

“Inklings and Wondering – What is Faith for Unitarian Universalists?”

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The title of this sermon is “Inklings and Wondering.” I like that word “inkling.”

I read and enjoyed the phrase recently in Krista Tippett’s book, Einstein’s God. Tippett, as some of you may know, hosts NPR’s “Speaking of Faith.”

Of the great scientist, she reflects, “Einstein was more than content with what he called a ‘cosmic religious sense’ – animated by ‘inklings’ and ‘wondering,’ rather than by answers and conclusions.” “Inkling” then, in this context is a sense, part of a “cosmic sense,” having to do with one’s spirit, grounded not so much in reason itself, but in something else.

In our UU communities of faith there is often a dance between reason and spirit, between investigating and “inkling,” between what informs us and what moves us. This morning I would like to reflect with you just little bit about our UU faith and about this dance between knowledge and reason on one hand with a grounding in this “cosmic religious sense” on the other, a dance which can be an especially lively one for us, as a community of Truth-Seekers.

Many of us, I being one, have come out of other faiths, often from faiths in which reason and a quest for knowledge were sometimes at odds with the belief structure or creeds we were taught. Finding ourselves a home in Unitarian Universalism, many of us have left behind other aspects of our former faiths. Sometimes that has included the dimension of spirituality.

I am defining spirituality here as a palpable and mysterious sense of connection to something larger than oneself.

A deep sense of spirit may be for some – including myself, for a while – tied up in a package with all those tenets or belief systems that seemed unreasonable, based on magical thinking, or just plain unscientific. Or in some cases seemed arbitrary, the results of arguments won or lost by competing political or theological factions in church councils.

For some UUs, spirituality is a hard concept with which to engage.

Take for example, some of us who are humanists. As part humanist myself, I know there is not, of course, ONE description of all humanists. As curious human beings we are just as diverse in our thinking as any subgroup of UUs.

Humanists founded many of our congregations especially in the 1950s and 60s. That cohort of humanists had to be particularly courageous in a larger very religious culture, to step away from what were considered mainstream religions. Many of them declared themselves atheists or agnostics, which back then often meant “un-American.” These folks were often on the front

lines for us, living out their First Amendment right for freedom of religion. It wasn't always easy.

But from many of our humanists I have heard that it was freeing to shake away what felt like bonds of former religions, to openly revel in reason and the discoveries of science! And for some the sense of "spiritual" was also wrapped into what was part of the faiths that were gladly left behind.

Now, fifty-sixty years later, the composition of our congregations is different. It contains lots of others for whom faith also includes spiritual depth; it is exactly what many are seeking!

In fact, to get a picture of the complex nature of the diversity of our faith, it is helpful to me to think of Unitarianism Universalism in its historical context as a big stream, perhaps better as two tributaries eventually making a bigger stream. In any congregation we will find people who have stepped into that stream in different places and at different times, culturally and personally. Our stream is constantly changing while waters carry the rich silt of where it has come from. It includes many phases and stages.

So this resurgence in recent decades of the wish for more spirituality in our faith communities should not be surprising. We are changing and will continue to change in the composition of who we are. That is both the blessing and the challenge of our very big theological tent, a consequence of being a non-creedal faith!

But to look further into this dance between science/Reason and spirituality, let's go back to Tippett's book. She explores with some great scientific minds how some folks – actually world renowned scientists – have made what sometimes seem the disparate science and reason AND spirituality into a really engaging dance for themselves. None was interested in only science OR religion, but rather saw that both arenas were very interesting and helped to animate their lives and, in fact, fed each other.

I'd like to share just a couple of examples from Einstein himself, although there are many more contemporary scientists Tippett considered whose ideas would be fun to engage with.

In talking about this cosmic religious sense, Einstein also said, "Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind." (Tippett:) "Einstein understood science and religion to be separate realms, but joined by kindred impulses."

He spoke of wonder and mystery, especially as related to nature, as equal parts of science and religion: "The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead." (Tippett, p. 23)

In recent times I have wanted to explore and experience those feelings of wonder and mystery more deeply. My sabbatical was especially meaningful to me in this exploration. But this morning I want to lift up another experience, one which surprised me a bit. I was at a UU religious educators' conference. The workshop leader asked us to stand on a human continuum

with one end of the continuum being “the faith of your childhood,” the far wall being as far as one could get from that. We were to place ourselves according to how close we were now to the faith of our childhood.

People dutifully placed themselves on the imaginary line across the room . . . .

I was very lonely as I stood at one end – the childhood end. My nearest colleague was at least halfway to the other side of the room. Most were by the far windows.

I had been raised as a child in a liberal Christian denomination. I hadn’t thought about it as I placed myself on the line, but just went with my first instinct. But now as I stood, all by myself, I asked:

*How could it be that I, who as a teen was fueled by such a skepticism that I became a religion major in an attempt to satisfy my unceasing questions, that I who fell in love with Unitarian Universalism and went to seminary and still love theological debate, how could it be that I was now in exactly the same place as I was when I was four years old? I was pretty sure I was not a Methodist anymore!*

So how could that be? Had I lost my UU faith?

I guess I was not really worried. I do love Unitarian Universalism. But what I was feeling was that as a young child I had what I would call a very deep faith, in fact one that in looking back clearly was completely spiritual in nature. In fact, I can actually remember, bring back into consciousness, what the feeling was like when I was so young: Connected to all, in awe, in wonder, in a place of tender thanksgiving. It was powerful.

It was before I had learned the meaning of the Apostles’ Creed or the Gloria Patri or the hymns celebrating a whole theology which would come later. But the “aha” of that lonely and lovely moment on the continuum was that I could re-elicited the depth of a very spiritual feeling of connection to what was larger, to a feeling that I was fully ALIVE – and wasn’t that deliciously dandy – that there was much beauty in the world, and that there was much love all around me. When I was three, four, and five these feelings were not thoughts or affirmations. They certainly were not guided by reason, or tested understandings. They were simply what I knew, not articulated, but knew to be true. Life was good, beauty abounded in the world, and I was loved. My world was trustworthy and I had a place in it.

Psychoanalyst and developmentalist Erik Erikson makes the connections that the experience of trust that young children can experience leads as adults to a sense of faith. Other developmentalists will tell us that one can expect children to have the capacity to feel this great sense of trust and spirituality if we don’t get too much in their way or if they don’t experience early trauma. Our UU forebears, Fahs, Channing and many of the Transcendentalists, alluded to this early special sense people are born with. Channing called it their “inward springs,” their capacity for a spirituality. I am actually privileged to get to see this frequently, at least weekly, in my work with children here.

All that being true, in my opinion, I also then acknowledge that the deep sense of belonging to a beautiful, magnificent and gracious universe came for me also in part from being alive in a loving faith community and a loving family.

On this Father's Day, I have been remembering how my dad in his advanced years confessed that he always crossed his fingers when he recited the Apostles' Creed. (He asked me not to tell Mom.)

But he never stopped going to church, or being part of a faith community, and he spent every moment he possibly could on a Saturday "wetting a line" without needing to catch a fish. He just wanted to be in the middle of the larger natural world that he knew he belonged to and never ceased a depth of delight in the wonder of other human beings, their minds and personalities, and all that each one was. He reveled in the mystery of life AND questioned a belief system which was not part of his own experience and didn't stand the test of reason. He didn't talk about these things much, but he did teach me by his actions to trust myself and my experience and to let my own inward springs be my guide.

And so with thanks to a loving environment which nurtured the acceptance of my own inner experience, the depth of that earliest "cosmic religious sense" still exists and I would say is the basis of my faith today. My mind is active, my reason intact – honestly – but what grounds me, what I need more than that is ongoing connection to exactly what grounded me as a young child, a cosmic inkling.

So, when I am driving to church on Sunday morning and could be listening to Krista Tippett and Speaking of Faith, I actually go more often for Stained Glass Blue Grass. Even though the words aren't remotely mine theologically, the songs often express a universal longing, a be-longing that I believe all people want. I revel in the universality of our connection to a bigger universe, something as a child I felt but did not think.

And, if I tease out what was the content in the spiritual feelings of my childhood, or my adulthood, what is in that "cosmic sense," for me, and I speak only for me, it goes like this:

I feel myself profoundly connected to, although just a little tiny piece of, an amazing universe, which manifests wonders of nature and of relationships, not just here and there, but in cascades of experiences, ongoing.

Out of that sense of amazement and connections grows the most fundamental religious impulse in my own experience, that is gratitude, and out of that gratitude grows love. A formula for my faith and a grounding for how I live life. So simple, but not in the least simplistic.

For me, as for Einstein, this faith is not grounded in a personal God; it is a cosmic sense, a very big inkling, and a response to a world that could be so generous.

Where does that cosmic sense come from? I don't know, but because I do not know where it came from does not make it less real. It emerges from something I cannot name.

Someday, as we learn more about the brain, perhaps we can pinpoint where such feelings come from, but even should this happen, knowing that still would not diminish the wonder and the power I experience.

I am speaking at this moment just for me, not what I think all of us feel, certainly not for what I think we SHOULD feel, because I do not know that.

At my workshop, I let myself stand at one end of a continuum. My friends were at many different spots. But there I stood, by myself. We each find the place that is right for us.

This morning I've shared a bit of what grounds and guides me. The beauty of a place like this one, is that we all can share from the lenses of our own experiences, and celebrate that and be enriched.

And, on this day as we honor the parents or others who have nurtured us and inspired us, I want to say how grateful I am that here, in this community of faith, we find a wealth of inspiration in an abundant diversity of seekers. Here we are fed by one another. Here is a faith home for all who, with the authority of their own experience, seek truth, guided by reason and lived in love.