

In the Details
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Does anyone know the story of where the expression, “it doesn't make one iota of difference” comes from? I want to share one of the versions of the story, and I can't swear it is true, but as Stephen Colbert would say, it has *truthiness*. We do know that the Council of Nicea was called in 325 to deal with something called the Arian controversy in the Christian Church, and this was a debate about the nature of Jesus. Arius and those who followed him understood the nature of Jesus as the son of God to be subordinate to God. Church leaders said that that Jesus and God were of the same nature. The Arians lost the debate at the Council of Nicea and the Nicene Creed came to be, which some of you who grew up in Christian churches may remember. However, there were many Christians who did not fall into line with orthodoxy, and some were called semi-Arians. They were willing to say that the Jesus and God were of similar substance, but not the same. In Greek the word for same substance is *homoousios* – and similar substance was *homoiousios*. There is an I, or an iota stuck in there, which changes the meaning. The 4th century Christian church felt that it was vitally important that all Christians adhere to the same doctrine, creed, and understanding of the nature of God and Jesus. As the church became connected to the government of the Holy Roman Empire, doctrine was enforced by the state, and the iota of difference became a bar by which admission to communion of the Church was allowed. I don't for *sure* if this is where the expression came from, but folklore and medieval studies folks tend to say yes. It could also be that iota was the smallest Greek letter and that is where the expression came from, but I like the Nicene story better—a huge church and government basing the future of their organization on the understanding of one word, and one letter, that this would make the difference, and would become a common saying even 2000 years later. The underlying theological question *was* a big one, because if Arius had won the debate, we probably would have had Protestants and Unitarian Universalists a lot earlier, we claim Arius as part of our theological history. This is because if one were to see God and Jesus as made of similar, but not the same “stuff,” it is not too slippery of a slope to get away from Trinitarianism, and God in three persons, and it is also not too much to imagine someone taking this to mean that Jesus was not fully human and fully divine (which would be debated at the Council of Chalcedon a little over 100 years after Nicea), or that perhaps other creatures might have some of the “stuff” of God in them. You can see how this would be concerning for those who wanted a unified and orthodox church. An iota can make a big difference.

Language is important because if we are not attentive to how we use it, and if we make assumptions about meaning as individuals or as a culture, than we can end up in places that we do not intend. Language works because we have a set of shared understandings about what certain sounds mean, but it is also true that the meaning of words and ideas change over time. There is that old story that is ascribed to many theologians and clergy with the punchline, “Tell me about the God you don't believe in, I probably don't believe in it either.” Jeanne Nieuwejaar, the Unitarian Universalist minister who wrote *Fluent in Faith*, says:

If the only concept of god available to us is that held by ... fundamentalists then we can put on our coats and go home because we have then very little to talk about. But let us not

give them that power. Let us go beyond their descriptions, opening the door to a broader understanding of what this word means. We will never reach an adequate description, but can still work toward a richer and fuller embrace of empowering concepts and images.¹

In a Lifespan Faith Development class last Sunday we talked about language, theology, and what words we use to talk about what is important to us in our spiritual lives. It was a really great conversation, and it made me think about the iota story. It can be easy to dismiss language as unimportant, not as important as what we do with our hands and how we care about each other, and in some ways, that *is* true. But it also incredibly important how we communicate with each other, how we make ourselves understood. Language can be used by those with power to shape a narrative, to write history, to keep people unseen. Language can also be a tool for liberation and changing how a group of people describes their identity and experience. In class we had a rich conversation about the meaning of blessing, what the word means to us, how we might use it, why, and so on. The hope in such conversation is not to worry about iotas per se, but rather to understand ourselves better, to share of ourselves with others, and by hearing the stories of others to perhaps see the world and ourselves in new ways. That is the point of education at its most basic, right? As we learn to communicate about ourselves, we also learn to hear the stories of other in new ways, and we are changed.

There is value in the particulars of each creature, rock, and flower. What do we learn about the big picture when we get down into the details? When thinking about this question I went to physics, and thought about how we are trying to get at some of the biggest questions of the universe by looking at the smallest particles. Since I don't know much about particle or theoretical physics, I wanted to go to a sacred text to help with this question as well, and I knew that the Tao would have something. In our reading from the Tao Te Ching, Chapter 32 this morning, it began,

The Tao is nameless and unchanging.
Although it appears insignificant,
nothing in the world can contain it.²

As you can imagine, each translator makes choices about what words to use to express the meaning as they understand it in the original language. Stephen Mitchell translates this passage as:

The Tao can't be perceived.
Smaller than an electron,
it contains uncountable galaxies.

I know that the ancient Chinese text didn't have anything expressly about electrons, but I think I get what Stephen was going for here – the Way, that force we are trying to understand, that we will never fully understand, it is both smaller and larger than anything we can imagine. Whatever the smallest thing we can put our minds around, it is smaller, and whatever the biggest, it is bigger. And that is the point of the Tao. In another chapter, and I am paraphrasing, it is written, that if you can describe it and put a name on it, what you are describing and naming is not the Tao. In the translation from earlier Chapter 32 ends:

1 Nieuwejaar, Jeanne Harrison (2012-08-15). *Fluent in Faith: A Unitarian Universalist Embrace of Religious Language* (Kindle Locations 1134-1139). Skinner House Books. Kindle Edition.

2 Tao Te Ching: Chapter 32, translated by J. H. McDonald (1996), http://earlywomenmasters.net/tao/ch_32.html

Naming is a necessity for order,
but naming cannot order all things.
Naming often makes things impersonal,
so we should know when naming should end.
Knowing when to stop naming,
you can avoid the pitfall it brings.

All things end in the Tao
just as the small streams and the largest rivers
flow through valleys to the sea.

This is also important to hold. For all the work we do to describe our experiences, to name what is important to us and to share and learn with others, it is also important to know when to let go of language. It can be a spiritual practice to reflect on our experience with words, to ask hard questions of ourselves, like, “what holds the universe together (or not) and how did I understand that better through this moment?” and it is just as important to sit in wonder. It is not either/or, but both/and. In Jeanne's book she reflects on a variety of spiritual terms and ideas like, love, compassion, blessing, sacrament, and grace. In the chapter on grace she writes:

“Grace is something you can never get, but only be given,” says Frederick Buechner. To pursue moments of exceptional beauty, clarity, or serenity would be fruitless. But to be open to receiving the gift that is available to us is another matter. The colors of the sunset, the birds on the water, the tenderness in our loved one's face will be there whether we notice or not. To be a person of faith is to be receptive to grace, to notice, to be attentive. It is akin to mindfulness. Gifts are available to us all the time, but they will pass us by unless we are open to see and to feel and to celebrate. In the words commonly ascribed to Ramakrishna: “The winds of god's grace are always blowing, it is for us to raise our sails.”³

I hope that we have had all had moments when we felt a spiritual opening, when we felt connected to another person or place, or the universe in a way that was important and special. Our invitation in Unitarian Universalist community is to be mindful and ready to experience such moments so they do not pass us by, so that we can be fed and grow through our experience. We are also invited to help each other along by finding ways, however imperfect, to share our experience, what we have learned, how we have changed, with our fellow travelers. We do this so that we all might find new ways to be open and mindful, to have our sails ready to lift, to see the details in new ways. If whatever connects us all is always smaller and bigger than what we can ever imagine, there is no chance that we will ever figure it all out (in case you were worried), and mystery will always be our companion on the journey. But as we explore and name and communicate with each other, we can expand, broaden, and deepen our shared experience, and that can be such a blessing to a neighbor who might feel stuck, or alone, or as if they are the only one who understands the world as they do. We will all use different language to describe our spiritual lives. To find that language, and be open in the context and support of a faith

3 Nieuwejaar, Jeanne Harrison (2012-08-15). *Fluent in Faith: A Unitarian Universalist Embrace of Religious Language* (Kindle Locations 1576-1581). Skinner House Books. Kindle Edition.

community, that is an experience that not everyone has, it is grace in our sails, and in a very real way, it began with an iota of difference.

Blessings on the journey. Amen.