**The Questions … submitted by members of the congregation.**

**1. One of the cornerstones of our nation is the concept of religious freedom and tolerance. However, I perceive that the Founding Fathers and Mothers were referring to tolerance between Christian sects. Whether trinitarians or unitarians, almost all of them believed in the nonsense of original sin and the requisite intercession by Jesus Christ.**

**I'll take this one step further. I'm disgusted by the institutionalized murder and mayhem promulgated by all of the Abrahamic religions. I don't like the ignorant, mysogynistic, Bronze Age-based mythologies of any of these groups.**

**I'd like to hear an entire homily about the hypocrisy of suppressing and murdering people in the name of "God". I appreciate the efforts of countless people to show how the monotheisms overlap in their concepts of brotherly love and hospitality to the stranger. Great ideas. However, such feel-good sentiments have almost always been overshadowed by the worldly-based power grabbers of the institutionalized religions, and their close affiliations with the current military-industrial complexes.**

**I'd also like to hear a homily on the Abrahamic misogynistic suppression of half the human population based solely on gender. And, as much as the dominant dogmas want me to appreciate them and defer to their sensitive natures, none of them would want to give me a few seconds of air time to tell my Truth to power. Their millennia-old systems are built on the perception that the sun revolves around the earth.**

**I am greatly perplexed by how our species can evolve when we stupidly continue to follow such mind sets as these, and base our moral concepts on them. Any suggestions?**

**2. If we like to consider ourselves inclusive, how can we expand our circle to include those with whom we vehemently disagree?**

**3. My question goes something like this: How can I tame my fear of what the world after I die will be like for my children? At Antioch Grad School, I heard Arne Naess the Norwegian deep ecologist say he was hopeful for the 22nd century and that the 21st would be dire.**

**4. How do recent scientific discoveries such as the Higgs Boson at the particle level or dark matter at the cosmological level impact our ability to reconcile science with our Unitarian Universalist principles?**

**5. James Hillman said, "Outrage is a sure sign of a soul awake". What do you**

**think?**

**6. I am troubled by the rift in our family. Our sister is a lifelong exuberant charming seductive character--and my other siblings and I have benefited from her charm. However, she has also been manipulative, a heavy drinker and a drug user (ex-husband was a dealer). She has told intimate details of our lives to others who should not know, gossiped about any family member not present and been very critical of each of us when she had an audience. She ruined several family gatherings with her behavior and finally the rest of us consulted a national addiction therapist and discussed what we could do. While she gave little optimism for change--she encouraged us to look at treatment options and offer to help her obtain help---and we did investigate what her insurance would cover and where treatment could be found. We wrote a letter with our offer of support and otherwise we would not interact with her any more. The letter was loving--but very clear. She has not contacted any of us since then--about 5 years.**

**My family has no experience with the kind of behavior she presented and I think we did not deal with it well. What should we have done differently?**

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**My Answers ...**

**Question with boldness, Thomas Jefferson proclaimed. Question with boldness even the existence of God, because if there is one, such a Being must more approve the homage of reason than of blind-folded fear!**

**Jefferson was not alone in challenging the pieties of his time. America’s founders and framers were unconventional thinkers who prized free inquiry, scientific method, and looked more to the book of nature than to scripture in their quest for truth.**

**George Washington never took communion, for example, probably because the sacrament held little meaning for him. Benjamin Franklin expressed frank doubts about the divinity of Jesus, remarking in his humorous way that it was a topic he had never studied, anticipating at his age to learn the answer soon with less trouble. John Adams refused to believe that the Creator of endless galaxies could have taken the form of a Galilean peasant or that a deity of cosmic proportions would consign any of his children to an eternal hell. And James Madison pointedly omitted any mention of religion from the Constitution he helped to conceive.**

**These men were not Christians in any orthodox sense, and their vision for America was not restricted to tolerance for other Christians. As President, Washington famously assured the Jewish synagogue of Newport that his government would give “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance” requiring only that individuals of whatever faith comport themselves as good citizens. At Mount Vernon, he promised to hire Muslims, Jews, Christians, or Atheists, so long as they were able workers. And in the Treaty of Tripoli negotiated under his administration, signed into law by John Adams, Congress ratified the sentiment that “the government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.”**

**Our founders were careful to separate church and state, to protect and preserve religious freedom in the First Amendment while also guaranteeing there would be no established church in the newborn nation. They did so because they understood how often institutionalized religion has been used to sanction bloodshed, wage war and prop up imperialism. In the West, this history goes back to the Bible itself.**

**The Good Book is a sprawling hodgepodge of poetry, myth, history and moral reflection, but at its center there is a story of liberation: the exodus from Egypt, the struggle to throw off oppression, the journey from slavery to autonomy. This is Judaism’s core narrative of redemption. But within that drama is a subplot. For as soon as Israel gained the promised land and achieved its freedom, it established new kings and strongmen whose rule was nearly as rapacious as the Pharoahs of Egypt. The Israelite kings hoarded wealth to build a magnificent temple in Jerusalem with a priesthood to sing their praise as they taxed the people without mercy to pay for their armies and foreign wars. And to counter the power of the kings and the priestly class, a band of dissidents and spiritual reformers rose up to speak for the poor and downtrodden. The prophets--Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, Micah---denounced the empty rituals and ceremonialism of the religious elite and condemned the few who prospered while the many went barefoot and hungry. And Jesus was also very much in this Jewish prophetic tradition of speaking truth to Caesar.**

**So religion throughout the history of civilization has had a dual identity. It served as the tool of tyrants, to bless and anoint their dreams of empire. And, on the other hand, it became the voice of the voiceless, championing a more just and equitable society for all.**

**America’s founders saw this dichotomy. They had lived through religious wars and persecutions and dealt with kings who claimed to rule by divine right. And they believed that by separating church and state, they could reign in the unholy alliance between throne and temple that had caused so much mischief over the centuries. Government could no longer claim any supernatural backing, and by the same token, the church could no longer enforce its teachings by the sword. Law and public policy gained their legitimacy not by holy decree but from the consent of the governed. And by separating church and state, our framers believed, the happiest of outcomes might result. Shorn of its appetite for worldly conquest and dominion, religion could fulfill its prophetic role of tweaking the conscience. A multitude of sects rather than a single official church meant competing preachers would hold each other in check, while also countering the overreach of secular authority. Meanwhile, political power would begin to flow in ways that benefit the majority and not just the men at the top.**

**This formula has worked remarkably well for 240 years, so that America is today the most religiously diverse nation on earth, and while hate crimes and religiously-inspired terrorism do occur, they remain the exception rather than the norm. Episcopalians, Mormons, Muslims and Buddhists for the most part attend the same schools, live in the same neighborhoods, vote in the same precincts and salute the same flag, though they worship in differing ways and places. They have the same stake in a water supply with no lead in the pipes. They all want safe schools for their kids, honest cops and a fair judiciary. There is so much we have in common compared to what divides us. And in answer to the question, how do we make room for people with whom we vehemently disagree, I would say that we do it as we have always done it, non-violently. Our ideas and opinions may clash. But neither in this country, nor in our congregations which aspire to be laboratories for democracy, do we threaten you with expulsion, deportation or ex-communication because of what you think or how you dress or to whom you pray.**

**When you think how hard it is to maintain goodwill and civility even within a family, it’s no wonder we as a people often fall short of these lofty ideals. When brothers and sisters quarrel, stop talking, harbor grudges and resentments, behave badly, it is always painful. And it happens all too often. It reminds me of the extraordinary accomplishment involved when we achieve any degree of harmony or health in our congregations, or workplaces, or in larger, less closely knit communities. If I were confronting someone in my own church or more immediate family who was acting out, I would try to do so in person, rather than in writing. I would frame my concerns in terms of “I statements” and avoid ultimatums or non-negotiable demands. I would remember that all parties in a conflict need to save face and be able to walk away from the table with their dignity intact. And I would try to preserve room for dialogue, unless I wanted to decisively end the relationship which sometimes must be done.**

**I think it is one of the virtues of families that we don’t get to choose our parents, or our siblings or aunts or cousins, and yet we have to spend Thanksgiving with them anyway. My own family includes Trump Republicans and Bernie bros, Seventh Day Adventists and hardcore skeptics, and probably your relatives are just as annoying as mine. These irritations are only magnified in our larger, human family, where we all have to live with each other regardless. So I believe listening, curiosity, compassion and a willingness to cross the battle lines to meet with our adversaries in the interests of peace and reconciliation are all signs of an awakened soul. Outrage not so much. I see plenty of outrage in our campaign advertising, in the comments sections of our newspapers, in our blaming and scapegoating of immigrants and foreigners and minorities rather than acknowledging our own responsibility for our problems and our own need to change.**

**Still, I remain optimistic about our country and its future. Those who want to make America great again need to remember where we were one hundred years ago. On this day, May 15 in 1916, Jesse Washington, a black teenage farmhand living in Waco, Texas, was dragged from the courthouse after being convicted of raping a white woman, then lynched and burned in the local square as police, town officers and a crowd of 10,000 onlookers cheered the spectacle. One hundred years ago, women couldn’t vote. Children labored twelve hour days in mines and factories and sweatshops. Jim Crow was the law of the land. Congress was about to pass the Immigration Act barring homosexuals, idiots and Asians from entering our borders. The US was in the middle of a polio epidemic. Meanwhile in the spring of 1916, the armies of Europe were enmeshed in trench warfare near a small town called Verdun, a battle that would claim the lives of over a quarter million young soldiers.**

**Today, a century later, we still have tremendous problems. But our crime rate has seldom been lower. Solar last year accounted for 40% of all new generating capacity in our country. Off Cape Cod, Humpback whales are making a comeback. And in this century, the United States elected its first African American president and appears on track to put its first woman to the White House. Goodbye Andrew Jackson, hello Harriet Tubman. Climate change and nuclear proliferation demand the world’s full attention. So yes, I worry for my children. All parents do. But it is precisely when I ponder a child, so inquisitive, so lacking in prejudice, so eager for affection, so free of ancient hatreds, so wired for wonder and willing to experiment that I take heart.**

**The younger generation, always questioning, is why I remain optimistic for the 22nd century and even more for the 23rd, when science will have undoubtedly unraveled the riddles of dark matter and dark energy, the mysterious stuff they tell us composes 95% of the universe we inhabit, which we have only only begun to understand. In a hundred years or a thousand, we will never run out of puzzles. The unknown and unknowable will always exceed all we comprehend. We will never not need humility. We will undoubtedly look back nostalgically on this tumultuous 21st century as “the good old days.” We will remain effervescent and infinitesimal particles in a creation that commands our awe, stirs our gratitude, mocks our puny chauvinisms, chastens our sense of self-importance and invites our trust.**

**Meditation**

**The rose never asks what happens when it fades**

**Or other foolish questions.**

**Which of us by worrying can add an hour to our lifespan?**

**Life is made moments; endure some, savor those you can.**

**Find the center of the wheel that remains still while the whole world spins.**

**What rises up in silence when words fall away?**

**Who remains present when you forget yourself, becoming lost in thought or music or in a good book?**

**Try not to overanalyze it.**

**Maybe God is not a noun or a verb but an adjective**

**Like “mysterious” or “amazing”**

**The kind of description that begins to attach to anyone and everything**

**You can see, touch, hear, taste, smell or love**

**If the conditions are right on a beautiful morning in the middle of May**

**Like this one.**