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**“Penultimate Truth: Doubt as Spiritual Practice”**

James Ishmael Ford

*Truth comes in small installments.  
Seldom does it break forth in fullness  
upon a darkened world.  
Revelation is not a once-for-all disclosure:  
it is the product of long,  
laborious and often spurned discovery.  
It is found by philosophers, scientists, home makers,  
and just anyone who lives a thoughtful life.  
Truths are ever building and built upon:  
As fallen leaves form new soil,  
truths of former seasons become  
the compost that sprouts the new growth.  
Truths make their way on an unmarked course  
through the wilderness of ancient error.  
Their encounter is with imposing authorities  
and the hobgoblins of distrust and fear.  
Dogmas of yesterday become the doubted  
notions of today,  
revered orthodoxies of the past the  
rejected fables of the present.  
We do well to cherish our meager wisdom,  
and hopefully await a deeper  
understanding.  
For truth comes to earth in small installments.*

Clinton Lee Scott's "Revelation" in *Promise of Spring*

I am on sabbatical and currently minister-in-residence at our UU seminary at Meadville Lombard. While at one of the bookstores connected to the University of Chicago I needed to use the restroom. Inside I noticed the higher end graffiti one encounters at universities, quotes from literature and philosophy amongst the more rude suggestions. And square above the toilet someone wrote the question "Where is Heisenberg?" To which, in a suspiciously similar hand although different colored ink, someone responded, "I don't know." Kind of cool, a little university humor regarding Heisenberg's famous "uncertainty principle."

I found myself thinking about uncertainty and doubt and questioning, a whole cascade, that I believe marks us, you and me, Unitarian Universalists in general and our spiritual way. There is a bit of spiritual perversity about us. We tend to be more into the question than the answers. I believe it's the source of that old joke most of us have heard too many times that if a UU came upon a fork in the road with two signs pointing in the two

directions, one reading “to Heaven” and the other “to a really good conversation about Heaven,” that a UU would just about always go for the conversation.

I think our liberal religious way is one of relentless inquiry. Our path demands we take the brains we were given and put them to good use. Our way, I assert, is about radical humility, about not-knowing, about constant opening to our own hearts and to the heart of the world. Today I want to throw all the facets of this form of inquiry—dynamic, open, humble, not-knowing—into one word “doubt,” and hold up that doubt as our cardinal spiritual tool, our principal spiritual practice.

Doubt isn’t given a lot of attention in traditional Western spirituality. Of course it rises from time to time. One of my favorites in the Christian scriptures is where after Jesus’s death and apparent resurrection one of the apostles, Thomas, speaks of his need to actually sink his fingers into the wounds before he would believe. While the scriptural account uses this story to put Thomas into his place I have to admit I love that challenge to blind faith and consider Thomas as my spiritual ancestor, indeed as our liberal spiritual way’s particular saint. As an aside I am more than a little pleased Thomas is considered the founder of far, far Eastern Christianity, having by tradition traveled to India, and from there his disciples having introduced their version of the faith to ancient China as what was called there the “religion of the Lovely, or by preferred translation, the Beautiful God.”

I want to take the remainder of our time together to unpack what this way of doubt might look like. In my experience whenever we take up a spiritual discipline among the first difficulties we encounter are what are called the “near enemies.” Near enemies are counterfeits, they look a little or even a lot like the genuine article, but are not it.

One of my favorite hymns is “Die Gedanken Sind Frei” Its refrain is “my thoughts are as free as the wind o’er the ocean...” And it resonates with the declaration “I think what I will.” We find its origins as early as the twelfth century and as a song of peasant revolt in the sixteenth century. The version we know was written sometime in the eighteenth century, and was revived in the German resistance to Hitler. It is, I suggest, our hymn. And the blood that purchased this hymn demands things of us; honesty, clarity, and passion. Among the near enemies of doubt as a spiritual practice are credulity, relativism, cynicism and arrogance. Let me unpack these dead ends on the spiritual quest, approaches unworthy of our free inquiry, if just briefly.

First credulity. I recall reading an historian of modern occultism who described an early twentieth century figure, an Anglican priest who was also a later-day alchemist. The historian said of the old priest how it appeared he would consider anything, so long as it was sufficiently unlikely. The world is full of assertions. The spiritual world is rife with them. Do you need to entertain all of them if you want to follow a path of honest inquiry? I suggest the answer to this is no. It is possible to have your mind so open that your brain is in danger of falling out. Not only is it okay to make some preliminary sorts about one spiritual thing or another, it is imperative one do so. You can’t follow every path; at best

we have a little more than a hundred years in a lifetime, most of us no where near that long. I suggest we don't waste that time.

I suspect the greatest danger on the spiritual path of doubt is relativism. Here is that line we hear that Unitarian Universalism means "you can believe anything you want." I suggest it's not what we're about, that's not what the hymn means in that ancient call to human freedom "I think what I will." Is every thought really equal to every other? It seems unlikely. Rather, when we're on our game what we're about is questioning and questioning and coming to believe within that process, not what we want, but rather what we must. There is much to be found in the difference between the words "want" and "will." Look for the gold.

We've birthed into this cosmos with six amazing senses: we can touch, we can see, we can taste, we can smell, we can hear, and we can sort all this information. These sources of information and their organization are limited. We know there are ranges beyond which our senses can detect. But, it turns out what we have is enough for us to survive for that up to a hundred years or so. And we die, not because our senses fail us, but because our bodies seem only to last so long. The good news is along this way our senses allow us to know enough to find that joy and healing which is the hallmark of an authentic spiritual way. The hymn sings "A glimmering fire the darkness will brighten; my soaring desire all troubles can lighten."

Similar to relativism, another false step is cynicism. This is just giving up. This is saying "so what?" Frankly, it's an easy out. To stop with a noticing that things are not right is to stifle the human spirit, and our own possibility.

I suspect of all the near enemies of doubt as a spiritual way, arrogance is the most dangerous. Institutionally it seems a popular fall-back stance for the religious liberal. Frankly, I think the general analysis of liberal religion is more accurate than that of the various orthodoxies I've encountered in my life. But to allow myself to stop there, or to not hear a lesson that may come from an unlikely source, is to cut myself off, from other people, from the world itself. This is so easy, and so deadly.

So, the question becomes how to avoid these traps, how do we make this way of doubt authentic and living? For the limited time we have left today, I'd like to briefly address four possible routes, just hold them up for your consideration: agnosticism, humility, curiosity and love.

First agnosticism. It's really interesting how this word has mutated in the last hundred and fifty years or so since it was coined by Thomas Huxley. Today it tends to mean "I don't know and I don't care." But when Huxley coined it, it meant "I don't know, and I care passionately." Here we are invited to something powerful and potentially transformative for ourselves and the world.

But it takes humility. When we say "I don't know," we are making a deep assertion. We are suggesting not only that we don't know, but that we want to, that we are on a path of

discovery. The great Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki advised us to follow a path of “beginner’s mind.” He suggested while for an expert there are few possibilities, for a beginner there are many, the world is wide open. This is the mind of humility, ready to learn, ready to be transformed. So, ultimately this path of doubt is a path of humility. If I don’t know, if you don’t know, then we need to be willing to learn. We need to open our hearts and minds, and let the world teach us.

This is all about curiosity. I want to know. I suspect you do, too. This is why we come into a place like this congregation. We are on a sacred quest, to know and to heal to find the joy the wise tell us is our common inheritance. This is something precious and the great gift, I believe, of our human condition.

In the last analysis all this is informed, I suspect, by our great human sense of love. Love, I believe, when you dive to its center is about connection, about seeing we really don’t end at our skins. It is the great secret of the cosmos, and the possibility of joy and healing, that profound discovery at the heart of the way of doubt. As the hymn concludes “Though prison enfold me, its walls cannot hold me: no captive I’ll be, for my spirit is free.” Remember those peasants, recall the German resistance, know they’re our ancestors, our guides: doubt freely, engage passionately.

This, my friends, I really believe, is the beginning of wisdom.

Amen.