

DOUBT AS ANTIDOTE - LIVING A RESPONSIBLE RELIGIOUS LIFE  
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GLEANINGS FROM ANCIENT AND MODERN WISDOM

From Ecclesiastes, chapters 1 and 2

I said to myself, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. But then I perceived that this is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

I became great and surpassed all who were before me. My wisdom remained with me (and) I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. The wise man has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness; and yet I perceived that one fate comes to all of them.

Then I said to myself, "What befalls the fool will befall me also; why then have I been so very wise?" And I said to myself that this is also vanity. For of the wise man as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise man dies is just like the fool!

So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

From Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*

Religious faith is the one species of human ignorance that will not admit of even the possibility of correction; that is still sheltered from criticism in every corner of our culture...

In the best case, faith leaves otherwise well-intentioned people incapable of thinking rationally about many of their deepest concerns; at worst, it is a continuous source of human violence. Even now, many of us are motivated not by what we know but by what we are content merely to imagine... Whatever our religious convictions may mean for the next life, they have only one terminus in this one - a future of ignorance and slaughter...

Mitigating the problem is not merely a matter of reining in a minority of religious extremists; it is a

matter of finding approaches to ethics and to spiritual experience that make no appeal to faith, and broadcasting that knowledge to everyone...

Nothing is more sacred than the facts. No one, therefore, should win any points for deluding himself. The litmus test for reasonableness should be obvious: anyone who wants to know how the world is, whether in physical or spiritual terms, will be open to new evidence...

The only angels we need invoke are those of our better nature: reason, honesty and love. The only demons we must fear are those that lurk inside every human mind: ignorance, hatred, greed and faith - which is surely the devil's masterpiece.

\*\* REFLECTIONS \*\*

This weekend marks the third anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, and while polls of both civilians and military personnel indicate a growing disillusion with this enterprise, the White House refuses either to disengage or entertain a meaningful change in strategy. Late last week the President renewed his commitment to the doctrine of pre-emptive warfare, and insisted again that Iraq was a key component of the War on Terror.

Despite the disastrous results of current Middle East policies: the loss of tens of thousands of lives; the wholesale destruction of Iraq's culture and its social, economic and environmental infrastructures; the decline of our own nation's stature in the international community; soaring federal deficits; the strengthening of anti-democratic and fundamentalist forces - in spite of all these developments, **President Bush's** convictions remain unshaken. Doubt, he and his supporters insist, is a sign of weakness, lack of resolve; it is what the terrorists count on. Doubters are dangerous and constitute a real threat to national security.

Clearly, the President is not of the same mind as the noted jurist **Learned Hand** who declared that "The spirit of liberty is that which is not too sure it is right."

If Iraq was the only instance in which the White House exhibited such unqualified faith and certitude we might treat it as an aberration. Unfortunately, it characterizes much of the administration's thinking and behavior. Balance of trade and budget deficits continue to mount; wages for 4/5 of American workers remain depressed; the wastefulness and inefficiency of our health care system persists; the Greenland icepack continues its slide into

the sea. Still, the President's visage beams with confidence and his speeches fairly bristle with defiant conviction.

Even hard science has suffered from the mindset of this faith-based presidency. Despite clear and indisputable evidence that abstinence-based programs are less effective than contraceptives in preventing unwanted pregnancies, the government has made abstinence its first priority. And despite the fact that a vaccine is now available that would protect women against the most common sexually transmitted disease - a disease that has been linked to cervical cancer - the White House opposes administering it to younger females. Why? Because protection from STDs might lead to more premarital sex. As the noted cancer researcher **David Baltimore** recently complained,

I never thought that now, in the twenty-first century, we could have a debate about what to do with a vaccine that prevents cancer... Politics plays a role in all these decisions, and so does belief. I have no problems with that. But this is religious zealotry masked as politics, and it runs against everything that I as a scientist believe in, that I have devoted my life to.

According to some who knew and worked with **George W. Bush** before he became president, this dogmatism, this unwillingness to alter his beliefs even in the face of compelling evidence, is relatively new. **Jim Wallis**, an evangelical Christian and social activist has said that when they first met, **Bush** was "very open and seeking." But since entering the White House he "has become a messianic American Calvinist who doesn't want to hear from anyone who doubts him." Having made this observation **Wallis** then proceeds to draw a critical distinction. "Faith," he says, "can cut in so many ways."

If you're...not triumphal, it can move us to repentance and accountability and help us reach for something higher than ourselves. That can be a powerful thing, a thing that moves us beyond 'politics as usual.' That's what Martin Luther King did. But **when faith is designed to certify our righteousness** - that can be a dangerous thing. Then it pushes self-criticism aside and there's no attempt at honest reflection.

**Jim Wallis** helps us understand something the President obviously doesn't: that religious faith and a reasonably healthy spiritual life can accommodate doubt, and that doubt is an asset rather than a liability as we strive for wisdom and virtue. The idea that doubt invariably undermines faith is simply not true, as the history of religion amply illustrates.

The fact is, many of civilization's most venerable and influential spiritual writings are suffused with doubt - a quality that makes them no less inspirational. The *Tao Te Ching* was composed around the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. It is among the oldest compilations of Chinese wisdom we possess, and it is humble, unpretentious and completely non-dogmatic. Chapter 65 offers some advice about effective leadership:

The ancient masters didn't try to educate the people, but kindly taught them to not-know.

When they think that they know the answers, people are difficult to guide.

When they know that they don't know, people can find their own way.

Certitude, **Lao Tse** suggests, is far more hazardous to a nation or a community than doubt.

Like **Lao Tse**, **Socrates** confronted his followers with hard questions until they were literally forced to re-examine and revise their convictions. Through his conversations, **Socrates** demonstrated how poorly grounded in logic and observation most people's cherished beliefs really are. **Socrates** was not a relativist. He definitely believed that "Truth" was attainable, but he also knew that most ideas masquerade as truth, fall far short of the "whole truth;" they represent shadows rather than substance. Doubt, **Socrates** taught, is the friend of truth; stubborn conviction is truth's real enemy.

A century or two later, a Jewish sage known today as **Quoheleth** recorded his thoughts about religion, wisdom and the meaning of life in the book we know as **Ecclesiastes**. It is perhaps the most philosophic discourse in the Bible, and it is certainly the most skeptical.

Like **Socrates**, **Quoheleth** spent his life asking difficult, unsettling questions. At times this produced acute discomfort, yet he insisted on being rigorously honest with himself and steadfastly refused to accept answers to humankind's existential dilemma that the evidence wouldn't support. Based on his own experience, life isn't fair and it doesn't seem to be redeemed by any

over-arching, transcendent meaning. Yet this realization doesn't cause Quohelth to despair. "Those who are joined to the living have hope," he insists.

Go, therefore, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do...Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days that have been given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life... And whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in that place to which you will ultimately go.

Quohelth's analysis of the human situation and his prescription have an Epicurean quality about them, and some scholars have suggested that he was influenced by that Greek school of philosophy. He may also have been familiar with the teachings of **Gautama Buddha**.

Like Quohelth, **the Buddha** took a long, hard look at the world around him and found that most of what he had been taught, and what most people believed, didn't make sense. He developed a unique insight into human psychology and the nature of suffering and described a path by which human beings could achieve insight and inner peace. A true free spirit, the **Buddha** rejected the efforts of his followers to deify him and to treat his teachings as gospel. Rather, he encouraged men and women to "be lamps unto themselves," to evaluate even the Buddha's sublime teachings in light of their own experience.

**Stephen Batchelor** describes Buddhism as a "deep agnosticism." It refuses to draw conclusions not based on evidence. It is neither atheistic nor theistic; does not take a position for or against an afterlife, because none of those assertions can be proved. "Buddhism," **Batchelor** writes, "is founded on a passionate recognition that *I do not know*." Like **Quohelth**, the Buddhist "confronts the enormity of having been born, instead of reaching for the consolation of a belief."

From the foregoing, one might conclude that ancient religions and schools of philosophy were far more inquisitive, and gave followers greater permission to doubt, than their modern counterparts. The philosopher **John Gray** argues that Christianity created the very first "cult of certainty" by declaring that certain ideas and lines of inquiry were strictly "out of bounds." The whole notion that some truths were divinely sanctioned, and that it was blasphemous to scrutinize them, was something new

under the sun. When Christianity became ascendant, doubt ran into profound difficulties, for now creative, critical and free thinking came to be labeled as "heresy."

And thus when the brilliant medieval Christian scholar **Peter Abelard** wrote a book exposing the contradictions and inconsistencies in the writings of the early Church Fathers, he was both censured and persecuted. **Abelard** was not being deliberately perverse or provocative. Like **Aristotle**, he felt that a strong, stable faith needed the support of reason, and that reason could reconcile seemingly contradictory statements. "The prime source of wisdom," **Abelard** told his accusers,

has been defined as continuous and penetrating inquiry... For by doubting we come to inquire, and by inquiring we perceive the truth.

But **Abelard** lost his argument with the Roman Catholic hierarchy. **Bernard of Clairvaux** - now known as Saint Bernard -- accused Abelard of "defiling the church." "Faith believes," he insisted, "it does not dispute."

And yet, without doubt and the disputes it engenders, Christianity would not be the religion it is today. **Jesus** himself was a doubter; he fiercely criticized the rigidly legalistic brand of Judaism that prevailed in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. **St. Augustine** was a doubter. Born a pagan, he began his Christian career as a Manichean, came to doubt that sect's teachings, and devised an innovative theological system that transformed Roman Catholicism. **Martin Luther** insisted that salvation is achieved by faith alone. Nevertheless, **Luther's** own profound doubts about the corrupt Catholic Church ignited the Protestant revolution.

At some level, all these men must have accepted the need for doubt and realized that it simply reflects "faith seeking understanding." Unfortunately, most people misconstrue faith as certainty; they believe that without a sense of certainty they have no faith. When this happens, doubters become heretics, or perhaps traitors, as the President and his supporters have suggested. But when certainty is prized above doubt, the ramifications can be profound - witness our own country's recent history.

Let us not presume, however, that doubt is always a benign and innocent thing. An open mind, curiosity, a healthy skepticism are essential preconditions for growth in understanding and wisdom. But just as faith can become arrogant and exclusive, so can doubt. I suspect we have all met people who doubt, not in the constructive spirit of

**Socrates**, but of **H.L. Mencken** who had little good to say about anyone or anything. **Mencken** once defined faith as "an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable," which makes him and Sam Harris something of kindred spirits.

Criticism based on thoughtful examination of the evidence is always appropriate. But such criticism should not be excessive or unnecessarily severe. The search for understanding is enabled by doubt, but detached from that search it can degenerate into disdain, condescension and derision. This is not the "positive" doubt of the questing searcher. It is the "negative" doubt of the nihilist, who is an expert at demolition but has no interest in reconstruction. Often as not the habitual fault-finder suffers himself from a profound sense of inner emptiness. He scoffs and doubts to deflect attention from his own deep pain.

And truth be told, doubting can strip the soul of all sources of support and solace. People refrain from doubting because they are afraid that it will expose the inadequacy of their assumptions about life and what they value. Back in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, **John Stuart Mill** wondered whether too much doubt among his own contemporaries had compromised their ability to maintain any faith, belief or conviction:

They...see too many sides to every question. They hear so much said, or find so much that can be said about everything, that they feel no assurance of the truth of anything.

Is there, then, a "middle way" between Bernard of Clairvaux's or President Bush's refusal to doubt on the one hand, and the kind of corrosive cynicism that precludes the earnest search for meaning and value? There is a middle way, and it is reflected in the religious and philosophic traditions to which I've alluded this morning.

In these traditions - and within Unitarian Universalism -- doubt is used constructively to plow under the stubble of old notions so that a new harvest of wisdom can be gathered. UU's and other reverent doubters, who respect the power of this enterprise and also recognize its potential for abuse, strive to be creators rather than mere destroyers. We doubt in order to be more discerning believers. The ultimate objective, as **Jennifer Hecht** reminds us, "is enlightenment; it is to teach us to live,

well and awake, in our strange place between meaning and  
meaninglessness...

The goal, as Quothleth finally realized, is to achieve  
a grateful and more "graceful" way of living.