

I WONDER

Sermon by Audette Fulbright
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All Souls Church, New York City

“The demand for certainty is one that is natural to [humankind], but is nevertheless an intellectual vice.” So said Bertrand Russell, and I invite you to hold this as the text for today’s sermon: the demand for certainty is natural, but is an intellectual vice.

From that auspicious beginning, I invite you next to consider a toilet. How many of you have used a toilet today? I won’t ask how many of you have not used a toilet today, because that may indicate a more serious issue. But think for a moment of the ubiquitous toilet. How does it work? If a young child asked you to explain the workings of a toilet, could you explain it clearly and thoroughly, from its mechanics in your bathroom through its connection to more public utilities such as pipes and outflow and reclamation? I wonder.

So just tuck toilet functioning in the back of your mind, along with Russell’s quote about certainty. We need to wander in the fields of sociology for a while, to set the scene. How do we know what we know? In philosophy and religion, this question falls into the realm of epistemology, our theory of knowledge. These days, my own theory of knowledge is undergirded by terms like cognitive and confirmation bias, the Dunning-Kruger effect, and the effectiveness of mental modeling and emotionally-informed linguistics.

I’ll be honest. Until relatively recently, I rested a little smugly in the confidence that my progressive perspective and my liberal faith meant that I was adept at reasoning and amenable to facts: when presented with new information, I have, many times, changed my mind. I fly the flag of Team Science! I cheer for adaptation within a multicultural approach! Obviously, folks like us – you know, let’s say, Unitarian Universalists – we might not be perfect, but we hold the high ground when it comes to Being Reasonable.

Alas, not so much. Study after study after study disproves this in the aggregate. In general, what we know about humans is this: we form first impressions very quickly. Once formed, our impressions are remarkably persistent. Our thinking is not particularly rational - but there’s a reason for that. You see, our species evolved for cooperation. On the savannahs of our original human homeland, we were not the biggest or strongest; we didn’t have the sharpest tooth or claw. Instead, we could imagine possible futures, and we could work together incredibly effectively. From that cooperative formation, the most evolutionarily useful qualities of mind were those which could solve the problems of living in collaborative groups. We needed to get along, to position ourselves as highly as possible within the group, which usually meant we needed to be liked and accepted. Agreeing with the group is selected; and indeed, it literally *feels good* – when we agree with those we like, love, respect or want to bond with, there is a rush of dopamine. It brings new meaning to the old expression “go along to get along.”

From this, different modes of thinking emerge. The first is, we share information, especially expertise. Think again about your toilet. If you’re out enjoying a pretty day, and someone asks you if you know how a toilet works, you’re likely to say yes. I mean, someone invented the toilet, others improved it, we all use them regularly, we may even have to fiddle with them from time to time, and it falls into that space of what we might think of as “common knowledge.” Because

some of us know a lot about toilets, and most of us know a little about them, we are very fuzzy about what information we have and what information others hold. We've evolved to rely on shared knowledge and expertise - it's essential to our survival. And this evolution led us to develop confirmation bias: basically, we tend to believe what the group believes, retain information and examples that confirm those beliefs, and forget, dismiss, and otherwise filter out those experiences and that information which does not confirm our biases. And when we step away from the deeply-held beliefs of the group, it is usually a difficult, arduous, and frequently painful experience -- one that often results in our exclusion from the group. Think, for example, of Galen's story of leaving his Mennonite beliefs and community.

You remember I listed the protections I imagined I have because I am progressive and believe in science and have changed my mind when presented with new information? I think most of us in this room probably are pretty attached to the idea that we are reason-able people, able to use our reason to consider a topic deeply and come to a conclusion. And we are – under the right conditions. Which we will come to, soon.

But for now, we need to stay and explore the realm of the liberal or progressive thinker. While these terms can be used to describe one's politics - and usually are, along with "conservative" - keep in mind they reference a worldview and a religious sensibility as much as anything else. The progressive or liberal mindset has identifiable values: **it values fairness, protection from harm, and empathy**. These are its priorities, its foundational principles. The conservative mindset, on the other hand, values loyalty, respect for authority, and purity. The conservative thinker, when shown images, lingers longer on repellent images, reflecting a greater attention to threat potentials. They own more things like ironing boards and organizing journals, revealing an inclination toward order. The liberal thinker has more travel memorabilia, owns more books -- revealing an inclination toward novelty and openness to new experiences and perspectives.

As like is drawn to like, we quickly fall into confirmationally-biased groups. Once upon a time, this was profoundly moderated by the fact that in our families of origin, in our work environment, and in the daily rounds of life, including our previously thick community organizational bonds, such as church, civic organizations, clubs, and teams – all of which are in such precipitous decline their survival is in question, in all those environments, we were exposed to different ideas, perspectives, and opinions, and the heterotivity of those encounters led us to the place Bertrand Russell extolled. We were less certain of our own understandings and opinions, and thus also more *moderate* in our responses. In other words, we held certain beliefs, but we were more open to the possibility that we might be wrong – or at least, that other viewpoints could also be valid.

So what's changed? I think you already know the answer. The good news is, probably not as much as you think. For well over fifty years, research has shown that if you put two people together who share similar views on a subject and provide them with a small amount of information on the topic, confirmation bias will strengthen and their opinions will solidify. But, add just *one* more like-minded person, and the position hardening will sharpen much further, with each person added to the shared-opinion circle, you also add rigidity to the perspective, because it's a feedback loop: look, we all agree! Now: add social media which is built on algorithms that prioritize shared opinions, which is rocket fuel to confirmation bias. Increase negative pressure on the systems that support us - our economic, educational, health systems, for example - and intensify political separation by stoking separation by those values we spoke of, and declare certain folk "other" and blame them for problems... and you have this world, 2019.

And that's without even mentioning the Dunning-Kruger effect, whereby those with the least mental capacity also lack the ability to be self-aware, and inaccurately judge themselves quite capable. Charles Darwin said, "Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge." But before we get too cocky, this applies to all of us. We *all* regularly overestimate what we know and the less aware we are of it, the stronger our opinions on the subject.

Which is our pivot point. What can save us in the world as we find it, where our adaptation as a collaborative species has been unable to keep pace with technologies that are sending it spiraling out of control, to not just our own human detriment, but the detriment of all species on Earth?

I wonder.

The thing is, the more that we know that we don't know... the less certain we are that we are right or that we know everything about a topic, the more moderated is our attachment to our opinions. When doubt or uncertainty enter in, we are better positioned to listen, learn, consider other viewpoints, or seek common ground between more opposing positions. But doubt and uncertainty are frequently uncomfortable. Indeed, the brighter the mind, the more it has spent time learning, becoming a subject matter expert on this or that, the less comfortable that mind is just being "uncertain."

Herein, I believe, lies the particular blessing of liberal religion. In our Unitarian Universalist faith, we do not invite you into certitude. We do not pronounce the answers to things. We value the question. We take seriously the role of doubt. Indeed, what we do together is *wonder*.

Because most of us value empathy, and fairness – because as Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the results of science, and care about our interdependence, not just as humans together, but as all living beings on one small planet – we do have the capacity to pause, and embrace wonder. And not wonder in its most awe-inspired element, but instead, we can embrace wonder in our most common, day to day interactions. I wonder if I do know how a toilet works? I wonder if I know everything about my own body, and pregnancy? For example, this week, as men in conservative states conspired to take bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom from my sisters and daughters, I learned that I hadn't really understood the wild inaccuracy of so-called "fetal heartbeat" bills, since at six and eight weeks, there is no fetal heart, nor heartbeat - only the rhythmic pulsing of certain cells which, if a lot of other things come together, can in time transform into the cells of the heart of a fetus. I wonder why I didn't realize this before.

"The great American judge Learned Hand once said, "The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right." As people gain confidence, they usually become more extreme in their beliefs, because a significant moderating factor—their own uncertainty about whether they are right—has been eliminated. The agreement of others tends to increase confidence and thus extremism."¹ Bringing wonder into our conversations opens doors. So often, when we are talking, we imagine ourselves to be "exchanging ideas." That's when we aren't just waiting for our turn to talk, to impress, to prove ourselves in one way or another. What happens when instead of jumping into our opinion, we wonder about our companion's? "I'm wondering how you discovered that. I wonder, what deep value do you hold does that this speaks to? I wonder when you came to realize this. I wonder, how does your wife feel about this? I wonder, how long did you study this?"

¹ "How People Like You Fuel Extremism," by Conor Freidersdorf. *The Atlantic*, June 27, 2017.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/06/together-people-like-you-fuel-extremism/531702/>

The toilet metaphor I have used throughout is a common one to touch on the concept of “explanatory depth.” Surprisingly often, when we are asked to explain something to someone else, we discover what we actually do not know – usually because we, being human, were unconsciously relying on shared knowledge as the result of our collaborative biases. Once we realize we don’t know as much as we think we do, that greater self-awareness leads the healthy among us into a place of wonder. It’s why some of the most effective teaching is when we ask children or any learner to teach us what we want them to learn.

Bertrand Russell also said, “To teach how to live without certainty, yet how not to be paralyzed by hesitation is perhaps the chief thing philosophy, in our age, can teach.” Unitarian Universalist minister David Blanchard said:

Doubt is the expression of faith in the intelligence and imagination of humanity.
Doubt is the expression of humility about the capacity for errors and mistakes.
Doubt is the expression of wisdom when popular and rewarding truths are wrong.
Doubt is the expression of confidence that knowledge can always be improved.
Doubt is the expression of courage in confronting the dangerous and destructive.
Doubt is the expression of hope that a better world is waiting for the future.

To that, I simply say: I wonder. And I hope you will, too.

Amen, ashe, blessed be.