

The Question Box

- Are the mind and the brain the same thing?
- "Experts" tell us the brain sorts things out when we sleep, consolidates new learning and is busy with many other activities; so what do dreams do? Should we trust dreams to guide us when we are awake?
- Why do people have recurring dreams?
- Do you believe in auras? Can't they give us clues as to what a person is like? If it isn't auras, what is it?
- Martin Luther King Jr. said the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice. Do you believe that?
- Do you think that, since the world (taken as a whole) tends toward equilibrium, the current political situation will go to the other extreme as it tries to balance itself?
- When Trump is gone from the scene, will the US be able to right itself (I'd say left itself, but there is no such word)?
- Who would be the best candidate to win the next election politically speaking? (That's an easy one to answer right now. The best candidate would be FDR!)
- What is the most important activity people of good will can do at this time?
- What theological implications follow from quantum physics?
- What is truth? Do we all have our own version of truth? Is there such a thing as one truth, from a UU point of view?
- Can we know certain truths without any evidence?
- If a man robs a bank but gives all the money to a charity which is then enabled to feed more hungry children and save more lives, did he do anything wrong?
- My question is how to maintain hope and not descend into despair these days.

Several years ago I got an invitation to speak to the Association for Research and Enlightenment in Norfolk, Virginia. That is the organization founded by the celebrity psychic and medium Edgar Cayce, born in 1877 in Beverly, Kentucky, and known as the "sleeping prophet." I didn't know much about Mister Cayce, except that he saw auras, talked to angels, believed in reincarnation and claimed to have revelations in a sleeping or trance state that enabled him to diagnose and cure various diseases. Frankly, I was surprised to get the call and told the conference organizers as graciously as possible that I wasn't a close follower of Edgar Cayce and didn't necessarily share all his beliefs. "That's okay," they

assured me, “we just want to hear about what *you* believe.” Wow. As an author, and as a Unitarian, that won me over immediately. And I was invited back recently to give another lecture titled “Always in the Heart: What Animals Have Taught Me About Love and Death.”

I definitely do believe in faith healing. I have no doubt, for example, that some of those crutches hanging on the wall at the sanctuary in Chimayo represent genuine miracles, or at least inexplicable recoveries, where the power of the mind or unconscious or some form of super-consciousness proved stronger than a debilitating physical illness. And I have no doubt that Edgar Cayce was able to cure some people through visions received while fast asleep. After all, he had clients and supporters as prominent as Thomas Edison, George Gershwin and Woodrow Wilson, who were certainly no dummies. Human beings are psychosomatic creatures, and it is not always clear just where *psyche* ends and *soma* begins, just as the boundaries between fact and fiction often are blurred or inexact. Intuition sometimes leads us astray. Judging people’s characters based on their auras or vibes or the non-verbal cues they emit may put us either on or off the mark. Dreams are often full of nonsense, leading seers like Cayce to the conviction that the white, brown, black, yellow and red races all had separate earthly origins, the red man being born on the island continent of Atlantis, and to his predictions that the American cities of New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco would all be destroyed before the end of the twentieth century. And yet dreams do occasionally yield information not available to the waking mind, not accessible in any other way. That was the case, for example, with the German chemist Friedrich Kekule, who at about the same time that Edgar Cayce was establishing an extraordinary reputation among his Kentucky neighbors by riding a mule that no one else could ride, had a singular dream about a snake eating its own tail. In the morning, Kekule realized that he had solved the problem that he and other scientists had been working on for years, the atomic structure of benzene. It was a ring of hydrocarbons, joined head to tail. A good night’s sleep and *voila*, problem solved.

I’ve never had a dream like that. But I do have a recurring dream that I’m in a house that seems familiar, though it’s not a place I’ve ever actually lived. Somewhere in the back of the home there’s a small suite of rooms that are if not exactly creepy a little vacant and unvisited or off limits. Of course I interpret this to mean that there are dimensions to my personality that I will probably never know and maybe don’t even want to get acquainted with. The *persona* is a many-chambered thing, not all of it splendid. And many religious traditions, Hinduism, for example, and perhaps the gnostic and Kabbalistic strains of Christianity and

Judaism, suggest that the conscious mind or ego is just a fragmentary expression of a much larger Godhead or eternal stream of thought or in more concrete imagery, that this sensory world is only Vishnu's dream, a passing fancy in the brain of the Creator.

A physicist in one of my former congregations described the universe in very much those same terms, as "crystalized consciousness." And that was also the drift of the famous British astronomer and particle physicist James Jeans who in his book *The Mysterious Universe* observed that:

Fifty years ago, the universe was generally looked on as a machine; it was said that the final aim of science was to explain all the objects in the world, including living bodies, as machines, as mere jumbles of atoms which would perform mechanical dances for a time under the action of blind, purposeless forces and then fall back to form a dead world. Modern science gives but little support to such materialistic views. When we pass to extremes of size in either direction--whether to the cosmos as a whole, or to the inner recesses of the atom--the mechanical interpretation of Nature fails. We come to entities and phenomena which are in no sense mechanical. To me they seem less suggestive of mechanical than of mental processes; the universe seems to be nearer to a great thought than to a great machine.

That's a big dream, a mighty thought, a powerful conception. I venture to say that many of the theoreticians working on the frontiers of physics would agree that mind, or subjectivity, or some type of intention or intelligence is woven into the universe at the most fundamental levels. Of course, it is another giant jump from there to suggest that the universe also has a moral foundation, a move I embrace but which is more a leap of faith than a step of science.

I am in good company, however, for our Transcendentalist forebears were certainly of that view. In fact, thinkers like Emerson and Thoreau and Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Peabody took the name transcendentalism from the work of the brilliant German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Being a "philosopher" in the eighteenth century meant an interest in natural philosophy or science as well as in metaphysics or abstract logic. And Kant had been the first to suggest that the tiny, smeared out smudges of light that astronomers were beginning to glimpse through their telescopes and that could not be resolved into clear focus might be so blurry because they were so far away, not stars at all, but what he called "island universes," or what we now call galaxies. But science in his era had

begun to have a corrosive effect on society because so many were insisting that the only truths we could know had to be based on sense evidence. Empiricists they were called. If something couldn't be seen through a telescope, or weighed, or measured, or quantified, it simply didn't exist. But what then happened to moral laws, right and wrong, justice and its opposite, which no laboratory could count, which no experiment could verify? It was a quandary. Kant thought he solved the problem by proclaiming that moral laws were like time and space. Nobody could weigh time. No one could see space, although they could see objects existing in space. Nobody could prove that murder or theft were wrong. But Kant said we knew that time and space were real and that murder was wrong *a priori*, even though these truths *transcended* sense perception. They were mental categories, ways of knowing that were innate, without which nothing else made sense, like the laws of geometry or $2+2=4$. The Unitarian minister Theodore Parker was another student of Kant and a follower of the Transcendentalist school. And it was Parker, before Doctor King, who first proclaimed that the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

I like the emphasis on long. Misdeeds like robbing a bank are fairly easy to dismiss, wrong even in the short run. What if everybody robbed banks and distributed the proceeds to charity? Pretty soon, nobody would feel safe putting their money in a bank and there wouldn't be any more banks to rob. That's what Kant called the categorical imperative. Could you make theft or murder or adultery or deceit the general rule for human behavior and expect society to function or survive? We seem to be testing that question at the moment, particularly in regards to lying and deceit. And I think it is well to remember that liars almost always become so entangled in their own webs of treachery that they bring about their own downfall. I think it is well to remember that cheaters may prosper temporarily, but that the conspiracies of vicious, small-minded men almost always fail, because men who are without any moral compass and in the game only for themselves will eventually turn on one another. Some moral laws really do seem self-enforcing, almost like gravity. But the rule that evil defeats itself doesn't necessarily mean that good triumphs quickly or easily. Because I am not sure that nations or cultures do tend toward equilibrium or homeostasis, or that a politics of divisiveness and bombast will naturally oscillate back toward one of civility and common sense. When Dr. King organized the bus boycott in Selma, when he marched across the Edmund Petus Bridge in Selma, when he said "I Have A Dream" at the Washington Monument, it was not because he believed that after three hundred years of slavery and a century of Jim Crow, America was going to swing automatically like a pendulum toward the side of racial equality and human dignity. It was because he believed that marching, step

by step, was the only thing that made ethical and moral sense in the context of that moment, even if it was a journey that led to the cross. Because he knew it was not going to be a short stroll but a long walk to freedom. It was because the question for him was not, when will I arrive or will we ever get to the Promised Land, but am I using the power I have now to change the things I can? It was a pilgrimage of faith, the kind of stubbornness or courage that keeps plodding forward through fire hoses and speaking out from behind prison bars, believing that it will not be long because no lie can last forever, because you still reap what you sow, because truth pressed to the ground will rise again.

That's what he believed. The question for all of us is, what do we believe? And what are we willing to risk to make our beliefs a reality?