

Title: Doubt, The Essence of UU by Phil Gilmore 1/2/11

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It is interesting to me that Norman Cousins and UU's in general cherish their doubt. If we didn't try to make a positive from our doubt, we wouldn't have much to celebrate would we? I sometimes feel that doubt is all there is. Are there any beliefs that we hold without question? I suspect the answer for most of us is no. We question everything. That is our strength. This church is a church of doubters. Witness the recent national ad campaign with the slogan, "UU's; we have questions."

Funk and Wagnalls dictionary defines doubt thusly vt 1. To hold the truth, validity, or reliability of as uncertain; hesitate to believe or accept. 2. to be apprehensive or suspicious of. 3. vi To be unconvinced or mistrustful. N- 1. Lack of certainty about the truth or fact of something. 2. A condition or state of affairs giving rise to uncertainty: Their fate was in doubt. 3. An unresolved point or matter; difficulty: to clear up doubts. 4. Obs. Fear Dread. – syn (verb) 1. question, distrust, mistrust. –(noun) 1. Doubt, uncertainty, indecision, skepticism, incredulity, disbelief, suspicion, distrust and misgiving refer to a state of mind that causes suspension of judgment or action. Doubt may be simple uncertainty about facts or truth, but usually combines also indecision about what action to take. Skepticism is a disposition to question, to demand evidence or proof before rendering judgment; it falls short of incredulity, which is unwillingness to believe what seems unlikely, and disbelief, which is the positive rejection of something alleged to be true or valid. We direct suspicion toward that which may be evil or wrong; distrust toward that which may be treacherous or deceitful. Misgiving is doubt about the outcome of an action.

Wow! No wonder doubt has such a bad reputation! For the purposes of this talk it is important to note that the doubt I am promoting is the questioning, skeptical doubt that leads to a search for answers. It is important to be able to function even with doubt. Weighing the odds, questioning assumptions, and delaying action could easily stifle all action, or at least to cause hesitation. The opposite position of unquestioning beliefs handed to you by authority, while certainly a lot easier, is not for me. I suspect a large part of the disdain directed at Agnostics is due to the perception of doubters as unwilling or unable to act due to their doubts.

Of the seven UU principles we have mostly been able to agree on, at least three admit to doubt.

- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations: This implies that there is always room for new understanding, and that none of us has a lock on the truth. We doubt anyone who claims they have all the answers, and encourage everyone to keep questioning.
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning: Again, we admit to doubt, and promote actively pushing for answers.

- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

“The right of conscience” promotes using our own judgment to decide what is best rather than relying on an outside source. Given some folks judgment, I am surprised UU’s were able to agree to this part of this principle. But allowing individuals to decide for themselves what is best may not be as frightening as you think. Mark Hauser, a Harvard biologist, in his book Moral Minds: How Nature Designed our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong, has done statistical surveys and psychological experiments using questionnaires on the Internet to investigate the moral sense of real people. The main conclusion of Hauser and Singer’s study was that there is no statistically significant difference between different religions, or religious believers, or atheists, or even primitive islanders in making moral judgments. Most of us make the same decision when posed with a moral dilemma. Clearly religion is not the source of our moral compass. Richard Dawkins gives a compelling and brief review of the argument for a Darwinian origin for our moral sense. Perhaps we are hard wired to be moral.

The belief in the democratic process evidenced by the second part of this principle also suggests doubt that any individual should override collective wisdom.

I suggest that doubt is really the prime mover that has built the UU tradition.

Universalism perhaps started with the universal inclusiveness of Jesus gospel message, or in the teachings of the Buddha in Confucius. Regardless of its inception, the Universalist belief that the whole human race will be “saved” was condemned as a heresy by a church council in 544. These early skeptics could not accept that only a select few would go to heaven.

Unitarian origins actually can be traced to the early Greek faith in the unity of all existence and to the belief of early Jewish Christians in the human prophet Jesus as Messiah, or son of man, ushering in the new reign of God. Unitarians doubted that the council of Nicaea in 325 AD got it right when they came up with the trinity idea. In 1638 in Transylvania the term Unitarianism referred to those who believed in the toleration of other faiths and the unity of God (versus the trinity). These early Unitarians were also declared heretics by the church for their questioning of church teachings. Both arms of our church are based in doubt.

On a personal level, how many of you were brought to this church by doubt? I suspect doubt, for many of us, was the factor that brought us here and keeps us here. Orthodoxy is just too pat and unsatisfying.

The Conservative Christian booklet by Greg Stier Venti Jesus Please is instructive. This pocket guide for youth explains that you can only be “saved” by accepting Jesus. Good deeds won’t get you into heaven. There is Original Sin, and we are all sinners.

Therefore, babies who are not baptized do not get into heaven. Animals don't have souls and don't go to heaven. I suggest that these types of teachings have been the reason most of us are here. We have questions, and we doubt the answers provided by conservative religions. We are skeptical that folks who live blatantly selfish lives and repent on Sunday to ensure their ticket to paradise, while an honorable humanitarian atheist is condemned to hell. In fact many of us doubt there is a heaven or hell except what we make for ourselves right here and now.

Accepting on "Faith" beliefs for which there is no proof was the admission price to the local youth group when I was growing up. I tried to force myself to believe, but quickly realized I was not able to forgo reason. I could have simply lied and continued to participate, but found my morals wouldn't allow that. Douglas Adams in Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency proposed a solution to this dilemma. A robotic Electric Monk, a labour saving device that you buy 'to do your believing for you'. The de luxe model is advertised as 'Capable of believing things they wouldn't believe in Salt Lake City'.

Many religions go so far as to encourage adherents to "believe" truly ludicrous facts. The earth is 6,000 years old for instance. Any evidence to the contrary is god's way of testing the faithful. The more ludicrous the belief you ascribe to the better. The further from reality these religions go, it would seem that the more doubt its' followers must have. Eventually there should be a breaking point where the leaders of these myths will be leading themselves and no others. But fundamentalists prove on a daily basis that a lot of folks will cling to any raft even if it is sinking.

Dawkins asks the question, why do we accept the idea that the one thing you must do if you want to please God is believe in him? What is so special about believing? Isn't it just as likely that God would reward kindness, or generosity, or humility or sincerity? Indeed what if God is a scientist who regards honest seeking after truth as the supreme virtue? (I am sure Dawkins wrote that last for UU's)

The Philosopher Odo Marquand has noted a correlation in the German language between the word *zwei*, which means "two," and the word *zweifel*, which means "doubt" – suggesting that two of anything brings the automatic possibility of uncertainty to our lives. *(From Committed by Elizabeth Gilbert). Doubt is ubiquitous. Doubt may not be comfortable, but it is the engine that drives all progress. Doubt leads to questions, that lead to theories, and eventually with patience and luck to answers that inform our beliefs. In fact, what would the world look like if everyone was completely sure they were right without doubt. I suspect it would look a good deal worse than what we see today. Instead of a few radicals espousing wacky ideas and killing everyone who disagrees, **everyone** would be committed to their own personal beliefs. I suspect the old testament with it's genocidal killing, gang raping, stoning for not observing the sabbath, and human sacrifices would start looking like a cake walk by comparison.

Richard Dawkins in The God Delusion brings some clarity to this argument for me with the following passage describing a preacher in his pulpit. "---admitted a sneaking regard

for atheists. They at least had the courage of their misguided convictions. What this preacher couldn't stand was agnostics: namby-pamby, mushy pap, weak tea, weedy, pallid fence sitters." And "according to Quentin de la Bedoyere, the Catholic historian, Hugh Ross Williamson 'respected the committed religious believer and also the committed atheist. He reserved his contempt for the wishy-washy boneless mediocrities who flapped around in the middle.'"

I strongly suspect this is how many view UU's. Fencesitters. Personally I am a bit put out to be called such names as mushy pap, or wishy-washy. Nor is the vitriol limited to the firm religious believer.

My recollection is that Sam Harris dismissed UU's in general with a similar argument. He would have no truck with any group that would respect a religion he so strongly disagreed with. We are too accepting for Sam. We should be actively working against organized religions. So Agnostics get it from both ends of the spectrum. Dismissal, ridicule, name calling.

For me Dawkins helped put this in perspective by suggesting that agnosticism is not really a simple third choice between theism and atheism but a spectrum of probabilities. Unlike T.H. Huxley who did not delve into the possibility of a spectrum of belief when he coined the term agnostic, Dawkins suggests the spectrum is continuous, and ranges from a strong theist who does not believe, but rather knows there is a god, to an agnostic who is completely impartial, "god's existence and non-existence are exactly equi-probable, to the strong atheist who "knows" there is no god and every slight variation in between these positions. Dawkins goes on to admit that Atheists do not have "faith" and reason alone could not propel one to total conviction that anything definitely does not exist. However he places himself very close to the total atheist position, stating "I am an agnostic only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden." He goes on to support this position with some pretty convincing arguments.

This insight that there are degrees of probability, while seeming obvious in hindsight, was actually a small revelation to me. A new way of looking at the old conundrum. I have always been loath to accept the title of agnostic or even of atheist because of the negative connotations. My question now is, what is wrong with the searching, questioning, doubting, fence-sitting position I find myself in? Why are true believers both left and right so adamant that everyone must ascribe to their position? Why are they so brittle? My intuition tells me they doth protest to much. They (both left and right) fear their own doubt and will persecute anyone with the audacity to force them to question their beliefs. In fact I believe they have doubts and won't admit it, in some cases even to themselves. Personally I think it is better to admit you are unsure and go about trying to figure things out, than to fight yourself, tamping down any doubts.

But the truth is, from the moral certitude of the religious right, and from the moral certitude of the staunch Atheist all look down their noses and frown on anyone with the chutzpah to admit to doubt.

Doubt is the little engine that can. Without it we stagnate and atrophe. With it we grow and expand. So to the religious right and to the cock sure atheist I say. Get off my back and stop calling me names. I will consider and respect your opinions, and hope you will consider mine.

After I finished preparing this talk, Janelle googled Doubt, and UU. In addition to several talks by various UU congregations that I was unable to access, there was reference to a book called Doubt: A History: ... by Jenifer Michael Hecht. In addition to numerous tantalizing reviews, there was a teaser of the first few pages, and the conclusion of the book. It seems as though the book would have been a great resource for this talk, with an exhaustive history of doubt. Part of the conclusion went right along with Dawkins theory of a range of probabilities for belief rather than clinging to the three terms of believer, agnostic and atheist. She suggests at least 7 categories to describe the more complex spectrum of possible belief /doubts.

I have been struggling for a conclusion to this talk that would wrap it all up in a bow. But as usual I find myself not in the black and white clarity of belief, but in the swirling mysterious gray fog, groping for answers twisting just out of reach somewhere above the fence I am sitting on. And perhaps that is the way it should be. But I doubt it. Guess I like Gray.