

June 11, 2006: The Importance of Questioning

The Spirit Of Questioning

Brian Maynard

When I saw the title of the sharing I was supposed to write, my first thought was, “What...? What is ‘the Spirit of Questioning?’” And then I realized that that was, ironically, a question. Reflecting on that for a while, I was reminded of my Math teacher, Gregory Somers.

You see, sometime near the beginning of the year, when we were going over the quadratic formula or something, he asked us we had seen the derivation for the equation. We shook our heads “no.” Shocked, he said, “So your teachers just gave it to you?” We nodded “yes.” He then asked, “And you trusted them?” Mr. Somers then went on to tell us to never take anything we’re told for granted, especially in school. Just because a teacher said something doesn’t make it true. It probably is, but if you question it before accepting it as truth, you can *understand* it and be *certain* you know it to be true.

That is, I suppose, the Spirit of Questioning – the quest for Knowledge. Throughout history, great inventions and miraculous discoveries have almost always arisen from people asking themselves questions. Questions such as, “Why do apples always drop straight to the ground when they fall from trees?” “What is lightning?” “What lies across that ocean?” By asking themselves these questions, great thinkers and adventurers across time have been able to do such incredible things as derive the laws of physics, harness electricity, and explore the far reaches of our world. And by asking myself a question, I was able to come here and speak to you today. The Spirit of Questioning is what allows us to understand our world, it is what drives us through our lives, it is what brings us here, today. It is the hunt for truth.

And now, ...

Why Questioning is Necessary but Sometimes Scary....

Erica Marden

Albert Einstein observed, “The further the spiritual evolution of mankind advances, the more certain it seems to me that the path to genuine religion does not lie through the fear of life, and the fear of death, and blind faith, but through striving after rational knowledge.”

As Einstein points out, the path to knowledge can often be blocked by fear. Fear of what knowledge and information will reveal, or not reveal. As the saying goes, “Ignorance is bliss.” Unitarian Universalism is founded on the basis of questioning;

questioning that which is around us and accepting that the answers we are looking for may or may not be there. Accepting that not everyone will reach the same conclusions and learning to incorporate different ideas and pieces of knowledge into life. I have always embraced this power; the power to question the decisions of my parents and the power to challenge or embrace others' ideas. However, I found myself in the middle of a struggle this year. The struggle between questioning and yearning for an answer, for reassurance.

It's always easier to be told that everything will be all right. As a UU I found myself jealous of those who had answers. I wanted reassurance, I wanted someone to take away my pain and stress. No one wants to live in fear or pain and an assured answer can serve as relief. However, life is not black and white, and I recently realized that I would never trade my freedom to question for a set of solid answers. No one person has the same spiritual needs as that of another. Faith is a journey, a journey of questioning and gathering knowledge along the way. The answers to life's questions and the ability to deal with life's problems has to be addressed on an individual basis, as scary as that might be.

Interestingly enough, when I agreed to give this sharing, I was not expecting to address the spiritual benefits of questioning. This is because until I recently met a group of Fundamentalist Christians while backpacking in Utah, I was unable to see the importance of accepting fear as a part of spirituality. Our nightly conversations by the campfire about evolution, life, and death reinforced my new friends common belief. If science did not have a flawless explanation then a higher being had to have been involved. I am in no way disputing their belief in a higher power, however, what I learned was that fear and the need for an answer or explanation was what had propelled my friends to their faith. And in turn, had helped me reevaluate my spirituality. I know now, that for me, as an individual, the more questions I ask, and the more knowledge I gain, the more understanding and strength I will achieve. Change is inevitable, and a fear of change or new ideas will only breed misunderstanding and hatred. Everyone wants to be right, to believe that their way of life is correct. However, by refusing to ask questions of yourself and your faith you are putting yourself at a disadvantage in life. Stubbornness or hatred is usually a facade for fear of change or fear of new information. An individual can never achieve complete spiritual fulfillment unless they continue to ask questions and explore the answers. Everyone deals with problems differently and therefore one answer can never satisfy the needs of everyone. Asking questions is a sign of great courage, a sign of a willingness to grow, evolve, and accept change. Nevertheless, asking questions will always be scary. Knowledge is a doubled-edged sword, and answers can leave us feeling more frustrated, hurt, or sad than before. But, by asking questions we force ourselves to understand change and continue to evolve.

I can now accept that being a part of a faith that encourages questioning, helps me to evolve into the type of person who, although will always have fears, will understand how to deal with and overcome fear. Asking questions takes courage, and courage can always overcome fear. Asking questions will allow me to find Ú satisfaction in life because I will never feel limited by customary beliefs. I no longer feel fearful when I

think about the limitless explanations in life. I will never have to repeat and memorize the beliefs of someone else. I have been given the freedom to search for my own answer.

Albert Einstein was a man well ahead of his time. Not necessarily because of his memory or ability to absorb information but because of his imagination and tendency to challenge what was believed to be fact. He said, “The important thing is to not stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality.”

Questioning the Majority: Person to Person Questioning

Emily Woodard

I originally intended this speech to address questioning of singular authority figures, but as its content began to unfold, I realized that there was another important power in our country, known as the majority. I would like to, therefore, unofficially retile this speech as, “Questioning the Majority,” for the majority creates the overall authority of a society’s beliefs and structures. The words and actions created by the majority of the population make up the overall atmosphere and structure of the society. It is crucial to question this majority, and, perhaps more importantly, lead other potential members of the majority to question themselves as well.

On this subject, the first circumstance that came to my mind was the questioning of our country’s leaders and administration. Some of my friends questioned my participation in anti-war protests and the concept of protesting in general. As I marched through the mall in Washington D.C. earlier this year, I asked myself, “What specifically are we trying to accomplish?”, “What do we even have the power to accomplish?”, “How much influence are we having on our countries leaders?”, “How much influence are we having on our countries citizens?” It was then that I realized my skeptical friends had already been asking these questions, and it was on a large scale thanks to their scrutiny that I was second-guessing at all. I also realized that the very act of the protest alone and its media coverage was likely to cause many other citizens to ask the questions, “Is this patriotic?”, “What are they trying to accomplish?”, “What is this administration doing that is considered so wrong in so many people’s hearts that they are willing to take the time to stand against it?” Through these questions our citizens are much more likely to look for answers, which would in turn lead to a more informed electorate and a much more legitimate democracy.

Questioning is also extremely relevant on a smaller scale, in our daily lives. From something as structured as a system or protocol to something as spontaneous as a joke or comment, many people accept their daily observations much too readily. I began to fully realize the relevance of this issue in my own life through my experience with an

organization at my school called the Gay Straight Alliance, or GSA. When a close friend began attending meetings a few months ago, I expressed my support, and a couple of weeks later she invited me to attend a meeting myself. I agreed to attend, but I was surprised at the awkwardness that followed as I told another friend about this decision. This friend is most definitely non-discriminatory and in full support of gay rights, but our quick conversation led me to question the atmosphere that my school's student body was creating. I am only speaking for myself and recognize that in a similar situation other people may not feel uncomfortable at all, but in my own personal experience as a straight activist for gay rights, I realized that the topic was harder for me to bring up on a personal scale than I had previously anticipated. This led me to really scrutinize the atmosphere that the population of State High was creating, even if the atmosphere was, in many cases, created unintentionally. Many times I observed a student make an offhand comment that was not meant to be discriminatory at all, yet still had a slightly negative connotation toward the idea of a different sexual orientation. This issue is by no means the only one of relevance in my own daily environment. I have often wondered why it seemed so natural for humans to constantly magnify their peers' flaws with actions such as telling a funny story about a student's particular idiosyncrasy, which most certainly does not show this student in a positive light. Offhand comments with a negative slant lead only to a more hateful environment, populated with alienation and uncomfortableness. If the majority of the population could, instead, be mindful of their words and actions and ask themselves and each other, "Is this comment or action accomplishing anything?" "How are these words and actions affecting the people around me?" "What specific things within my environment still have room for improvement?", the majority of our society's surrounding atmosphere would change for the better.

Once the majority of society is asking the crucial questions, a new problem arises: how to go about answering them in a way that the majority of the population is satisfied with the results. I once read a quote on observing and analyzing information by Buddhist teacher Thich Naht Hahn, but as I was writing this speech I could not locate the exact quote again, so I will try to paraphrase the best that I can, "When a person first hears an opinion or observation, they immediately try to classify as something with which they agree or disagree. Instead of this, simply listen to each statement you hear and let its wisdom permeate into your being like the rain into the soil." By letting each piece of wisdom sink into your being and absorb without bias into your complex system of beliefs and values, you are opening your mind to consider other people's answers and find a way to link them with your own. Within each person's own mind and heart lies their own personal philosophy for approaching life and the world—a philosophy that is undoubtedly comprised of different pieces of many other people's ideas. The formation of legitimate philosophies rely on remaining open minded enough to hear other people's opinions and remaining humble enough to admit that you might be wrong in providing your answer. Everyone's most personal beliefs have some ring of truth to them, so if you are vocal about your own answers and look for ways to merge these answers with the ones that the rest of your society's, you may come closer to creating a mutual agreement within the majority that leads to, in its own small way, a more peaceful world.

Questioning Yourself

Andy Hayes

A question is a simple thing, but when used correctly it can be the vehicle to all deeper thought. Questioning things from authority to people is normal, but one thing that people don't do enough, is question themselves. This requires an incredible amount of resilience and motivation, but the payoff is immeasurable. **To question yourself is to grow closer to discovering who you really are.** The bulk of humankind goes through life, defined by things other than their personality; in high school it's the teams or clubs to which you belong; in adulthood you're defined by your career. People realize this, and try to mold themselves to fit in or be accepted. **There is a complex solution to such a simple problem, discovering who you are.** From there, you can start to find people you truly connect with; true friends, not friends out of necessity or proximity. From this, drama can be diverted and conflict resolved peacefully.

Discovering yourself is a scary prospect, sometimes it means cross examining your beliefs and your opinions to find what is truly meaningful in your life. You may be surprised to find some of the things you fight over are ultimately inconsequential. But this inner examination can also lead to a new passion in your life, the discovery of something that you truly love to do, or something that you can stand for unabashed. Life goes by too fast; most of the time a person is too swept up in the whirlwind that is living in the system that they don't have time to think about who they are, and where they're headed.

The system is the American Dream. The cliché image of a nice house with a white picket fence, 2.5 children and a dog named Rover. This dream is instilled at a very young age, we are taught that we must strive for happiness, and happiness is embodied in material goods. So here children are presented with a quandary, they're told they need to do well in school so that they can achieve a goal that they're not sure will even make them happy. They chase this ethereal goal throughout middle, and into high school. The dream phases into realism and pushes out any other goals in the child's mind. The child then graduates high school, goes to college, and gets a job in his major. There is one thing seriously missing from this, a time for self-discovery and self-reflection. These feelings well up, and start to snowball, gaining momentum, and gaining potency. When the snowball finally hits, it can shake a seemingly happy person's life off its foundation. This is most commonly called a mid-life crisis. The adult finds himself stuck in a dead-end career with a life that doesn't make him happy, he wonders where those lofty ambitions of his youth went and how he ended up in the spot he's at now. Most cope with such revolutionary feelings by getting a convertible or a new wife, but much emotional damage and savings accounts could've been spared if our John Doe would've just taken a moment to think, to question him self.

So what's the answer? Is there an answer? Yes, the answer is to continue to live through questions. The answer is to never stop your on going quest to find out what is true, what is real in your life. To not judge your own life by anybody else's terms, but to

define your own terms and to follow your own path. Question yourself; find out what you believe and what you stand for; because questions are the vehicle to inner-understanding, and a happier you.