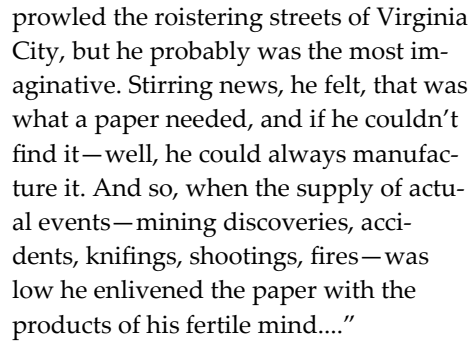




August 2022

## Wisdom Story



It has been said that we see the world not as it is, but as we are. This makes many things more subjective than we may like. While we are encouraged to distinguish fact from opinion, this essential discipline is under assault.

In an age with the exponential increase of fake news and the electronic means to disperse it widely, we must now distinguish among “facts,” some of which are true, while others are intentionally and patently false, and even “alterative facts.” When fabrications, misrepresentations, unfounded conspiracy theories, and outrageous lies abound, perhaps the problem today is that we have far too many Mark Twains. It seems that Orwell’s 1984 prophecy is being fulfilled. Orwell’s *Ministry of Truth* proclaimed, “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.”

(Continued on page 6)

Repair of the world is never easy or straightforward. While we may be guided by the best intentions, there are often unintended consequences. We would do well to be mindful of the ambiguous nature of reality. We pull one thread here to untangle a mess, only to create a knot elsewhere that proves almost impossible to undo. Sometimes it is best to proceed from a place of unknowing in order to escape the assumptions, prejudices, and motives of which we are unaware. Or, as Henna Inam counsels, "When we train ourselves to hold paradoxes by stretching ourselves out of the boxes our minds create, we stretch into new possibilities and adapt more quickly in a fast-changing world." Perhaps, then, we can begin the repair.

*This project is supported by subscriptions from Unitarian Universalist congregations.*

*Based on the delightful book, The Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster*

The tollbooth had magically appeared in his bedroom one day in a large box. While he had to assemble it, the instructions were clear. Looking at the map that came in the box, a map that was not familiar to him at all, he decided that he would play along and travel to Dictionopolis because he was so bored. Milo thought that a little excitement would do him good. Then, with no idea of what was really going to happen, he drove his electric car up to the tollbooth, deposited the coins, and started driving.

Driving onward, he came to a sign that said, "Welcome to Expectations." The man he met there told him that everyone had to go through Expectations before they could get Beyond Expectations. Milo thought it made sense in a weird sort of way and decided to keep driving. He came next to a place called the Doldrums, a place where "nothing ever happens and nothing ever changes." "Boring," thought Milo, but that is where

(Continued on page 2)

# Repairing the World

## Heart & Home

(Continued from page 1) **Oracle of Paradox**

he met the watchdog, Tock, who became his faithful traveling companion. Being a watchdog, Tock, had a large watch on his side that went tick, tick, tick.

Together they made their way to Dictionopolis, which was located between the Foothills of Confusion and the Sea of Knowledge. Of course, things did not go well. Milo and Tock both ended up in prison because of a “slight” accident in the Word Market. The charges, although unfair, were extensive and Milo and Tock were sentenced to six million years in prison. That is where they met Faintly Macabre who was a Which, that’s W-h-i-c-h, not a Witch, W-i-t-c-h. She had been responsible for choosing “which” words were to be spoken by people, but she became greedy and offered fewer and fewer words until nobody was speaking. That was when she was put in prison. Milo promised to help her escape after he was released, but Faintly Macabre said that the only thing that could help her was the return of the two princesses, Rhyme and Reason, as the rulers of the land.

Eventually Milo and Tock were released, along with their new companion, Humbug. They traveled to the Castle in the Air and rescued Rhyme and Reason. They again began ruling the Kingdom of Wisdom. Now, Milo just wanted to go home to his very own bedroom, but his home was not on his map.

While the princesses did not know the way home, they were sure that Milo could find it by asking the Oracle of Paradox who lived in the north tower in the Castle in the Air. Milo hurried there and asked the Oracle, “Which way is home.” The Oracle, whose real name was Peter Paradox, answered with one riddle after another, but none of them made any sense. The oracle finally said, “Your home is where your heart is. Close your eyes and find the answer.” Milo did as he was told. Everything got very quiet, and Milo slowly found his heart. When he opened his eyes, he was back in his bedroom. On his bed was a blue envelope that read, “For Milo, who now knows the way.” And Milo realized that he did.

Source: Touchstones

## Enjoy the Mess

### Tolerating Ambiguity

Maggie Dugan

The human mind is, for the most part, set on being in the know. We don’t like being uncertain or confused, we seek answers and explanations, a pattern we can recognize to make sense of what’s happening around us. In the face of an elusive solution, or a murky, messy problem, a lot of people are ill at ease.

This discomfort has driven invention and innovation for centuries. The need to understand and clarify and find an answer has opened the door to all sorts of advancements....

...It is exactly this drive to know absolutely that can get in the way of innovation. It makes us inclined to latch on to an answer too quickly.... Unknowingly, we trade possibility for certainty.

...This is when we need tolerance for ambiguity. ...But how do you cultivate this...?

#### **Stay neutral and suspend judgment.**

Delay, as long as you can, the expression of an opinion, positive or negative, about the topic of discussion or exploration. Don’t get distracted by the process.... Take it all in as interesting data.

**Stay curious.** Avoid assumptions, and try to take ...an open-minded, curious stance about what’s happening.... Ask questions that start with “why....”

**Enjoy the mess.** The creative process is rarely neat and tidy. Consider this an opportunity that allows you to be messy. ...

**Take time.** ...Slow things down and take your time to look at things for longer, to ask more questions than you’d normally permit yourself, to generate more ideas and options before selecting among them.

**Try things on.** Play with questions and ideas and concepts.... Follow threads of thought, pretend something might work and see where it takes you.

...If you can cultivate the capacity for ambiguity tolerance, and you don’t try to shortcut the creative process, it will produce novel insights and distinct opportunities for innovation.

Source: <https://knowinnovation.com/tolerating-ambiguity/>

## Devolution

### The Paradox of Our Time

Bob Moorehead

The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings but shorter tempers, wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints. We spend more, but have less, we buy more, but enjoy less. We have bigger houses and smaller families, more conveniences, but less time. We have more degrees but less sense, more knowledge, but less judgment, more experts, yet more problems, more medicine, but less wellness.

We drink too much, smoke too much, spend too recklessly, laugh too little, drive too fast, get too angry, stay up too late, get up too tired, read too little, watch TV too much, and pray too seldom. We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often.

We’ve learned how to make a living, but not a life. We’ve added years to life not life to years. We’ve been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet a new neighbor. We conquered outer space but not inner space. We’ve done larger things, but not better things.

We’ve cleaned up the air, but polluted the soul. We’ve conquered the atom, but not our prejudice. We write more, but learn less. We plan more, but accomplish less. We’ve learned to rush, but not to wait.

...These are the times of fast foods and slow digestion, big men and small character, steep profits and shallow relationships.

Source: <https://www.jodyhatton.com/files/paradox.htm>

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**The above paradoxes are reminders of the mismatch between our society’s espoused values and our collective actions. Rather than despair, we should embrace an attitude of hopefulness that we have the power to align our actions with our values. This is spiritual work, and the time to begin is always now.**

# Readings from the Common Bowl

**Day 1:** "Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment



and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious Ambiguity." Gilda Radner

**Day 2:** "The ideal art, the noblest of art: working with the complexities of life, refusing to simplify, to 'overcome' doubt." Joyce Carol Oates

**Day 3:** "Faith is for that which lies on the other side of reason. Faith is what makes life bearable, with all its tragedies and ambiguities and sudden, startling joys." Madeleine L'Engle

**Day 4:** "If someone doesn't value evidence, what evidence are you going to provide to prove that they should value it? If someone doesn't value logic, what logical argument could you provide to show the importance of logic?" Sam Harris

**Day 5:** "The state of ambiguity—that messy, greasy, mixed-up, confused, and awful situation you're living through right now—is enlightenment itself." Brad Warner

**Day 6:** "How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress." Niels Bohr

**Day 7:** "Most of us, most of the time, have a low tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. We want to reduce the cognitive dissonance of not knowing by filling the gaps with answers." Michael Shermer

**Day 8:** "Every human being relies on and is bounded by his knowledge and experience to live. This is what we call 'reality.' However, knowledge and experience are ambiguous, thus reality can become illusion. Is it not possible to think that all human beings are living in their assumptions?" Masashi Kishimoto

**Day 9:** "The truth always carries the ambiguity of the words used to express it." Frank Herbert

**Day 10:** "Paradox. Our world is not a child's nursery of bright primary colors. It's a shadow land of nuance and ambiguity, a dappled world not of always and

because, but of sometimes and somehow. And therein lies its tragic, unutterable beauty." Fred Small

**Day 11:** "In overlooking, denying, evading this complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves." James Baldwin

**Day 12:** "It's paradoxical that the idea of living a long life appeals to everyone, but the idea of getting old doesn't appeal to anyone." Andy Rooney

**Day 13:** "Psychological or spiritual development always requires a greater capacity for anxiety and ambiguity." C.G. Jung

**Day 14:** "To live fully, one must be free, but to be free one must give up security. Therefore, to live one must be ready to die. How's that for a paradox?" Tom Robbins

**Day 15:** "A paradox: The things you don't need to live—books, art, cinema, wine, and so on—are the things you need to live." Matt Haig

**Day 16:** "I think if a poet wanted to lead, he or she would want the message to be unequivocally clear and free of ambiguity. Whereas poetry is actually the home of ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty." Billy Collins

**Day 17:** "Let go of certainty. The opposite isn't uncertainty. It's openness, curiosity and a willingness to embrace paradox, rather than choose up sides." Tony Schwartz

**Day 18:** "The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth." Niels Bohr

**Day 19:** "The awareness of the ambiguity of one's highest achievements—as well as one's deepest failures—is a definite symptom of maturity." Paul Tillich

**Day 20:** "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is



room for paradoxes." Maxine Hong Kingston

**Day 21:** "That's the problem with the truth. Sometimes the truth is ambiguous...." Ilse J. Bick

**Day 22:** "The world of science lives fairly comfortably with paradox. We know that light is a wave, and also that light is a particle. ...Living with contradiction is nothing new to the human being." Madeleine L'Engle

**Day 23:** "Unable to bear ambiguity, I built a barricade of delusions against it." J.R. Moehringer

**Day 24:** "To have that sense of one's intrinsic worth which constitutes self-respect is potentially to have everything: the ability to discriminate, to love and to remain indifferent. To lack it is to be locked within oneself, paradoxically incapable of either love or indifference." Joan Didion

**Day 25:** "Life is easier in black and white. It's the ambiguity of a world defined in grays that has stripped me of my confidence and left me powerless." Amy Plum

**Day 26:** "There is the 'you' that people see and

then there is the 'rest of you.' Take some time and craft a picture of the 'rest of you.' This could be a drawing, in words, even a song. Just remember that the chances are good it will be full of paradox and contradictions." Brennan Manning

**Day 27:** "Isn't life a collection of weird quizzes with no answers to half the questions?" Pawan Mishra

**Day 28:** "The trouble is, if you don't risk anything, you risk even more." Erica Jong

**Day 29:** "Learning to live with ambiguity is learning to live with how life really is, full of complexities and strange surprises...." James Hollis

**Day 30:** "Our waking life's desire to shape the world to our convenience invites all manner of paradox and difficulty." Cormac McCarthy

**Day 31:** "Nobody comes here anymore, it's too crowded." Yogi Berra



## Doubt, Truth, and the Dancing Paradox

Rev. Laurie Bushbaum

It sometimes serves us best to doubt; it sometimes serves us best to believe. Theodore Rubin said, "There are two ways to slide easily through life: to believe everything or to doubt everything; both ways save us from thinking." ...Creating a belief system is hard work. We don't get to do it just once and then call it quits. Rather it's like that simple item you think you are buying and when you get it home and open it, you realize the phrase on the box, "Some assembly required," was the understatement of the year.

A professor [said] ...that most people, at least once in their lives, experience what she calls "religious impasse." This is an experience in which what you have thought or believed about yourself or the world suddenly comes up against what you are actually experiencing—and the two don't match.

...Professor Rosemary Chinnici says that when we encounter a religious impasse, we have three choices.

[1] We can comply with our belief system and deny our own needs and hopes. ...[2] We can abandon our faith and cut loose from the bonds of religious community.

But there is a third option we have when we encounter a religious impasse. [3] We can "become theologians." Becoming a theologian means we do the gut-wrenching, creative work of synthesizing our experience and our faith so that each can live with the other in the light of day.

...Becoming a theologian means we dance with both doubt and faith. Doubt is not the enemy. Doubt and Truth are twin helpers that refine our thoughts and beliefs and help us live lives of clarity and integrity. [Robert Weston wrote,] "Cherish your doubts for doubt is the attendant of discovery. Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge...."

Doubt is the touchstone of truth.... (Doubt) is to the wise as a staff to the blind; doubt is the attendant of truth."

...Neither doubt nor truth is good or bad in any given situation. Truth can feel very comfortable on one level and make us miserable on another. Doubt can be an unpleasant companion riding on our shoulder, but it may also whisper that one word that opens a locked window to a new view. Most of us have to do a complex dance with doubt and truth throughout our lives. Staying balanced may look static, but it is usually an active process.

...Jennifer Michael Hecht [writes] ...: "Like belief, doubt takes a lot of different



forms, from ancient Skepticism to modern scientific empiricism, from doubt in many gods to one God, to doubt that created and enlivens faith and doubt that is really disbelief. There are also celebrations of the state of doubt itself from Socratic questioning to Zen koans.... Yet with all this conceptual difference ... doubters in every century have made use of that which came before."

...Before doubt there was belief. Belief is simply a way for humans to orient ourselves in the universe, to create some structure for making sense of it all. The history of doubt is the history of how humanity, through time, has collectively shaped and reshaped its response to religious impasse.

We can certainly look at the history of Unitarianism and Universalism through this lens of doubt and faith.

...In 1553, Protestant Reformer John Calvin persecuted another Protestant Reformer. Calvin had our forefather, ...Michael Servetus burned at the stake for his book, *On the Errors of the Trinity*. Servetus dared to doubt the Biblical

underpinnings of the Trinity.

[T.S. Eliot wrote,] "*Except for the point, the still point, there would be no dance. And there is only dance.*" Change happens. People with narrow ideas of truth and the need to control the truth, often try and stop the dance of change, the dance of life, and deeper truth seeking. ...One of those still points at the center of the universe is the human desire to seek the truth, ever changing though it may be.

In the early 1880's, William Ellery Channing led a break from the Calvinist church of New England, arguing freedom of Biblical interpretation. He was followed by Ralph Waldo Emerson who preached a dramatic and radical sermon ...challenging the next generation of ministers to honor their own religious experience, not just the dried and hollow teachings from the past. There was a small group of bold 19<sup>th</sup> century women who insisted that not only men could be ministers. They found creative and courageous ways around their own Unitarian or Universalist liberal traditions that still had their doors locked to women clergy. Many of them moved to the Midwest, to frontier territory because that was the only place they could get churches. They started a great number of new congregations.

*"Except for the point, the still point, there would be no dance. And there is only dance."*

All of these change agents ...were saying, in a sense, when they hit a religious impasse, "I'll take door #3. I'll become a theologian. The answer is neither black nor white but something new. By doubt I will come to greater truth."

One of the guiding principles of Unitarian Universalism is "the free and responsible search for truth and meaning." We do not need to identify ourselves as either doubters or believers. We are encouraged to keep both in our toolbox of faith. We know that growth means change and sometimes loss.

May we stay open to the power of doubt to move us deeper into truth, into deeper integrity, and wholeness—that we might live with greater compassion for all beings. "*Except for the point, the still point, there would be no dance. And there is only dance.*"

Source: excerpt of a sermon no longer online

## The Elephant and the Six Blind Men

*a new version*

Once upon a time, in a land faraway, there lived six blind men. They loved to sit under the shade of a banyan tree and discuss matters of consequence. While they were considered to be very wise, they often invited gurus and others to come and teach them. In this way, their wisdom continued to grow. People from the nearby village would also come to ask their advice about important decisions that they were facing.

One day, there was quite a lot of noise on the dirt road beside the tree. The men asked a young boy to lead them to the source of the disturbance. The boy did as he was told and helped the men form a circle in the road. They did not know that they were standing in the presence



of a large elephant. Slowly, they took small steps forward with their hands and arms outstretched in front of them.

The first blind man to reach the elephant touched its side and asked, "Who built a wall in the middle of the road, when did they do it, and why?" He was quite upset.

The second blind man, who was in the front of the elephant, reached up and touched its trunk.

"Oh no," he said, "there is a giant snake right in the middle of the road. It must be hanging down



from a tree. I hope it is not poisonous." He took several steps back because he did want the snake to bite him.

The third blind



man walked forward and touched the elephant's tail. He laughed and said, "I don't know why you are being so frightened. It is only a rope hanging down in the middle of the road. I wonder who tied it to the tree branch above."

The fourth blind man was confused by all of the differing reports. He stepped forward and walked right into the elephant's leg. Putting his arms around it he said, "It's not a wall. It's a tall tree and the trunk of the tree is very big indeed. I never knew that it was growing here, but that is what the snake and the rope must be hanging from."

The fifth blind man wanted to find out for himself what was happening in the middle of the road. Walking forward carefully, he reached up and touched the elephant's ear. "Yes," he said, "It is a tree, a palm tree, but it can't be very tall for I can touch one of its huge leaves."

Slowly a picture was emerging, but they all still had questions. The sixth blind man, who had been silent, reached up and touched the elephant's tusk. "I don't know what is going on, but someone in the tree is holding a spear and I fear that we are all in danger."

Having watched all of this, the young boy began laughing. He said, "It is not a wall, and it certainly is not a palm tree with a rope and a snake hanging from it and hiding someone with a spear. It is just one thing, not six, and you have each touched a different part."

One of the blind men said, "Then we need to know more." They began walking around the elephant. Then four of the blind men reached out and said in unison, "I am holding a tree trunk." Four tree trunks, not one in the middle of the road. The other two, now at the back and the front of the elephant said



in succession, "I have a rope," and "I have a snake." They began walking around again. Two of the blind men then said, "Now I have found a leaf." Four trunks, two leaves, a rope and a snake. Another two called out, "I have found a spear, but it is curved." Four trunks, two leaves, two curved spears, and a rope and a snake.

The oldest blind man began laughing so hard that he fell to the ground. "Oh, we are so foolish, it must be an elephant." That is when the elephant stamped her front foot and made a loud trumpeting sound. The rest of the blind men started laughing, and the boy said, "Finally."

This is how a young boy helped six blind men to become truly wise.

Source: Touchstones

### Family Activity: Clue-Less

This story is famous because it shows, in part, the limitation of our senses. Because they can't see, but can only feel, the information that the six blind men gather is partial and ambiguous. It also illustrates that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Purchase some red and green seedless grapes. Invite your children to close their eyes. Let them feel, smell, and taste red grapes and then green grapes. Then ask them which grape was green and which was red.

Discuss with them how they made their decision and what other clues would have been helpful.

### Family Activity: Clue-Full

Read the story on this page to your children and show them a video that tells a more traditional version of the story. (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vn9BUfUCL4I>).

Then discuss the stories with your children. Ask them why the blind men struggled to determine that it was an elephant. If they were the little boy in the story on this page, what clues would they share with the blind men to help them discover that it was an elephant.

# Summoned Into a Larger Universe

(Continued from page 1) **Introduction**

has been very effective in authoritarian countries. It has also been effective in the United States where 71% of Republicans believe Trump's Big Lie that the 2020 Presidential election was stolen. As Orwell rightly observed, "In a time of deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act."

For some, or perhaps for far more than some, none of this is a problem. Despite political persuasion, for them the world is black and white, and truth is a shape-shifter. Things either fit in their beliefs, or they do not. The slot in the opening of their mind has a unique shape that admits self-reinforcing information, while conveniently blocking everything else.

Daniel Goleman, author of *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception*, writes, "...people fall prey to self-deception ...because it has an appropriate ...place in the ecology of mind." The role of self-deception is the mind's ability to allay anxiety by distorting awareness because denial soothes. As cartoon character Foghorn Leghorn was fond of saying, "Don't bother me with facts, son. I've already made up my mind."

Our fourth principle is a bedrock of our religious tradition: "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." This may seem relatively simple, but it is actually complicated. As above, sometimes we see the world, not as it is, but as we are. Philosopher and psychologist William James wrote, while "part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes out of our mind." Religious liberals tend not to be doctrinaire, but our sense of the truth is still influenced by hidden assumptions, our culture, experience, and other factors. An important, but often overlooked commitment of liberal religion is to take seriously that which we do not believe to be true. This creates an openness that also encourages us to view even our own convictions with some skepticism. In this, it is helpful that we view truth with a lowercase "t" rather than a capital "T." Relative rather than absolute.

The first stone of Unitarian Universalist James Luther Adams' five smooth stones of religious liberalism was based on

the principle that "revelation" is continuous. New truths are always emerging and everything that is known may be called into question.

Our sense of what is true can be challenged when we encounter something that is ambiguous, and therefore subject to different interpretations. While we may be amused by the Indian fable on page 5 of the six blind men encountering an elephant and describing their discoveries: a wall, a snake, a spear, a tree, a leaf, and a rope; the truth eluded all of them.

John Langdon writes, "Ambiguity is one of a handful of English words whose meaning describes itself. In other words, 'Ambiguity' is ambiguous. It refers, on the one hand, to a situation of imprecision, of obscurity, because more than one interpretation is possible. On the other hand, something ambiguous can be understood perfectly well—but from more than one point of view."

The ability to live with ambiguity requires moving from the simplicity of black-white thinking to dwelling in a reality characterized by shades of gray. The degree of possible complexity may be inferred by the fact that the human eye can distinguish more than 500 shades of gray.

Theodor W. Adorno wrote, "Intolerance of ambiguity is the mark of an authoritarian personality." So how do we cultivate tolerance for ambiguity? Maggie Duggan writes, "It means staying in uncertainty, or staying with the question, despite the discomfort of not knowing the answer, or not knowing where we're headed. It requires relinquishing control—even though a solution isn't always guaranteed—to make room for new and emerging connections to crystalize into a clear direction. It also means accepting the fact that there might be numerous ways of answering the same question, each with different but potentially positive results." For Unitarian Universalist minister Kendyl Gibbons, tolerating ambiguity is a sign of spiritual maturity.

While tolerating ambiguity may not be easy, engaging paradox can be especially challenging. The word paradox comes from the Greek word *paradoxon*, which combines *para*=beyond and *doxa*=belief. It meant "contrary to expectations, existing

belief, or perceived opinion." The physicist Niels Bohr framed the nature of paradox when he wrote, "The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth."

Paradox abounds in the wisdom teachings of the ages. Jesus counseled people to be "as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves." St. Francis concluded that, "it is in giving that we receive." Lao Tze wrote, "To be empty is to be full. ...To have little is to possess."

The element of paradox appears in our fourth principle: "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." An emphasis on freedom can undermine responsibility, while an emphasis on responsibility can limit freedom. More intriguing is columnist David Brooks' assertion of the paradox of liberal institutionalism because it attempts, he wrote, to "build a house of obligation upon a foundation of choice."

A universal depiction of paradox is the symbol of yin-yang. A paradox unites two opposites that are interrelated and interdependent. One cannot exist without the other. Consider these paradoxes:

- ♦ "...One cannot move toward experiences of immensity except through intimacy." Rev. Lynn Strauss
- ♦ "Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment." Anonymous
- ♦ "There are two tragedies in life. One is to lose your heart's desire. The other is to gain it." George Bernard Shaw
- ♦ "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change." Carl Rogers

Unitarian Universalist minister Julia Corbett-Hemeyer writes, "Both ambiguity and paradox invite us to step out of our certainties and the comfort they may provide into the unknown. They ask us to look at what we do not know, rather than what we do know. Both call us to hold the tension of (seeming) opposites and not rush to choose one over the other. Both ambiguity and paradox, and mystery as well, summon us into a larger universe than we can comprehend rationally, so, [as Marjorie Newlin Leaming wrote,] 'stop trying to reduce the incomprehensible to our own petty expectations.'"

## Layers and Layers

### Mystery

Krista Tippett

Mystery is the crux of religion that is almost always missing in our public expressions of religion. It eludes and evaporates beneath the demeaning glibness of debates and sound bites. Mystery resists absolutes. It can hold truth, compassion, and open possibility in relationship. This relationship could redeem our otherwise hopelessly literalistic, triumphalist civic and religious debates. We could disagree passionately with each other and also better remember the limits of our own knowledge. If mystery is real, even more real than what we can touch with our five senses, uncertainty and ambiguity are blessed. We have to live with that, and struggle with its implications together. Mystery acknowledged is, paradoxically, humanizing.

I find that mystery is a word people of every tradition love, whether they speak of it often or not. It is a word that many nonreligious people are open to embracing and exploring, perhaps more so now than in previous generations. Introduce mystery into any conversation and the conversation gentles; reality doesn't lose its sharp edges but the sharp edges are not all, not the end. Mystery takes form and substance one life at a time, though long ago we learned we could also summon its presence together. Mystery is at the heart of all ritual—layers and layers



of idea, liturgy, postures, lifted prayer constructed to capture and express something that cannot be contained. Mystery is apprehended fleetingly, but it leaves its mark. Our traditions are imprinted and suffused with it, endlessly washed and chastened by it, evocative of its memory, expectant of its return.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/16646/speaking-of-faith>

## Delicious Ambiguity

### Tea

Phil Cousineau and Scott Chamberlain Hoyt

By way of introduction Anna Willmann, writes, *"Although the Japanese word for the tea ceremony, chanoyu, literally means 'hot water for tea,' the practice involves much more than its name implies."* She continues, *"...in the mid-sixteenth century, ...influential tea masters such as Sen no Rikyū ...began to incorporate rustic ceramic vessels from Korea ...and Japan..., and found beauty in unrefined, natural, or imperfect forms. ...This aesthetic, which celebrates austerity, spontaneity, and apparent artlessness, is known as wabi."*

Tea is all of these things and more—or less? This delicious ambiguity was voiced best by the great ...Japanese tea master Sen no Rikyū, who described his way of performing tea ceremony as *Wabicha*, or "the tea of simplicity." He wrote: "Tea is nothing but this: / First you heat the water. / Then you make the tea. / Then you drink it properly. / That is all you need to know."

...San Francisco tea entrepreneur Roy Fong said, ...that the wisdom of tea is inexhaustible. "The beauty of it," he says, "is that it allows you to directly communicate with nature."

...Perhaps that is what Thích Nhất Hạnh ...meant when he said, "We are most real when we are drinking tea."

The suggestion of the deeper meaning of tea is beautifully revealed by the following passage from ...*Three Cups of Tea*. A Balti tribesman, in Pakistan, is addressing the author, Greg Mortenson, who has returned there to build schools for the people who helped save his life: "The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family, and for our family, we are prepared to do anything, even die. Doctor Greg, you must take time to share three cups of tea. We may be uneducated. But we are not stupid. We have lived and survived here for a long time."

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/20063>

## Awareness of Paradox

### Laughter

Matthew Fox

I sense that the cosmos is not only full of surprises, but also full of jokes. Do all creatures play the role, unwittingly of course, of cosmic comics? Are we here to amuse one another as well as the gods and goddesses, the visible and the invisible? Do the angels laugh at us just as we laugh at them? If life becomes death and death becomes life, and darkness turns into light and light into unbelievable darkness—are there any limits to the amount of jesting that goes on in the universe or the number of surprises that stun us?

To attempt to live without humor, without awareness of paradox all around us and within us, without the ability to laugh even and especially at ourselves is to contradict the universe itself.

One person I know who dedicated his life to naming the paradoxes of existence was Ken Feit, who called himself a "spiritual fool." He challenged persons to attempt to listen to "the sound of clouds bumping or a car clearing its throat or grass growing or a leaf changing color." One of his favorite acts was to



liberate ice cubes: "Did you ever liberate an ice cube? An ice cube, after all, is water that's kept in prison to serve humans' needs by cooling their drinks and soothing their headaches. Well, I sometimes ransom bags of ice cubes from gas stations, take them to nearby ponds, and let them go so they can return to their water brothers and sisters."

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/15057>

# Small Group Discussion Guide

## Theme for Discussion

### Ambiguity & Paradox

**Preparation prior to Gathering:** (Read this issue of the journal and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

**Business:** Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

**Opening Words:** "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." *Pema Chödrön*

**Chalice Lighting:** (James Vila Blake) adapted (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

**Check-In:** How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

**Claim Time for Deeper Listening:** This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

**Read the Wisdom Story:** Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page one.

**Readings from the Common Bowl:** Group members read selections from *Readings from the Common Bowl* (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

**Sitting In Silence:** Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

**Reading:** "Abandon the urge to simplify everything, to look for formulas and easy answers, and to begin to think multi-dimensionally, to glory in the mystery and paradoxes of life, not to be

dismayed by the multitude of causes and consequences that are inherent in each experience -- to appreciate the fact that life is complex." *M. Scott Peck*

**Living the Questions:** Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving on.

1. When you were growing up, were some of the answers to questions that you asked adults ambiguous? If yes, please share some examples.
2. What is your level of comfort with ambiguity? Why do you think that this is the case for you? How has your level of comfort with ambiguity changed as you have gotten older?
3. Do you prefer a world with shades of gray or one that is black and white? Why?
4. Was there a time when you had to deal with a significant level of ambiguity or uncertainty in terms of making an important life decision? What helped you make a decision?
5. As you consider how your Unitarian Universalist faith has evolved over time, have some of your religious beliefs been characterized by some level of ambiguity or paradox?
6. Paradox can often involve "both/and" realities which seem contradictory. Are there examples from your own life of these? How have you dealt with them?
7. Have you grown in response to a challenging experience that you did not believe would result in any growth?
8. What would you consider your tolerance for ambiguity to be? Why?
9. How does Unitarian Universalism support people in living with ambiguity and paradox?

**Deeper Listening:** If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

**Checking-Out:** One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

**Extinguishing Chalice:** (Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

**Closing Words:** Rev. Philip R. Giles (In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*

# Infinitely Better Than

## Living on Paradox Drive

*Rev. Richard Gilbert*

"Life is a controlled fall. As we take each step, we throw ourselves out of balance." I don't recall the author; it does not matter; it is the truth of the words that counts. We all yearn for stability, for equilibrium, but they are elusive. We work ourselves up into anxiety or down into depression, longing for the time when all will be on an even keel. I do it too: If only I can manage these next faltering



steps, all will be well. And, happily, there are moments of blessed calm, of centering. But they are merely a pause in the ongoingness of living. Life throws us off balance once again, and we thrust one foot forward seeking to regain it. The process repeats itself for—a lifetime. Yet strangely, it does seem infinitely better than standing still.

Source: <https://uussd.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Beacon-at-the-Beach-Oct-2012-9.29-12pm.pdf>

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