



**The Unitarian Church in Westport**

## **SERMON TRANSCRIPT:**

### ***The Courage to Doubt***

By Rev. Dr. John T. Morehouse, Senior Minister

Sunday, October 9, 2022

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After a bumpy flight, fifteen men dropped from the Montana sky. They weren't skydivers. They were smokejumpers: elite wildland firefighters parachuting in to extinguish a forest fire started by lightning the day before. In a matter of minutes, they would be racing for their lives.

The smokejumpers landed near the top of Mann Gulch late on a scorching August afternoon in 1949. With the fire visible across the gulch, they made their way down the slope toward the Missouri River. Their plan was to dig a line in the soil around the fire to contain it and direct it toward an area where there wasn't much to burn.

After hiking about a quarter mile, the foreman, Wagner Dodge, saw that the fire had leapt across the gulch and was heading straight at them. The flames stretched as high as 30 feet in the air. Soon the fire would be blazing fast enough to cross the length of two football fields in less than a minute.

By 5:45 p.m. it was clear that even containing the fire was off the table. Realizing it was time to shift gears from fight to flight, Dodge immediately turned the crew around to run back up the slope. The smoke-jumpers had to bolt up an extremely steep incline, through knee-high grass with 40 pounds of gear to the top of a rocky point. Over the next eight minutes they traveled nearly 500 yards, leaving the top of the ridge less than 200 yards away.

With safety in sight but the fire swiftly advancing, Dodge did something that baffled his crew. Instead of trying to outrun the fire, he stopped and bent over. He took out a matchbook, started lighting matches, and threw them into the grass. "We thought he must have gone nuts," one later recalled. "With the fire almost on our back, what the hell is the boss doing lighting another fire in front of us?" He thought to himself: That bastard Dodge is trying to burn me to death. It's no surprise that the crew didn't follow Dodge when he waved his arms toward his fire and yelled, "Up! Up this way!"

What the smokejumpers didn't realize was that Dodge had devised a survival strategy: he was building an escape fire. By burning the grass ahead of him, he cleared the area of fuel for the

wildfire to feed on. He then poured water from his canteen onto his handkerchief, covered his mouth with it, and lay face down in the charred area for the next fifteen minutes. As the wildfire raged directly above him, he survived in the oxygen close to the ground.

Tragically, twelve of the smokejumpers perished. A pocket watch belonging to one of the victims was later found with the hands melted at 5:56 p.m. (from Think Again: The Power of Knowing What We Don't Know)

In his book Think Again from which this story comes, Adam Grant, proposes that it might be better to doubt our first intuition; to question from reason our beliefs and actions. I can tell you this is very hard for me as your minister. I am an off the scale intuitive thinker. My first hunch seems like the right hunch. Couple that with a little too much confidence and out comes arrogance.

It has been my life mission to live both courageously with new ideas but with enough humility, groundedness to find some wisdom. What I have learned, and I am still learning is that it is ok to doubt our first instincts and subject them to the lens of reason and others wisdom. To be curious. You all know all too well that I make mistakes, we all do. What I am trying to do now is slow down enough to learn from them, indeed to have the courage to doubt and ask others for their wisdom. My watch words are curiosity and discussion. As Whitman said, "Be curious not judgmental." Open yourself to doubt. And when we do this together as a community we are touching the divinity of logos and agape, ancient Greek ideals of wisdom and love.

When we have the courage to doubt our first instincts, like the smokejumper Wagner Dodge did in lighting a forward fire, we can make a huge difference in the world. So, let me ask you, when have you doubted something that made a difference?

Let me give you a current example of our courage to doubt. We had a rough year last year; the organ and the name change being hot button topics. I won't talk about the organ, but the name change is a beautiful case in point, a coming together of logos and agape. In a town hall meeting last November the board came to the congregation with a possible new name, a name they believed to be inclusive of our current identity and welcoming of those from different faith backgrounds. In a lively debate it was decided to drop the proposal for now and the board appointed a Name Change Task Force to devise and then implement a process by which we could design a new name that was both inclusive and welcoming. The Name Change folks have done an amazing job. They focused on inclusion and doubting the status quo to help us work through this complex issue. They used reason, surveys, data analysis and iterative votes to get us this far. Everyone who wanted to be heard is being heard. And next Sunday members will have a chance to hear about the top ten names and arguments for them. With courage we have

taken a divisive idea and made it a reasonable process towards a new idea. The Courage to Doubt. Brilliant.

Our theology as Unitarian Universalists is by its nature open ended. For us, revelation is not sealed; it is constantly evolving and opening us up to new ideas and new ways of thinking about our world. I know the minister who stands before you now, is far different than the minister of thirty years ago. Good theology is less certain and more open to new ways of finding meaning in our world. Good theology is not a certain belief but a creative process. This is why my doctoral thesis was *Creating Theology Together*, now an online course. For us, the question is the point, or as the theologian Paul Rasor put it ours is a faith without certainty. It sounds paradoxical, and like all good wisdom it is a bit. As the African American Womanist Theologian Criss Jami put it:

“Doubt is a question mark; faith is an exclamation point. The most compelling, believable, realistic stories have included them both.”

This is the spirit of our religion as UUs, the spirit of Michael Servetus the 16<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian physician who doubted the doctrine of the Trinity for which he was burned at the stake. Ours is a rich history of questions and the use of reason, a history I hope to bring to you this coming year.

Many years ago, one of my parishioners described Unitarian Universalism as a “wash and wear religion”. What she meant was that we want a religion that is immensely practical, able, when it falters, to put in the washing machine of reason and come out with a fresh start. It fits our rather low church nature to not expect you to put on the finery of dogma and creed but to instead ask you to pursue the spiritual path that fits your experience and needs. As Marcus Borg, the great historian of religion once urged, it is time to move beyond the second-hand religion of what someone said thousands of years ago, to the first-hand religion of what we know to be true today (Paraphrased). This does not – and I repeat does not – mean that this is a belief in whatever you want religion. We encourage the free and responsible search for truth and meaning but we encourage you to match what you believe in how you live your life. That integrity is vital to our life here. It is our community that serves as the unifying force in which to form what we hold most dearly and that definitely does not mean pettiness, hatred or exclusion. Ours is a religion based on reason and no more so because of that source of “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the result of science and warn us against the idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

Permit to unpack this dense source of meaning. From the mid-19th century on, Unitarianism has been expanding its understanding of ultimate meaning. Ralph Waldo Emerson and his fellow transcendentalists sought an understanding of God that transcended the bible and

Christianity. Through long walks and longer conversations, the Transcendentalists argued that Holiness could also be found beyond books, in the bounty of nature, in his words “The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn”. By the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, our theological tent grew again. With stunning clarity scientists such as Bohr and Einstein discovered the physics of quantum mechanics; the world it seems is not as it seems. They had the courage to doubt common sense. One atom displaced here changes the entire universe and we are intimately and profoundly interconnected in time and space. This coupled with Charles Darwin’s understanding of evolution and humanity seemed to be on its own; part of a grand story, but not necessarily at the whim of a God. So was born religious humanism, the possibility that we could have a religion that taught wonder at the universe, morals based on decency without an Omni-potent Big Daddy, all based on the use of reason. At first this was, even for Unitarian Universalists, a heresy. But as time went on, we began to appreciate the power of human reason as its own arbiter of meaning. Thus, we incorporated the rich teachings of humanity’s learning from literature to science into our faith tradition. We have come to accept that wisdom is not just religious but human, sometimes richly so, all through the courage to doubt.

Contrary to popular belief we do not worship diversity here: we allow diversity to enrich our journeys but it is not our common faith. We believe that all life is connected in a Holy Whole and that damage to any part damages the rest. It’s a faith that is as strong as the salvation of Christ, as strong as the supremacy of Allah, as strong as the steadfastness of Torah, as strong as the Eastern understanding of Nirvana. It is our common faith. The belief that we are all interconnected is the higher ground that we call the world to, it is the reason we are about the business of building the radically inclusive community. It is true to our heritage as Unitarian, the believers of One God and the Universalists, the believers in Universal love. So strong is this common faith that we could actually save the world with it, testify to congress for it and shout out to the world with it.

Of all the ways towards this truth, none is perhaps more enduring than the gifts of reason. What is reason? Reason is the belief that a statement of meaning has to both make sense logically and have some basis in fact. Using reason is not the rejection of God, necessarily. It is rather the belief that our intellect and experience are sufficient means by which to discover and hold the sacred, the greater meaning to our being here. It is a rich and abiding heritage and, current theocratic tendencies notwithstanding, it is more a part of our world than you think.

Great thinkers like Galileo, Newton, Voltaire, Rousseau, John Locke, the Buddha, John Dewey, Margaret Fuller, and Emerson are all part of this rich heritage. Any one of whom brought us forward with the simple idea that we, that is human beings, can actually discover the meaning of our world and existence with the faculties of reason and the use of experience. Blind faith is

unseated. Faith in our abilities to discover are enthroned. The fact that you are here, weighing my words, even doubting what I am saying, deciding if you agree or disagree is due in large part to the gift of reason.

And it all begins with being able to think. This is the church where we ask you to think, to NOT check your mind in at the door. Humanism in the West started in earnest after the philosopher Renee Descartes claimed thinking itself as the proof of our existence. The only sure truth, he wrote was that we are thinking creatures. Now you can argue with that if you want. but it does make us all pretty unique as creatures. Cogitio Ergo Sum. I think therefore I am. Of course, even that can get you into trouble. Soon after finishing that piece of wisdom, Descartes went out to the tavern with his friends. The evening progressed and the wine ran out. One friend went up to the bar to get another bottle and called out to Descartes, "Renee, do you want more wine?" To which the philosopher replied "I think not" and Poof! He disappeared.

Reason has, since the 17th century forced us to measure what we believe with what we have experienced. It was Voltaire, the grandfather of modern humanism who put it so succinctly:

"All men are born with a nose and ten fingers, but no one was born with a knowledge of God."

The knowledge of God or of anything beyond what we can see has to be learned and to be appreciated. We may be wired for spiritual inquiry as some neuro scientists have now discovered, but there is no such thing as a God Gene. The hope of reason is that, whether or not you believe in God, the Force or Mother Earth your experience and the empirical facts of science guide your journey towards meaning.

But can reason truly lead us to the ineffable mysteries of the Sacred? Many thinkers both secular and religious don't think so, the theologian Soren Kierkegaard, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the late evolutionary biologist Stephen Gould, all claim that religion and science inhabit different realms, and while science can use reason to explain our universe, religion is decidedly unable to do so. Religion, explain these thinkers, is the realm of the mysterious, the ineffable, the moral.

Perhaps they are right. Reason has its limits in the face of the largely unknown universes of love, fear, hope and the infinity of time and space. Using reason alone forces us to sacrifice the hopeful possibilities of the unknown before us. I can't comfort a family who has lost a child with reason; beyond the physical reasons for the loss there are no words that reason can provide to soothe that tyranny of grief. We are left then with only our presence, our love, our touch and that love so beyond reason is sacred in and of itself.

These days I suggest that as spiritual people we would do best to think like a theologian but act like a scientist. Measure your instincts with reason, open yourself to other ideas. But then take

action on knowledge. We used to think that if you weren't sure of an answer on a standardized test you should go with your first instinct and choose the one that feels right. Numerous studies have been done that show this is wrong. If you don't know the answer either reason it out or leave it blank. It's ok to doubt.

I found the measure of greatness lies in how curious we are about the other alternatives. All of us as skeptical religious liberals need the ability to be able to doubt what has become common knowledge and seek new answers in new ways. When I have been wrong I have always found a way to correct my mistakes and learn from those mistakes. It's not always popular but it is true to who we can be if we have the courage to do this we can truly make a difference in the world.

Sometimes our own desire to be right overshadows our ability to seek new answers and learning new ways sometimes we preach our convictions to the detriment of new knowledge. The one thing I learned when I was abroad this summer was to be a lot more curious about the way things are as a way to finding out about how the things could be curious not judgmental Walt Whitman said. Perhaps this is the line we should be taking all of our junctures trying to learn more about who we are deep inside don't think that you know yourself to its full extent until you have asked yourself what else could there be as Josie Gaarder wrote in her novel *Sophie's World* "The most subversive people are those who ask questions."

Do you remember the BlackBerry? It was the most favored personal device until 2011 when the iPhone came on the scene. The iPhone quickly took over the market because of this larger capability and because of the smoothness of typing on glass. BlackBerry was never able to change because they fell victim to confirmation bias they only looked for people around them who agreed with that theirs was the best product.

Perhaps we as a congregation have become victim to the confirmation bias. We seem to only be interested in the success of the past instead of looking for the potential of the future. If we only see what we want to see as the only path forward, then how are we supposed to see what the next generation is looking for?

The curse of knowledge is that it closes off new possibilities. Even the iPhone was not something that Steve Jobs wanted to consider initially. It was his engineers convinced him that he could marry the phone with the computer. What will be next revolution? Continuity is often reinforced by what we already know rather than breaking with what we know in trying something new. How can we as a congregation find a way to remain continuous with the things that we love while at the same time inviting new ideas to change the way we are at attract people who are different from us?

Many years ago, after Francis and I had just moved to California, I was doing laundry at a laundromat. We didn't yet have a washer and dryer. As I was folding my wash and wear shirts a

young man noticed that almost all my shirts were white. He commented that it was unusual to see someone with so many dress shirts cleaning them at a laundromat. We got into a conversation and I eventually admitted to being a minister. Remember what I told you about admitting you are clergy in public. Well, he suddenly became very agitated and started raising his voice, “How can you talk about a God?! (I wasn’t by the way) Where was your God when my brother was taken by cancer, even though he seemed to be improving, even though we prayed and prayed? Where was your God when my father left my mother over it and was killed in drunk driving accident? Huh? Where?” Tears flowed down his face. A modern-day Job right there in the laundromat.

I stared at him for a moment and finally said, “I doubt God was there. I don’t believe in that kind of God. I believe in the sacred power of being there for one another when we need it most. I don’t know why your brother died. Or why your father left and was killed. I don’t have reasons why a God would do that. I doubt anyone really does. But I do know that you are living through the mystery of that pain, to come out to the other side and offer your own love to the broken. That capacity to love is my God.”

As my colleague Robert Latham said “the most profound and critical agent of human transformation is our answers to the questions of mystery – the more committed in community a religion is to that message, the more powerful a tool of social change it becomes...”(From PSWD UUMA Retreat Jan. 2006)

Neither reason alone nor any belief answers all the mysteries of why we live nor why we die. We are reminded in the hope of reason and the courage to doubt to be wary of idolatries of mind or spirit. Reason and experience alone may not be enough for us to feel a greater connection to the unknown but it sure helps. There is hope in reason, if nothing else it keeps all this talk of God and faith, honest, but reason alone is not enough.

In the midst of all that challenges us, I offer a faith blazed first by reason but made light be a mystery we have yet to discover. In the words of the Iranian poet, DUNYA MIKHAIL

In this way she makes music.  
She lifts her hands to the clouds and braids her tears into a flower.  
In this way she sings.  
A wave breaking outside the sea.  
In this way I go on.

Let us go on in love. Amen.