

Doubt and Faith
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UUMSB

Who here has doubts? When we are trying to make up our minds about something, what are the tools that we use to decide? When we are presented with something new, or something that we don't understand, at what point do we decide that the "whatever it is," is real? Or real enough? For many of us, we need to see things, like the old expression, seeing is believing. A foundation of our Unitarian Universalist tradition is doubting that the way scripture had been interpreted by other traditions was correct and seeking new understandings. There are some people who might suggest that to doubt in matters of religious importance is to show a lack of faith, and some Christians would point to the John 20 passage we heard in our reading as support of this position. But others have interpreted this passage to mean that it is entirely human to question that which we don't see, and for Christians, Thomas' example shows an ongoing relationship with their God, not a closed and complete set of stories, but rather illustrating that each person will have to come to their own understanding of faith and truth. For the liberal faithful of traditions of all sorts of theological stripes, doubt is foundational to our faith.

Elaine Pagels, a popular biblical historian, wrote in her book, *The Gospel of Thomas*, that at the time the Gospel of John was written, there may have been competing Johannine and Thomasine sects, and so in John, Thomas is the fall guy for lots of stuff. He says the wrong thing, and is a foil for the author to explain what the right behaviors and choices should be. I am not John's biggest fan, being a later Gospel is all about evening out the narrative, making things fit, and he breaks the third wall all the time with little snarky asides to the reader. The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of the sayings of Jesus, probably written after the Gospel of John, and not by the actual Thomas. Scholars knew that it had been written because of references to it in other texts, but it wasn't until the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1948 that a complete copy of the Gospel of Thomas was found. The text is really interesting because as a collection of sayings, there is no narrative, and this is not based in any technical scholarship but just on my own read, it seems that there are lots of internally conflicting statements. Also while there are some phrasings that made it into other Gospels as well, there are also some statements that are fundamentally and theologically different than the Gospels included in the canon. It is almost but not quite Gnostic, meaning that there is a lot of talk of the horribleness of the earth and people, splitting things into dualities of good and bad, but there is also some beautifully phrased lines that remind me of Proverbs like:

(3) Jesus says: "If those who lead you say to you: 'Look, the kingdom is in the sky!' then the birds of the sky will precede you.

If they say to you: 'It is in the sea,' then the fishes will precede you.

Rather, the kingdom is inside of you and outside of you."

"When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will realize that you are the children of the living Father.

But if you do not come to know yourselves, then you exist in poverty, and you are poverty."¹

¹ Stephen J Patterson and James M. Robinson trans. In *Biblical Archaeology Review* July/August 2015

There is also a phrase similar to the doubting Thomas scene in John

91) They said to him: “Tell us who you are so that we may believe in you.”

He said to them: “You examine the face of sky and earth, but the one who is before you, you have not recognized, and you do not know how to test this opportunity.”

(92) Jesus says “The one who seeks will find. [The one who knocks], to that one will it be opened.”

In the Gospel of John, Thomas needs to see to believe, and clearly the author takes this as an offense. To paraphrase the end of chapter 20, “Jesus did lots of cool stuff that I am not even going to tell you about, but I told you this much so you would believe that Jesus is the Messiah.”

Doubt is foundational to the past and present of our Unitarian Universalist tradition. Back in the mid-19th century, there were movements afoot in the United States to bring reason and science to bear on religion and the Unitarians and Universalists were both deeply involved. Unitarians were part of the Transcendentalist movement and the Universalists connected many people with spiritualism. According to scholar John Buescher, “The number of spiritualists in America grew rapidly in the decade of the 1850s. Just before the Civil War spiritualists and non-spiritualists alike estimated the number as two to three million (out of a U.S. population of 30 million).”² These spiritualists attempted to contact the dead, and through that contact resolve questions like, what happens to us after we die, and who was right the ultra-Universalists who believed that everyone went right to heaven, or the Restorationists who believed that there might be something else that happens first? They wanted to know and erase doubts.

This period of our history is so interesting because while sitting with mediums does not sound much like a scientific experiment to us today, many spiritualists viewed it that way. They were using the tools available to them, mediums, to gather empirical evidence about the afterlife. They wanted to see to believe. Adin Ballou, the Universalist minister wrote,

I am a Spiritualist because I regard Spiritualism as a great body in the promulgation of free discussion. There are thousands of questions on the subject of religion, science and philosophy which must be discussed, but could never be solved by any method...possessed prior to the birth of modern Spiritualism.... The time has come when religion and reason must be married.³

By the *end* of the 19th century, the tables of public opinion had turned in many ways against the Spiritualists and folks were looking to science to instead *disprove* their connection to the spirit realm. You may not be surprised to find out that in Buecher’s reading of the accounts of people’s results from this question in sessions with mediums, the answer very much depended on who was asking and recording it. In the 19th century, because the scientific method and ideas like applying reason to the Bible were new and shiny, there was a push to apply them to everything, even to understanding the afterlife. In that process, we learned a lot about the human mind, psychology, and meditation, but nothing empirically about life after death. There are some beliefs that we come to through our experience that cannot be explained or proven through reason. We either get comfortable with our doubt, or not.

There are some among us here today who believe that there is a power in the universe that pulls people toward goodness, love and relationship, and they have many different names for

² Footnote broken

³ Footnote broken

that. There are some among us who believe that there is call in our shared humanity to live lives that support goodness, love and relationship, and might describe it in a variety of ways. No one here can offer empirical proof of their beliefs and nor should they have to. Reason is an incredibly vital part of our tradition, that opened up religious texts, especially the Bible, in new and important ways. Through new translations and lenses for looking at the Bible and Christian theology, the world has movements like Liberation Theology, Womanism, and Process Theology. In our own tradition, we helped birth Transcendentalism and through that environmentalism in the US, peace movements, new philosophies, and who can measure what else? We used our reason to come to new understandings about the roles and place of women, oppression, slavery, and the care of the mentally ill. Our 19th century foreparents put their faith, through a lens of reason, to work in the world.

Part of what has made our tradition what it is today are times when we have gotten over-excited about something, some believing that we could figure everything out if we could just get the right translation and interpretation of the Bible, or if we could prove matters of faith through our reason. Someone had to help put on the breaks and say, “Woah there, step back. Let’s talk about experience. Let’s talk about the transcendent. Let’s talk about the ineffable we can’t put into a box.” We have had to remember that like Thomas, in the end it is not only a matter of what we see or touch (though Thomas never actually touches Jesus), but rather our relationship to the holy and the universe, our personal faith, that will help us come to an understanding of truth and meaning. In a tradition that holds direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder as one of our sources, we have to remember that just like love, compassion, and justice, doubt is fundamental to our shared tradition.

Adin Ballou wrote, “I am a Spiritualist because I regard Spiritualism as a great body in the promulgation of free discussion. There are thousands of questions on the subject of religion, science and philosophy which must be discussed.” He was right that these topics and beliefs were important to be discussed, but it eventually became apparent that these conversations needed to take place among the living, including their shared experiences, hearts and their reason. There is no shortcut to finding answers that need to be struggled with. The answer to life’s most important questions are in the process for each of us, and there is no one, living or dead, who can find those answers for us. As Michael A. Schuler wrote:

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the servant of truth.

Question your convictions, for beliefs too tightly held strangle the mind and its natural wisdom.

Suspect all certitudes, for the world whirls on—nothing abides.

Yet in our inner rooms full of doubt, inquiry and suspicion, let a corner be reserved for trust.

For without trust there is no space for communities to gather or for friendships to be forged.

Indeed, this is the small corner where we connect—and reconnect—with each other.

So may it be. Amen.