

The Wisdom of Uncertainty
by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, August 14, 2016

For the next few weeks, I am going to preface each sermon with a few remarks about interim ministry. There are five essential tasks for us to accomplish together during my time here:

- Coming to terms with the past
- Discovering a new identity
- Allowing needed leadership to emerge
- Renewing denominational linkages
- Committing to new directions in ministry

We will obviously be building on the developmental work of Anne Marie Alderman and the interim work of Eric Posa before her.

The ultimate goal of this work is for you to call a minister who will stay and spend many years with you. Part of the deal with interim ministry is that I come pre-fired. I don't get to keep you and you don't get to keep me. Who will ultimately be your next minister is a mystery, a question yet to be answered, a future still undecided. These interim years are a time to engage the teaching of wise sages throughout time who taught the wisdom of uncertainty.

John Lennon said "Life is what happens while you are busy making other plans." Gandalf, the wizard in J.R.R. Tolkien's classic tale, *The Hobbit*, said "It does not do to leave a live dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him."

Philosopher Alan Watts tells of a fantasy he had as a child of sending someone a parcel of water in the mail. The recipient unties the string, unleashing a deluge in their lap. Says Watts of this fantasy, "But the game would never work, since it is irritatingly impossible to wrap and tie a pound of water in a paper package. There are kinds of paper which won't disintegrate when wet, but the trouble is to get the water itself into any manageable shape, and to tie the string without bursting the bundle."

As humans, we have the ability to think about the future, and, we seem to have an innate desire to be in control. One way of being in control is to make plans for the future. The only problem with planning is that the future is uncertain. We tend to plan for the future based on the past. But if we look at the past honestly, and compare it to the present, we see how much has changed and how much of that change was beyond our control.

The field of psychology has shown that people prefer certainty over uncertainty. We prefer our leaders to be decisive. We are constantly being told to take control of our lives. Studies have shown that when given a choice, people will choose the option of knowing they will receive an electrical shock over the option of maybe receiving an electrical shock or not. Let that sink in for a minute. People will choose certain pain over the possibility of no pain. We have a tendency to choose the known over the unknown, even when the known is unpleasant. These studies give some insight into why it is that people tend to stay in or go back to abusive relationships. They may even give insight into why we continue to find ourselves at war, even when we know the deadly consequences of war. We seem to have a built-in aversion to uncertainty and a built-in preference for that which we know.

You may have seen the cartoon that shows three booths at a fair. One booth offers past life regressions. Another offers instructions in meditation. The third offers fortune telling and a glimpse into the future. The lines at the first and third booths are long, while there is no one at the middle booth, except the tender of the booth, who is saying, “Can I interest you in the present moment?”

The drive to understand the past and the allure of knowing the future are strong. The only thing that is certain is the present moment, yet we tend to overlook it while, as John Lennon pointed out, we are busy making other plans.

Religion has a role to play in dealing with uncertainty. The religion that is in the headlines today deals with uncertainty with – well – certainty, with definitive beliefs that leave no room for doubt or question, beliefs about who is damned and who is saved, who is going to hell and who is going to heaven, who has the right to marry and who does not, who deserves to be rich and who deserves to be poor, who has the right to control women’s bodies and transgender bodies, and who should use which bathrooms, all in the name of God. When these questions, along with the question of one’s own ultimate eternal fate are decided, the anxiety of uncertainty is kept at bay.

I believe that religion has something much deeper and more hopeful to offer. Religious thinkers, teachers and practitioners from a wide spectrum of faith traditions point to uncertainty as an existential reality, an unavoidable part of life. Rather than seeking refuge in its polar opposite, there are gifts to be discovered in an embrace of uncertainty. Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron says “As human beings, not only do we seek resolution, but we also feel that we deserve resolution. However, not only do we not deserve resolution, we suffer from resolution. We

don't deserve resolution; we deserve something better than that. We deserve our birthright, which is the middle way, an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity.”

What I hear Chodron saying is that resolution, or certainty, closes doors while uncertainty and ambiguity opens them, opens us to the possibilities that the Catholic nun and scholar, Joan Chittister calls “the benevolence of the unknown.” When we see the unknown as friendly and welcoming instead of as hostile and dangerous, we can “melt into the stream of life more fully human ourselves.” Joanna Macy, Buddhist practitioner and environmental activist puts it this way: “When you make peace with uncertainty you find a kind of liberation. You are freed from bracing yourself against every piece of bad news, and from constantly having to work up a sense of hopefulness in order to act –which can be exhausting. There’s a certain equanimity and moral economy that comes when you are not constantly computing your chance of success.”

We live in uncertain times. There is a presidential election yet to be decided. The outcome will undoubtedly impact our lives for better or for worse. We cannot fully prepare ourselves for what is yet unknown. Global economies are shifting and changing, creating vast opportunities for a few and conditions of desperation for millions of others. Mass migrations of people fleeing abject poverty and the violence it breeds are disrupting what once were predictable cultural norms within countries now flooded with refugees. Global climate change has made it so that weather patterns are less predictable, including the approach of destructive storms, leaving people unprepared and unable to cope.

We all have known times of uncertainty: waiting for test results from the doctor, waiting for approval of the bank loan, waiting to find out if we have been accepted to the school of our choice, waiting to find out if we got the job we applied for. When I have been in these types of situations, I find myself saying to my closest friends and loved ones, “The not knowing is the worst. Even if the news is bad, I know what to plan for.”

The truth is that we never know for sure what the future will be like, at least not with any degree of certainty.

Religion has a role to play in dealing with uncertainty. What does our Unitarian Universalist faith have to offer in times such as these? We offer a wide path where people of diverse beliefs can walk together in search of truth. We offer a middle way between the past and the future, embracing the here and now as holy

and sacred. We offer a community of companions to help us slay the anxiety dragons that live within uncertainty. We offer a religious perspective that is open to new insights and understandings, a religious perspective that sees doubts and questions as necessary attendants of faith. We offer a spiritual practice of humility, bowing before the great mysteries of life that are beyond our knowing. We offer shelter from the storm, a gathering place where we give to each other, where we provide for human needs as best we can.

We offer the freedom that comes in knowing that we are not in control of future outcomes, that we are part of something larger than ourselves and that we can only control our own actions, yet when we unite our efforts towards the common good, we have a greater impact. We offer forgiveness and freedom from judgment when life turns out differently than we had planned. We offer the wisdom of uncertainty and the grace that comes with knowing that reality is a lot like water that cannot be tied up in neat paper packages, but has a flow of its own.

We began this morning by singing “As tranquil streams that meet and merge and flow as one to seek the sea, our kindred hearts and minds unite to build a church that shall be free.” The hymn goes on to say, “A freedom that reveres the past but trusts the dawning future more.” To trust the dawning future means that we must free ourselves from our preference to choose what is known and familiar, even when what is known is uncomfortable, painful, or destructive. To revere the past is to take the best and leave the rest behind. To move into a future free of war, free of oppression, free of poverty, free of bigotry, racism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia and all the fears that divide, we must learn to live with uncertainty and that which we do not know. We do not know how to live in freedom, at least not the freedom I just described.

This is partly due to a failure of imagination and partly due to an aversion to uncertainty. What if we imagined the future as benevolent? What if we truly believed that a peaceful coexistence on this planet is possible? What if we imagined such a future and began now to live into it? What if we truly possessed the humility to admit that we do not have all the answers to the world’s problems? What if we were truly okay with not knowing the answers? What if we knew that we possess the magnanimity to greet each unfolding event with grace? What if we knew that we possess the strength and courage to meet each new challenge with a sense of adventure? What if we worked to be skillful at living with our anxiety dragons so that we might choose new possibilities with uncertain outcomes?

Maybe then we would live more fully in the present moment. Maybe then our lives would flow with more ease. Maybe then we would dance on the edge of mystery, embracing the unknown as a partner in life. Maybe then we would live as the poet Rilke suggests when he says: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

The words of our closing hymn remind us: “Age after age we rise, beneath the eternal skies, into the light from the shadowed past.” The past will always be with us. Yet, life moves ever onward. The light of the future is always dawning. We live on the edge of the great mystery. Of this we can be certain.