

The Question Box 2017

Unitarian Universalists take pride in being a questioning faith. Free inquiry is a touchstone of our religion. No authority, no doctrine, no custom nor social convention is above scrutiny. Curiosity for us is a cardinal virtue. The sense of wonder and, behind that, the wondering of why things are the way they are and how the heavens came to be and whether the parochial political arrangements here on earth were really written in the stars are all marks of an awakened mind, not a passive soul but one spiritually engaged and active.

So thank you all who submitted questions for this morning's sermon. You asked

- What can you say about fate, predestination, and free will? If we exercise our free will, does it necessarily impinge on another's fate? Or are our choices part of their fate and their choices part of ours?
- Tell me more about Michael Servetus.
- How do we cope with human beings behaving so illogically?
- Discuss dystopia. Is it science fiction, or have we already taken the first steps to make dystopia a reality?
- Finally, is surrender, in the Taoist sense, the same as passive resistance or is it just passivity?

I'm going to give you the answers now, but there will be a quiz afterward, so please listen carefully.

Maybe you saw an article last week that physicists discovered a new particle in the sub-atomic menagerie. It was in the proton family, but almost four times heavier, consisting of two charmed quarks and one up quark. It's existence and mass had been predicted by the standard model, which made scientists happy and unhappy at the same time. Happy that their theories had been confirmed, but disappointed because the standard model is messy, a veritable can of worms.. It's incompatible with relativity. It doesn't lead to supersymmetry or any grand unified vision of what makes the world tick. So the discovery of the new Xi particle provided further confirmation that the cosmos is profoundly complicated, cluttered, resistant to one-size-fits-all solutions, and that the deeper down we go, the more elusive any final answer appears to be, the more puzzles proliferate.

Physicist Stephen Weinberg put it rather strongly, asserting that "the more we learn about our universe, the more it all seems pointless." And yet not all

scientists share that assessment. There were simply too many fortunate coincidences in the construction of the cosmos to chalk it up to chance. Tweak any of the fundamental constants of nature--pure numbers that were present at the creation 13 ½ billion years ago, like the speed of light--and the results are catastrophic. As Stephen Hawking notes, “the odds against a universe like ours emerging out of something like the Big Bang are enormous. If the rate of expansion one second after the [initial singularity] had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand million,” creation would have been kaput. “I think,,” he says, “there are clearly religious implications.”

There is widely known quote attributed to Albert Einstein that the most important question we can ask is whether the universe is a friendly place, a thought worth considering even if he never said those exact words. Because our response to that question will determine partly how we live and relate to the wider world: with trust, confidence, serenity and acceptance or with fear, anger or despair. Is the universe malevolent? Is it indifferent? Is it a madhouse or chamber of horrors? Or is it somehow worthy of our appreciation, reverence and gratitude? Faith suggests the latter, that despite the obvious bits of chaos and randomness, the cosmos is actually more unified and coherent than it seems. And not only that, the world is also better than it seems, more gracious and hospitable and abundant. And there's plenty of evidence to back that up, not just in the beauty of the equations but in the beauty of a coral reef or a kind heart. And yet faith is not ultimately based on evidence. It rests on a hunch or intuition which is the mirror-image of paranoia. For while the paranoid suffers from the delusion that the world is out to get him, the believer has a sneaking suspicion that behind-the-scenes a vast conspiracy is working on his or her behalf.

Einstein was no believer, not in any conventional sense. But he did confess that “behind all the discernible laws and connections, there remains something subtle, intangible, and inexplicable.” Mysterious, he also called it. That kind of mysticism sounds almost like the Chinese sage Lao-Tze.

There was something formless and perfect
before the universe was born.
It is serene. Empty.
Solitary. Unchanging.
Infinite. Eternally present.
It is the mother of the universe.
For lack of a better name,

I call it the Tao.

That's the kind of deity that appeals to me. The Tao means simply the Way or the Path, not a god or goddess or celestial autocrat so much as a movement or dance or rhythm that animates and enlivens every particle of space and time, for as we are learning now even particles like the newly discovered Xi are not static objects--not hard, massy substantial entities like billiard balls in miniature--rather they are events, short-lived episodes in a continuous pageant of creativity and destruction. The Xi, for example, endures for about one ten billioneth of a second before it decays into lighter particles that in turn give rise to other ghostly apparitions defined by their charm, strangeness, flavor and spin, all these sub-atomic poltergeists together giving rise to the illusion we call real life.

Yet beneath and behind this everyday Reality which appears so solid, there is another level, where other rules apply. Uncertainty and spontaneity are the hallmarks of this tiny world. Determinism is out. Fate doesn't operate here. For in this realm everything is cascading and tumbling into new combinations that can't strictly be predicted from past behavior. Shoot a laser pointer at a blank screen, for example, and the beam behaves as though the photons that compose it were little packets or bundles of light. Put two narrow slits in front of the same screen, however, and the light passing through creates an interference pattern as though it were made of waves, overlapping and cancelling one another. So is light a particle or a wave? It all depends on the kind of experimental questions that you ask.

The questions we ask here in this middle sphere also have consequences. That was the case, for instance, with Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician of the sixteenth century whose reading of the Bible caused him to challenge the reigning theology of his time. Servetus questioned the doctrine of the Trinity, which set him apart from both Catholics and Reformers, but his greatest clash was with the Protestant divine John Calvin of Geneva, whose teachings of predestination affirmed that human beings are utterly powerless to work one good deed worthy of the grandeur of God, whose sense of God's overwhelming majesty and omnipotence reduced the human intellect and human strivings all to naught. These teachings offended Servetus, who believed that people are free and have a capacity for virtue even if they more often prefer sloth, gluttony, wrath, envy, Bud Light, Fox News and the other seven sins. The books Servetus wrote enunciating these ideas were eventually burnt, along with their author, over a fire built of green wood to prolong the agony, an act of cruelty so shocking that

the conscience of Europe was aroused, and voices began to be raised in defense of religious toleration as a more enlightened and Christian policy than the bloody persecutions and religious wars which were common in those days.

Servetus was right. Each one of us is a center of choice and agency. Every moment presents decisions over how to react to our circumstances and surroundings. People are free, but also lazy, sometimes scared or insecure, often selfish, not always logical. So how do we respond? Often my first instinct is to lash out and attack, to judge others, to condemn, maybe even to exult in my own mental and moral superiority.. But the Aikido or Tai-Chi master, versed in the ways of the Tao, would emphasize maintaining my own inner balance, staying poised, deflecting or disarming the adversary, allowing the negative energy of the aggressor to defeat itself. Gail Stern, who teaches women's self-defense, illustrates one possible parry to a bully bragging about grabbing women's private parts, for example. Counter with a comment like "I love satire. It's so weird that people believe that for real and it's so cool you called that out." That's verbal jiu jitsu. Not an easy maneuver. Not when so many stupid, counter-factual, misleading and uninformed tweets can make it seem as though, not only are we living in an asylum, but that the inmates are in charge. But this is the moment I need to take a deep breath and let it go. To think about the big picture, the Xi particles and the Big Bang and the incredible scale and intricacy and improbability of it all. To remember who I am, a microcosm, a fleeting expression of this astonishing creation. To believe again that life is not just worth living, but worth protecting and promoting and celebrating. To remember that this world, despite its cruelty, is no dystopia, and not a ship of fools.

Plato uses that image to describe a ship filled by mutineers. In the allegory, none of the upstarts knows how to sail or navigate. All are utterly ignorant of any seafaring skills. But having seized control of the vessel, each demands the helm and wants to assume command. They give themselves inflated titles like commodore and captain, without having earned those accolades in the least. They spend their time quarreling, calling each other names, even throwing one another overboard. Without realizing it, they are lost at sea. Meanwhile the true pilot, Plato says, will watch the winds and seasons, observe the skies and stars and tides and currents, while the fools will call the able seaman a stargazer and good-for nothing.

Let us be the stargazers on this voyage.

