

I Know I Know Nothing**A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****Delivered by the Rev. CJ McGregor****On August 6, 2017**

(From an episode of The Simpsons, set at the church ice cream social)

Lisa: "What flavors do you have?"

Rev. Lovejoy: "Well, chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, and our new Unitarian flavor ice cream."

Lisa: "I'll have that" (Rev hands her an empty bowl)

Lisa: "But there's nothing in there."

Rev: "Eeeexactly."

We Unitarian Universalists are an interesting bunch. Some of us arrive here knowing we have the truth and things figured out, some of us believe we have the truth but are open to mystery, wonder and even revelation. Heck, even our fifth principle tells us that we are on a journey together to seek the truth in love. Those outside of Unitarian Universalism say that we believe anything or that we believe nothing. I've been thinking about how Unitarian Universalists may dismiss or scoff at things they cannot see, hear, and touch. How can we be so certain when we don't know what we don't know? I know you don't know what you don't know and I know that you know that that I don't know what I don't know. You know? There is mystery, indeed.

Let me tell you a story from my own life. I've shared with you that my early childhood was traumatic and my relationship with my mother was strained until her death. However, there are bits of my childhood where my mother is concerned that I cherish. In the evening I would often find my mother stretched out looking at the stars. We lived in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains so you can imagine what the night sky might look like. Broad, open, and filled with stars. I would join my mother and stargaze with her. It was in these moments that my mother was calm, generous, and loving. We talked about everything especially the mysteries of the universe. What was out there? What were the possibilities? We were reminded that there was so much that we didn't know about the universe and other mysteries. Those moments are seared in my mind as precious memory of my mother and a special time that we shared together. This is the why of experiencing mystery and wonder. So that we can have moments of awe that keep us connected with others, so that we can remember times of shared living, so that we can continue to be in awe of the universe and so that we can share our enthusiasm for life and love and affirm a willingness to approach one another with an open heart, an open mind in ways that support mystery and awe.

The phrase "I know that I know nothing" or "I know one thing: that I know nothing", sometimes called the Socratic paradox, is a well-known saying that is derived from Plato's account of the Greek philosopher Socrates. The phrase is not one that Socrates himself is ever recorded as

saying, and there is some disagreement about whether it accurately represents a Socratic view. If it were not for Plato we might not know a lot of what Socrates said. Plato investigated Socrates's explanation of that aspect of his philosophy often termed "the Socratic Paradox." Socrates believed that we all seek what we think is most genuinely in our own interest. (Obviously, short-term pleasure or success is often not in our best interest. The long-term effect on the soul is, however.) On the one hand, if we act with knowledge, then we will obtain what is good for our soul because "knowledge" implies certainty in results.

On the other hand, if the consequences of our action turn out not to be what is good for our soul (and hence what is genuinely not in our self-interest), then we had to have acted from ignorance because we were unable to achieve what we desired. In a sense, then, for Socrates, there is no ethical good or evil in things in the world—things are what they are. Instead, "knowledge" is considered to be materially equivalent to what is "good," "excellence," and "ignorance" is considered to be materially equivalent to "evil" or what is "harmful to our soul." If harm happens to us, then, at some point, we had to have acted with a lack of knowledge. In this manner, Socrates concludes, what to many people seems paradoxical, that we are "morally responsible" for obtaining all the knowledge we can. In this sense, ignorance is no excuse.

Let's go back to the paradox. The meaning of the word "paradox" itself. The word's origin is Greek. The prefix 'para' means beyond and dox from the Greek meaning opinion or belief. So the literal meaning of "paradox" is "beyond belief". The best word for something beyond belief, it seems to me, is "mystery". In our quest to be part of the greater, unseen, unliteral world of creative power and mystery, we must consider faith and mystery. As Unitarian Universalists we affirm and promote seven Principles, which we hold as strong values and moral guides. We live out these Principles within a "living tradition" of wisdom and spirituality, drawn from sources as diverse as science, poetry, scripture, and personal experience. There are six sources and we will focus on the first today which is "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life." This source instructs us to have an openness to the forces that create and uphold life and to the forces that take life.

One of our preeminent theologians of the 20th century, James Luther Adams, said it like this: "Religious liberalism depends on the principle that 'revelation' is continuous." It means that the only kind of Bible a Unitarian Universalist could believe in is a Wikipedia-type Bible. It means that, when Unitarian Universalists read the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible in a way that is faithful to our theological tradition, we never read it literally and in a way that assumes the ancient message—the meaning of it—is frozen in the amber of time. Always, we are finding ways to value the old insights in the context of their time, and to evolve the old insights so that they can serve new understandings and new needs. We believe in evolution.

There is an old hymn, "Light of Ages and of Nations" #189, that is set to an older hymn tune, the words were written in 1860 by the Unitarian minister Samuel Longfellow, younger brother of the more famous Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the poet. It's believed to be one of the earliest hymns to fully-recognize non-Christian traditions. I name it because of the expression in verse three, "revelation is not sealed." But really the entire hymn is a testimony to the Unitarian Universalist beliefs that there is that of truth in all religions and that the potential to know truth exists in all people, of all times and places, including today, and here. The first part is about religious diversity. In our view, revelation was never restricted to one religion. Especially today,

in the present climate of intolerance, this is powerful. We are not new to interfaith understanding. We have a century and a half of experience from which to draw in understanding and working with our brothers and sisters of other faiths. We have an historic appreciation, written in our souls' deep pages (as the hymn says), of the truth of their religion for them. We know that it is as true – no more, no less – for them as ours is for us. You ask what gives Unitarian Universalism power? There is power in our belief that the possibility of revelation was 1) not ever restricted to one religious group and 2) continues to be as possible as ever. We don't know what we don't know and must be open to the mystery.

The second part is that revelation is still possible. Ours is a “living tradition,” we like to say. It has evolved over time and will continue to do so, in large part because it is not tied to an ancient scripture or institutional creed. We do not hold onto the literal meaning of scriptures that originated in a historic context different than ours, defined by the customs and values of their (ancient) times. While we can, and do, find meaning in scriptures for our own times, the first source from which we draw is our own direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder that moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life. We rely on our experience to know the truth that will set us free. I don't know what I don't know. Hey, I play it safe. I have no expectations for the afterlife but if I do arrive at a pearly gates rather than plead the fifth I will get in by the skin of my nose having been open to revelation and mystery.

Sometimes, our experience causes us to challenge our own faith principles. Take for example Rev. Bill Schulz, former Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. His experience encountering evil, advocating for victims of torture and opposing the death penalty, caused him to doubt the first principle that Unitarian Universalist congregations covenant to affirm and promote: the inherent worth and dignity of every person. He said in a 2006 lecture to UU ministers, “I don't buy that anymore. I have fought tirelessly against the death penalty in this country. I have visited death rows, spoken frequently with condemned prisoners. Some of them have acknowledged their crimes and altered their hearts. Others of them are truly innocent. Many of them are mentally ill. And some of them are vicious, dangerous killers. I oppose the death penalty not because I believe that every one of those lives carries inherent worth... I oppose the death penalty because I can't be sure which of them falls into which category and because the use of executions by the state diminishes my own dignity and that of every other citizen in whose name it is enforced. I need, in other words, to assign the occupants of death row worth and dignity in order to preserve my own. But I find no such characteristics inherent in either them or me.” So is the worth and dignity of every person inherent? “No,” he says. “Each of us has to be assigned worth—it does not come automatically—and taught to behave with dignity...” That we must draw on our own experience, and can question even our own principles, is a source of power. It's not easy, but it engages and energizes us and therefore enables us to take action on behalf of our principles, to do the work of love and justice in this world. It gives us power.

Ongoing revelation, questioning, transformation... with so much change, what lends stability to our faith tradition, which we sometimes even call a “movement” rather than a “denomination,”? The word “religion” means “to bind together.” By what are we bound? We are not bound by creeds, but by covenants. We are bound by promises we make about how we will be together.

We call them covenants, a Biblical word. Our members covenant with new members, and congregations covenant with each other, as member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association. So, grounded in covenants, empowered by our belief in ongoing revelation, what is it all for? Is it all just for us, individually and collectively, or are we empowered for something larger than ourselves, this congregation, this movement? One of the joys of belonging to a free faith is the right to wrangle with questions like these. Human beings have asked themselves these questions over and over again, and, not surprisingly, have come up with different answers. We can only invite one another to ask these questions because we believe that faith is a journey and “revelation is not sealed.” Change is constant. We honor the great mystery as one of our sources of our faith. We don’t know what we don’t know and must be open to that.

The author Rabi Michael Lerner is a Political Activist and Rabbi at a synagogue in Berkeley, Ca. He is editor of a progressive magazine focused on social and religious activism. He is chair of the interfaith Network of Spiritual Progressives, rabbi of and author of eleven books, including the national best-seller *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back our Country From the Religious Right*. His sentences, “It is the reality of human experience that at our core we respond to the universe with a sense of awe and wonder at creation.” And “We are dazzled by the incomprehensible fact of being itself.” are to my mind the deep thoughts behind our first source. We cannot not seek for the sacred, the mystery, and the wonder which moves us to renew our spirit and opens us to the forces that uphold life. It is part of our DNA, part of our being; it is the essence of our humanness.

We look and we wonder and we search and we argue for and against and we believe and we don’t and we change our mind but the reality as Rabbi Michael Lerner reminded us is, that at the core of the human experience is that we respond to the universe with a sense of awe and wonder and we are amazed by the incomprehensible fact of all of existence. Exploring your thoughts and beliefs, your experiences your ideas is what can deepen your spiritual self. These are some thoughts that I would like to leave you with, the universe is richer than we can imagine, life is more mysterious that we can find answers for; human nature will always want to know the why and the what and how. Being a religious, spiritual person is the how. Let’s together find the fire in our faith and use it to light a path to a future, more just, more loving world.

May it be so.