

I DON'T KNOW

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
June 4, 2017

I want to begin by congratulating those of you whose newly-pledged membership of All Souls we celebrate here today. This congregation has been preparing for your eventual arrival for the past 198 years. I'm delighted, both for you and for us, that you have finally arrived. And you have arrived just in time, because there has never been a better or more necessary time to be a Unitarian Universalist.

The values for which we stand as a faith community — the clarity of truth, the call of justice, the necessity of human dignity — find themselves at perilous risk in our world today, perhaps as never before. No matter what brought you to All Souls, and no matter where you spend the six days of your week between Sundays, you face a world in retrograde motion. The political forces that have invaded our nation's capital threaten to make a mockery of our founding ideals as a nation. The economic forces overrunning the globe are driving inequality to catastrophic levels. The environmental forces long ignored by humanity in its hubris threaten to make our planetary home uninhabitable.

In the face of these retrograde forces, the institutions of organized religion seem mostly in retreat. The legacy traditions are in decline, a broad trend from which Unitarian Universalism has not been immune. For many people who now operate without religious portfolio, the emerging plan is to be spiritual without being religious. And whatever spiritual might mean in this case, it does seem to imply an individual quest without institutional support.

All of which means that there has never been a better or more necessary time to be a Unitarian Universalist. We are people of faith precisely because we believe in transformation; we believe that the future can be better than the present. We believe that we can become better people as part of a faith community, and we believe that we can together make the world a better place — both for the people who inhabit it and for the natural world itself.

Put in theological language, the world and its people desperately need saving. And we can help save it. Not alone, to be sure, but we have a critical role to play in this salvation story. It will take all our energy, all our talent, all the skills we can learn, and all the knowledge we can accumulate. We face a momentous challenge, given that many of life's largest-scale problems, whether personal, political, or environmental, seem too big to solve. Even so, it's a time for us to muster confidence in the face of what we know and to show humility in the face of what we don't know. When it comes to the sources and uses of human knowledge, people who claim they already know everything they need to know aren't just delusional, they are sometimes downright dangerous.

The Nobel Prize-winning poet Wislawa Szymborska, who died five years ago at the age of 88, was born in 1923 in a small town in Poland. She lived her entire life after age six in Krakow. With Hitler savaging Poland during her teens and Stalin serving as its overlord during her twenties, she experienced a full measure of the twentieth century's turmoil and tragedy — as well as, in her later years, its potential for change and renewal.

As major poets go, Szymborska wrote relatively few poems, and she mostly shunned the public eye. But her trenchant observations of life and politics, distilled in her poetry, make her writings an essential companion for times like these.

In Szymborska's poem titled "In Praise of Feeling Bad About Yourself," she writes:

The buzzard never says it is to blame.
The panther wouldn't know what scruples mean.
When the piranha strikes, it feels no shame.
If snakes had hands, they'd claim their hands were clean.

A jackal doesn't understand remorse.
Lions and lice don't waver in their course.
Why should they, when they know they're right?

Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,
in every other way they're light.

On this third planet of the sun
among the signs of bestiality
a clear conscience is Number One.

In her 1996 Nobel lecture, Szymborska explains her wariness of people whose minds are made up and whose consciences are clear. In her view, the problem with such people is that they think they know everything. "They know," she says, "and whatever they know is enough for them once and for all. They don't want to find out about anything else, since that might diminish their arguments' force." In the most extreme cases, she says, citing well-known cases from ancient and modern history, this closed-minded approach has posed a lethal threat to society.

You and I could add to the catalog of cases from our own time, and the catalog grows lengthier by the day. Whether it's a late-night Twitter fusillade from the Oval Office against our European allies, a legislative broadside against women's reproductive rights in Austin, a deadly knife attack against defenders of Muslim dignity in Portland, or lethal attacks targeting young women in Manchester or Western sympathizers in Kabul or Westerners in London, the damage done by people who know they're right is wreaking havoc on our world.

In the wake of Donald Trump's predictably petulant decision on Thursday to withdraw from the Paris climate accords, I received an email from Dan Beshers, a longtime member of this congregation who is a professor emeritus of applied physics and physical sciences at Columbia. Dan expressed exasperation that many people today think the question of climate change is relatively new and limited to a few specialized scientists.

In fact, Dan writes, "many of the people who first observed and analyzed climate change were outstanding scientists of their day, and their work in other fields is woven into the fabric of our civilization." Dan points out the work of Joseph Fourier, a French mathematician and physicist born in 1768, who established the theory of heat flow and developed the field of thermal analysis. Fourier "asked how it could be that Earth is as warm as it is, given its distance from the sun; the answer he suggested was that the atmosphere was holding heat in."

The point, Dan explains, is that the climate question is not new and has been studied by some of the most well-respected and accomplished investigators over the past two centuries. He adds, "I made a very rough estimate several years ago that the number of papers that touched on climate was on the order of a thousand a month. We get critics who have read one or two papers trying to discredit climate science, without having any idea of how much data and work to obtain the data underlie these findings."

Dan will turn 89 later this year, and he has one of the most engaged and probing intellects of anyone I know. I recall a fascinating conversation several years ago in which Dan, who specializes in metallurgy, tried to explain to me why some metals stay bent when you bend them and others spring back — they somehow remember their original shape (remember is my word, not his). Even today, Dan is constantly pushing back the boundaries of human knowledge. His approach is to take seriously what we think we know and ask questions about what we don't.

In her Nobel lecture, Wislawa Szymborska says that the problem with people who know they're right is that they have no interest in new information. They have no interest in discovering what they don't know. On the other hand, if we are willing continually to ask questions, we clear the way for new discoveries and yet another cycle of questions. The term she uses for this forward-moving cycle is inspiration. "Whatever inspiration is," she says, "it's born from a continuous 'I don't know.'"

Szymborska explains: "That little phrase 'I don't know'... is small, but it flies on mighty wings... If Isaac Newton had never said to himself "I don't know," the apples in his little orchard might have dropped to the ground like hailstones and at best he would have stooped to pick them up and gobble them with gusto. Had my compatriot Marie Sklodowska-Curie never said to herself "I don't know," she probably would have wound up teaching chemistry at some private high school for young ladies from good families, and would have ended her days performing this otherwise perfectly respectable job. But she kept on saying "I don't know," and these words led her, not just once but twice, to

Stockholm, where restless, questing spirits are occasionally rewarded with the Nobel Prize.”

Make no mistake: Szymborska is not saying that we can never know anything with confidence, nor is Dan Beshers. Indeed, we can have confidence in knowledge that’s based on the available evidence, but we should reject so-called knowledge that’s based on denial of the available evidence. The difference comes down to the contrast between an open mind and a closed mind. When we approach the problems of the world with an open mind, we can embrace with confidence what we know to be true, yet recognize with humility the profound incompleteness of human knowledge.

As faith traditions go, Unitarian Universalism has specialized from the beginning in questions that remain unanswered, paths that remain uncharted, and terrain that remains unexplored. We begin with a simple declaration that conveys both humility and possibility: “I don’t know,” or maybe “I’m not sure.”

Unlike the legacy religious traditions, which look to ancient scriptures as the fundamental source of inspiration, we believe the book of revelation remains open. We take everything we know into account as we decide what to believe and how to live, all the while recognizing that our knowledge remains fragmentary and incomplete.

This is not to say that we don’t know some things for sure. The evidence is clear that people who participate in a religious community are generally happier, healthier, and live longer than people who don’t. Plus, people who work with others to transform their own lives and the world around them have a vastly greater chance of succeeding than those who work in isolation. We are better together.

This recognition establishes our fitness for the practice of our faith, which is indeed divine work. We open our minds and hearts to the experience of everything: all that is present in our lives and our world, as well as all that is past and all that is possible — an experience I call the experience of God. Despite the tragedies of our past and the brokenness of our present, we are inspired by a vision of what’s possible. This one thing I know for sure: we can be agents of healing and hope — prophets of possibility.