



Message

We are a diverse people. We are people who have emerged from churches with more rigid theologies, who are still shedding the fear that doubting is a sign of spiritual weakness. We are people who have been Unitarian Universalist for years, who find in the act of doubt something as comfortable and familiar as a beloved old blanket. We are people who come from no church background. Coming here may be about releasing the doubt that there is anything of value to faith at all. It may also be about building a fragile trust in being part of a religious institution. And, we have those who grew up Unitarian Universalist, who, perhaps, watched their parents reject the faith they grew up in, and are now using the practice of doubt they learned here to question the kind of Unitarian Universalism that has been their inheritance. This means that when we talk about something as complex as doubt, every one of you is going to have a different experience of doubt, and a different spiritual growth edge in relation to doubt.

When Time Magazine's front cover announced that Mother Theresa had lived in a crisis of faith for most of her life, people's reactions showed a whole range of understandings about doubt. Some people were shocked and dismayed. To find that she had been riddled with doubt, depression, and darkness, that there was such a stark difference between her public persona and her personal spiritual life, for some, it placed a shadow over her work and her person, as if they had been somehow hollow or without substance, or even misleading.

I was one of those who reacted in a very different way. My respect for Mother Theresa grew. I had never been able to relate to her because she seemed too perfect, too strong, too confident. Suddenly she seemed much more human and real to me, someone I could actually connect with. To know that she had been in such a tormented place and had continued to engage her powerful ministry meant a lot to me, particularly as a spiritual leader and a woman. Doubt is a big part of my spiritual life. To see the example of a woman who experienced doubt, despair and disillusionment, and continued to persevere and be such an inspiring leader, moved me and gave me hope.

You know what saddened me most about Mother Theresa's story? She judged herself for her doubt and felt she had to hide that side of herself from her public ministry. Imagine how much hope she could have offered had she shown her struggle with her own faith. Imagine how much less lonely she might have been if she had not felt she had to present this strong fearless front. Her judgment of her doubt kept her from living authentically, and she paid a huge price for that.

She is not alone. So many people, deeply wanting to be faithful good people, see their doubt as a weakness and bury what is happening inside them. Like her, they wear this front that is not really who they are. How much energy does it take to keep up that front? How much spiritual and psychological damage is left in its wake?

I am reminded of the story of Thomas in the Gospel of John. When Mary, Peter and Simon Peter visit the tomb and see that Jesus has risen, they run back to the disciples and tell them what they have seen and heard. Thomas, alone of the disciples, doubts their story. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later, he has his chance. Jesus appears again and says to Thomas, "Put your fingers here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." When Thomas has been able to see and to touch him, he finally believes, and Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

How often is this story interpreted in a way that judged Thomas for his doubt? The good disciples are those who believe simply because they are told. They have faith. The bad disciple, Thomas, needs proof. His faith is thus weaker. The larger message, and one that many of us have internalized, is that those who believe are more faithful than those who doubt.

I look at the story of Thomas in a different way. If doubting is really so weak, why did Jesus humor Thomas? Why give in to his so-called weak need for proof? Why not just say, "Sorry Thomas. You just don't have enough faith. Too bad for you!" Instead, Jesus meets Thomas where he is at, right at the center of his doubt. It is much too simplistic to draw the conclusion that the story of Thomas sets up belief as superior to the act of doubting. Something more is going on here.

I see at least two truths emerging from this story. 1) Doubt is a normal part of human life. It makes us who we are and points us in directions we need to go. If Thomas had never expressed his doubt, he would never have come to a place of acceptance that the man he loved so much had come back. His doubt was a good thing because it took him to a new place. 2) Sometimes



doubt can hold us back as well. When we use doubt as a reason to distrust, as a reason to be rigid and unbending, we hold ourselves back from life itself. When Jesus said "Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe," he was showing Thomas another way. Yes, there is power in doubt if we engage it creatively. But it's not the only way. There is also power in trust and belief.

What we know without a doubt is that we all doubt. We have all been in the position of Mother Theresa, where things we counted on, things we needed to be true, things we desperately hoped to experience and find comfort in, did not come through for us. Each of us has experienced the doubt that arises in the face of despair.

We have also each been in a situation where we've been asked to believe something we couldn't believe in. Whether it is a political candidate making promises to get your vote or a church leader espousing a theology you cannot relate to, each of us has experienced the kind of doubt that gripped Thomas.

The issue is not, do you doubt? The question is, what do you do with your doubt? How do you engage doubt? When is it time to doubt? And when is it time to trust?

Many of you found Unitarian Universalism because you had a crisis of faith. You experienced doubt about any number of things – the messages coming from your faith tradition, the scriptures themselves, the ministers who interpreted them, the churches that proclaimed them. I have spoken to so many of you who felt imprisoned by those beliefs – imprisoned in your hearts, also in your bodies, and in your minds. You had all these doubts, and often felt alone in your doubts and unsafe in expressing them, wondering if anyone else around you felt as you did. Many of you have shared that you had doubts that there was any religion out there that could hold you as you experienced your doubt. And then you found Unitarian Universalism. In so many ways, our churches are communities of doubters, filled with people who have gone through what you went through – the sense of alienation, the frustration, the hunger to connect with others who felt as you did.

Our religion is part of a long tradition of doubt. Every significant religious and philosophical shift, from the Ancient Greeks to the Renaissance, from the Protestant Reformation to the Civil Rights Movement, has happened because people doubted the status quo. For us, doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt is part of the faith journey.

For many people who join Unitarian Universalism, this freedom to doubt is precious and becomes a cornerstone of their faith and the way they engage their deepest questions.

And yet, there is a shadow side to the way some Unitarian Universalists have done doubt. For some, the practice of doubt has become more about rejection than affirmation. Their Unitarian Universalism is more about who we are not, than who we are. This kind of doubt is most common among those Unitarian Universalists who are unwilling or unable to make peace with their past, who continue to identify Unitarian Universalism with a rejection of previous beliefs.

The practice of doubt as rejection has brought us to a place where we are often very hesitant to make choices about who we are as a religious people. We are so afraid of making anyone uncomfortable, of triggering anyone who has not made peace with their history, that we hesitate to claim any kind of truth, becoming instead a melting pot where we half approach truth and then run away as fast as we can just in case we might be caught needing a sense of definition or direction.

When you function from a place of rejection and woundedness, doubt mutates into distrust and fear. We see this on a personal level, we also see it on an institutional level. The insularity of many of our churches comes from this way of doing doubt. This not only promotes a certain kind of isolationism, but also diminishes our relationships with each other. Doubt has often become a way to hold ourselves at arms length from one another so we don't really have to engage.

Intellectual historian Jennifer Michael Hecht calls this kind of doubt "calcified doubt." Doubt is no longer the doorway into an active faith, but rather a wall that blocks any kind of movement at all.

What has become clear in the last 50 years, particularly since the merger of Unitarianism and Universalism, is that we have often fallen short of the proud tradition of doubt that has marked our churches since they first emerged. Both Unitarianism and Universalism emerged during times of doubt, when many were actively questioning traditional interpretations of Scripture. Unitarians questioned the literal truth of the Bible. Universalists questioned the doctrine of hell. Both engaged in a doubt that



involved a rejection of previous doctrine. But they didn't stay there. They moved forward, using their doubt to propel them into an active engagement with their faith. The goal was to become more faithful, not less, more connected to that moving of the spirit, not less. In each of the major transitions, whether it be the transcendentalist movement, the deist movement, or the humanist movement, the universalist or the ultra universalism debates, Christian universalism or multifaith universalism, doubt functioned as both rejection and affirmation. You took your doubt and moved forward through it. Somehow, our movement lost that forward momentum and focused primarily on rejection.

Nowhere is the criticism of these patterns of Unitarian Universalism more active than amongst our younger members. Many who grew up Unitarian Universalist have moved into adulthood with unmet spiritual needs that their religion gave them no language for. They didn't become Unitarian Universalists because they rejected something else. They're here because this is their religious home. These Unitarian Universalists are often hungry for spirituality, ritual and the overtly religious, and some will surprise themselves by a need to connect with a divine source that is beyond them, that they might even want to call God. Sometimes when they speak of these spiritual needs, they feel guilt, and perhaps also shame and self-judgment, because the need for ritual, spirituality and a higher power was often doubted to the point of dogma and creed by their elders. These Unitarian Universalists often struggle to find a place in their movement. There is so much focus on meeting the spiritual needs of those recovering from past religions, that their own needs are often sidelined. If they choose to stay, and most do not, they often try to bring a sense of spirituality back into their churches.

These patterns are also being challenged by Generation X and Generation Y Unitarian Universalists who are joining as adults. Many of these Unitarian Universalists, especially those coming from unchurched backgrounds, are not joining Unitarian Universalist churches having fled from other religions. They are coming for a sense of the divine and a hunger for service, for making a difference in the world. They have no problem with religious language and want something that is truly spiritual. Because they come from a world filled with doubt and uncertainty, they aren't necessarily looking for a church that can nurture their doubt. They're hungering for a level of certainty that leaves some Unitarian Universalists deeply uncomfortable. They are also, as young parents, more likely to be wondering why their children are being taught about religion, rather than how to be religious in their Sunday School classes. Unlike those raised Unitarian Universalist, there is no shame or guilt in proclaiming their need for ritual, spirituality, and explicit God talk. There is likely to be fear, for it does not take long to learn the unspoken rules about what can be said and what can't be said in our churches.

Clearly, there is some aspect of a generational rebellion happening here. Every generation must find a way to claim its place. But I would be remiss if I were to say that this momentum is coming only from our younger members. Some of our older members are feeling similar things. These sentiments have been growing in the last 15 years, but with the addition of Gen X and Gen Y, both raised UU's and adult joiners, their yearnings are gaining a critical mass.

These Unitarian Universalists are engaging our tradition of doubt to doubt Unitarian Universalism - their doubt that this religion can actually stand for something, their doubt that this religion could dare to approach a center, and truly engage them and their children on a deep spiritual level. In some way, their doubt is a mirror of what many of you have experienced with Christianity. My hope and my prayer is that our churches actually engage their doubt in a meaningful way, so that they don't feel the need to leave their churches the way many of you left yours.

The solution is not for the church to become what its dissenters wish it to be. Nor is it to stay where we are. I would encourage us to welcome this new generation of doubters as full participants into our liberal religious tradition, so that they may find their place and be active participants in the covenant of membership. I would encourage us to deeply trust one another and to hold the wellbeing of each other as closely as we would value our own. That doesn't mean protecting each other from our demons. It does mean speaking the truth in love.

I would encourage the new generation not to be shy about claiming their place in this religious movement and not to silence their doubts. Become active in your churches because they belong to you as much as they belong to other members. Express your doubts until you have been heard. If there is no place to do that, make a place to do that. And when you do express yourself, do it from a place of love. And finally, do not confuse being heard with getting exactly what you want. Our churches are not about its lay leaders or ministers giving the people what they ask for. Our churches are about empowering each of us to make of our faith practice a genuine way of living, to create in our lives and our religious communities the means to move beyond our individual wants and needs and into the larger hurts and hungers of the world. Our churches are about



"Doubt for the 21st Century"

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strengthening us for the journey so that we may bring our whole selves into alignment with the greatest power there is – unconditional love, that power that some will call God.

I close with the words of Mother Theresa - missionary, visionary, and doubter: "I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish that He didn't trust me so much."

Amen.