

To Question Is the Answer, but How?
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August 27, 2006

Reflections on the Soul of Summer
“Crab Grass” by Lynn Ungar

We’ve all admired it
even as we’ve cursed
the matted roots, white fingers
pointing toward new frontiers,
the tangled tapestry stubbornly
weaving the world in place.

Imagine living that way.
Imagine knowing from the ground up
that you are tied to the whole,
that you are undefeatable,
that below the surface
undefinable discoveries
are always taking place.

Don’t you think there are
things worth holding on to
with a thousand arms,
ten thousand gripping toes?
Aren’t the undaunted
particularly blessed?

Before you deride the faithful
consider carefully
where you will put your roots.

Reflections

Societies are made up of people in relationship, and the quality of our relationships determines much about the well-being of our community. It seems a simple point to make, but society does not exist separate from us, but only as we create it, through our active engagement. Whether in how we respond to yesterday’s Nazi demonstration on the Capital Square or to our process of planning an addition to First Unitarian’s building, the honesty and openness of our participation affect the larger community we participate in. Poet David Whyte reminds us,

You are not a troubled guest on this earth,
you are not an accident amidst other accidents...

...looking through the slanting light of the morning window
toward the mountain presence of everything that can be
what urgency calls you to your one love?
What shape waits in the seed of you
to grow and spread its branches
against a future sky?

Is it waiting in the fertile sea?
In the trees beyond the house?
In the life you can imagine for yourself?
In the open and lovely white page on the waiting desk?

For many of us that sprouting possibility is best nurtured in this community of seekers, a circle of people who share our devotion to the principles of freedom, reason and inclusiveness. This morning after the service, as we do each month, we will welcome those who wish to sign our membership book and join their lives to the life of this community. We hope that each of these new members will find themselves changed in significant ways by their participation in our congregation, just as we know that this community is changed by each of its participants.

I've been feeling a growing sense of urgency about Americans' lack of engagement with the larger world. As my colleague Michael Schuler has repeatedly lamented, our nation's leaders seem to be able to act and speak with no real accountability to our citizenry, and too many of us respond, not by questioning this shoddy leadership, but by withdrawing into hopelessness and inaction. Too many of us live as the troubled guest in Whyte's poetry, unhappy at our nation's perversion of democratic principles and stunned at many leaders' shameless disregard for truth, but stymied as to how we might respond. I can think of no better parallel than the once-futuristic worlds of George Orwell's novels *1984* and *Animal Farm*. When I read these books in high school, it was unimaginable to me that a nation could be lied to so brazenly, and would accept the constantly-shifting truth with resignation. Perhaps it goes without saying that I take Orwell's warnings much more seriously these days.

Liberal religion and, indeed, much of American culture in the 19th century was characterized by confidence in the surety of human advancement, expressed in Unitarian James Freeman Clarke's words, "onward and upward forever and ever," but the course of our history since then urges us to rethink that optimism. While we have to acknowledge that progress is not a foregone conclusion, I also wouldn't want to conclude that we're guaranteed to descend into ignorance and inhumanity. The outcome depends upon us, of course, and our willingness to be active participants in society's affairs; that is, progress onward and upward won't simply happen without our working for it. Our engagement can happen in a variety of ways, one of which is the activity of critical thinking, and it's this dimension that I'd like to highlight this morning.

The origin of this term is from the Greek *κρиво*, which was used to describe winnowing wheat to separate the nutritious kernels from the inedible chaff. In a similar manner, critical thinking helps us to separate genuine communication from that which is untrue, irrelevant or irresponsible. With the growing influence of the internet, making available so much information with no standards of accuracy, we have to be able to winnow out what is trustworthy from what is not. With pseudoscience always encroaching upon the worlds of public education and public policy, we need to be able to winnow out what is genuine scientific knowledge from what is

actually religious dogma or self-serving fiction. With journalism being increasingly blurred with advertising and entertainment, we have to be able to winnow out what is legitimate news from marketing manipulation. And with religious institutions continuing to misunderstand the nature of genuine seeking, we have to be able to winnow out messages of honest inquiry from dogma and wishful thinking. We need to be able to winnow out communication that is honest and useful from that which is lazy, irrelevant or even willfully deceptive.

Those who are new to Unitarian Universalism are often a little surprised to see questioning, challenge and doubt given so much attention and even praise in our worship services and programs. After all, aren't religious communities about intellectual conformity, a place where belonging means toeing the line, where the ministers say "jump" and the congregation asks "how high?" Believe me, it's not. What it means to be a Unitarian Universalist is to be willing to commit to intellectual and spiritual freedom, and not let the messiness of the journey scare us away. I know of many Unitarian Universalists, and even a few UU ministers, who wish we could just settle on a fixed statement of belief and straighten out the barely-controlled chaos that comes with being such a religiously diverse movement. It can be uncomfortable not to have a set of simple answers, and it's hard work to struggle through every real-life question to glean our own insights. But I wouldn't have it any other way -- rather than giving our members "the answer," I believe that this congregation exists, in part, to help us each develop the tools to develop answers that mean something. But the Unitarian Universalist journey toward a life of meaning and purpose requires our active participation in the process, rather than, in the words of T.S. Eliot, "dream[ing] of systems so perfect that no one has to be good."

Years ago, there was a period when evangelical Christian churches were sporting bumper stickers that said "Jesus Is the Answer". In response, quite a few Unitarian Universalists began displaying their own bumper stickers, saying, "To Question Is the Answer". It's easy to feel a bit lonely out in the world as a seeker, since our culture doesn't give much support to this questioning. In 1983, the National Committee on Excellence in Education produced a report called *A Nation at Risk*, in which it warned that many young people are leaving high school without critical thinking skills: unable to draw conclusions from written passages, unable to write persuasive articles, and unable to reason through problems requiring several steps. In addition to our concerns about children simply being able to read and calculate, we need to worry that they are also not learning something perhaps even more basic. Standardized testing in public schools makes it tempting to teach young people *what* to think, rather than *how* to think. Not only is American culture generally *not* enthusiastic about reasoning skills, much of our nation sees this ability *as a threat*, and so life as an adult is no more likely to encourage us to ask probing questions. This is partly why First Unitarian Society serves such an important purpose -- this is a community *committed* to deeper understanding and what we can do with it. Anyone who thinks that the fuss over more space for our children is all about babysitting needs to see what they're really doing in their Religious Education classes. And we believe that learning how to see more clearly, feel more deeply, and act more justly are activities that we never outgrow. Adults and youngsters alike at FUS are learning how to bring curiosity and openness to the "big questions" of our lives, and I believe that the answers we reach also serve us better than the ones that come pre-packaged.

Being seekers begins with the realization that, throughout the activities of experiencing the world, interpreting those experiences, integrating them into our existing worldview, communicating them to others, and shaping our responses based on them, a lot can go wrong. A

lot of errors and misunderstandings can arise in the life cycle of ideas and actions, like mutations as our DNA carries genetic code from generation to generation, and so we apply techniques of critical thinking to help keep that process true to our standards of integrity. These are some values and steps that come to mind as we strive to be critical thinkers:

- Insight: we can learn to trust and further develop our inner alarm system that tells us when someone is misleading us, either deliberately or inadvertently;
- Precision: we can ask that vague statements be repeated with more details or exactness;
- Clarity: we can ask that sweeping generalizations be elaborated with specific examples;
- Relevance: we can ask that off-topic statements be made to bear on the question at hand;
- Depth: we can ask that a shallow statement be reframed in a way that does not oversimplify the situation;
- Breadth: we can ask that a narrow perspective be made to include other relevant viewpoints;
- Logic: we can ask that an unreasonable statement not contradict itself or other relevant facts; and
- Fairness: we can ask that a statement clearly representing someone's vested interests also take other interests to heart.

Making a commitment to critical thinking implies that we have come to realize something about human nature and the nature of ideas, and that we have developed a certain level of skepticism out of this awareness. What I'd like to suggest is that, rather than letting this harden into chronic suspicion, it elicit instead a deep humility. The more closely I observe how we each go about advocating for our own ideas and agenda, the more I recognize how closely this resembles cheering for one's own sports team rather than seeking the best answers. We are immersed in a mindset of "my country, right or wrong," and "my candidate, right or wrong," and "my idea, right or wrong" -- a misplaced sort of loyalty to whatever we've spent so much of ourselves developing and defending. And I have to admit that I'm capable of this naïve allegiance as much as the next person. If there were any warning labels I would attach to those steps of critical thinking, it would be that I'm required to apply them to my *own* biases as diligently as to everyone else's. All of us have our prejudices, and all of us bring preconceived notions to our conversations, and I'm coming to see that these biases don't go down without a fight.

As an example, I think of the film *What the Bleep Do We Know!?*, which came out a couple of years ago and stirred up much conversation among those of us who like to straddle the

boundaries between religion and science. If you haven't seen the movie, it's a blend of documentary interviews and fiction, drawing the conclusion that our thoughts actually have the power to create our physical reality. Whether or not this conclusion is valid, the film took considerable liberties with scientific information and interviews, and my colleagues and I have largely dismissed it as pseudoscience. But it was a great opportunity for seekers of many kinds to recognize how much *we wanted it to be true*, and therefore how difficult it was to see when the film's claims were questionable. One particular anecdote from the movie illustrates this point -- the story that, when Christopher Columbus' tall ships first arrived in this world, Native Americans had never before encountered such craft, and were therefore literally unable to see them. There's something very compelling about the philosophy of positive thinking, and certainly some truth that we are better able to see what we *expect* to see, but this story itself is mythical -- there are no surviving accounts, either oral or written, to substantiate it. Another similar example might be the wildly popular book *The Da Vinci Code*; while it's exciting and satisfying (in a guilty way) to accuse the Vatican of covering up the real stories of Jesus' life, again, too many liberties were taken with history and theology to consider the book more than a fanciful good read. Again, I didn't become upset as it became clear that these two should be taken with a grain of salt, even though it could be said that the authors were capitalizing on people's wishful thinking. Good fiction does tap into the worlds that we wish were true or suspect might be true, and that benign exploitation happens with our implicit permission.

What I'm working up to with this is that the way critical thinking plays out in our lives is related to the issue of trust. Committing ourselves to the use of critical thinking implies that we have recognized that there is chaff that needs to be winnowed out from the kernels of truth, but it's *how* we exercise that winnowing that comes to resemble an art rather than a mechanical reflex. There's a middle ground between gullibility and suspicion that we strive to occupy, and it's easy to become intoxicated with the power of skepticism and let it become chronic distrust. In fact, my classmates and I at Starr King School for the Ministry used to parody this issue by responding to even the most innocent of statements -- like "good morning," for example -- with "what do you mean by that?"

The vision I have of a community in which critical thinking is used well involves using this tool lightly, rather than ham-handedly. Especially for those of us who have been hurt by the power of religious institutions, or really, by any community of ideas, there's always the possibility that we will use our gifts as a shield rather than a doorway. Trust is a funny thing; I try to be generous with my trust, knowing that it will occasionally be betrayed, and therefore am not devastated when someone has played fast-and-loose with the truth. We are all pieces of work in progress, and rather than this congregation promising the fiction of "the answer," the activity of critical thinking helps us always to be moving in the direction of integrity, via a pathway of wise questions. It's a practice that I believe remains more faithful to the values of an evolving, emerging understanding of truth, and I find that it also allows for a community of diverse viewpoints, like this special place.

Life as a Unitarian Universalist is being part of a community of seekers who recognize that understanding is a living, growing thing, and we learn together how to sink our fingers into it like the tenacious crab grass, and hold on tight. We are bound together by something larger than any of us, but what that something is gets its shape from the gifts of humility and trust and persistence that we bring to this place, and indeed, to every moment of our lives. May this community of love and insight nurture in our hearts the means for a world transformed by wisdom and shaped in justice.