Worcester Art Museum, were prominent members here. The congregation reached its peak in 1946 with 1500 members on the rolls. To some it must have seemed as if Jefferson’s famous prophecy were finally coming true, when he predicted back in 1822 that “I trust there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian.” Our religion seemed poised to capture a country that believed in never-ending progress and continuous self-improvement. It was a faith that appealed to the best and the brightest. Ours was “the religion of the presidents,” as well as scholars, Supreme Court Justices, artists and entrepreneurs. But of course, Unitarianism never became numerically significant, not even in Worcester, because the answers to some of life’s most important questions are not the kind that can be found in universities or museums, and a religion for overachievers misses the 90% of the human race for whom achievement rings hollow and success is a fickle goddess.

As an illustration, take a figure like Margaret Fuller. From infancy, she was drilled in Latin, Greek, Italian and French, mastering philosophy and metaphysics, testing the limits of what one girlish mind could absorb. Margaret excelled in everything her teachers could teach, but as womanhood approached she realized that domesticity and spinsterhood were the equally depressing prospects open to a woman like herself. By the time she reach adulthood, Margaret was in despair. She was an overeducated frill, a vacuous container for extraneous knowledge destined by her sex for trivial accomplishments. She recorded in her journal: “I felt within myself great power, and generosity, and tenderness, but it seemed to me as if they were all unrecognized, and as if it was impossible that they should be used in life. I was only one-and-twenty; the past was worthless, the future hopeless.”

Margaret was absorbed in these dark thoughts, walking in the woods, and had seated herself near a pool of water when “suddenly the sun shone out,” and so illumined, she was unexpectedly lifted up out of herself, out of her skin, out of her ordinary consciousness, as she records:

I saw there was no self; that selfishness was all folly, and the result of circumstance; that it was only because I thought self real that I suffered; that I had only to live in the idea of the All and all was mine. This truth came to me, and I received it unhesitatingly; so that I was for that hour taken up into God.

For that brief time, the shell of ego seemed to be stripped away, as an energy not her own poured in. And from that point on, she began to blossom. She became the editor of Transcendental journal *The Dial*, writing essays on feminism that would appear in book form as *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. She worked as a reporter, investigating prison conditions and treatment of the insane, then as a foreign correspondent traveling to Europe where she fell in love and had a child with an Italian revolutionary, fighting for the creation of a Roman Republic. Margaret is perhaps best known for her exclamation, “I accept the universe!” To which Emerson’s friend Thomas Carlyle snarkily replied, “Gad, she’d better.” But accepting the universe for Margaret was no shallow acquiescence to fate or weary resignation to the inevitable. Rather it meant a hearty embrace of all that life had to offer—tears and blood and love and passion—an unqualified “yes” to her own birth and death and all that lay between.

Notice that Margaret’s faith didn’t grow out of free inquiry or debating whether miracles happen or God exists. Rather, her faith dawned in a mystical moment when she suddenly realized that life itself is a miracle and that the infinite is here and now. She realized all that, not just with her frontal cortex, but with a deep, inner knowing. And a questioner remarks, “Years ago, at a UU Senior Session, I mentioned Faith as a virtue to be embraced. Then I remembered Joseph Campbell. Asked if he were a man of faith, he replied, ‘No, I rely on experience.’” So which is it, this inquirer wonders, experience or faith? For Margaret Fuller, of course, that would have been a meaningless distinction. Real faith, life changing faith, grows out of experiences like hers, often at those points when we sense ourselves coming unglued or powerless, our souls about to disintegrate or shatter. It’s then we feel connected to a reality larger than ourselves, accompanied by an assurance of well-being from being held in its embrace. It’s when we’ve run out of answers that we discover an affirmation beyond all question. A theologian might call these flashes ecstatic or numinous, while a psychologist could term them transpersonal or just plain crazy. For occasionally they’re accompanied by voices or lights or paranormal phenomena or sensations of heightened perception. Now I don’t say these experiences occur often or to everyone, and I don’t know why some people are immolated in the crucible of pain while others, like Ms. Fuller, emerge from the cauldron radiant and transformed. But I do know they happen, that a few individuals who might be

called spiritual geniuses (figures like Christ and Francis and the Buddha) live continuously in that zone of oneness or non-duality, while most of us only catch glimpses of the boundless and unconditioned. But even an hour there is enough to leave a lifetime altered, to render one a little more compassionate, more forgiving, more appreciative, more sensible that separateness is the illusion and that we're all in this together.

Religion grows out of just such encounters with the transcendent. That's why every major faith has loving kindness as its essence, whether Hindu, Sikh, or Ba'hai. It's why every great wisdom tradition has hit on some version of the golden rule. But that soft, golden core becomes surrounded, sometimes nearly obliterated, by the institutional trappings and externals of faith, the iron creeds and rigid catechisms, the rusty rituals and priesthoods that characterize so much organized piety. Christianity is no different. In the process of collapsing eternity into time and unconditional love into the politics of history, distortions were introduced. So while Jesus came teaching and living the Kingdom of God, we wound up with the church. I personally love and respect the Christian religion, so much so that I wish there were more people who actually behaved like Christians. But there seems to me to be serious problems with a religion that makes a torture device the centerpiece of human redemption. There's something bloodthirsty in the orthodox doctrine of the atonement, which makes human sacrifice the price of placating an angry deity. There's a disturbingly sadistic dimension to the concept of hell in which the Creator consigns the majority of creation to the fires of everlasting torment. Love comes from God. But cruelty arises from people playing god, from weakness pretending to be strength, from the human masquerading as the absolute. A questioner recalls, "As a young boy I recall once sitting on the stoop of our apartment in the Ghetto Like Hood where we lived and one of the boys had brought a large magnifying glass and taught me how to burn the poor hapless little ants much like using a laser." What makes human beings so cruel, he asks? My proposal is that we like to see the weak squirm, because making others feel puny makes us feel powerful, godlike. Inflicting suffering on others shields us from feeling vulnerable ourselves. So more cruelties have been perpetrated in the name of religion than by all the serial killers known to the annals of criminology. It's not just Christianity. Every religion that has attained power has abused power. So whether First Unitarian chooses to frame its worship in predominantly Christian terms or broaden the framework of scripture and prayer to include other religions, care must be taken.

"As I understand," writes one questioner, "this congregation has been nearly split asunder by heritage issues in the past, I wonder how important it is to continue to use the Doxology, Lord's Prayer and covenant as we move forward?"

The answer to that question is entirely up to you. But it's a conversation you'll want to have this coming year, in my opinion, before you call a newly settled minister. What nourishes your spirit? How do you name the sacred? My recommendation, if you decide to retain a liturgy that feels more Protestant than Catholic, more Christian than Jewish, and more Western than Eastern, might be to put some big Tibetan prayer flags out front, or hang banners between each of the pillars on your façade decorated with the yin-yang, a dancing Shiva and other symbols of global spirituality to let passersby realize this is an active congregation and not an empty shell like the other buildings in Lincoln Square, and that despite the architecture of the building which speaks of Anglo-Saxon grandeur and tradition-held-fast there is an inclusive and diverse community inside.

You are a diverse community. And this interval of ministerial transition is an opportunity for this church to re-examine and redefine itself, to discover what you have in common. So take this opportunity to ask the hard questions. Have the holy conversations. Why are you here? What difference do you want to make in the world? What makes you different from a schoolroom, or a museum, or a debating society? Where do you experience hope and healing? What are your dreams and commitments for this place, and for those who come after? Who are the neighbors that you want to serve? What work has the Great Taskmaster given to you now? Being Unitarians, of course, you'll never agree on all the answers. But our questions bring us together.