



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

A More Beautiful Question

Ted Zorn © 7 July 2024

I've entitled my talk today, "[A More Beautiful Question](#)".

I borrowed the title from [a book by the same name, written by former Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court Warren Berger](#). More about him later.

Remember the scene from Alice in Wonderland where Alice asks the Cheshire Cat: "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

The Cheshire Cat answers: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."

Alice: "I don't much care where—".

And Cheshire Cat replies: "Then it doesn't matter which way you go."

You could argue that Alice's was an imperfect question, not a beautiful one. She asked a question without knowing what sort of answer she wanted, or what would in fact be a useful answer. It was a question lacking purpose.

But you don't need to read too deeply between the lines to see that she was just asking for help. She was lost. And **at least she asked**. There have been times in my life when I've been lost, too, and not known what question to ask. Maybe some of you have found yourself in that position.

Just asking in some cases is enough.

I want to make three points about questioning in my talk today.

First, questioning is an important part of who we are as Unitarians and it is a part of our identity and tradition that we should embrace.

Second, questioning implies uncertainty, and both questioning and uncertainty can make us – and those around us – uncomfortable.

Third, all questions are not created equal. Some are more "beautiful" than others.

So...

Questioning and Unitarianism

We Unitarians have raised the art of questioning – especially questioning authority -- to an art form. We question because we either don't think there are simple answers, or because we have doubts about the answers that have been handed down to us. We also question because we suspect that things could be better, or more just, than the status quo.

Our questioning spirit has led to us UUs occasionally being the butt of jokes, such as [“Unitarian Universalism is where you go to get your answers questioned.”](#)

And one of my favourites, by the great comedian Lenny Bruce, who said: “I know my humour is outrageous when it makes the Unitarians so mad they burn a question mark on my front lawn.”

Unitarianism and Universalism, long before they merged, were movements driven by questions that challenged the religious norms of their times.

Unitarianism emerged during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century and dared to ask if the doctrine of the Trinity was scriptural. This led early Unitarians to emphasize the oneness of God and reject the notion of Jesus as a deity. Their questioning spirit was not content with accepting traditional dogmas. They sought a deeper, more rational faith. Early Unitarian leaders were willing to risk their lives for the questions they asked and answers they sought. Michael Servetus was ordered by John Calvin to be burned at the stake and Francis David died in prison, in both cases for questioning religious doctrine.

Universalism arose from a different question: Could a loving God truly condemn souls to eternal damnation? Universalists answered that question by boldly proclaiming that God's love is all-encompassing and that salvation is universal. Universalist leaders questioned the harsh doctrines prominent in their day, and this laid the foundation for a religion based on hope, inclusivity, and the intrinsic worth of every individual.

What unites these two streams of our heritage is the courage to ask hard questions. These were not mere intellectual exercises; these questions went to the heart of human existence, morality, and our understanding of the divine. These questions provoked controversy, discomfort, and sometimes even persecution. But they were also questions that led to liberation, reform, and a more profound grasp of truth.

That questioning spirit continues today and is in stark contrast to the dogma embraced by most contemporary religions.

The sociologist and theologian [Peter L. Berger said](#), *“The basic fault lines today are not between people with different beliefs but between people who hold these beliefs with an element of uncertainty and people who hold these beliefs with a pretence of certitude.”*

So that leads me to my second point:

Questioning and Certainty

Our rejection of dogma and our principles 4 and 5 that emphasise that we value a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” and “the right of conscience” mean that we reject simple answers and embrace uncertainty. But uncertainty makes us uncomfortable and some people more uncomfortable than others.

There is a natural tension that we humans experience between certainty and questioning, and I believe that tension is important to recognise and embrace as part of our spiritual journey.

The literary theorist Kenneth Burke -- who many consider the founding father of my academic discipline, communication studies – wrote a characterisation of what makes us human.

He said that we are “*goaded by the spirit of hierarchy, and rotten with perfection*”. [REPEAT IT SLOWLY]. He’s saying we are compelled towards order and clarity – certainty, if you will -- and especially certainty on what’s good and bad, best and worst, perfect and flawed. (That’s the hierarchy part.) And we also take this need to get it right too far – that’s the “rotten with perfection” part. Burke is one of many great thinkers who have pointed out that a quest for certainty is fundamental to our human make-up.

The quest for certainty leads us to look for answers – especially simple, easy to understand and easy to recall answers. The widely touted principle Occam's razor sums this up: When faced with competing explanations for why something happens, the simplest explanation is likely the correct one.

Similarly, and more colloquially, there’s the KISS – K-I-S-S – principle – Keep It Simple, Stupid – which likewise pushes us toward simple, direct explanations.

There’s a lot to be said for simplicity. Our lives are busy and complex, and we often feel overwhelmed with information and stimulation. Simplifying things can often bring peace and comfort, among other benefits.

But there’s also a danger in simplifying, especially when simple becomes simplistic.

Maybe, as Occam’s Razor suggests, the simplest explanation is **often** the best. But it’s not always.

Simplistic thinking is at the heart of many social problems and injustices. For example, the idea that race or nationality determines achievement, trustworthiness and criminality. The idea that people experience poverty because they are lazy. That the climate change we are experiencing is just part of a natural cycle. Trickle-down economics.

All these are simplistic answers, and for some people, they’re comforting and easy. They allow them not to have to consider more complex explanations or to look in the mirror for answers.

So, it's no wonder people often gravitate to certainty and simplicity and avoid the hard questions.

As Unitarians, we embrace questions. But, while we believe all people are equal in worth, not all questions are. So let me talk about the idea of...

A More Beautiful Question

Like many teachers who want their students to think critically, I've often told my students that there are no stupid questions. In a few cases, I've been tempted to retract that statement. But I have tried to treat all my students' questions with respect, even when they seemed, well . . . stupid.

As much as I'm praising questions and questioning in this talk, I don't want to suggest that all questions are good questions. And certainly, all questions are not beautiful questions.

Some questions are harmful and destructive. Consider the difference between these two questions: "What can we do to make sure everyone in our community feels safe and valued?" versus "Why do some people always cause trouble?" The first question opens up possibilities for understanding and inclusivity, while the second implies blame and judgment.

People often use questions to imply criticism or to disguise an ulterior motive.

Questions can be sarcastic ("Oh, so you think you're an expert now?"). They can imply criticism ("Why did you pull into the left lane back there?" "Why do you always seem to forget to put out the rubbish?"), and they can be gaslighting ("Don't you think you're overreacting?" "Are you feeling okay?").

Questions can be used to spread disinformation by leading the listener. "Might it be true that vaccines cause more harm than good?" "Could we do more to reduce poverty by cutting taxes and regulations and allowing the economy to grow more quickly?" These are often framed as innocent inquiries, especially if followed up with "Just asking".

So there's no doubt questions can be used for pernicious ends.

But let's look at what's possible. Let's look at *beautiful* questions.

What makes your heart sing? What makes you feel most alive? What makes you feel at peace? What does a perfect day look like for you? What would you regret not doing in your life? What are you willing to fight for?

To me, these are beautiful questions.

Warren Berger said a beautiful question is one that challenges assumptions, opens up new avenues of thought, and leads to discovery. A beautiful question is one that, by its very nature, invites deeper engagement and reflection.

In a world that often values quick answers and simple solutions, a beautiful question serves to stimulate deeper understanding, reflection and wisdom. As Berger put it, "*A beautiful question is an ambitious yet actionable question that can begin to shift the way we perceive or think about something—and that might serve as a catalyst to bring about change.*"

Think about some of the most significant moments in history—many of them began with a question. "What if?" "Why not?" "How might we?" "Is it possible?" These questions have propelled humanity forward, leading to scientific breakthroughs, social reforms, and personal transformations. They invite us to imagine new possibilities and to consider perspectives beyond our own.

The late Robert F. Kennedy, paraphrasing George Bernard Shaw, described a beautiful question when he said: "Some men see things as they are and ask, Why? I dream things that never were and ask, Why not?"

When you ask those beautiful questions, though, one thing that often happens is a lifetime of baggage – self-doubts, perceived limits on your abilities, learned helplessness and more – may come rushing in to limit your answers.

An idea that may be helpful here is the Zen Buddhist concept of [*beginner's mind or Shoshin*](#). Shoshin refers to the idea of letting go of your preconceptions and having an attitude of openness when approaching a subject or situation. This may be especially helpful if it's a situation you're struggling with – your spirituality, your relationship, or some troubling aspect about yourself, for example.

There are some things that can help cultivate beginner's mind. Consciously letting go – even if temporarily -- of the need to be right, of the need to win, of even the need to "add value" to the situation. Cultivate curiosity, saying to others "tell me more about that."

Meditation may help, along the lines of what we did earlier in the service, to consciously cultivate shoshin.

So when we get to the big questions that face us in our quest for truth and meaning, it's no wonder that many people opt for the certainty of creeds or dogma. But there's equally good reason that we Unitarians respond with, "Hmm. I have questions about that."

Asking beautiful questions about religion and spirituality, as well as what we want for our communities, our relationships and ourselves, is worth doing. It's our tradition and we should embrace it.

Meditation / Discussion Questions:

- What question or questions are most meaningful to you in considering your spirituality or your wellbeing?
- Have you ever been asked a question that challenged you or had a major impact on your thinking?