

BELIEF DIVIDES; DOUBT UNITES

Rev. Kit Ketcham, June 15, 2008

In February of 2006, at our annual auction, our well-loved friend and neighbor John Adams purchased the right to choose a topic for me to speak on at a worship service. He thought it might take him awhile to decide what it might be, but that fall, John and Gail attended a performance of the play “Doubt”, by John Patrick Shanley.

On the walls of the theatre lobby were a number of posters with quotes by a wide range of wellknown folks, and the one that caught John’s eye that night was by Sir Peter Ustinov, the actor: “Beliefs are what divide people. Doubt unites them.”

John decided that he would ask me to preach on this idea and we agreed that I would do so. Tragically, John died suddenly only weeks later, leaving us all bereft and missing this dear friend who was so much a part of the life of this congregation.

But John’s idea did not die, nor did any of the work he began in this congregation. As we see our building go up, as we use the model he built and the art work he supplied to display how it would look in actuality, we are reminded of John and his legacy on a daily basis.

This sermon is part of John’s contribution to the life of this congregation and I think it is significant that on this Father’s Day, 2008, some of his family has come to be with Gail and to attend our service. This is not a second memorial service for John Adams, but it is a recognition of the intelligence and creativity that this dear man brought to our midst.

Belief is a word that has become so embedded in our culture that its meaning has been stretched and broadened to include religious creeds, self-affirmations, personal opinion, scientific and non-scientific knowledge. The word is even used as a figure of speech: I believe I'll have another cup of coffee. For the most part its meanings are intended to be positive.

On the other hand, the word Doubt has become almost pejorative, negative in its associations. "I doubt it" says the parent whose child is saying that she/he has no homework. Doubting Thomas, in the Christian gospels, had to be convinced of Jesus' resurrection by seeing the wounds on Jesus' body. Doubt has gotten a bad reputation over the centuries, seeming only to represent negativity of thought and a lack of trust in someone.

And so Peter Ustinov's wisdom might seem counterintuitive. Wouldn't belief tend to unite people? Doesn't doubt throw up barriers between people?

I remember a moment a few years ago, when I was candidating with my first congregation and having lunch with members of one of the church committees. They were asking me about my approach to a variety of issues and at one point, one woman said, "ah, Kit, I knew it, you're a believer!"

As she was a fervent atheist, it was clear that what she meant was that I am a theist---and it put us on two different sides of an issue of belief, as she saw it. All of a sudden, however, I saw the negative side of belief in her mind. It was definitely not a compliment, but rather a statement of our difference. I doubt she meant anything unkind by it, but it struck me that it put me in a category that I was not completely comfortable with.

My American Heritage dictionary defines "believer" as one who has firm faith in something. And there are things I have firm faith in, but the traditional concept of God isn't one of them!

Belief has been at the heart of many a religious debate. My own religious background, Baptist, has been fraught with arguments about doctrine and true belief. Baptists are firm believers in soul liberty, which means, essentially, freedom of conscience. The way it plays out, in actuality, is that Baptist churches have frequently split over doctrinal issues. That's why there are so many different groups which call themselves Baptist and each of them considers their doctrine, the only doctrine, the only way to heaven, at least in the more conservative Baptist congregations.

A story that made the rounds when I was in seminary illustrates this point in a humorous way. And it was told by my Baptist colleagues!

Narrator: I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. I immediately ran over and said, "Stop! Don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he said.

I said, "Well, there's so much to live for!"

"Like what?"

"Well ... are you religious or atheist?"

"Religious."

"Me too! Are you Christian or Jewish?"

"Christian."

"Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

"Protestant."

"Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

"Baptist."

"Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

"Baptist Church of God."

"Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God."

"Wow! Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!"

To which I said, "Die, heretic scum!" and pushed him off.

There's a part of me that thinks this is pretty funny because it's so outlandish and yet, having been labeled a heretic myself by conservative folks, it also gives me a twinge of alarm and I tend to stay away from religious conversations when I'm on bridges!

It's my experience that belief unites right up until a difference of opinion is detected!

Belief does have its upside: optimism and unambiguous rhetoric. It comes naturally and quickly, whereas doubt is slower and not so easily obtained, according to Michael Shermer, editor of Skeptic magazine. Shermer cites a study in the December 2007 Annals of Neurology which supports the conjecture of the 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, that most people have a low tolerance for ambiguity and prefer not to work too hard sorting out claims and counterclaims.

The scientific principle of the null hypothesis---that a claim is untrue unless proved otherwise---challenges humans to think harder and more deeply about their beliefs, but many of us would rather not.

Why are people attracted to rigid belief systems? I'm inclined to think that there are many reasons, including family or cultural heritage, trust in the authority figures of that belief system, lack of energy to investigate its claims, lack of time or interest in change, a desire to be part of an in-group, the list goes on.

But as I studied church history in my path to ministry, I became acutely aware of how much fear was engendered by early religious doctrines and teachers. A culture of fear drives people toward rigid belief as they seek structure and a sense of strength and solidity.

What happens to our place in a group of believers when doubt creeps in? Well, we stand to lose a sense of belonging; we may feel dishonest; we may hide our feelings; we may pretend or go through the motions of belief in order to maintain a connection; we may choose belonging over an honest facing of doubts.

Sometimes when our doubts become too strong to hide, we may try to override them and convert them into passionate belief, becoming what's commonly called "A True Believer", a person whose belief seems so strong that it rules his or her life in an addictive kind of way, causing the person to take positions that seem incomprehensible to others and changing his/her relationships.

We see how difficult and dangerous this can be when we witness the fall of some of culture's prominent religious figures, such as Jimmy Bakker, Ted Haggard, and others, whose secret doubts were their undoing and they were revealed as hypocritical and dishonest. Some of them proclaimed their opposition to certain so-called sins, only to be unveiled as practitioners of those particular sins.

We Unitarian Universalists are advocates of freedom of belief and, though we may not agree with the beliefs of others, we support others' rights to their own thoughts. However, freedom of belief means freedom of non-belief as well, and skepticism, we think, prevents too-hasty bandwagon behavior!

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of anti-belief literature, pitting atheist writers against theistic writers. The diatribes and ridicule flying back and forth on the Internet occasionally reach a pitch so feverish that it's hard to take any of it seriously.

When did “doubt” become acceptable? For most of the past millennium, everybody in the Western world believed in God. It didn’t occur to anyone not to believe that there was a physical supernatural being in the heavens who ran the universe, who required humans to behave in certain ways, to give money to authority figures such as landowners and the Church, and to fear hell as punishment for any independent action which might diverge from church law.

In the 18th century, a philosophical shift began to occur as a result of the Enlightenment, that period in history when scientific exploration and discovery began to infiltrate culture. It produced considerable skepticism towards the doctrines of the church, encouraged individualism, advocated a belief in science, the experimental method, and the use of reason, and declared that education could be a catalyst of social and political change. It began to be okay to doubt the church, to doubt the laws of the land which discriminated against the poor, to doubt even whether there was a God.

Doubt became an act of courage. We may remember the courage of our Unitarian ancestor, Michael Servetus, who dared to challenge the doctrine of the Trinity and was burned at the stake for his doubts. Countless heretics suffered at the hands of the early church when their doubt was discovered and punished.

But the act of doubt, questioning the established norms, the established conclusions of doctrine, the established understandings of how the universe works, became a driving force. Our scientific knowledge comes directly from our questions about whether or not accepted theories (that the sun revolves around the earth, for example) are accurate.

As scientific knowledge grew and more and more established dogma was called into question, conflict between orthodoxy and rationality increased until it began to appear as though religion and science had no common meeting ground.

Doubt's approach to knowledge became "be patient, welcome the questions, don't fight them, don't assume that others have the answer unless they can show you why. Believing is different from knowing."

Now, I'm not implying that True Believers are all fundamentalist Christians, or Muslims, or Jews, or Buddhists. Because we UUs are susceptible to the same syndrome----our way is right! It's very easy to become a True Believer just by refusing to listen to other points of view, refusing to understand how and why others think the way they do. I can imagine a die-hard atheist, for example, so convinced of the rightness of his or her logical understandings that he/she is unable to understand the rightness of another's intuitive knowledge.

So how does doubt unite people? I think the "uniting" aspect of doubt has a different quality to it than that of belief. It's looser, less rigid, more permeable, more open to new information. It's not easy to doubt. One has to be willing to risk looking foolish, being wrong, losing relationships, even being ostracized.

But what we have to gain is inestimable. When we shift to a more openminded stance in our thinking, we find ourselves flooded with new ideas, new lenses with which to observe the world around us, new directions for our creative urges.

When Effie and I were discussing this topic, as we designed today's service together, she made an observation that I'd like to share with you because I feel it expresses very clearly the role of doubt in our spiritual lives.

Effie had used the analogy of the physical body, with its skeletal framework, to describe her concept of the roles of doubt and belief.

She wrote: “Concretized beliefs can become limiting and close down our spiritual growth as well as shut off communication with those who have differing beliefs....Exploring the questions prompted by our doubts can expand our spiritual boundaries and encourage exchange of ideas with others.

“...Belief and doubt are actually complementary to one another and can very effectively dance together... For me, it is my beliefs that form the supporting bone structure of my spiritual life, but those bones cannot move—let alone dance---without the tendons and muscles. One of the things that keeps my spiritual tendons and muscles strong and supple is stretching them by exploring the questions that arise from my doubts, especially in the context of a caring community. This is a dynamic process that keeps my beliefs alive and congruent with my life experience and encourages relationships that are vital and nourishing.

“If I don’t exercise my physical body, the bones and muscles become weak and my joints become stiff and painful to move. In the same way, my spiritual life would become static and stale if I became stuck in old beliefs and fail to acknowledge, let alone love, the questions that arise from following my doubts.”

Thank you, Effie, for letting me quote your eloquent words. I think Effie is right, that we need both belief and doubt in our human lives.

The way I see it is as though our lives are like gardens planted in the warm, dark earth. If we use and re-use the same soil constantly without replenishing the nutrients that have been infused into our plants, the soil gets tired, is worn out, doesn't produce good strong healthy plants. In a similar way, beliefs which are merely rehashed repeatedly become stale and lack much needed nutrition. Doubt is like compost, re-enriching the soil, re-enriching the soul.

What does this all mean to us as Unitarian Universalists? Here's what I think. As we grow and reach out into the Whidbey Island community, if we want to work with others to make life better for the poor and homeless, we will need to learn to work with people whose beliefs are very strong and may be very different from ours. How will we do that?

If we have family members whose beliefs are very strong and very different from ours, this can be an uncomfortable challenge for both us and our family members. How can we achieve a sense of peace and unity together?

If we see things happening in our community that seem to run counter to ethical government or environmental stewardship, things that seem to emerge from a strong belief system that seeks to impose itself on a community, we need to take action. How can we do this in an effective way?

Our mission as a congregation includes Spirituality and Service. Our values have emerged from the combination of our beliefs and our doubts. How can we live out our mission while respecting the beliefs and doubts of others?

Our journey together as a congregation can be a passionate effort to increase our ability to work with others to enact compassionate government, compassionate social action, and compassionate living in our neighborhoods.

I'd like to end with a quote Mavis sent me that seems to answer the question of "how can we do this?" Margaret Wheatley made this observation:

"We have the opportunity many times a day, every day, to be the one who listens to others, curious rather than certain. But the greatest benefit of all is that listening moves us closer. When we listen with less judgment, we always develop better relationships with each other. It's not differences that divide us. It's our judgments about each other that do. Curiosity and good listening bring us back together."

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

CLOSING HYMN: #311, Let it Be a Dance

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering to listen to each other, especially when we disagree with the beliefs expressed. May we be patient, may we welcome the questions that arise, and may we always be ready to show compassion and understanding for those who are different from us. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.