

The Question Box
Rev. Gary Kowalski
UCOT 10/4/20

- **What if there is no God and no Heaven? What difference does it make for how we live our lives?**
- **Do you sometimes wish there were a Hell for those we disapprove of?**
- **Are Christians somehow “better” than Buddhists or Jews or Muslims?**
- **Are Unitarians more saintly because we “allow” others to have their own beliefs?**
- **In the age of Trump what is our duty to our fellow Americans and the world?**
- **Do we have a duty to others?**
- **Is science helping us be better people? How?**
- **How can we love our fellow man if they are Trumpians?**
- **How can I decide on emotions/thoughts that are positive toward those who are encouraging violence in our election?**
- **“We badly need new transformative stories to help us enter a great period of uncertainty, narratives that would tell of a generation’s success in liberating itself from fossil fuels, thanks, for example, to mutual aid and cooperation.” Can you speak to our planetary crisis and dark ecology?**
- **How should we be? If I remember correctly, this is a quote from Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*. I’ve always taken it to mean, how do we manifest our true nature?**
- **Do you think that love is more than a feeling? At the very least, is it written into our DNA? And at the outermost, outside, could it be a constituent part in the makeup of the universe?**

- How and why do clams migrate?

Thank you for your questions.

Years ago, I was very briefly on stage in a touring Broadway production of *The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was a sold out house. The avant garde African American choreographer Bill T. Jones brought his show to the Flynn Theater in Burlington, Vermont for a one night performance. And as the title suggests, the musical was about slavery and the legacy of racism, expressed through dance and dialogue and drama. Everywhere that Mr. Jones took his show, in every town, he invited a member of the local clergy to join him under the spotlights for an impromptu, unscripted conversation about the roots of evil and the Biblical Book of Job. And almost everywhere, Jones was joined by a black pastor for this discussion. But in northern New England, black pastors were scarce, so the local Unitarian minister was the next best thing. And I was invited up for my fifteen seconds of fame.

On cue, I walked onto the stage. There were three thousand people in the audience. Bill T. Jones graciously welcomed me. I had no inkling of what was about to happen. And then he asked me, "Reverend Kowalski, are you a person of faith?" For a moment, I was at a complete loss for words, dumbstruck.

Then I said that everyone is a person of faith. Everyone has some instincts about who or what to trust, some rules for living they think are dependable, somewhere they place their confidence, their loyalty, their allegiance when the chips are down. The question is not whether you're a person of faith,

but where you put your faith and what kinds of causes and ideals you commit to.

I'd never been so relieved to hear words come out of my mouth.

It was mid-January, that night. It happened to be Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday and it was also the night that the United States began the first Gulf War, bombing the city of Baghdad in Operation Desert Storm. Maybe you remember or watched it exploding on CNN like some surreal video game. That was one of our wars, but it's hard keeping track. Since then, we've had Somalia and Bosnia and Kosovo and Afghanistan and Iraq again and the war on Isis in Syria and the proxy war in Yemen, and probably others we don't even know about. So where do you put your faith? I said to Bill T. Jones that some people like Dr. King put their faith in the power of non-violence and the moral force of love to change the world for the better. While others put their faith in cruise missiles and military hardware to keep oil flowing from the Persian Gulf.

So that was my answer then and that's my answer to the first question this morning. "Does it make any difference if there is no God and no Heaven? What does it matter in how we live our lives?" Because the question for theology has never been is there a God, but what god do you serve? Everyone places their bets. Everyone wagers. Is the game all about money? Or fame? Or power? Or just a struggle for survival? Here's another way to think about it. Imagine your soul or psyche as a constellation of flickering likes and dislikes, passions and prejudices; then ask, what's the center of gravity that's holding that constellation together? What larger pattern is it tracing out across the arc of time and space? And is it a bright star or a dark hole pulling at your center?

Ask yourself, what is it you most cherish and treasure and would defend against all comers? That's your god, what you worship.

And what about heaven? Do you want your pie in the sky, as in the old union song? Or is your idea of heaven more like the Kingdom God where the hungry are fed, where the first shall be last, where the prisoners and the captives go free? Or maybe you've heard from reliable sources that the Kingdom of Heaven is within you, that there's a stillpoint of calm and contentment and clarity that comes when you simplify your wants and let go of judgment and return to right relations with your fellow earthlings. Seek and ye shall find: so be careful what you're searching for! Consider this: If your entire life were like the motion of a wave on the ocean, where's all that energy tending, what's the far shore?

Here's another analogy. One of my correspondents tells me she was on the golf course recently. It had been decades since she'd hit a ball. But there on the driving range she had a visit from her Dad, who's been dead for twenty-five years. He was with her that day, however, instructing her in how to stand, how to focus, how to address the ball. And as she put the face of the club just at the point of contact, she would think: "If I can hit this with the kind of attention he taught me, it will explode the ball from the impact of love." And she started hitting balls farther and straight than she could ever remember.

So what kind of intention are you bringing to your swing? What's driving you? What are you praying for--not with your lips (because I doubt if many of us pray like that)--but with the whole fiber of our being?

How should we be? What kind of person are we intended to be? Who does God want us to be? More questions. Leaving aside the theistic language and taking a more Buddhist perspective for a moment, all being is inter-being. That's the term coined by the Zen monk Tich Nhat Hanh who invites as we contemplate a sheet of paper to also glimpse a cloud, because without the cloud there would be no rain and no trees would grow. Who invites us also to see the sunshine, and the logger who milled the tree, and the logger's mother and the grain that fed her. Nothing exists in isolation. It's a much older Buddhist teaching called "dependent origination." All arising is co-arising. Or to put it more simply, we're all in this together. We're in the same boat. Other religions say it too. We're all members of one body. And science confirms. We share ninety-nine percent of our DNA with gorillas and orangutans. There is no biological reality that corresponds to race or caste or creed, and there's certainly nothing that elevates the human species over all the rest. Even clams can run away from danger and want to live like we do! There is no "nature" out there separate from ourselves that we can plunder or pollute without pillaging our own home and garden. Call this is dark ecology or common sense. But the concepts of "I, me, mine," like national boundaries and hyperpatriotism--these are inventions--tribal gods of our own making--that seem real but whose only power is to divide.

So it's co-existence or no existence. That's a simple fact. We're not better or more virtuous because we tolerate other faiths. There are about 10,000 Christians in the world for every Unitarian, and 8,000 Muslims. Should we "allow" them to have their own beliefs? That's making a virtue of necessity. Making a virtue of necessity is why Elon Musk says he started Tesla and Solar City, not primarily out of concern for climate change but because petroleum is finite. Even now gas would cost about \$15 at the

pump if oil companies weren't allowed to externalize all their costs. Knowing the true price of things is important and a great motivator. It's hard to invent sacred stories and new myths, but relatively easy to read a balance sheet. And the truth is that the earth doesn't belong to us, we belong to the earth, and you can't just liquidate the planet and re-capitalize it.

There's not much we can truly own, but much that can own and lay claim on us. In the *Heart of Darkness*, there comes a scene in the middle of the novel where after weeks of navigating hazards on the Congo River, the narrator finally reaches the farthest Western outpost in the depth of the jungle where he expects to find enlightenment and progress and civilization. Instead he finds that the company man who runs the station has gone mad, turned himself into a local deity ruling with terrible cruelty over his subjects, exulting in the extent of his domain. "The river, the forest, the ivory, all mine!" he cries. Everything belonged to him. "It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places," remarks the storyteller. "Everything belonged to him--but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to ..." What he belonged to And that is the question. How wide is the circle of our belonging? To whom am I responsible or accountable? What are the boundaries of my moral community? Who is my neighbor?

I seem to remember a story about a Samaritan along those lines. Last month, Dori and I were coming home from a hike when we saw an older man (actually about our age) pushing his bicycle by the side of the highway. The bike was loaded down with panniers and heavy gear so we turned the car around to see if the cyclist was okay. He had a slight build.

He was flushed. He said he was feeling dizzy and light headed and that his vision was beginning to blur. He lived on the road, on his bike, with just a small dog for a companion, hiding out in the woods at night to sleep. He'd had nothing to eat but a tin of chicken and a pack of ramen in the last day. He wasn't dehydrated but had probably burned through most of his fat and was starting to metabolize muscle. Happy to have a chance to use my little medical gear, I took his vitals which seemed okay before Dori and I left him sitting in one of our folding camp chairs while we drove to get him a burrito. Paul was lonesome and very eager to talk about his rambles, which led my wife to mention John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*, a book Paul knew well. That led somehow to chat about Abraham Maslow and the hierarchy of needs. Like many homeless people, he was an intelligent guy and well read. Paul chattered on about growing up in the south, about being bullied by blacks when his high school integrated, about how it made his blood boil to see inter-racial couples. He just wanted to shoot them. About Donald Trump being our country's only hope. About George Soros paying leftists in antifa to set the wildfires burning in Oregon and how they should all be sent to Guantanamo. I tried to politely but firmly counter the stuff Paul was saying, but he'd drunk the kool-aid. He was predicting civil war by election day. I don't think either of us raised our voice, but his quiet conviction was just about as scary as if he'd been raving and ranting. I wasn't sorry we stopped to help Paul. As a firefighter, I don't ask about folks' politics before I put out the fire. But I was glad to get away just the same.

Still I'd stop again. I'd stop again because I have to believe in being a roadside Samaritan and in the power of goodness. I have to believe in hospitality toward the stranger. It's easy to hate Trumpians, just as it's easy to hate any abstraction, but it was hard to hate Paul himself even

though I shuddered at everything he said. It's hard to negate the humanity of anyone up close and in the flesh. After all, the Bible doesn't say we have to agree with our enemies. It doesn't say we have to like them or be their friends. It doesn't say we have to have positive thoughts about them. It says we have to love them. And love in the sense of agape may or may not involve an emotion but it always involves action. It's not a sentiment. It's a choice, which probably makes it harder than other kinds of love like sexual attraction that seem easy because they are built into our DNA. Agape requires extending ourselves, instead of just driving by stopping to help. Paul, I noticed, was a loner. His only human contact seemed to be online, through the internet. I think that having Facebook or Twitter as my only connection to the rest of the world would be hell enough. That would be like endlessly watching last week's Presidential Debate. I wouldn't wish that misery on anyone. I think that real community starts small, in congregations and volunteer fire companies and women's groups where people break bread and check in and notice when someone doesn't show up. It doesn't end there, but it starts small. As Jesus said, "where two or three are gathered." Not in a megachurch rally. Not on Youtube. But in the actual encounter of I and Thou. At the interpersonal level.

There we discover that people have more in common than otherwise. In the final act of the show, *The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin*, everybody is dancing, naked. The preacher man, Bill T. Jones, the whole cast and crew, gay and straight, female and male, all body types, old and young, dancing before an audience of thousands. I didn't take off my clothes, because I was too chicken and thought it might shock my Board. But I think it's a statement that we're all acceptable. We're all equal and at the same time radically diverse. We're all human, vulnerable and mortal and

perishing. All we have is each other and our brief hour to fret and strut upon the stage. But somehow that's enough.