“The Uncertain Truth”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

April 15, 2018

Asking a good question is a gift. It is a gift to those who receive the question as an opportunity to discover new ideas and insights. And it can be a gift to be *able* to ask a good question. Asking good questions is a skill some people do really well and others, well, struggle. Me? I’m with the strugglers.

I envy those who ask great questions. In the seminary I attended, there was a large dining hall for students who lived in dorms as well as commuters on campus for classes. Within the first couple weeks of school, I managed to scope out a particular table to join for lunch. More specifically, I discovered a student, Judson, with a gift for asking great questions. A whole group of us would cram around the table just to hear Judson ask his question and to participate in the animated conversations that ensued. Fifteen years later, Judson has made a career as a consultant —in other words, he gets paid to listen and to ask good questions.

Not every question is the same. Some questions land with appreciation (“oh, thanks for asking! I’m _____”) and other questions ignite a fury (“Stop nagging me, mom!”)? As a struggler in asking good questions, I’ve had to learn how to ask better questions. For example, as a new teacher, I would broadly ask a dozen undergrads “so, what did you think of the reading?” Then, I’d be surprised when they didn’t launch into passionate, nuanced answers citing page and paragraph. With support from more experienced teachers, I learned to ask more specific and targeted questions. (“On page 31, why do you think Joann walks away from her friend?”)

You may have also experienced something similar in asking questions of your kids, friends, or intimate partners. There can be a big difference in asking a generic question like “how was your day” and asking more specific questions like “how was your meeting with Barb” or “how do you feel about your science test today?” Specificity can be a cue that you’ve been listening, that you *know* the other person.

These same challenges and skills have also appeared for me when writing questions for the monthly theme. Some of these questions are printed in the Order of Service and others are written on the white board downstairs by the kitchen. Some months the white board fills up with responses. Some months . . . crickets.

© Stephanie May 2018

If you have not seen the white board, this month there are two questions. One of the two questions asks: what question do you wish you had an answer to? In response, someone has written, "what rhymes with orange?" *I don't know. Do you?* The other of the two leading questions asks: what do you *not* question? Pointing out the question to Kate, she walked up and wrote, "my boss." *[I've recommended a raise for her in next years budget...]*

But, what I find most interesting is the answer someone wrote, "Nothing! Question everything!" I don't know who wrote this, but I strongly suspect they are not alone in their sentiment. Indeed, as a tradition, Unitarian Universalism has long been characterized by asking questions—questions that often challenged orthodoxy and assumptions. In an early example, 19th-century Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing wrote, "The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp *our* minds upon the young, but to stir up their own." In other words, we encourage children, youth, and you to ask questions. To seek, to search, to not simply accept.

But *to what end* do we encourage such searching and seeking? Is the process and the journey all that matter? Or, are we trying to get somewhere? Is there a point to asking questions? Certainly encouraging children to question is a way to develop their own capacities for critical thinking as well as for self-determination. In his book, *Between the World and Me*, author Ta-Nehisi Coates explained, "My mother and father were always pushing me away from secondhand answers—even the answers they themselves believed. I don't know that I have ever found any satisfactory answers of my own. But every time I ask it, the question is refined."

Asking questions—asking good questions—matters because our capacity for knowledge and understanding will always be limited. But deepening and clarifying knowledge is not all of what Coates is referring to in this passage. Preceding this quote is an extended description of his experience in public education. He explains how he sees the public school as an arm of the state. Failure in school justifies returning students to the streets. And, in the streets, the physical violence of the state threatens black bodies. Suspicious of the role schools play, Coates began asking *why* he was taught the particular stories he was in school. It was in this context, these questions, that his parents sent him searching for his own answers. Such questioning of knowledge, of power, of the state becomes political. Questioning can disrupt power. Questioning can liberate. Being "politically conscious", Coates explains, can mean "as much a series of actions as a state of being, a constant questioning, questioning as ritual, questioning as exploration rather than the search for certainty."

In many ways, this posture of constant questioning that Coates describes resonates with Unitarian Universalists and their love of questions. But, I am left wondering whether we see our

© Stephanie May 2018

questions as *tools*—tools that help us understand how power works in our society, tools that can build our understanding of how to best disrupt injustice, tools that can help develop our capacity for being in relationship with others in more authentic and supportive ways? The ritual of questioning, the posture to question everything, teaches us to live with uncertainty and curiosity. But, does it also teach us to question with a purpose?

If we think of questions as tools, then I think it matters *what* questions we are asking. If questions are tools of exploration, *what* issues, landscapes, or experiences are we exploring? In what direction are our questions taking us? Into which relationships with which people are our questions bringing us? If questions are a tool of exploration, where are our questions moving us . . . or keeping us?

Over the last few days, I participated in a conference of Unitarian Universalist Emerging Scholars. With today's sermon on my mind, I was keenly aware of the sheer volume of questions that were exchanged in our time together. Sure, there were a lot of ideas given and statements made. But, what made the creative difference in shaping and changing ideas were the *questions.* For my part, I presented a book proposal and received a lot of expected questions about audience, structure, and process. But, I also received a question I didn't expect. One of the mentors, a black scholar, asked me, "when do the black people show up?" Admittedly, when I wrote the proposal, this was *not* a question at the forefront of my mind. My whiteness shaped the questions I did—and, more importantly, did *not* ask.

This again raises the question, "what do you *not* question?" How do the questions we do and do *not* ask impact how we understand the world, how we interact with the world, how we disrupt or sustain the world? How do the questions we do and do *not* ask participate in our *living*, not just in our knowing?

Or, to ask a slightly different question, I wonder whether our habit of questioning sometimes gets in the way of taking action? Sometimes questions need answers—and action. We cannot endlessly ask "what shall we have for dinner?" without eventually taking action and feeding ourselves. As personality tests indicate, closing off the line of questioning and making decisions can be harder for some of us than others. Apart from personality, it can be difficult to know when to take action based on what you know—when the truth is uncertain and the questions are not all answered. *Is now the time to leave my job? Is now the time to talk with my child about behavior that concerns me? Is now the time to speak to my friend about the racist comments they sometimes make?*

© Stephanie May 2018

I worry that as lovers of questions we may hesitate to act, to speak up, to be—or, at least, appear—decisive. I wonder if there times we need to act as if something is unquestionably true? *Oh, but doesn't that sound so judgmental, so fundamentalist, so non-UU?!?* And yet, is it not also "UU" to affirm and promote the worth and dignity of persons, the use of the democratic process, justice in the world, and more? How do we both take action and question everything?

For me, the answer to this question lies in living with the uncertain truth. We must sometimes act on what we know, what we think we understand to be true, *and* we must retain a humility that keeps us open to questions. This is not an easy place to be. In ways, it can be easier to be certain, to "know" we are right, and to act accordingly. Growing up as I did in a worldview that proclaimed many answers, I can testify to the comfort found in such certainty. *And* I can testify to the deep pain as doubts crack the façade of such certainty until the whole thing tumbles down.

In a recent episode of the comedy sitcom *Modern Family,* one of the adult children on the show has begun dating an astrophysics professor. Mom and Dad, Phil and Clare, invite the new boyfriend to lunch to meet the parents. However, just before lunch, the professor receives the news that his life's work has been disproven. Clearly distraught, he insists that as a Brit he will just move on, no problem. Nonetheless, the show cuts to the professor huddled in despair beneath a pile of pillows on the couch. Phil and Clare comfort him by asking him questions *and* by assuring him, "you can be *wrong* in this house."

You can act and live and even base your life's work on a particular understanding . . . and you can be wrong. But this possibility cannot keep us from sometimes acting upon what we do know, how we do see the world. Sometimes we have to act even with the uncertain truth. And sometimes we have to question everything.

Yes, as Unitarian Universalists and religious liberals we like to ask questions. We delight in the discovery of ideas and insights and often we recognize the disruptive power of asking good questions. Fond of questioning, we can eagerly join with the Jewish mother who asked her son, "Did you ask any good questions today?"

But, as we ask questions, I hope we also ask *why* we are asking the questions we are—for what purpose, to what end? I hope we ask what we are *not* questioning. What do we not know? What are we afraid to learn?

© Stephanie May 2018

Questioning can be powerful and transformative. Questioning can bring down whole systems of power—as we have seen in the investigations into sexual harassment during this #metoo movement—and not questioning can keep injustice and corruption in place.

Questioning can also be personally transformative. We can pick up the phone and call a friend, “how are you?” We can pay attention to the details of loved one’s life and ask them specific questions.

Good questions can change not only our understanding, but the lives of others as well as ourselves. Some may be more naturally gifted than others at asking good questions, but I think we all can learn how to ask better questions. Don’t you?

© Stephanie May 2018