

“Actively Wonder Why”
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
June 4, 2017

One of the joys of working with the Rev. Sam Teitel this year has been the opportunity to have someone with whom to talk geeky religious ideas. Of course, a favorite topic for ministers is to talk about God.

Last week, Sam preached about the tensions in Unitarian Universalism when it came to talking about God. He shared how he wasn't uncomfortable with God-talk when he grew up UU, but he also didn't come into his own belief in God until his twenties. His sermon title, “Be Still and Know,” came from the verse in Psalm 46, which says, “Be still and know that I am God.” When Sam uses this verse, it's not the way an orthodox Christian might engage it. Because, if there is one thing we have learned from Sam, it's that the Bible doesn't need to follow the old ruts of explanation! Sam's fresh interpretation took this phrase in new ways. If you missed the sermon, you can listen to an audio online or on iTunes.

After hearing Sam preach, I was thinking if Sam's sermon was “Be Still and Know,” then my responding sermon would be “Actively Wonder Why.” More than a clever twist, it's also a title that points to something important in Unitarian Universalism—the freedom to be curious and ask questions.

Many of you know that my own religious journey began as an evangelical Christian. I *knew* that God was real, that I was loved by God, that my eternal future was safe because of my faith in God's love for me. My story from this kind of conservative Christian faith to life as a Unitarian Universalist minister can both intrigue and confuse people. *But, wait, how did that happen?* There is, of course, a long version of the story, but the short version I often give is: well, I kept asking questions and moved farther and farther left until I fell off the edge.

It was the questions that did it. What is the relationship between monkeys and humanity? Could Darwin be right? Was the Bible ‘wrong’? What about all the kids born to non-Christian parents in places like India? Is it really their fault if they go to hell because they didn't know about Jesus? Am I really supposed to stay silent in church, to not expect to be a leader . . . at least not of men? And, submit to a husband? Even on my best “good girl” days that one seemed like a problem.

The questions just kept coming. They wouldn't be still. I *didn't* know. The questions led me out of evangelical Christianity. They led me into seminary and then led me away from

becoming a liberal Christian minister—even the liberals had answers they wanted me to sign on to. I followed the questions to doctoral studies—discovering the bliss and challenge of being on the cutting edge of new questions.

Then, in becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister, I felt as if I had found a place and a people with whom I could keep asking questions. You have heard me say that as a tradition we have long endorsed, “deeds not creeds.” Such a view prioritizes the moral actions of our lives and humanizes religion—making it clear that deeds that alleviate suffering by caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, and fighting for the dignity of others matter more than holding to the correct interpretation of an ancient text or to the party line of long tradition. In this sense, we are not here to get our *ideas* right; we are here to try and get our *lives* better.

And yet, the slogan “deeds not creeds” also says: *no creeds*. For many, freedom of belief is the hallmark of the UU tradition that brings them here. Like my own story, many have found themselves sitting in various religious communities questioning what was being taught. The UU freedom to question—to actively wonder why—is more than a ‘nice’, liberal feature. For some, this freedom can be what makes walking through these doors even possible.

Indeed, I know that some of us walk in here with a painful religious history. Being told to *not* question, to simply believe, to “be still and know” can contribute to an intellectual violence where our minds are assaulted by a dissonance that disorients and weakens us. Whether dissonance between religious claims of creation and evolutionary science or crushing confusion between emerging sexual desires and religious ideas of right or even ‘natural,’ holding together the fissure of understanding between our religious communities and other sources of knowledge can be deeply stressful. For me, following my questions was a necessary way to resolve the tension of this dissonance. More than simple curiosity, questions were my lifeline to finding truth, to healing the mental divide of conflicting beliefs that threatened to tear me cognitively apart.

Such intellectual violence brings great danger. When we are told to silence our inner wondering, that our questions are nonsense, or that our line of thinking is wrong, we begin to doubt ourselves, our perceptions of the world. This kind of intellectual violence does not only happen in religion. It happens in intimate relationships when one person tells another to shut up, to be quiet, to stop asking so many questions. It happens in schools when students are expected to memorize knowledge without the opportunity to approach novel material with questions and curiosity. And, it can happen in politics when those in power attempt to silence dissent and questions of accountability.

One way I learned about such cognitive violence was in my former marriage to my son's father. Although my ex-husband never hit me, I came to understand that he was abusive. A highly intelligent man, he controlled me and hurt me instead by what he said. I made excuses for him. I questioned myself. When I read a pamphlet describing abusive relationships as 'crazymaking', I immediately understood. Although it would take time before I left for good, reading that definition of abuse as 'crazymaking' began the process.

It has taken me years to learn to trust my own instincts, my own perceptions again. Part of the difficulty has been my penchant for questions. I'm inclined to question everything—including myself. I'm suspicious of fundamentalist stances . . . of a certainty that will not yield to any questions. And so, I question myself. I hear a criticism and I wonder . . . is it true? Am I blind to something in me? Sometimes I suppose I am. This is the human condition after all, isn't it?!

I understand why I am this way—the rejection of conservative religious upbringing, a lively mind that loves new ideas, a survivor of domestic violence that carries scars. I am all of these things and more as I try to make my way in the world as a mom, a spouse, a friend, a citizen, and a minister. From this standpoint and these experiences, I engage in the world—just as each of you live out your life with your own particular configuration of life experience and natural inclination of personality. We all show up here as the extraordinary, broken and longing people that we are.

Being human is not for the faint of heart in the best of times. And, in this place and time, I fear our lives are being made harder as toxic national leadership would have us silence our questions and numb our instincts. I know that you have not installed me as your minister to be your political pundit. But since I began asking questions of religion in my teens, I have always understood that both religion and politics are about shaping our society. And I believe that right now we are facing a particularly pernicious example of national crazymaking that has both political and spiritual impacts.

Truth is under assault. What is truth? Is it true that human activity is warming the Earth? Is it true that such warming threatens cities and cultures as well as access to fresh water and food? Or, is it true that Climate Change is a hoax? An effort to disrupt our national economy and power?

Is it true that mainstream news cannot be trusted? That it is all 'fake news'? How do we know what is true? Who do we listen to? Who do we trust? The man in the White House? Our neighbor? The radio host we like? The late-night comic?

Historically, truth has been the purview of religion. As a minister, my traditional role would be to expound this truth to you . . . learned as I am in the Bible and its truth! But, as Sam questioned in his sermon last week, do we know who is the arbiter of conflict and truth in a congregation that does not share a belief in God, let alone the Bible? No longer can I stand here as *the* authority on *the* Truth. That's not who we are as Unitarian Universalists.

But, does this leave me with nothing to say? Does this leave us all awash in questions, actively wondering why, but without any answers? Are we doomed to be lost in the fog of crazymaking as we are told by men in power that *they* understand better than we do?

We are at risk. This is a political issue, but it is also a spiritual and religious issue. Where do we look for Truth, for direction, for an anchor amidst a landscape embroiled with uncertainty and questions? I fear that without some arbiter or some sense of solid ground that we risk becoming lost in confusion or rage or indifference. I fear not only becoming ground down beneath the weight of authoritarian power; I fear the loss of freedom to ask questions, to trust our perceptions, and to search for truth and meaning. This loss is a spiritual loss in which our inner capacity of being human is diminished.

Amidst these dire times with violence that is both intellectual and horrifyingly physical, I am still uncertain about God and whether to trust in God as that final arbiter. I can say that there are times when I have a sense that there is something larger than any one and all of us. There have been times when I have sensed that something larger so palpably that it felt alive. And there have been times when I have reached out towards that undefinable presence to draw upon the power and strength I sense there. While some will call this presence God, I hesitate. 'God' still feels unwieldy to me—cumbersome at best and dangerous at worst.

I actively wonder if this sense of something more, this power or energy, this force for good, for life, for love is of divine or human origin? Are we as humans a part of divine and holy energy stretching across time? Or, is the divine a fiction of human longing from one generation to the next, reaching ever further towards possibility, toward continued life and love? These are the questions I cannot answer—not *for* you and perhaps never definitively in my own heart. As the poet Rainer Marie Rilke reminds us, sometimes we must learn to live the questions. Sometimes *all* we can do is actively wonder why.

Although my own instincts are towards openness and questions, the threat of crazymaking challenges me to name what I believe is true. These truths become the arbiters against the

conflicting narratives in the public square. Sometimes we need to ask questions; sometimes we need to claim answers and say what is true.

So, what *is* true? Our dependence on the earth for our life is true. Our dependence on one another for life, for civilization as we know it, is true. And, our capacity to learn, to ask questions, and to search for answers is true. And so I resist those who would silence all questions and who dismiss others' questions as foolish. While we may not be able to easily or immediately find answers to all our questions, may we value the gift of *actively asking why* as we live with an open mind to the wonder, heartbreak, and truth of life.

So may it be.

Amen.