

Today's readingⁱ reminds me of how many of the world's major religions start out by warning people not to get too specific about the divine. In the Islamic holy text, the Quran, it is written that there is "nothing like a likeness" of God.ⁱⁱ And there is a Muslim belief that if people create specific images of God, it may lead to idolatry: to worshipping the image, rather than the true God.

In Hinduism there are countless deities to evoke aspects of the divine—figures such as Lakshmi, Kali, Vishnu, Ganesha—which might seem like a way of getting *really* specific. But actually the sheer number of them—as many as 33 million— suggests an ultimate beyond-ness.

The Hebrew Bible also cautions against worshipping lifeless idols or "graven images," that distract people from the real God. And when Moses asks the real God's name, the God that is portrayed in the scriptures dodges the question (or answers it head on?) by saying something to the effect of "my name is Being."

There is an ancient wisdom that it better to keep God a little vague or uncontainable. And I've always found this fascinating: as you read them, the Hebrew scriptures start out by speaking of God in the plural, as in "We gods." That's how god speaks in the story of creation. God says, "Let us create these things..."

By the time you get to the Christian scriptures, there is a monotheistic theology—only one God exists. And this monotheism was considered by many other ancient peoples to be dangerously limiting, and it was even considered to be a form of idolatry because it was not expansive enough. Interesting, right?

In the lives of those early Christians, however, religion was more about ritual, custom, community than it was about intellectual claims. Religion was a way of life, more than it was a set of truth claims.

Then, in the 17 and 1800's there was a big shift. There was a cultural revolution in the Western world, the Enlightenment, in which intellectual thought came to be valued above ritual and custom. Science was picking up speed. Myth and metaphor were seen as things of the past, relics of ancient times. Theologians and priests, absorbing the values of the culture around them, also bought into the notion that the intellect was superior to other ways of knowing. And so it followed that "religious knowledge became theoretical instead of practical."

As the religious historian Karen Armstrong notes, that's when "we began to understand concepts such as faith, revelation, myth, mystery, and dogma in a way that would have been very surprising to our ancestors." In particular, she points out that people were now expected to accept a set of truth claims or beliefs if they wanted to be part of a certain church.ⁱⁱⁱ

And if anyone doubted those claims? If anyone felt uncertain about their absolute truth? Well, pretty soon doubt was equated with a rejection of the faith, and doubt became a sin.

What a shift, right? From the ancient way of avoiding absolute claims about the divine, to a belief that if you are even uncertain about those claims, then you are lacking in faith. From faith as a way of life, to faith as a leap a person must make over their doubt. Hence the phrase, “leap of faith.”

And seeing the direction things had taken, seeing how humans had taken the Jesus story and become very rigid about what it meant, God created the “side-eye,” and Unitarian Universalism was born.

Many UUs are come-inners. That refers to the folks who weren’t raised UU. We don’t really convert people, we just say, “Hey, come on in!” So, *come-inners*. A common theme in the stories of come-inners in the US is being raised in a Christian tradition, experiencing doubt, and either losing or leaving their place in that faith because of it.

I heard one such story recently that was a classic example, and I don’t think the person would mind my sharing it, though I can’t ask him because he died peacefully, just short of his 100th birthday, this year. He was raised in a very conservative Christian church, the kind with no dancing, drinking, card playing, or anything like that. Very strict. One day, when he was in high school, he asked his pastor whether his friends who belonged to other Christian traditions would go to heaven. The minister said that while they *might*, only their own church knew the true route to heaven.

Well, this young man found that answer lacking. In other words, he had his doubts. Fast forward a few years, and he was out dancing and drinking with a Unitarian, and then they were married for nearly seventy years and attended this church. That’s how we get ya.

Doubt gets a bad rap. But just as the author of this morning’s reading describes, it’s actually really valuable in our spiritual lives. Doubt can lead us to test our beliefs against our values—do they really align? Doubt can lead us to leave behind what no longer serves us or serves Love, and to grow in spiritual wisdom and practice.

Of course, in this church, it really is okay if our doubts lead us to let go of (or never take up) the idea of god. About one third of this congregation identifies as atheist. But I also want to point out that while doubt may lead to disbelief, the two are not the same. The word *disbelief* actually suggests a kind of certainty—the certainty that something is not true. Doubt, on the other hand, is what we are *less than certain* about.

In the year I spent as a chaplain intern at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in the early 2000’s, I saw a wide range of spiritual belief. In the ER, and on regular floors, the way faith or doubt played out in a patient or family’s experience varied greatly.

Sometimes the faithful were carried through heartache or worry with their religious beliefs like firm ground beneath them. They took control of what they could, and handed the rest over to God, praying only that they would not feel alone in their suffering, but would be held in that

larger love. They left enough mystery around their understanding of God that their spirituality was resilient and strong.

Other times, a patient or family would cling to a certain religious belief long after it had become unhelpful or been undermined by the situation, and it only seemed to cause more pain... how many people did I see brow beat themselves, believing that if they had only been more perfect, God would not have let a bad thing happen to them? A little doubt about the way things work might have cracked open the door to grace, and eased their suffering.

Sometimes I did encounter people who came in believing one way, embraced the doubts their experience stirred, and were therefore able to arrive at new understandings, because they were open to it.

What I walked away from that year knowing is that the idea that faith and doubt are opposites is not correct. Although it sounds like a paradox, doubt is required for strong faith and it takes a lot of faith to embrace your doubt. Without the faith that allows us to risk embracing the mystery, doubt is paralyzing. Without doubt, faith is lacking in what is most essential for authenticity in the human spirit.

And what are some of the doubts that arise among faithful Unitarian Universalists? There are many, actually. From disagreement with something a minister preaches, to skepticism about something in the principles we affirm as a UU congregation, to troubling existential questions about life's meaning, doubt is a part of UU faith as well. The wonderful thing is that since this church is not based on a creed, your doubts are welcome here.

About ten years ago, when I was still a pretty new minister, someone came to me for a pastoral visit, and asked me point blank what the meaning of life is. They were experiencing some of those troubling existential questions. The religion they had been raised with had offered a firm answer, but they doubted that answer very much and did not find it comforting. Did Unitarian Universalism have a better one?

We had a conversation about shifting from needing to know THE meaning of life, to knowing how to live A meaningful life. Later, I wrote a poem—or is it a meditation?—about the unanswered questions we carry. Some of you have heard it before. I'd like to share it again now, since it is connected with this morning's theme. It's called Utterance of the Timeless Word:

You bring yourself before the sacred,
before the holy,
before what is ultimate and bigger than your lone life
bigger than your worries
bigger than your money problems
bigger than the fight you had with your sister and your aches and pains

bigger, even, than your whole being, your self who is

part of

and trapped within

and blessed with

a body that does what you want

and doesn't do what you want

and wants all the wrong things

and wants all the right things...

You stand at the edge of mystery,

at the edge of the deep,

with the light streaming at you,

and you can't hide anything—not even from yourself,

when you stand there like that,

and then... what?

Maybe you call your pastor and say,

What is this?

What am I looking at?

What do I do?

And your pastor comes and stands at the edge with you

and looks over.

She can't hide anything either, she thinks,

not even the fact that she doesn't know the answer to your question,

and she wonders if you can tell by looking at her

that this is the case.

She thinks of all the generations who've come there before you
and cast words out toward the source of that light,
wanting to name it.

Somehow, she thinks to herself, the names stayed tethered to the aging world and got old
while the light remains timeless and burns without dimming.

Meanwhile,
the armful of worries you brought to the edge of mystery
have fluttered to your feet.

Unobscured by these, you shine back,

light emanating unto light.

You, with your broken heart and your seeking,
you are the utterance of the timeless word.

The name of the Holy is pronounced
through your being.

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Before I wrap up this morning, I do just want to say a word about another kind of doubt that is impacting our lives right now, and that is doubt about the COVID-19 vaccine.

Like many of you, I'm sad we are experiencing another wave of sickness and deaths, and sad that it is complicating the reopening plans we announced just a couple of days before this new wave began to rise. I am frustrated by how many people did not get the vaccine when it became available. At the same time, it's important for us to be clear in our thinking and in our words about misinformation, doubt, and who is not vaccinated.

There are some people out there knowingly spreading misinformation, stoking fear, and posing questions about vaccine safety that have no basis in fact, as a way of sowing division and drumming up anger, and that is not right.

There are also people who refuse to practice any kind precautions, including masking or distancing, and that is not right either. Ranking individual convenience over the lives of others is not right. The bible doesn't teach it. It violates the golden rule. If we all lived that way society would collapse. Let's be clear about that.

And:

Let's also be clear that there are still others who have doubts about the vaccine, and who have not gotten it yet, but who do care and take other precautions. A significant number of people of color who are unvaccinated fall into this group. It's important to acknowledge that difference makes a difference.

One example: This country's anti-blackness, starting with chattel slavery and morphing into Jim Crow laws, medical abuse, segregation, redlining, economic policy, drug policy, educational funding structures, the prison industrial complex, and healthcare discrimination, to name a few, has led to a situation where many black and brown people found themselves in frontline jobs with little protection and higher rates of death when the pandemic hit.

Who could blame a person in that situation if they felt suspicious when the same country that designed that reality, then rushed in offering brand new vaccines to their community first, as happened in some cities? Who could blame a person for wondering whether it was an attempt to do right, or another piece in a four-hundred-year-old pattern?

Difference makes a difference. And not just for Black Americans. For lots of other folks, too. I am white. I had a different experience of my own. I had the experience of being nineteen years old, pregnant, unmarried, poor, and in an interracial relationship in Oregon in the 1990's. I can tell you my encounter with medical professionals in that time and place was pretty awful. It was so awful, that I came to feel medical professionals could not be trusted. When I encountered anti-vaccine literature after my baby's birth, I was already feeling like the last thing I wanted to do was go back to a doctor of any kind, and I found that literature easy to believe.

While my kids were eventually fully vaccinated, I refused to follow the standard schedule. I got a lot of flak for that, but not the kind of meaningful conversation that would have reassured me or addressed the harm I'd experienced, which had sowed that doubt in my mind in the first place.

I was eager to get the COVID vaccine when it came out last winter and I'm glad I did. I'll keep urging others to do so, too. I share these perspectives, though, to encourage you—all of us—not to be too quick to lump people together into vaxxers and anti-vaxxers, good and bad, but to look for the histories that are playing out right now and speak from a place of deeper understanding. Let us seek that deeper understanding, and be thoughtful about which perspectives we are centering as we look out at the human landscape. Even as vaccine mandates become necessary from a public health perspective, I encourage us to still have faith in the value of compassion and nonjudgement in our personal encounters. And most of all, I encourage all of us to be suspicious not of one another in our communities, but of those who seek to pit us against each other.

ⁱ "God, Rid Me of God" by the Rev. Matt Laney. <https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/god-rid-me-of-god/>

ⁱⁱ Chapter 42, verse 11

ⁱⁱⁱ Armstrong, Karen. The Case for God. p xv.