

“The Illusion of Certainty”

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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How apt that this morning’s prelude is titled “Improvisation”. Who can say what we’ll hear when music is “not quite composed?” Being composed is the case for neither musical improvisation nor the religious/spiritual state of any of us gathered here. Knowing what to expect musically and being “calm, cool, collected and composed” carry an undercurrent of certainty. Where would jazz be with melodic certainty? Where would our living tradition be with theological certainty?

“Certainty is so often overrated.” “Yes, yes, and yes,” I nodded in agreement with Julia Baird, an Australian writer and television personality, in response to her op-ed piece for *The New York Times*.

“This is especially the case when it comes to faith, or other imponderables,” she continued. My mind strayed to the arena of faith and “other imponderables.” I grew up Presbyterian, reciting the Apostles’ Creed without question. If you asked, I could probably recite it this morning. Don’t worry; I won’t. It wasn’t until midpoint in a long and winding journey spiritually, psychologically, educationally, and culturally that I questioned it to the point of becoming Unitarian Universalist. This doesn’t mean I’ve thrown the baby Jesus out with the bathwater. My turn into Unitarian Universalism was not a change of direction that called me to give up every speck of my prior religious identity. This community of faith and doubt—and I speak of our larger Unitarian Universalist community—has allowed me to *expand and deepen* my understanding of and appreciation for Christianity with all its riches and flaws and, for that matter, my experience of Judaism and Islam and humanism and paganism and other filters for digesting matters intimate and ultimate.

Curious George is one of my favorite figures in the literature for children of all ages, and we’re all simply aging children. It’s hard not to claim him as intrinsically Unitarian Universalist, but that would be assuming ours is the “one true faith of curiosity”, which puts us at the outer edges of a shaky limb. Curious George is a seeker, and seekers get into trouble because they’re troubled enough to act on their curiosity. “What? Where? Who? Why? What if?” How can these queries NOT get us into trouble of the richest sort?

Consider an episode from Yann Martel’s novel, *Life of Pi*. Piscine Patel, the birth name of the character through whose lens the story is told, changed his name early on to Pi, a term that leapt off the blackboard of a math class as an obvious solution to the relentless teasing from his peers, given their readiness to distort Piscine into...you can guess.

The son of an esteemed zookeeper in the Indian village of Pondicherry, Pi was expected to conform to the secular notions of both his parents. He was a curious child—most specifically, a religiously curious child. What about God? Pi went exploring. Much like our own youngsters do during their Coming of Age journey, he visited a number of houses of worship; but he went further. Pi became friends with the local priest, the local imam, and the local pandit—not pundit, pandit. He became a practicing Christian, a practicing Muslim, and a practicing Hindu.

His parents had no knowledge of their son's excursions, until...one Sunday afternoon they set off for a seaside stroll with Pi and their younger son, Ravi. "Uh-oh," thought Pi. Who should be approaching but the trio that Pi called "the three wise men"?

"My parents looked puzzled to have their way gently blocked by three broadly smiling religious strangers.... My Father saw himself as part of the New India—rich, modern and as secular as ice cream... Mother was mum, bored and neutral on the subject..."

As for Ravi, he was a baby and slept. After the initial greetings, an awkward silence fell on this unlikely gathering.

The priest spoke first: "Piscine is a good Christian boy. I hope to see him join our choir soon."

The imam broke in, "You must be mistaken. He's a good Muslim boy. He comes without fail to Friday prayer, and his knowledge of the Holy Qur'an is coming along nicely."

"Nonsense!" cried the pandit. "Piscine was born a Hindu, lives a Hindu and will die a Hindu!"

Havoc ensued as each of the more or less wise men sought to derail the credibility of the other two:

From the imam: "'Hindus and Christians are idolaters. They have many gods.'"

"And Muslims have many wives," responded the pandit.

It was the priest's turn: "Piscine, there is salvation only in Jesus."

Claims and put-downs flew back and forth in the seaside air.

"Father raised his hands. 'Gentlemen, gentlemen, please!' he interjected. 'I would like to remind you there is freedom of practice in this country.'

Three apoplectic faces turned to him.

"Yes! Practice—singular!" the wise men screamed in unison."

The pandit spoke first. 'Mr. Patel, Piscine's piety is admirable. In these troubled times it's good to see a boy so keen on God. We all agree on that.' The imam and the priest nodded. 'But he can't be a Hindu, a Christian *and* a Muslim. It's impossible. He must choose...'"

"Hmmm, Piscine?" Mother nudged me. 'How do you feel about the question?'

'Bapu Gandhi said, 'All religions are true.' I just want to love God,' I blurted out, and looked down, red in the face.

My embarrassment was contagious. No one said anything. It happened that we were not far from the statue of Gandhi on the esplanade. Stick in hand, an impish smile on his lips, a twinkle in his eyes the Mathatma walked...”

“Father looked at me for a second, as if to speak, then thought better, and said, ‘Ice cream, anyone?’”

How often do divided loyalties, clashing theologies, and sparring ideologies find common ground in ice cream on the seashore?

How commonly such dynamics escalate through the channels of religious and political and social ideologies that claim God or righteousness or truth in the possessive? And how readily do such dynamics become “us against them?” “God is on my side, so he (and it’s usually a he) isn’t on yours.” “I’m right; you’re wrong.” “I speak the truth; you don’t.” Certainty in its mildest forms reaps alienation. Certainty in its zealous forms reaps suppression. Certainty in its fanatical forms reaps systemic oppression.

Certainty’s undertow is fear.

So what about illusion? Is it perhaps what happens when we think what we see is other than what is there, or at the very least, ambiguous? Such was the experience of our youngsters this morning, as they studied the illustration that one of you brilliantly chose for the cover of our order of service.

What do you see? A man’s head, with a bald dome and intense facial expression? A young person playing a reed flute in the foreground with a young woman sitting in the background in a somewhat stark lakeside setting? Did you see one or two images? Did you vacillate between the two? What did we learn from our children? And what about that game of “telephone”? The more participants, the more fun, the less certain that the person who is last to receive the whispered message will repeat what was whispered to the first listener. Such is the stuff of rumor; such is the stuff of gossip; such is the stuff of illusion, even delusion. Is seeing believing? Is hearing knowing?

Consider the notion of spirituality. How many here have said or heard, “I’m not religious, I’m spiritual.” God forbid—so to speak—we should be religious, if we haul all the baggage connected with that term onto the flight from what we were perhaps told was absolute truth. What is it about *spiritual* that resists linkage to what I call “religious scar tissue”? For starters, it’s hard to pin down spiritual, even though when I use the term in conversation, folks commonly nod their heads as if we’re all in agreement on what it means. Just as some here may have an allergy to the term “religion”, I have a mild allergy to the term “spirituality”. When I shared my dilemma with my former mentor, Rev. Victor Carpenter, he replied, “Defining spirituality is like bottling fog!”

As for religion, the term comes from Old French, or “from Latin *religio(n)-* ‘obligation, bond, reverence,’ possibly based on Latin *religare* ‘to bind’”, as in “blest be the tie that binds.” So why not, “Blest be the tie that binds us in faith and doubt, faith in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the power of conscience, the interconnected web, etc.? Religion need not be a term to shun, but to claim as reverence for truth as dynamic, community as inclusive, and love as our ultimate aspiration.

Is Unitarian Universalism a religion? Recall the wisdom of the 16th c. Unitarian preacher from Transylvania, Francis David: “We need not think alike to love alike.” In a tradition that not only permits but is grounded in doctrinal freedom, there is ample room for varying perspectives on these matters. My favorite take on this greets visitors to Dog Mountain in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, founded by the late Stephen Huneck. It’s an expanse of countryside with a dog-friendly playground and a chapel replete with images of our canine friends. At the entrance to the grounds is a signpost with the caption, “Welcome all creeds all breeds; no dogmas allowed!”

Unitarian Universalist theology is a mosaic of perspectives and beliefs. The adjectives with which we identify ourselves go on and on—Buddhist, Humanist, pagan, atheist, humanist, Christian, Jewish, none of the above. The common ground is what my friend and Unitarian Universalist theologian and scholar Thandeka calls “love beyond belief.”

How many names do we have for the Holy—Spirit of Love, Mystery of Being, the Ineffable, God, Goddess, Spirit of Life? Certainty violates the expansiveness of our theology. That doesn’t mean we stand for nothing. Nor does it mean we stand for everything. We do not stand for fear or for the religious or social or political conditions that fuel fear.

Certainty gone awry breeds fear. Love dissolves fear.

Op-ed writer Julia Baird brings us deeper into the spiral:

“Certainty is so often overrated. This is especially the case when it comes to faith, or other imponderables...”

She continues:

“If we don’t accept both the commonality and importance of doubt, we don’t allow for the possibility of mistakes or misjudgments. While certainty frequently calcifies into rigidity, intolerance and self-righteousness, doubt can deepen, clarify and explain. This is, of course, a subject far broader than belief in God.”

It expands readily to science—Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, for example. Werner Heisenberg was a German physicist who in the early 20th century posited, “that we cannot measure the position (x) and the momentum (p) of a particle with absolute precision. The more accurately we know one of these values, the less accurately we know the other.” This is now a fundamental precept within quantum mechanics. In the words of science journalist, Alok Jha, “the uncertainty principle enshrines a level of fuzziness into quantum theory.”

How can I forget the import of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle when one of the questions included in what to prepare for in taking my doctoral comps in developmental psychology was to explain how Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle relates to doing research in the social sciences? It was uncertain whether this question would appear on those comprehensive exams, but indeed it did. After getting writer’s cramp from going on and on in my blue book (You can tell that I did this several years ago; no more blue books!) I decided to conclude my response with a bit of respite for my reader: “Only your hair dresser knows for sure!”

The illusion of certainty is ironically clarified through the chutzpah of humor, the evolving discoveries of science; the relentless presence of ambiguity; the expansiveness of imagination; the drive of curiosity; the grace of compassion; and love beyond belief.

So may it be, and Amen.

Sources:

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