

Doubter's Stew
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Unitarian Church, Davenport
Allen Bertsche
Kathy Bowman

Opening Words (Allen): What we are not going to discuss in any depth.

Doubt about the nature of God, or the very existence of God or gods has always been with us. It is not a new development, though it does seem to be a popular topic today. In recent years we have been flooded with new books, some, like Richard Dawkin's "God Delusion" or Christopher Hitchens's "God is not Great" attack the faithful and reject the divine as the vestiges of a violent and superstitious past. Others respond with defenses of faith and often attacks of their own against the irreligious.

Today's service, does not intend to revisit the ongoing, often divisive debates about science and theology or about orthodoxy and heresy. These debates, though stimulating intellectually, can also leave most listeners mystified about what relevance the discussion has to their lived experience. And we must be honest that there is an inherent hypocrisy in the arguments. After all, within each deeply religious defender of faith is a firmly held atheism towards any God beyond the one they accept and worship, and behind the scepticism of each attacker of religion is a deeply held faith, in science, or reason, or humanity's ability to uncover the nature of truth. Faith and doubt cannot exist one without the other.

Today we would like to take a different tack, we would like to consider the irreligious, the atheist, the free-thinker, not to dissuade anyone from their own faith position, or to engage in endless debate, but to argue for an idea, that leading a life of ongoing doubt is a spiritual alternative, one which can yield rewards, can sustain the human spirit and can inspire new, creative directions.

So, welcome to our service today, a service about doubt and doubters, but also one about affirming not denying, about our spiritual lives, a hearty stew which nourishes both questions and faith.

REFLECTION

Kathy:

Do you believe in serendipity? Just last week the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published a report called the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey. The perfect segway into today sermon topic! The survey reveals a broad trend toward tolerance and an ability among many Americans to hold beliefs that might contradict the doctrines of their professed faiths. But more exactly on point for today's sermon, the survey sheds light on the beliefs of the unaffiliated, those that do not identify with a particular religious tradition. Seventy percent of the unaffiliated say that they believed in God, including one of every five people who identified themselves as an atheist, and more than half of those who identified as agnostic. So, atheists say that they believe in God as do half of the agnostics. Equally interesting, a significant portion of people that do identify with a mainline religious tradition report that they do not believe in God. They identify instead with history or holidays or communities. So we have many people in these hallowed United States that say that they are atheists, but believe in God, and we have many people who identify with a religious tradition, but say that they do not believe in God. Hum? Very interesting!

I grew up in a family where it was OK not to believe, or it was OK to believe. This sort of freedom is hard for some people to imagine if they grew up in a family where a particular doctrine was part of their family's legacy. It is particularly remarkable coming from a background in rural Iowa during the 1950's, growing up

on a farm. Our family was Protestant, in the midst of a largely German/Irish Catholic county. You had to choose, Protestant or Catholic, there were no other choices. My mother was loosely associated with the local Methodist Church, helping with the Ladies' Aide Society, teaching Bible school, and cooking for community meals. My father was supportive of her involvement but preferred not to be involved with any organized religion itself. Not that he had any argument with religion, or that he disbelieved, he just wasn't interested. An independent farmer all the way.

But his family, wife, friends, and community had great respect for the integrity of his word. His ethic was not to impose any of his religious beliefs or doubts upon anyone else, especially his children. My mother certainly believed in a Christian concept of God and the divinity of Jesus, but she also was not one to try and persuade anyone else about the truth of her point of view. Her ethic was always to lead by example: demonstrate the truth of her religion by living in generosity with her family, friends, and neighbors. They made a good pair. Neither one trying to persuade the other, with a tacit agreement not to try and impose religious doctrine on the children, but let them find their own way.

Now this religious freedom could either be a great gift to a child who has always been dogged by the impulse to make a religious interpretation of life, or it could leave this child, me, adrift in a sea of more choices, more challenges, than I was prepared to handle. I can remember building an altar in my bedroom around the age of twelve. These altar consisted of a small Native American totem pole and a circle of rocks that I had collected. I prayed at this altar. Can't really remember who I prayed to or what I prayed about. But I was obviously very interested in religious symbols and practices. I soon discarded that practice, but the quest to find meaning in life through the exploration of religion has always been there for me.

Allen:

My story is quite different from Kathy's, though we both find ourselves together in the same place today. I was raised in the Christian tradition, Lutheran to be exact, by parents, who were believers and raised their children to be believers. I attended Sunday School and heard stories of Creation, of Sinners and Salvation, of Noah's Flood, Joseph's coat and David's sling. I went to church camp and bible classes, attended potlucks and moved slowly from sheep to shepherd to king in the Christmas pageant. I joined the Lutheran Youth Group and was confirmed in the Church. But for me each of these acts was more about my faith in my parents and their desires for me than out of a deep belief in the creeds and commitments of the church.

I must admit, I was a lousy Lutheran. On Sunday mornings I would feign sleep until the last possible moment, hoping to be able to skip service for a week. I would fidget in church, or doodle on the attendance cards. In Sunday school I was one of those kids, though not the only one, who every teacher feared. I asked too many questions. Do dogs go to heaven? What about fish? What about the fish we eat? Are they angry with us when we get there? When you go to heaven are you the age you died or is everyone 18? (18 at my age was the oldest anyone would ever want to be.) What if you died in a fire, would you smolder and smoke for all eternity? If you were shot, did you have a hole in you? What did the lions eat on Noah's ark? Because Noah certainly would not let them eat the only 2 antelope left on Earth. If Adam and Eve only had sons, where did the rest of us come from? If God knew everything, then he knew we would go to Heaven or Hell before we were born, so what's the point of trying?

I asked questions. And asking questions meant that I heard the same responses pretty often. Stop. Don't ask questions like that. You just have to believe. Because the Bible says so. It is a mystery. God works in mysterious ways. These were not very satisfying answers, and as I grew I also grew tired of being told to stop doubting, questioning or thinking too much.

At 14, I completed the church's confirmation classes, and I asked the minister what it would mean if I was not ready to confirm my belief in the ideas found in our church's core creeds. He smiled and assured me that this was not a problem, I would simply repeat the class for another year. So, another year of the same, getting "left back" at Sunday school, or... a small untruth spoken before the entire church. I went through the confirmation service that year, a little nervous that lightning would strike me down, but happy not to repeat confirmation classes. After my confirmation I asked my parents if being confirmed meant I

was an adult in the eyes of the church. They said yes it did, and I replied that as an adult I had decided that I didn't feel the need to go back to service on the next Sunday, or any Sunday.

That was nearly 30 years ago, and while my father is now happy I attend a church each week, I suspect that he still holds out hope that I will turn back to the Lutheran church. Actually, since I have become a member of this church, and my sister has converted to Catholicism, I think we both balance out just about at Lutheran. Though I doubt my father sees it this way.

What I tell him today is that I enjoy this church because I am never asked to prove that I am towing the company line, and no matter how hard I try, none of the questions I ask here are unwelcome or unanswerable. Doubt, questions, the need to follow our own paths are all part of this place.

Kathy:

Unitarian Universalists are known for their skepticism, for their disbelief. Our 18 Century Unitarians doubted the tri-part personhood of God, finding the unity of God the only logical answer. The Universalist doubted that a God of benevolence would ever damn anyone to hell, calling instead for the universal salvation of all souls. Through the ages there have been many great doubters both inside and outside the Christian tradition. In fact, every major religious tradition has prominent doubters within its written commentary who question aspects of doctrine and the revealed nature of God/gods, along with the very existence of that God/gods.

One of the great Christian theologians, Paul Tillich, says:

“Every theologian is committed and alienated: he is always in faith and in doubt; he is inside and outside the theological circle. Sometimes the one side prevails, sometimes the other; and he is never certain which side really prevails.”

And, of course, at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist Purposes and Principles is the principle, “. . .the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” This principle commits each individual to examine their own experience to find for themselves the truths that will guide their actions, and the meaning inherent in their own existence. If this search involves living a life in doubt, so be it. But, it is also true, that it is doubt that can lead to some of life's most profound revelations.

So has my doubt led me to any profound revelations about life? No, probably not. I think that cooking up a stew is a good metaphor for how various ingredients of life simmer together to help us answer some of life's most vexing questions. When I want to cook up a stew, I usually follow no recipe, just look in the refrigerator and consider what is in season. So the foundational ingredient to my Doubter's Stew is my individual experiences of life. The key to examining your own experience is not to come to them with any preconceived notions about what life should be like, or who you should be, or how things should go in this life. I started out with a gift from my family or origin, a gift that encouraged me to thinking independently about my own experience and to be realistic about my own self. So my actual life experiences are much like yours, a chaotic mixture of days passing without any seeming pattern, punctuated with amazing joy, incredible sorrow, and unanswerable questions about the meaning of it all. The next step in preparing this broth of life's experience is to pass it thorough the 'fire of reason.' This is very much an individual choice on my part, because I have always been predisposed to try and reason things out, being a left-brained person, probably a genetic predisposition from birth. I try to gather more information when I don't understand, outline things, make lists, try and figure it all out, write sermons. But if this isn't your approach to life's mysteries, blessings on your journey!

My next ingredient is the arts: specifically what the arts can teach us about life. My first love was fiction, drama, and poetry—the great narrative arts which can teach us so much about the larger world that we live in, a world beyond the narrow confines of our own individual experiences. The timeless Greek tragedies teach us how we might live our own lives a bit better, realizing that pettiness, human greed, and jealousy will poison not only our own lives, but the lives of everyone around us. We are a people that live by and through the stories that we tell one another. Fiction was my first love in college, preparing to be the proverbial English major. The words of poetry can mirror our most complex feelings, and lead us to

new insights: how we might grow these feelings into something deeper, more insightful, and eventually more life enhancing. It is only recently that I have come to a greater appreciation of film, something that I was not really raised on, but my children have convinced me that the genre is worth of my reasoned appreciation. But most recently, I have come to appreciate the world of dance: the potential therein for story-telling, expression of human emotion, and combining music, movement, and color. The arts are our great gift to our selves in trying to understand our experience.

But this stew has to be flavored with the bitter herbs of human failure. I cannot go through this life without fully acknowledging in my own life, and in the lives of everyone that I meet the permeations of human failures that haunt our days. I own my own pettiness, my own jealousies, my own meanness, and my own failures to act when I could have made a positive difference. I acknowledge the horrors of war, the darkness of the criminal mind, the inexplicable accident that ruins a life, the grip of addictions, and the virus of systemic dysfunctions that cause so much human pain. Human failure, sin in the old theology, has to be a key ingredient for this doubter's stew to be authentic.

Salt with joy, and pepper with gratitude. Yes, living daily with a sense of joy in the natural world, joy in our human relationships, joy in doing the good work of the world, joy in playing with our children and grandchildren; yes, living with joy is the 'salt of life.' Also living with gratitude gives us the humility to appreciate what are the gifts, blessings in the old theology, given us each day without our asking. The gifts of breathing and consciousness, recognized with an attitude of gratitude, can get us through the most difficult of days. A spiritual practice of gratitude is one that I have attempted to cultivate: informed gratitude firmly rooted in the knowledge that all is not well with this world, and it never will be.

Simmer this stew of doubt. Do not sample too soon since you might always be learning something new through a reasoned examination of our own experiences. Always leave yourself room to add something new at the last moment because life is always sending surprised your way, new ingredients that might change your whole way of looking at the world. And then share the feast with family and friends when you are searching together for the answers to life's most vexing questions: What is the meaning of my eventual death, which is the one thing that I do not doubt? How can I live a life of integrity, goodness, and justice seeking? How can I live in responsible relationships with my family, friends, and community? How can I do any meaningful work in this chaotic world? How can I balance my own needs for joy and gratitude with an acute knowledge of how unfair life is for other people? My Doubter's Stew helps me answer this questions, feeds my soul when I need nourishment. You probably have your own vexing life questions to answer. I hope that the 'Stew of Your Life' whether it contains large chunks of doubt or not, is a hearty mix that can satisfy your appetite for life.

Allen:

When Kathy and I started brainstorming this service, we spoke quite a bit about the new wave of books which defend Atheism. And to be honest, I wasn't sure how far we were going to go with the topic. As many of you know, I have led services before on Agnosticism, and on finding spiritual messages in the words of scientists, but Atheist and Atheism are words I have never been able to embrace. I prefer to call myself an agnostic, or a secular humanist, because I cannot escape the thought that Atheism is both a confining and a negative term. I say this not because conservative politicians throw Atheist around as a scapegoat for everything they dislike, can you even be an Atheist in America without being a Godless Communist? For me it is negative because it defines what people reject rather than what inspires them. Atheism is a powerful statement against our superstitious, supernatural past, a definitive stance that says I do not find the divine to be rational, I do not find room for gods in the universe which I experience. I deny, I reject. One can certainly appreciate the need to do this from time to time, but for me, the Atheist stance makes the same mistake that many religious zealots make, it tries to be definitive, to say that there is one way to think and rejects contrary arguments out of hand.

But there is another term, often used in place of Atheist, one which I feel brings out the best qualities of doubt and questioning: Freethinker. I love this term, and what is not to love? Thought, reason, contemplation and questioning is at the heart of freethought. It proclaims a lack of dogma, a liberty to explore the world on your own and reach your own conclusions. For me the idea of Freethinking offers me exactly what I most cherish, freedom and discovery. It offers a worldview where you can choose what you accept as truth, what gives the world meaning for you. Some may choose to follow hard science,

others look for commonalities between the world's great faiths, or see spirituality in nature or in humanity itself. In a world of open exploration, we have absolute freedom to be who we feel we are, to seek out what we find to be true and to live lives of inquiry and awe. Freethought acknowledges that this is our right, unfettered by awkward, often illogical traditions, unchained from dogmatic creeds and stagnant institutions. Freethinkers proclaim as undeniable a right which many would deny us, an absolutely vital right in my mind, the right to be wrong.

What do I mean by the right to be wrong. There are lots of ways to define this. Perhaps it is the right to go against common sense or common practice, and do something unusual. Perhaps it is the right to challenge long-held beliefs and stand for a new way to view the world. To push against injustice even when it is seen as part of traditional values. But, for me it is even more basic, it is the right to learn, to grow, and to change my mind. As a freethinker I ask questions, not only of authority or of the establishment, but of myself as well. I am free to question my own beliefs, to interpret new discoveries and alter what I held as true only moments ago. And I am allowed mysteries, without being told to stop asking about them. Freethought is far more than simply railing against a lost faith or finding every detail of a religion which contradicts or fails to meet expectations of logic. It is about the ability to define your own universe. To define, refine, and redefine faith itself.

A brief example is perhaps overdue. I believe in science, though I do not consider myself a scientist. I am hopeful that those who brought us relativity and quantum mechanics, and who now talk about string theory and parallel universes, are onto something. I expect much good from technology and medicine, climatology and psychology. But I also like mysteries; and for me this past week I found a perfect example, a very simple, but strong example of the balance of inquiry and mystery which Freethinking provides.

I was at Modern Woodmen park, waiting for a rain delay to end and the game to resume, when an absolutely perfect rainbow formed in the sky. It rose from the skybridge in Davenport, over the river and found its other base somewhere around Rock Island High School. It was a thing of beauty. Perfectly curved, brightly colored, with dark clouds making way for the last remnants of a sunset on the river. And only a few days after the Pride Festival, it was almost poetically appropriate. Now, I would say that I have a good sense of how rainbows occur. They are a very logical, very reasonable atmospheric effect dealing with filtered light and color refraction. The science here is not very difficult. And I think I have a pretty solid grasp on how my eyes perceive color and light, and transfer that image to my brain. Rods, cones, neural pathways, again very reasonable. But I cannot explain, not even in the least, why a rainbow should change my mood or awaken my awe.

What is it about the colors, or the shape or even the way the air seems clearer after the rain that makes me enjoy the experience so deeply. The warm fuzzy sensation that I am sure many others also feel, hardly seems a practical feature of evolution. The ability to perceive rainbows and to appreciate them does not fit with biological imperatives, at least none that I can imagine. There is a gap between what I understand and what moves me. I find mystery not in the natural, almost rudimentary workings of the rainbow, but in its inexplicable workings within me. This is a mystery I like to hold onto, it is a sacred mystery, a space where God may exist, though a God perhaps unlike anyone else's. The mystery of rainbows, sunsets, or that uneasy but pleasureable feeling you get when you try to contemplate the full scope of the universe, is what keeps me from declaring absolutes, from calling myself an atheist. I cannot get myself to use the term, but it certainly does not keep me from calling myself a free thinker. For me, the ability to blend wonder and reason, to understand the sunset and yet still be marveled by it, is at the heart of my own personal faith. The ability to appreciate beauty, to feel awe or to share those moments is what I consider the best part of my doubter's stew. It is what keeps the stew from turning to mush or from drying up in the bottom of the pot. As one of our favorite Buddhist teachers, Thich Naht Hanh said:

"People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth."

So, where do we go from here? What is the path of the freethinker and how can it be used to increase our sense of wonder, our joy and our humanity? As a final answer I will defer to one of our ages most challenging and most challenged voices, a man who knows quite a bit about the dangers of fundamentalist faith and the risks of thinking outside of dogma, the author Salman Rushdie. In 1997, while still living under the death threat of the Ayatola Khomeini's fatwa, Rushdie wrote an open letter to the as-yet-unborn 6 billionth world citizen, entitled "Imagine There's No Heaven." In it, Rushdie contrasts dogmatic faith with open inquiry and questioning, a position he refers to simply as Freedom. After denouncing the use of faith to foster division, intolerance and violence, Rushdie concludes his thoughts as follows:

Only hard-line ideology is clear cut. Freedom, which is the word I use for the secular-ethical position, is inevitably fuzzier. Yes, freedom is that space in which contradiction can reign; it is a never-ending debate. It is not in itself the answer to the question of morals but the conversation about that question.

And it is much more than just relativism because it is not merely a never-ending talk-shop, but a place in which choices are made, values defined and defended. Intellectual freedom, in European history, has mostly meant freedom from the restraints of the Church, not the state. This is the battle Voltaire was fighting, and it's also what all six billion of us could do for ourselves, the revolution in which each of us could play our small, six-billionth part; once and for all, we could refuse to allow priests, and the fictions on whose behalf they claim to speak, to be the policemen of our liberties and behavior. Once and for all, we could put the stories back into the books, put the books back on the shelves, and see the world undogmatized and plain.

Imagine there's no heaven, my dear Six Billionth, and at once the sky's the limit.