The Faith of an Agnostic
Offered by Rev. Wayne B. Arnason

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West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church
Rocky River, OH

Reading:
From the Kalamata Sutra of The Buddha
Do not be satisfied with hearsay, or with
tradition, or with legendary lore or with what has
come down in scriptures, or with conjecture, or
with logical inference, or with weighing
evidence, or with liking a view after pondering
over it, or with someone else’s ability, or with
the thought “This monk is our teacher.” When
you know in yourselves: “These things are
wholesome, blameless, commended by the wise,
and being adopted and put into effect, they lead
to welfare and happiness.”

Sermon - Part 1
I wish there were some good agnostic jokes. It
would make starting a sermon about agnosticism
so much easier. “Yes, I’ve looked on the
Internet and there’s nothing worth telling. Is this
scarcity of jokes because agnostics are a
humorless bunch? That’s not my experience, and
as a UU minister I have had more chances to get
to know agnostics than most people! It’s true
that the best source of jokes about any human
group is the group themselves. Good humor is
usually the result of a group of people who take
themselves lightly enough to make fun of
themselves. Maybe that’s the reason why there
are no good agnostic jokes – because agnostics
take themselves, and take religion, very
seriously. Not knowing is a tough thing to do,
after all. Very few human beings are willing to
accept not knowing.

Failing in all my attempt to find a good
agnostic joke to begin this sermon, I have to go
to the next best thing, something even more rare
than an agnostic joke – an epistemology joke!!
Epistemology is the philosophical study of how
we know things, or to put it even more starkly,
how we know anything! And believe it or not,
the discipline of epistemology has its very own
favorite joke. Here it is:  An engineer, an
experimental physicist, a theoretical physicist,
and a philosopher were hiking together through
the hills of Scotland. They reached a hilltop.
Looking over to the next hilltop, they saw a
black sheep. In delight, the engineer cried,
“What do you know? The sheep in Scotland are
black!” “Well,” replied the experimental
physicist. “Some of the sheep in Scotland are
black.” The theoretical physicist considered this
for a minute, then said, “Well, at least one of the
sheep in Scotland is black.” The philosopher
took this all in for a few seconds, and then
responded, “Well, it’s black on one side,
anyway.”

The true agnostic about religious matters
cheers for the philosopher, is willing to agree
with the theoretical physicist, struggles with the
claim of the experimental physicist, and is
certain that the engineer is just plain wrong.
Agnosticism in religion is the belief that we
can’t know the truth about the metaphysical
claims about traditional religious subjects:
whether God exists, whether there is another life
after this one, whether it includes a heaven or a
hell, what role Jesus or Prophet Mohammed or
Krishna plays in it, or whether it includes a
reward for good behavior in this life and
punishment for bad behavior. Agnosticism is a
popular position among people who seek out a
church like ours, and for many people who find
us from strongly doctrinal backgrounds, it comes
as quite a relief, a kind of darvon pill that
counters creedal migraines. You don’t have to
worry about that stuff any more.

But that initial relief can soon turn to
consternation. If I’m an agnostic, what do I do
next? If I can’t know what’s true, then do I just
decide what’s true for me, and do the best I can?
Agnosticism is most often cast as a negative
belief system, a list of things you don’t believe
because they can’t ever be known for sure. For
that reason, I spent a lot of the early years of my
ministry being a little impatient with the
agnostics in my congregations. My secret
opinion of many of them was that they were
cop-outs, people who did not want to risk
engagement with conflicting truth claims, or
stake out a position and defend it, or surrender to
spiritual path of practice that would inevitably
have philosophical contradictions that would never be resolved.

But that was not the position of the man who in 1876 invented the word and the discipline of “agnosticism”, Sir Thomas Huxley, the natural scientist, and father of writer Aldous Huxley. For Thomas Huxley, agnosticism was a active middle path that rejected both strong atheism and traditional theism. As I have moved more and more towards that position myself, within the context of my deepening Buddhist practice over the years, I have come to see that agnosticism can be a positive, affirming, and engaged faith stance, rather than a negative or detached one – and that is what I want to explore with you today. What does it mean be a faithful agnostic who is on a religious quest?

In order to answer this question, let’s go back to our epistemological joke, which invites us to consider the question: What do we know, really? How do we know anything? The first way that we know things is through the evidence of our senses? I know that there is a pulpit here because I can see it and feel it and knock on it. The evidence of my senses confirms it. Not only that, if I asked all of you, most if not all of you would confirm that you also see something in front of me that looks to you like a pulpit. The evidence of the senses is important in how we know something, but that evidence has to be based on a consensus of other human beings with similar capacities. I have to be pretty confident that you would all agree with me a pulpit is present in front of us to say that I know it to be here. If there was a red banner hanging from it, and I told you that I know the banner is red, most if not all of you would confirm that you also see a red banner, but not as many as would confirm the existence of the pulpit. That is because a certain number of you are color blind and don’t have the capacity to see red the way I do. But we take that into account. We know that different human capacities and experiences do make a difference in perception, and so we don’t hesitate to say that we know the banner is red because a minority doesn’t see it that way.

On the other hand, if I was to tell you that I know that Angel Gabriel exists because I can see him up in the organ loft hovering over David Blazer with a fiery sword in his hand, most if not all of you, beginning with David, would likely not confirm that you see such an angel, and would be skeptical that we can all know that Gabriel exists.

So, one way of knowing is the evidence of the senses shared in consensus with other human beings of similar capacities. The philosopher in the joke is only willing to say that we know the sheep is black on one side because that is all that four men are experiencing with their senses. But that is not the only way of knowing. What about things we can’t necessarily experience with our senses? The laws of mathematics are initially based on calculations that can actually be represented by objects we can experience. Objects are often used in teaching children elementary math. Three rows of three blocks include nine blocks. 3 x 3 is 9. If that works, 9 x 9 rows of blocks should include 81 of them even though we may not have 81 actual blocks to demonstrate this truth. We accept that 81 will be the right answer to 9 x 9. This same principle allows us to estimate the distance to the next galaxy and the number of stars in the universe. We know things by noticing and describing how they work and creating laws or principles that can be extrapolated to larger or different realities. Until someone comes along and shows us that this law or principle does not apply or work the same way, we accept the knowledge that comes from using laws and principles. The two physicists are willing to go beyond their senses based on their experience of never before seeing a two-toned sheep and say that one of the sheep, or even some of the sheep, in Scotland, are black.

Another way we know is by inference. Inference is how we know that something exists because it is a puzzle piece that fits nicely into a space that is surrounded by other pieces of knowledge we are pretty sure about. Cosmologists have never seen a black hole in space, but the existence of black holes is widely believed-in knowledge because of what we know about how everything around the black hole is behaving. Inference is a widely used part of the scientific method. Proving that several things are true can imply that something else is
true. You need a certain critical mass of data, however, and that is where the engineer in the joke falls short. One black sheep sighted is Scotland is not enough data to make the inference that all the sheep in Scotland are black.

The further method that we human beings use to establish that we know something is by referring to authorities we trust. This is particularly relevant for religion because it is often the starting point for truth claims about doctrinal issues. A particular scripture is an authority I trust as being literally true, and so I know that what that Scripture tells me about this life is true. I trust the scripture because the founders and authorities of my religious community either wrote it or trusted it and that trust was passed down through my family and that’s good enough for me!

In everyday life, most people base what we know, or think we know, on a combination of these methods of knowledge, except when it comes to matters of religious doctrine. Most religions begin and end their claims to knowledge from the method of authority. The more intellectually minded believers in religious doctrines will sometimes want to add arguments from inference to bolster their knowledge, and the interdependent web of life that we celebrate in Unitarian Universalism is a prime piece of the inferential evidence for many. People say there must be a God because of how beautifully designed the natural world is.”I know there must be a designer.” Some believers will also want to justify their knowledge of religious truths by an appeal to laws or principles that they know work well in the human realm and therefore operate in the metaphysical realm. If parental love is the most compelling of loves, then God must be like a parent. If this world is good, and if applying principles of justice within the human community improves the ways we live together in this world, then it follows that there must be justice in a life after this one. Unitarian transcendental theists of the 19th century did just this, claiming this kind of inference to be more reliable than trusting Biblical authority.

Frequently, however, the person who is most comfortable with claiming knowledge about religious issues is the person who has had a personal experience that has helped them appreciate, understand, and trust the descriptions of how this universe works found in a particular religious tradition. People growing up Christian who report having a personal experience of the presence of God or of Jesus in their lives are likely to trust the inerrancy of the Bible more than those who have never had such an experience. Personal experience is inevitably private and not verifiable, but in a community of other believers who share similar experiences, the consensus develops that we truly do have knowledge here that we can trust, that enough people have seen the Angel Gabriel that we can trust what the Bible tells us about the existence of angels, to give one example. The world of religion is dominated by the first and fourth way of knowing – personal experience leads to trusting an authority that tells us what we know. There is less interest in justifying religious knowledge through the second and third ways of knowing – through application of laws and principles, or through inference from evidence. These two ways of knowing are the critical components of the scientific method of uncovering knowledge that we can claim as trustworthy. An agnostic longs for a convincing argument from the second and the third ways of knowing that the claims of religion about God and God’s role in our lives is verifiably true, but hasn’t heard that argument yet. Moreover, the agnostic is doubtful that that such an argument is even possible with the sensory and intellectual capacities that human beings have available to them. The agnostic doubts that religious knowledge can be anything more than personal or, at best, tribal – knowledge verified by an experiential consensus of a certain number of humans, but by no means everyone – and therefore, not reliable as knowledge.

So if that is where the agnostic comes down about religious knowledge, why would an agnostic be interested in religion at all? And what would it mean to be a faithful agnostic? We’ll find out after we take up the offering for the work of West Shore Church for this Sunday.

Reading From Rich Turner:
Sometimes the agnostic faces the charge that they deny and lack faith. Everyone operates on faith – more than we realize. At the simplest
level, virtually all of us function on the faith that we will be alive tomorrow. Since the future is unknown and unknowable, the conviction that we will be continuing with our lives tomorrow rather much as they are today is an article of faith governing almost everything we do. Even though evidence and experience informs us that we could have an accident or a heart attack, we have faith that we will not, at least in the immediate future.

What distinguishes the agnostic, perhaps, is the acceptance of uncertainty. The principal uncertainty accepted by the agnostic is that the existence of God is not an established fact because it is unknowable. Once one accepts this concept, one can become, much to the surprise of the true believers, quite comfortable with it. With complete acceptance of this state of affairs, one can resign from the debating society and get on with the business of living in accordance with right principles that do not depend for validity on divine inspiration.

Sermon – Part 2
In 1997, the former Buddhist monk Stephen Batchelor created a stir in the Buddhist world when he published *Buddhism Without Belief*, a very lucid exposition of the Buddhist approach to life that challenged some of the typical doctrinal accretions from Asian cultures that have complicated the West’s picture of Buddhism, accretions like the continuation of many lives after this one, or re-birth into another body, or Buddha’s metaphysical status. He championed a Buddhist agnosticism, “which eschews atheism as much as theism and is as reluctant to regard the universe as devoid of meaning as endowed with meaning. For to deny either God or meaning is to simply the antithesis of affirming them. Yet such an agnostic stance is not based on disinterest. It is founded on a passionate recognition that I do not know. It confronts the enormity of having been born instead of reaching for the consolation of belief. It strips away, layer by layer, the views that conceal the mystery of being here – either by affirming it as something or denying it as nothing. Such deep agnosticism is an attitude towards life refined through ongoing mindful awareness.” (Batchelor, paperback edition, Riverhead Books P. 19).

I like the phrase “deep agnosticism”. It suggests an immersion in the mystery of life with an attitude of both reverence and curiosity. Rich Turner suggests that an agnostic who is so immersed in living can “resign from the debating society” and get on with the task of developing a set of personal principles for meaningful living. But I think that the debating society still has its place in the life of the deep agnostic. Recognizing that language is a human tool, that metaphors and stories and poetry are human tools, and can invite a kind of knowledge that authority, inference, principles and laws, and personal experience cannot, the deep agnostic is open to entering into the language and culture of the believer to see what can be seen. So rather than debate, the agnostic converses. Without a need to prove or disprove, questions are more appropriate than trying to prove certain answers. Answers are appreciated for what insights they offer, but every answer can still lead to new questions.

So for example, how did you hear the beautiful song we just heard from “Sweet Honey in the Rock”? It is on the one hand a testimony to all that the composer does not know. Despite her not-knowing, she nevertheless makes a choice, takes a stand, and claims an identity. Faithful agnostics are not necessarily people without identities. They can be people who are passionate about their identities, especially those identities rooted in their ancestors, their family members, their racial and cultural heritage, and their religious community. But they don’t have to claim that their identity is normative for everyone, or better than anyone’s. The sources of power and strength and meaning that we find in our lives are only worth arguing about if they are forcefully imposed on others or institutionalized as a system for holding on to privilege or power.

The senior teacher in the lineage of Zen in which I study is Bernie Glassman, and Bernie has founded a Zen Peacemaker Order which has as its very first principle, “Not-knowing” thereby giving up fixed ideas about ourselves and the universe. Not knowing is most intimate. This is a line that comes from the 20th koan in
the collection called the Book of Serenity.
Koans are often stories of how the right teaching at the right time opened a student to realization.
In this story, the teacher meets a monk on pilgrimage and asks him what it is he expects from the pilgrimage experience. The monk replies: “I don’t know”, and that is when Fayen says “not-knowing is most intimate.” Why is not-knowing described as most intimate?
Because if you drop the barriers of preconception about what you are experiencing, if the categories of thought that you have been committed to in constructing your view of the world can become transparent, it is like experiencing the world from the inside of a room instead of peering in a window from the outside.

Bernie Glassman describes not-knowing as an active and positive practice for living, and in so doing he suggests what a faithful agnostic does next. A faithful agnostic bears witness, that is, notices, engages with, honors the joy and suffering of the world – and out of that experience, the faithful agnostic does their level best to live a life based in loving actions towards ourselves and others. These actions of bearing witness and loving actions form the second and third principles of the Zen Peacemaker Order.

You don’t need to be a Zen practitioner to appreciate the simplicity and value of this approach to living. It is a way of life very close to and compatible with the principles that Unitarian Universalism teaches. Approaching each person we meet as we would like to be approached, as a person of worth and dignity, without preconception about who you are because of your appearance or your gender or sexual identity or what is known about your culture or political beliefs, is a profoundly challenging spiritual practice that starts with not knowing. Unitarian Universalists seek ways to turn the compassion that grows out of this approach to life into concrete actions in the world, and see such actions as more weighty than all the books of philosophical doctrine that have ever been written. In seeing ourselves as part of the interdependent web of life and not the managers of it, we relinquish our temptation to belief we are in control, and instead find ourselves living a truthful life rather than arguing about where the truth in life will be found. We take to heart and put into practice the twenty-four hundred year old advice of the Buddha who said: When you know in yourselves: “These things are wholesome, blameless, commended by the wise, and being adopted and put into effect, they lead to welfare and happiness.”