

ON PURSUING THE QUESTIONS

When our program chair Don Morrison suggested that I frame this morning's talk using that ancient book, *Mind If I Differ?*, I summoned up all my residual polite manners and did not respond with a visible jaw dropping. But I thought, "You have to be kidding!" Turns out, however, he was serious.

Now this is a book published by a Catholic publishing house in 1963, and is an exchange of letters between a Catholic writer and me, focused primarily on a class I took at the Cathedral taught by Monsignor Garvin specifically for people who wanted to know more about the Catholic religion, not necessarily with intent to join. One man was there because his son was seriously considering the priesthood, another woman was there because she was married to a Catholic. One classmate did subsequently join the church.

I signed up for this class at the instigation of my down the hill neighbor who I used as an unwitting resource when I was teaching the junior high class here with the curriculum "The Church Across The Street," which begins with the Catholic church and about which I had a very mixed bag of information, certainly not adequate for that bunch of young junior high students who could ask some pretty demanding questions. .

Then one day my neighbor ordered me down the hill for coffee and told me about this class being offered by her church. "I will take you over for the first class," she said, "and introduce you to Monsignor and you can stay or not stay, but don't you ever come down the hill and ask me one more question about my church."

I had been carrying on a sporadic letter writing with Lucile Hasley, a Catholic essayist, to whom I wrote a fan letter after I read one of her books, *Reproachfully Yours*. So I popped off a brief note telling her I was attending this class and back came a letter saying, "Maybe we have a book if you don't get all frozen." Since I never believed the book would be published, it was no effort to stay thawed.

But it was, of course, published, turning me briefly into something of a local celebrity—well, maybe just the answer to the prayers of a lot of local program

chair people. When this book went to press, the Mass was still being said in Latin in the Catholic church, my daughter who has now been a practicing attorney for more than 30 years was in the sixth grade, and I had been a Unitarian for a less than 10 years, all of it in this fledging fellowship.

That makes it the second of the two most audacious acts of my life. The first was to meet my mother-in-law for the first time the night before her one and only--and perfect-- son and I left to get married. The dialogue began, "Mother, this is Betty. We're leaving to get married in Montana."

The second was to write a book about Unitarianism having never set foot in a regular Unitarian church, much less to have gone to a General Assembly, or even a regional meeting. When I did finally go to a regional meeting, the book was an instant conversation starter, roughly equivalent to taking a puppy on a train. "Oh, you're the one who wrote the book," was usually how it began.

I did get quite a few fan letters. Some of them said, "I hope you didn't mind too much losing the argument." But the most rewarding responses were from other Unitarians. Perhaps my favorite was from a woman who said she gave a copy of the book to her parents and they told her, "We never understood why you left our church, but after reading this book, we do understand."

So considering that response, I decided that this morning I would go down the path Don Morrison suggested at least for a little while. For me revisiting the book had its hazards like the re-editing impulse, the I-should-haves, the retrospective embarrassments. Who was that woman with my name—I barely remember that skinny, naïve, intruder on the religious discussion scene.

But the other side of that life altering experience was the class itself. By the time I was 18 I had a pretty skewed opinion of the Catholic church starting with our rural grade school where my brother and I were the only protestants on the school roster, and my fate was regularly and gleefully announced, "It doesn't matter what you do—you are going to hell because you are not a Catholic."

Several subsequent experiences in high school left me both confused and fairly bitter about the Catholic church, and certainly with only scanty knowledge of its theology. Of all the subsequent benefits of attending that class, one of the ones I personally cherish the most is coming to a better understanding of Catholicism, a letting go of my previous animosity. For example, I do not think I would have attended and graduated from the University of Mary had I not taken that class..

Monsignor Garvin, who once labeled me “the big one who got away,” on a Christmas card, became a friend and we had many interesting discussions after class and after the class ended, including a command performance after I delivered a copy of the book to his home, the publisher having sent three advance copies.

The phone rang one night and it was Monsignor. “You are to come over here right now. Yours is the only book besides my breviary that I’ve ever read more than once and if you’re going to write a book about me the least you can do is come over and let me read what I’ve written in the margins.”

In one of our subsequent conversations he told me the local bishop had bought I think it was a dozen copies of the book. “Maybe, said Monsignor, “he wants one for every room in the house.” According to Monsignor the bishop’s favorite line in the book was when I said that “if I was thinking of becoming a Catholic, I think I’d wait until after I was past the childbearing age.”

Subsequently Monsignor suggested I take a night class in literature at Mary College explaining he thought I’d like the professor and the class. And from that class I went on to complete my college education that I had interrupted when I had decided instead of going back to college after my junior year at the U. of Minnesota, to major instead in the new young lawyer who had arrived in my home town. Monsignor preached the sermon at my graduation three years later.

But surprisingly, maybe, in retrospect, I also developed a deeper commitment to Unitarian Universalism as a result of the study of a different faith, a realization that I was, indeed, on the right religious path—for me. It was as if by studying Catholicism for those six months of weekly sessions I had a clearer, better educated picture of what I did not believe.—and consequently what I did believe.

In his book *Skeptics and True Believers*, the author Chet Raymo quotes the biologist Richard Dawkins who has suggested “that the credulity of children—the willingness to believe whatever one is told by adults, especially parents—has been reinforced by natural selection for its survival value.”

The child, Raymo says, comes into the world knowing nothing, and must quickly learn how to navigate the perils of life. At first, “Don’t touch the stove” and “Be good or Santa won’t bring toys” are absorbed with equal credulity. The child is asked by an authority figure to behave as if the stove is hot and to behave as if Santa exists, and so she does. The challenge of growing up, said Raymo, is

to learn which sorts of make-believe are useful reality constructs and which are poetic metaphors.

Personally, perhaps I can trace my life as a skeptic to the small Heywood Wakefield rocking chair which goes with me wherever I live. When I was about four my parents arranged to have the chair handed to me by Santa Claus when he was in town delivering bags of candy to the community children. But it was a windy day, and when he leaned over the box of the truck to give me the chair, the wind blew his mask partially aside. He had black hair and needed a shave. And I no longer believed in Santa.

It doesn't always get any easier when we are adults, and not children, when we become aware that we no longer believe what we had been taught by parents and/or a church, constructs that no longer made sense to us. So now what?

Convinced maybe that if I spent the summer reading murder mysteries my brain might atrophy, I got involved with two books. I say involved because both of them taxed my poor octogenarian brain. One is by Chet Rayma from which I just quoted. He is a professor of physics and astronomy at Stonehill College in Massachusetts, and a weekly columnist on science for the Boston Globe.

The other is entitled *The Believing Brain* by Michael Shermer who is an adjunct professor at Claremont Graduate University in California, the founding publisher of *Skeptic Magazine* and a monthly columnist for *Scientific American*. Both of them have written several other books and both of them propose that we are born with at least a tendency to be believers.

Or not to be believers. It's in our genetic inheritance; it's in our DNA. And/or its dopamine and its kin folk and in our inherited brain path for using it.

As one who has generally taken my brain for granted, I was brought up short by the description Shermer provides; "The brain consists of about a hundred billion neurons of several hundred types, each of which contains a cell body, a descending axon cable, and numerous dendrites and axon terminals branching out to other neurons in approximately a thousand trillion synaptic connections, A hundred billion neurons is ...a 1 followed by 11 zeros. A thousand trillion connection is a quadrillion, or ...a 1 followed by 15 zeros The number of neurons in a human brain is about the same number of stars in the Milk Way galaxy –literally an astronomical number!"

Perhaps such a numerical rendition inspired the physicist Gamow to compose this limerick:

There was a young fellow from Trinity
Who took (the square root of infinity)
But the number of digits
Gave him the fidgets;
He dropped Math and took up Divinity.

Bear with me and my octogenarian brain for a few more quotations: Shermer says this in his book, *The Believing Brain*: “There is a belief engine in the brain associated with specific areas that generate and evaluate beliefs across a wide variety of contexts. One role of this engine is to reward belief of all putative claims, including and especially belief in God. In other words, it feels good and rewarding to believe in God.”

He goes on to say that “belief comes first; reasons for belief follow in confirmation of the realism dependent on belief.” Relating to an experiment carried on at UCLA using fifteen believers and fifteen non-believers, results confirmed that “the feeling of conviction is what we rely on as consumers of beliefs – but clearly this feeling can become uncoupled from good reasons and good evidence in any domain, (mathematical, ethical, etc.)

The longer we hold a belief the more we have invested in it; the more publicly committed we are to it, the more we endow it with value and the less likely we are to give it up.

How beliefs are framed often determines how they are assessed, and this is called the framing effect, or the tendency to draw different conclusions based on how data are presented.

“Smart people believe weird things because they are better at rationalizing their beliefs that they hold for non-smart reasons.”

And from Raymo again: “Look again at that electron microphotograph of the tangled strand of DNA. It is not just lying there, static, like a cast-aside string of pearls. It is a pulsing, undulating farrago of threads, feathers, knobs and whiskers, a microscopic lace maker frenetically making a lace called life.....The more we learn of the details, the more miraculous it seems. Not matter how much we read about how it happens, no matter how many electron microphotographs we see of the actual process in its various stages, no matter how hard we try to stretch our

imaginings to encompass the DNA fandango dance of life, it seem impossible. And yet I believe it..... But I don't believe in the gray bearded God of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, extraterrestrial visitors, or the shroud of Turin as Christ's winding sheet, all of which on the face of it are more plausible.”

Temporary end of quotations. Thank you for your patience. And exactly what beneficial knowledge did I gain from all this brain taxing stuff I read? One was a renewed appreciation for what science has learned about brain function in the last decade. Raymo's book, *Skeptics and True Believers* from which that last quote came was published in 1998, Shermer's *The Believing Brain*, in 2011.

For years I have maintained mostly for its comic effect that when they passed out the belief gene, I must have been out of the line. Now after these two books I'm inclined to think that is a rather unscientific statement of what the authors maintain – that there is indeed a genetic disposition to be a believer or a doubter, that it has originally to do with the nature of nerve paths in our brains.

And exactly how does that have anything useful to do with my life? Or yours? Since I had long ago taken the road not traveled much in the community in which I have lived most of my life, it was both reaffirming and not particularly surprising. It is the one place I am in full accord with Martin Luther who said after pounding those 95 thesis on the church door, “Here I stand. I can do no other.” Of course, we are standing by quite different church doors, but the inevitability is similar.

So is it all inevitable, like the color of our eyes or whether we're male or female, a genetic destiny whether we like it or not? Of course not. It was Socrates who maintained that an unexamined life was not worth living, and it is my contention that an unexamined faith is not worth having.

To me the most important question is the one that the poet Mary Oliver asked, “Tell me, what is you are going to do with your one wild and precious life?” I'm not sure we can know how to answer that question if we have not arrived at an understanding with ourselves about what we believe in, what kind of DNA has been in control of our religious life or lack thereof. It does present the opportunity to claim not that the devil made you do it, but your DNA may have been involved.

But it is that question, “What am I going to do with my one precious life?” that brought me to this church, to Unitarian Universalism, and which has kept me coming for the 60 years of the fellowship which we celebrate this year. Once I had

laid to rest whatever religious concepts I still carried from my childhood, from my theological wandering years, I had to find where I went from there.

Through all these 60 years a grand variety of DNA history has been involved in the fellowship. Some were angry, some were truly lost, wandering between childhood prohibitions and confusing opportunities. Other were simply grateful to have found a religious home where they were free both to express their doubts and explore new possibilities. Sometimes the very presence in this church creates problems at home reminding us ever again that freedom of religion is a part of our national vocabulary, but not always a personal reality.

Others go nowhere in search of a religious home which is meaningful in their lives, and I find that sad because few human beings go through their allotted days without the kind of personal crises that demand a reckoning, some re-arranging of their lives if not their understanding of the nature of life itself.

Personally I hit that crisis stage when I was 21 and my father suddenly died. As I listened to his funeral service I realized that I didn't believe any of the stuff being said, nor any of the songs being sung. I had spent my religious life in this church starting as a small child, and now when my life had suddenly fallen apart, my church offered me no comfort, no solace.

I did not know that I was a Unitarian Universalist., but that is precisely why it is so important not only that we have been here for 60 years, but that we are prepared to continue, that we are here to be the religious home for others as the song goes, "In sunshine and in shadow."

Rachel Ramen, the author of those chicken soup books, wrote somewhere that the secret of living well lies not in having all the answers, but in pursuing the questions in good company. That inquiry class from whence came the book "Mind If I Differ?" was a most hospitable place that provided all the answers. But I never asked any of my really important questions.

So this morning as we began another season pursuing the questions, let us endeavor to be the good company such questions deserve.