

Uncertainty¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Welcome to our sacred time of worship, a time to explore the mysteries of life in the circle of loving community. Today, we will venture into the topic of uncertainty. And so I offer these words from Rainer Maria Rilke, in his *Letters to a Young Poet*:

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

*Our reading today was Notice by Steve Kowit.*²

Excerpt:

...For although you may not believe
it will happen,
you too will one day be gone,
I, whose Levi's ripped at the crotch
for no reason,
assure you that such is the case.
Pass it on.

Sermon

In early January, I flew to Chicago for a Learning Convocation at Meadville Lombard Theological School. I have started mentoring a first year Meadville student, and all mentors and students were asked to attend the two-day gathering, which focused on ministry in our time. One worship service spoke of the power of lamentation—an ancient practice in which we raise our voices in grief about troubles we are experiencing or witnessing. When we are able to fully express our sorrow in the company of our community, we are then better able to emerge into a sense of trust, or expectation, or hope.

At the root of a practice like lamentation, is the knowledge that life holds both sorrow and joy for every person. In America we are fond of claiming the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But happiness is not a guarantee. We don't know what tomorrow may bring to us. If we are joyful today, we don't know when or if that joy might disappear. If we are sorrowful today, we don't know if that sorrow might be relieved tomorrow. How do we live in the face of such uncertainty?

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2 From *The Dumbbell Nebula*

One way that we might react to uncertainty is to feel anxious and play out possible future scenarios in our minds. While I was on the airplane for my Chicago-bound flight, thoughts of plane crashes meandered into my mind. Has this ever happened to you? I know that statistically speaking, one is more likely to crash in an automobile accident than in a plane, but there is something about being so high above the ground that can start my mind going in the direction of disaster and death. Usually, I say a little prayer to the wind, that it carry us safely to our destination, and then I distract myself with a good book, or some writing I have to do.

But this time, an inner voice whispered back to me: “Death *could* come at any time—it might come from something outside you, as with this airplane crash you are afraid of. But it also might come from within the body like a small explosion. There are no guarantees. This is life.” And this doom-laden message, ironically, left me with a greater feeling of equanimity. As Steve Kowit speaks about in our morning reading, since “you too will someday be gone,” “kiss the earth & be joyful, & make much of your time, & be kindly to everyone, even to those who do not deserve it.”

Struck by this insight into my own mortality, my heart opened up and I felt awake. I started noticing this very present moment of my time. I looked at the sun on the water outside my window. I noticed I felt a little too warm. I enjoyed the glow of the black tea with honey that I had purchased before take off. I let myself be on an adventure.

I didn't know what to expect on my Chicago trip, and a part of me was even reluctant to take the time away. But my wiser spirit told me to watch for moments of beauty and grace—be open, perhaps I would find a lovely surprise on this trip, or go deeper into my soul in some unexpected way. After I finally arrived at the hotel where I would be staying, I did encounter some delightful surprises. My hotel room had luxuriously huge windows facing the park and Lake Michigan and a magnificent dawn sky the next morning. I discovered friends and colleagues that I did not know would be attending the event, and we shared deep conversations about our lives. I had dinner with my student, and got to know better his experience of the work and study involved in exploring the calling of ministry. When I came back home, I *did* feel closer to my own soul, more awake and open to my own life.

It is ironic that death and uncertainty seem to go hand in hand, since, as the saying goes, nothing is certain but death and taxes. Death is an inescapable fact of life for every being. But most of us don't know how or when our death will arrive. That uncertainty can fill us with anxiety, or can render our time more vibrant and precious.

The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen speaks about befriending our death. What might it be like to imagine death as a far away friend who will one day come for us, to take us into the great unknown?

I am reminded of an old show on PBS called *Mulberry*. In this show, Death is a fierce-looking older man in an elegant black suit who comes to visit those whose time has come. But Death also has a son he is trying to apprentice to the trade, and this is the premise of the show. The son has one assignment, a wealthy elderly woman, Miss Farnaby, who has known much bitterness about her life. Death's son, who calls himself *Mulberry*, arrives at the manor, and asks for the job of her manservant. But he can't bring himself to take the sad old woman out of life until she finds some joy and gladness. So he sets about getting an extension on her appointment with death, and arranging for little adventures to break her out of her doldrums.

Mulberry's father may be Death, but we learn that his mother is Springtime, harkening back to the old Greek myth of Hades and Persephone. Hades was the god of the underworld, who kidnapped the young Persephone to make her his bride. But her mother, Demeter, the goddess of the earth and the grain grieved so drastically for her daughter that the earth was in danger of dying in an endless winter. So the gods arranged for Persephone to return for half the year, and thus springtime came again to the weary world. According to evolutionary biologists, death and sex came into being at the same time—so perhaps the mythical marriage of Hades and Persephone was rooted in some deeper wisdom than we give it credit for.

How do we imagine the death we would befriend? A stern old man in a black suit? A sweet and cheerful young Mulberry who hopes for us to enjoy our days? Perhaps a few of us already know the name of the disease that has given us notice of our mortality? Or perhaps death will be a tiny strand of DNA that has planted a certain frailty in our bones? If you could talk to your death, what would you want to say?

Perhaps if we befriend our death, we might be better able to befriend uncertainty. In ancient times, people tended to believe in the idea of fate—that everything was already decided. The Fates were personified as goddesses in many European mythologies. Their Roman names were Nona, who spun the thread of life, Decima, who measured the thread, and Morta, who cut the thread and determined the manner of death. All of this was fixed on the day the baby was named.

But in our time, most of us believe that we have some choice about how our lives will go. We even imagine that how we live our lives can shape the number of our years. Healthy living can give us extra years, and reckless living can subtract them. We have statistics instead of the three Fates. But we can also take that too far—become enamored of logic and plans and control over every aspect of the future.

So we tend to think of uncertainty as a problem to be fixed. We want to quickly move from what is unknown into what is known. No wonder one of our favorite genres of fiction is the mystery story. The story starts with a murder or an unsolved crime, and then the brilliant detective solves the case by the end of the book, or the end of the hour. So satisfying.

Life is rarely that simple. But what if we stopped thinking of uncertainty as a problem at all? What if we began to notice all the gifts that we receive because of uncertainty? In some ways, uncertainty is the best friend we might ask for from life. Since we don't know in what form the future will arrive, we can experience a kind of spaciousness—anything might happen. We might live to be one hundred. We might find surprises waiting for us where we least expect. We might bring about positive changes in the world. We might experience life like an adventure.

Rebecca Solnit has written about the benefits of embracing uncertainty. In her book, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, she writes:

Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That's where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go. ...The things we want are transformative, and we don't know or only think we know what is on the other side of that transformation. Love, wisdom, grace, inspiration — how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the

boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else?³

Uncertainty is what enables us to grow, to become more than we have already been. Uncertainty is what enables us to go on a journey in our spirits, to change our minds, to learn something new, to meet the love of our life. Without letting go of some comfort and familiarity, there would be no story, there would be no transformation. As Unitarian Universalists, we actively celebrate a spirituality of the journey, a spirituality of mystery, a spirituality of uncertainty. Many of us had to leave behind the safe haven of dogma, and get lost in unfamiliar seas. We assume that what we believe now may be challenged by future experiences. We welcome all sorts of questions and doubts.

Uncertainty is at the root of creativity. Again, in the words, of Solnit:

Certainly for artists of all stripes, the unknown, the idea or the form or the tale that has not yet arrived, is what must be found. It is the job of artists to open doors and invite in prophecies, the unknown, the unfamiliar; it's where their work comes from, although its arrival signals the beginning of the long disciplined process of making it their own. Scientists too, as J. Robert Oppenheimer once remarked, "live always at the 'edge of mystery' — the boundary of the unknown." But they transform the unknown into the known, haul it in like fishermen; artists get you out into that dark sea.⁴

She also writes, "I once heard about a botanist in Hawaii with a knack for finding new species by getting lost in the jungle, by going beyond what he knew and how he knew, by letting experience be larger than his knowledge, by choosing reality rather than the plan."⁵

We can get into trouble when we cling to what seems certain, because often, we are trying to make the world fit our preconceived notions of what it should be like, rather than being open to what actually exists. We see this propensity to shape the world according to how we already see it in the political debates that are heating up in our country as the primaries are underway. People don't weigh all of the options, and think about things, and listen to facts. They only absorb the facts that support what they already believe. We cannot get beyond that human tendency if we are not willing to enter into the unknown, if we are not willing to let go of certainty.

That may not bode well for the difficult situation in which we find ourselves in the twenty-first century. It is easy to feel a certain despair after listening in to the commentary of political candidates. But uncertainty has gifts for us in this realm too. The writer Virginia Woolf says, "*The future is dark, which is the best thing the future can be, I think.*" Solnit reflects: "To me, the grounds for hope are simply that we don't know what will happen next, and that the unlikely and the unimaginable transpire quite regularly."⁶

3 Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, (Viking, 2005) p. 4-5

4 <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/08/04/field-guide-to-getting-lost-rebecca-solnit/>

5 <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/woolfs-darkness-embracing-the-inexplicable>

6 <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/woolfs-darkness-embracing-the-inexplicable>

Robert Bly encourages us to boldly practice entering into the unlikely and the unimaginable, in a poem, entitled, “Things to Think.”⁷ He says:

Think in ways you've never thought before.
If the phone rings, think of it as carrying a message
Larger than anything you've ever heard,
Vaster than a hundred lines of Yeats.

Think that someone may bring a bear to your door,
Maybe wounded and deranged; or think that a moose
Has risen out of the lake, and he's carrying on his antlers
A child of your own whom you've never seen.

When someone knocks on the door,
Think that he's about
To give you something large: tell you you're forgiven,
Or that it's not necessary to work all the time,
Or that it's been decided that if you lie down no one will die.

Joanna Macy also speaks about uncertainty as the ground of hope. If the future of the earth was certain disaster, we might despair. If we knew for certain all would be well, we might sit back and do nothing. But since the future is uncertain, our actions are vital in determining how things will turn out—uncertainty can inspire our passionate action, as well as our hope.

If I am able to befriend uncertainty, what emerges for me is a deep sense of gratitude. Gratitude for this day of living, this sunlit or rainy morning, this day in which to eat breakfast, and greet my beloved, and do work that engages my mind. Gratitude for trees and sun and moon, and the songs of birds that have come back to grace my morning walks. It was not certain that I should see this day, and so I welcome it as a gift and a blessing. The ordinary becomes sacred. The mundane becomes the mysterious. If we are able to befriend uncertainty, what emerges is gratitude and mystery.

Meditation:

Let us take a time of meditation beginning with a prayer from UU minister Gordon McKeeman.⁸ He writes:

How does one address a mystery?

Cautiously—let us go cautiously, then, to the end of our certainty, to the boundary of all we know, to the rim of uncertainty, to the perimeter of the unknown which surrounds us.

Reverently—let us go with a sense of awe, a feeling of approaching the powerful holy whose lightning slashes the sky, whose persistence splits concrete with green sprouts, whose miracles are present in every place and moment.

Hopefully—out of our need for wholeness in our own lives, the reconciliation of mind and heart, the conjunction of reason and passion, the intersection of the timeless with time.

Quietly—for no words will explain the inarticulate or summon the presence that is always present even in our absence.

But what shall I say?

⁷ From *Morning Poems*.

⁸ #19 in *Lifting Our Voices: Readings in the Living Tradition* (UUA 2015)

Anything—any anger, any hope, any fear, any joy, any request, any word that comes from the depth of being addressed to Being itself—or, perhaps, nothing, no complaint, no request, no entreaty, no thanksgiving, no praise, no blame, no pretense of knowing or not knowing.

Simply be in the intimate presence of mystery, unashamed—unadorned—unafraid.

And at the end say—Amen.

Closing Words

It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable, experience
to be lost in the woods.

Not till we are completely lost, or turned around...
do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of nature.

Not till we are lost do we begin to find ourselves,
and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.

Henry David Thoreau