

ALWAYS THE MORE BEAUTIFUL QUESTION  
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### Call to Worship

I call you to worship with words from Reverend Robert T. Weston. From 1929 until a few years before his death in 1988, he served UU congregations from Florida to New York, and did one stint in Bakersfield, CA.

Here are a few words from reading #650 in our hymnal

“Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth. Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge; it is the servant of discovery. A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief. [Let doubt test belief.] The truth stands boldly and unafraid; it is not shaken by the testing.”

### Story for All Ages

Luke's Gospel, Chapter 10:21-25 tells a story of Jesus. Most UUs think of Jesus as a really good teacher of religious principles. He may be more than that to some of us, he may be less than that to a few, but he is a great teacher to most.

Luke wrote, “An expert in Jewish religious law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Now notice that this is Jesus. He is the central figure of the Christian religion. If you ask many Christians this same question today they will talk about “believing in Jesus as God savior.” But Jesus says nothing about that.)

Jesus answers instead with another question. “What is written in the Law, how do you read it?” (This is a common practice in Jewish congregations, called midrash, to talk and question about scripture. It is also something we do, and people liberal Christian churches do, to ask “how do you read that, what do you think?” Jesus is being a Unitarian at this moment.)

The lawyer answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus affirmed. “Do this and you will live.”

(He found a simple and correct answer!) But the scholar was not happy with this answer, he wanted to be certain of this loving-living, and Jesus' answer was too obvious and simple, so he asked Jesus a more beautiful question, “And who is my neighbor?” In our church we could ask this question still, or we could what is God? or “What do you mean by love?” but this man asks the definition of “neighbor.” Jesus tells a story.

In his story there was a Jewish man who was traveling a road between two cities when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, took his donkey, (which is what they used like cars back then) and they beat him and went away, leaving him for dead. Then, A priest (like a minister, except he might have more rules about not getting his clothes dirty,) happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. (Left him for dead.) So too, a Levite came to the place and saw him, (A Levite is like a Worship Associate, an important person in a religious community who should know the religion well.) The Levite also passed by on the other side.

Religious leaders of his own people passed the wounded man. But a Samaritan came where the man was; (This person is a foreigner, so not a neighbor who lives nearby. And the

Samaritans were not liked. They were seen as dangerous enemies, (in the way that some people think of "Muslims" or a young black man in a t-shirt and dreadlocks, as dangerous.) When this Samaritan saw the beaten man, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on expensive ointment. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two hundred-dollar bills and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

Then Jesus asks, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Jesus points out that generalized words like Samaritan, or Neighbor, or Homosexual, or Arab, distract us from the responsible part of "free and responsible." They distract us from caring about the reality of lives lived. He says to be responsible and good requires expanding the idea of to whom you are responsible, and who you mean by "we" and "my people."

### Meditation -

When we begin meditation, it is about focusing and calming the mind. The focus is on peace. But there is a Tibetan technique called *tonglen*. In it the meditator begins by becoming aware of pain or suffering. Pema Chodron, a Buddhist Abbot in Nova Scotia writes - "Fear is a natural reaction to moving closer to the truth" She explains, "...feelings like disappointment, embarrassment, irritation, resentment, anger, jealousy, and fear, instead of being bad news, are actually very clear moments that teach us where it is that we're holding back. They teach us to perk up and lean in when we feel we'd rather collapse and back away. They're like messengers that show us, with terrifying clarity, exactly where we're stuck." "Most of us do not take these situations as teachings. We automatically hate them. We run like crazy. We use all kinds of ways to escape -- all addictions stem from this moment when we meet our edge and we just can't stand it. We feel we have to soften it, pad it with something, and we become addicted to whatever it is that seems to ease the pain."

Tonglen is about being calm and open and kind in the presence of this part of reality. The practitioner breathes in pain, or sorrow, or loss. Then they transform it, weaken its awful edge, and turn it into liberation and well-being. In this spirit let us meditate with clarity of mind on the reality of pain and suffering that we cannot end. Let us be present with the unanswered questions in our mind, the suffering and injustice we can not yet stop. With each in-breath name a source of suffering. With each out-breath send comfort, ease and equanimity of mind into the hurting world.

### Sermon-

Life is a journey and questions reveal the map. The poet, e e cummings described this journey when he wrote: "Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question."

You may have heard that my wife, Amy, did some substitute teaching this year. One of the ways she got the children in her classes interested, and to treat her more like a human, was to let them ask her any three questions. But the questions could not be answered with a single word or a proper noun. Many of them found it was difficult to

come up with such a question. Likewise, when we first meet someone, we ask simple questions; Where are you from? What is your name? Can I get you anything? Even church, where we should ask things like, "What makes your heart sing?" we ask similar questions. These are not delicious questions. They lead to prosaic answers.

For years I have created a service around questions because it helps me surface open issues in my congregation, and it gives me topics for next year's sermons that I might not think of otherwise. So, you all are helping to shape sermons I will give in San Dieguito. But the main reason I do this is because one purpose of religion is to help us be the beautiful answer that asks more beautiful questions.

Big questions arise "What happened to my father after he died? What is in charge of this universe and can I change that? Is there anything I can depend on? How can I be good? Who really are my people?" Once you seriously ask these questions, they can trouble your sleep. They can make you uncomfortable. Bright answers to these questions will then seem delicious. They may even seem beautiful. We may cling to them. We may like an answer so much we create an orthodoxy around it. The word "orthodoxy" comes from 'ortho' "true, straight, or right" and "doxa" "belief, thought, opinion or seeming." But an idea is not truth. It is only opinion. To find the truth we must test our answers so as to ask more beautiful questions. As the poet e e cummings wrote in the introduction to his second collection of poems,

"The poems to come are for you and for me and are not for mostpeople [he fuses 'most' and 'people' into one word.] -- it's no use trying to pretend that mostpeople and ourselves are alike. Mostpeople have less in common with ourselves than the squarerootofminusone. You and I are human beings; mostpeople are snobs." *He asserts*, "- you and I are not snobs." *Then he gets to the point*: "We can never be born enough. We are human beings; for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing" *and he concludes with* "always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question."

In Cedars we accept one another, **and** we encourage one another to spiritual growth, to not get too satisfied with answers because "there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief." Even more importantly, we attend to questions because they determine the answers. If we ask, "should we fight racism and dismantle white supremacy?" the obvious answer is either yes or no. But if you ask, "what should we do about racism?" you get a different answer, and if you ask, "How do ideas of race live in this congregation?" Then you begin a journey rather than reach a conclusion. Remember that a conclusion is a place of stopping. We want to journey on.

Talking about a journey, the first question to appear in the question box asked, "What's next?" This is a big question. It is the reason for creating the I-Ching, Tarot decks, and the scientific method. We want to know the future. But, note that this query does not specify for who or how long from now. Are we talking next week, next month, into the autumn, or into the next generation?

The simple response in this particular context is "Reverend Zackrie for you-all and The Fellowship of San Dieguito for me." Furthermore, we know that for all of us together the earth is going to continue to warm and fires and floods and droughts and ecological

stress will continue. But you might ask, "For how long? What is next? Will we stop climate change in the next 30 years, or not?" Yes, wouldn't you like to know?

So, another response to this question is "Who knows?" We can make all sorts of guesses, and plans, but truth can only be found in the future itself. In the Quran 18:24 God says, "Do not say you will do such and such a thing without also saying, "*inshallah*" - "if God wills it." The American version is, "It'll happen if the the Lord's willi'n an' the crik don' rise." I think this is a wise and humble saying. It is better than the arrogant and opposite Americanism: "It will happen, come hell or high water."

I like using *inshallah*, partially to show solidarity with my Muslim friends but also to say that nothing is certain. More often, I use humanist language and say, "it is better to have a plan that you can change." What we know for certain, as UUs, is that the future always holds adventure and challenge.

Talking about God and God's will, there were two questions. One is "**What is there beyond theism and atheism?**" The second was "**How can one be a Christian Unitarian at the same time?**" To be a UU Christian should be as easy as being a UU atheist. In fact, I have met atheist Christians for whom the person of Jesus is central, but not literally 'god.' There are Sufi UUs, Pagan UUs and Jewnitarians, spelled with 'j-e-w.' There are Buuddhists or Huumanists, both spelled with a double letter U. Remember, that thought our general approach was always part of the faith, the first people to use the "Unitarian" name were Christians in the 1500s. In America, almost all people who carried the Unitarian name, from the 1800s on, also carried the Christian name and many continue to do so to this day. The ease or difficulty of being Christian comes from the relationship between you and other UUs and their ability to work with Christian words. Most, of us tend toward a more secularized spirituality and naturalistic-theism. Many of us have experienced Christian words and ideas used to harm people. But don't let that tendency become an orthodoxy. If someone uses the word "God" then ask, "what do you mean by the word God?" When you use Christian words or ideas, explain what you mean by them. Be responsible in your use of words.

Which brings me to the next question, "**How do you understand the term "responsible" in the "free and responsible quest for truth and meaning?"**" This is the kind of question that can, beautifully, only lead to more questions. The first source of accountability and responsibility for us is in our principles and affirmations. The free search for meaning used to mean exploring sexual liberation and seeking pleasure in individual freedom. But personal freedom does not necessarily lead to "justice, equity and compassion in human relations." So to be responsible in your search means to seek well-being for all. Responsible means we can't explore willy-nilly. We must have an end in mind. The other side of responsibility has to do with to whom we are responsible. Who are my people, really? We still struggle with if helping our neighbor means helping a single person or family we find in trouble on the side of our road, or does it mean creating a health care system that helps everyone within our reach?

If we are truly free to find what is true and meaningful for everyone, then we have great power. Which leads us to the last two questions. First, **Why do so few**

**people know about us?** I boil this down to two issues: One, is that we don't tell others about UU. Find what excites you about our religion. Like the beautiful evening with UUs described in Joys and Sorrows today. Don't just tell other people in Cedars, tell everyone you know. Two, is that often what we offer is confusing or vague. Be specific. Tell people what is better in your life because of this congregation and tell them that you wish they had the same. The final question today is **Why are there so few children here on Sundays?** There are many reasons. Some are big changes in American culture. Birth rates from 1945 to 1975 were above 20 for every 100,000. Now it is 11.8. The role of and expectations for religion are shifting. Time for families is far more divided and stretched. These three factors in general are causing changes in what people need from congregations, and what congregations are able to offer. But I bring my children to church. What you must do is ask questions of those parents of children who do not. Ask open ended questions about what they want and need. Ask them what helps them find truth and meaning. Some UU congregations have changed their programs radically to meet what they discovered. Others have not. But what matters is relationships that open us to the questions.

If you are caring about and responsive to the needs of children and their parents, then, if they need community, they will join with you. And if they get what it means to be free and responsible, they will be caring and concerned about your needs and responsive to you. And if we all do that well in Cedars, then the world will be a little bit better. And if we join with other UUs who are doing this good work, then the world is even better. And if we UUs join with all other liberal religious people in the world in becoming beautiful answers and asking more beautiful questions, then it begins to look a lot better. Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question.