

*Allergies and Antigens: Belief, Doubt and Humility in Unitarian Universalism*

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May 21, 2005

Hamilton, Ontario

The Way the River Flows

Greetings. I thank you and the selection committee for this privilege to share my thoughts today. However, I do come before you with some trepidation. My predecessors at this podium have set a high standard of discourse. As I jump into this river of thought that marks our confluence, my best hope is to cling to the raft they have built and perhaps to lash another twig of meaning to the rig. The waters rush, bubble and swirl at this juncture, making the adventure exhilarating, if dangerous. I hope there is not too much debris in the water, or in my own head, and that the blue sky above will keep my mind set on calm.

By now I hope you know that this lecture series, inaugurated three years ago by the Moose Creek Minister's group, was intended to provoke thought, inspire action, "and engender wholeness and integrity." I have no idea if my thoughts will accomplish any of this. I am neither the philosopher that John is, nor the raconteur that Ray is. But I do follow a similar direction. In the first lecture, *A Thoughtful Faith*, John argued that Unitarian Universalism is a faith tradition. He discussed the idea of faith and meaning and the ways that meaning making, language, and conversation build tradition. Ray, the provocateur, led us through a journey of identity with his *Idea of a Possibility*. He argued for a change in identity and direction, proposing that we move beyond our religious identity to that of radical cultural transformers.

Are Unitarian Universalists Doubters?

Those are, of course, superficial overviews of two complex lectures. I offer them to you to illustrate the flow of the series. For I propose to discuss similar ideas. My thoughts began with question from a rabbinical friend, Neal Rose (who spoke to us in Winnipeg when you were last there). One day he turned to me and asked, "What do Unitarians say about doubt?" Turns out he is planning to teach a course about doubt at the local university. Unitarians, he reasoned, must talk a lot about doubt. He wanted some references to Unitarian thinkers.

Doubt, I wondered. Hmmm? Do Unitarian Universalists doubt? We do skepticism really well. But doubt? Are they the same thing? Well, no. But what is the difference between skepticism and doubt anyway? Well, one thing led to another and before I knew it I had led myself into a thicket of belief and doubt in which I found things like faith, humility, epistemology, language, theodicy, arrogance, and bridge building. It was hard to control. But that is what I propose today: well, not so much to control as to

examine these ideas and how they manifest themselves in our congregations. Perhaps I can point us toward an understanding of how we might better live together in diversity.

I will begin the exploration with a reflection on diversity and the allergic reactions we so often exhibit toward it, especially when rationality and spirituality come up against one another. I want to explore the roles of faith and belief and then doubt as they sustain and modify the allergies. And finally I want to talk about arrogance and humility as antigens and desensitizers.

### Doubt Via Diversity

To get there, I need to establish some context by way of with confession. Which means I actually begin with autobiography.

First, just to get it out of the way, because you are sure to suss it out anyway: I was born and raised in the United States. In Canada this makes me an American, something I never was in the States because, as I learned in grade school, America is a continent, or rather two of them. I was a merely a citizen of the United States. Being an American, then, is an identity imposed upon me since my arrival in Canada. Most important, though, this makes me an antigen among you. And as an antigen, perhaps I can serve as a reminder about the identities we tend to impose on one another when we let our allergies gain the upper hand.

Second, I am a Christian preacher's kid, so potentially a double antigen. But even that fact needs context. And that context will, I hope, go further to expose some common allergic assumptions. My dad was a United Methodist (it parallels United Church here) minister. He went into seminary when I was kindergarten age and was ordained when I was in grade two. In the university context our family participated in many a religious event, Christian and otherwise, and I developed a great curiosity about religion. My parents met my questions with openness and acceptance. I dined and worshipped with Sikhs and Hindus before I knew the difference between them, attended our own church, went to Baptist Vacation Bible School, and to my best friend's Catholic Church. I envied the Baptists their swimming pool under the altar (actually a baptismal font) and my Catholic friend her lace scarf, rosary, rituals and statues. In my own church, with no particular prompting, I questioned the Apostles' Creed, the Passion and the stories of Moses, Noah and Job. The etching of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac in our large family Bible titillated and horrified me. Later when I realized that, unlike Abraham, God carried through with the sacrifice of his son and set up Judas as the fall guy, I became very angry with Him. With my parent's blessing, I explored meditation at an ashram up the mountain from us. Throughout the years I learned, among other things, that God is Love, that church has its minefields, and that what matters most is how I live my life now.

I ended up not being a good match for the mainstream churches. If you recall the old Italian folk tale of Stregna Nona whose simple apprentice made her porridge pot boil

over, down the hill and into town, you will have a good idea of what I was like with questions. There wasn't any place that could hold me and no magic words to stop me, at least until a boyfriend introduced me to the Unitarian Church.

Walking into the Unitarian Church in Sherborn, Massachusetts felt very familiar, like walking into my grandmother's home. It smelled just like the churches of my childhood years: furniture oil, candle wax and dust motes that had been closed up for a short while. The hymns were familiar old tunes, though the words were different. We even sang Cat Steven's *Morning Has Broken*. (I didn't notice it is an old Gaelic hymn until much later.) The minister talked about his spiritual journey and about rediscovering God as She (I thrilled. Can you really do that? I asked myself.) At coffee time, everyone ignored me. Just like home.

Before long, after quite a debate with myself (I can't do that. Dad did that.) I enrolled in Divinity School. There the wonderful swirl of spiritualities continued to surprise and thrill me. I attended classes with Buddhists, Orthodox and Catholic priests, all manner of Protestants, Hindus, African traditional religionists, Mayans and Native Americans. They challenged me to articulate what it means to be a liberal religious person in a language that could at least build communication. It was, in short, three and a half years of peak experience, exhilarating, stimulating and plain old fun.

I tell you all of this because I want to give you an idea of my context beyond what you might assume is the context of a Christian preacher's kid. And I want you to know how much real diversity, give and take and theological challenge excites me and how I grow from it. I want you to know how much I miss it among our congregations. And I want you to understand how its lack among us inhibits our personal and institutional growth.

### Celebrating Allergies?

I also want to share some surprises along the way. One was that I could find way to talk about God and other matters spiritual in a meaningful way, even if it was a struggle at first. I felt tremendous encouragement all around me from professors and students. They were eager for me to find my voice, not their voice. I had not expected that.

That experience contrasted significantly with where I had expected to find encouragement. I had, after all, entered divinity school as a humanist, not quite an atheist, but almost. Early on I decided to attend the Humanist meeting on campus. When I saw that the gathered were all older men well past retirement, save one middle-aged woman from India, I felt a bit taken aback. I found out why, though, when I introduced myself as a Unitarian Universalist divinity student. At that point, one man, apparently the chairman, bellowed that you can't be a humanist if you go to divinity school. I had no means to argue. So that was that. Cut off from further exploration, I left feeling puzzled and rejected. So ended my second surprise. Well not exactly

ended, just postponed.

For once I arrived in the parish, I discovered a major malady rampant in our congregations: allergies. You have experienced them: the arrogant blustering when the word God appears in a service; the audible dimming of the voice when "amen" sounds; the reflexive huff when certain words to old favourite hymns become inclusive; the twitching that occurs when the word "spirit" or "soul" sounds; the rigor of the face that sets in when a cherished idea becomes the butt of an ill-placed joke; severe reactions when Christmas Eve services mention Jesus or angels, even in passing; the querulous tug of war when "sanctuary" replaces "auditorium" for the worship/service space in the church/fellowship building. Some Unitarians become congested very quickly when faced with even minute quantities of these apparently potent antigens.

This is a common behaviour, more so, I think, in Canada. All around our movement Unitarian Universalists joke about our allergies. It's an "in" kind of thing, a short hand for discomfort, not only with the word, but also with the implied conflict that may arise. "Unitarians are allergic to God," we laugh -- and to prayer and church and hymns (and do I add, pledging at sustainable levels?). I used to smile too, sympathetically at first because I shared the allergies. Then my smiles became more apologetic. As the years went on, I stopped smiling and began wondering about this little script of ours.

Allergies are adverse reactions to certain substances, or in our case antipathic reactions to ideas and metaphors. Generally speaking, allergies are not a positive asset. Most people don't want them. So, most people either avoid the antigens (those substances or ideas that set off the reactions), not always easy, or find a way to accommodate them, or even to desensitize themselves. Many people outgrow allergies. But not Unitarians. With a kind of perversity, we invite the antigens into our midst by affirming our diversity, then turn around and get sick. Why, I wonder, do we content ourselves to live with these allergies?

After all, these allergies are pathological. Unchecked allergies of our sort encourage power struggles, misunderstandings, and hurt feelings in our congregations. They engender to suspicion. They lead to tiptoeing. They promote to un-clarity. They create fear. The allergies themselves, not the just antigens, become toxic. Add to that our habitual politeness, which is what we call our reluctance to engage in (even) healthy conflict or rocking the boat, and the confluence of the various diversities, especially rationalist and spiritual diversities, quickly becomes murky, roiling waters. Though I've done no study, anecdotal evidence tells me that these undercurrents of allergic tensions do play a negative role in our ability to sustain our church memberships.

Putting Context in Faith

We tend to be a passionate people. The majority of Unitarian Universalists come to

our church because they have chosen to, not because it fits family or community tradition. Ours, as the book with that title suggests, is a chosen faith. Yet that very word is one of our antigens. Few Unitarians claim the word "faith" positively. Let me give you an example. On the first Sunday of January each year, our congregation has a "Question Box Sunday." Instead of preparing a sermon ahead of time, I answer questions people have written on blank index cards during the service and collected during the offering. Usually over thirty questions come in. I can address three or four of them. One question that came in this year reads:

*"The tsunami disaster has brought out all the god-talk of traditional religion. They stress that the tragedy leads to greater faith. Who can be honest and state that faith, rather than being a virtue, is the ultimate in human gullibility and that god is a creation of human [beings]? Is that a role for us as Unitarians?"*

Hmmmm. Anyone want to comment on the wording? [Pause for conversation.]

The person who wrote this is a latent Unitarian Universalist evangelist.

He or she doesn't have much respect for traditional religion.

S/he "otherizes" traditional believers

and is allergic to the words god and faith, at least as he or she believes them to be defined.

Calling faith "the ultimate in human gullibility" indicates a pretty closed attitude toward faith, god and the believer. It's also rude.

This is a Believer who cannot claim faith.

This person is ready to convert the unbelievers. He/she is aching to evangelize.

This person is a liberal fundamentalist.

[I'll get back to this more later, but let me note here that until you can claim your faith, you make a crummy doubter. Because doubt is predicated on belief.]

Let's try to open up a few definitions here. While the question writer might be in accord with those who regard faith as that which "strains the intelligence," John Barros Johnson offered you another definition from this podium three years ago:

"There is a sense in which we all begin with faith. There has to be some level of trust in order to bring a new generation into the world. From the time we are born we must necessarily trust those around us. Faith is

often understood as trust -- and that's important to remember. ... More carefully understood, however, faith is a hunger, an anxiety, or a concern for meaning in life. It is one of the qualities of being human. All of us have it, and like other qualities -- like courage or tenacity or integrity -- some have a stronger sense of faith than others."

Faith, then, is not the same as belief. It is, rather, *an attitude*, a trust, toward what one understands as the meaning of life. But faith is not passive. The late Unitarian Universalist theologian, James Luther Adams, talks about "authentic faith." Authentic faith, he reminds us, must be a willful act; that is, a passive or received faith is no faith at all. "An unexamined faith is not worth having, for it can be true only by accident. A faith worth having is a faith worth discussing and testing."

### Examining Faith

For Adams all religion and all faith require criticism. Speaking directly to Unitarian Universalists, he writes: "The criticism of religion must include the criticism of the faiths that are concealed behind seemingly irreligious words and acts." That is, even those who appear to reject faith, need to turn a critical eye on how, why and what they place their trust in. Our role in religious dialogue, or even in the work of conversion implied by the questioner above, begins, not with the "other," but with ourselves and our own faith. What guides our life? What takes us through the thin and the thick of living? Even if we consider our faith irreligious, it is still a faith that requires examination.

This part is hard to do, as Adams himself learned. As a young man, he spent a significant time in Germany as the Nazis were rising to power. He even managed to smuggle out some historic film footage of important leaders of the time discussing their worldviews. So it was that during the war he found himself lecturing U.S. Army officers who were preparing for the post-war Occupation. In the process of lecturing he realized he was also engendering among his students "an orgy of self-righteousness." So he asked them if there was an essential difference between their attitude toward the Negro and the Jew and that of the Nazi attitude toward other races. You might guess the response. He spent the succeeding hours, he writes, repeating the question, "How do you distinguish between yourself and a Nazi?" Then he adds, "Seldom have I witnessed such agony of spirit in a public place."

You are wise enough to know that Canadians are as in need as Americans to experience this agony of spirit. Canada didn't do well by Jews during this same period, has a long relationship of injustice toward its native peoples, and despite popular belief, a history of legitimized slavery. Yet Canadians prefer to look south for evil. A few weeks ago, my daughter's boyfriend was writing a paper comparing Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*. I wondered why his elite private school chose these two books rather than some Canadian material and then asked him if he thought he learned anything about Canadian racism from reading these books. He blustered, bluffed and blushed. I grant that he is only seventeen, but

judging by the prejudices I have heard expressed over my fifteen years in Canada, his reactions are not atypical among Canadians who find (like people the world over) self-awareness and self-criticism difficult.

Yet, as Adams writes, the ability to look at oneself, the ability for a movement to look at itself, is essential. First, because we cannot know another until we know ourselves. Second, because "not all can distinguish between faiths and separate the good from the evil. Even the great, good works of ancient religion do not always draw upon a full treasury of great and good faiths." And finally, because, "The words [of faith] can circulate as debased currency, a currency that can be used for illicit traffic in credulity." That is, we need to pay attention to how and why we use the words we use to describe our faith, and, I would add, we need to develop a broad and rich vocabulary for the discussion so that, among other things, we do not make assumptions about how others use the words.

### Faith vs. Faith

We can look at the religion and science debate for some examples. Science once considered religion a debased currency. However, some scientists realized that science itself is a story and that facts do not equal truth. Moreover, scientists realize that much of what they do is acting "as if" theories are true, because, given scientific methodology, even time-honoured theories may prove false or lacking. Thus, when absolutized or inappropriately invoked, science *also* becomes a debased currency.

While some scientists find points of meeting between science and religion, others feel the divide so irresolvable that the late paleontologist, Stephen Jay Gould, proposed his theory of NOMA ("non-overlapping magisteria"). NOMA declares both religion and science equally important, but too distinct in style of inquiry to overlap.

Yet even this distinction is challenged. Novelist and physicist, Alan Lightman, argues that the gulf is not nearly as broad as Gould would hold it. "Science," he writes, "is powerful, but it has limitations. Just as the world needs both certainty and uncertainty, the world needs questions with answers and questions without answers." In fact, many scientists will now concede that both science and religion, fact and faith offer us significant measures of our lives. *Both operate on faith in a universe of uncertainty.* So the alleged divide between science and religion represents something other than a gulf between fact and faith. Indeed, the real divide lies between *faith* and *faith*.

### Enter Doubt

Here is where doubt comes in. Belief is the affirmation of a faith. We can talk about our faith when we talk about what we believe. But faith lies far from truth. The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty. Or as John Ralston Saul points out, "The opposite of doubt is dogmatism," not faith. That is, faith and dogma are not synonyms. As Jennifer Hecht observes in her book called *Doubt: A History*: "Great believers and great doubters seem like opposites, but they are more similar to each other than to the

mass of relatively disinterested or acquiescent men and women." That is because believers and doubters both struggle with that great divide so aptly described by Forrester Church when he says, "Religion is the result of being born and having to die." That is, the great divide lies between what we experience and what we cannot experience in this life, what we know and what we cannot know.

It might do to take a step backwards and give doubt itself a bit of context. Hecht took five hundred pages to do it. I shall try for less.

Doubt, is, of course a broad concept, that covers everything from where you doubt you left your glasses the last time you took them off, to the existence or non-existence of supernatural beings. As you might know, Socrates was one of the earliest Western philosophers to cultivate doubt. The best approach to truth is through doubt, not conviction. Whereas, Socrates did believe that truth could be found, the Skeptics, who came roughly half a century later, believed that nothing can be known. None of these thinkers was "fighting against the religious impulse; they just reconceived the sacred so that it seemed true." Modern skepticism has evolved from this philosophical school into a methodology, a way to explore knowing that scientific rationalism has claimed in our era and that many apply to religious questions as well.

Up until the beginning of the Christian era, doubt was a synonym of skepticism. Then a new kind of doubt made an appearance. You can see it in the story of Jesus. Jesus, Judas, and Peter each did battle with it. Jesus epitomizes it in the Garden of Gethsemane. (The book of John shows us a doubting Thomas, but Thomas, it turns out, was really a skeptic, not a doubter.) Hecht describes this new kind of doubt as "...doubt in the ability of the human being to inhabit his or her side of the ... equation." It is a doubt that most of us know, a visceral, human doubt that lies at the conjunction of understanding and the void.

Through persuasion and force the Church kept doubt in the closet for hundreds of years. Our own great doubter, Michael Servetus, died a horrible death for his doubt. But thinkers like David Hume, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Huxley began to pull doubt from the flames. Huxley, of course, coined the word "agnosticism", a stance based firmly in uncertainty and utilizing doubt as a method. Wrote one of Huxley's contemporaries, Henry Longueville Mansel: "The enunciation of this great first commandment of science consecrated doubt. It removed doubt from the seat of penance..." Extracted penance, however, did not extract all of doubt's emotional qualities.

### The Difference Between Doubt and Skepticism

Remember that I am arguing that Unitarians are poor doubters and that our lack of doubt, rather than its excess, contributes to the allergies among us. We continue to think we are good doubters because we confuse doubt and skepticism. One problem lies in the language confusion. More often than not we used the two words as synonyms for the same experience. Yet, I do not think that reflects the actual



experience of doubt and skepticism. The nuances and the implications of the two ideas point to differences that I think matter, especially in a movement such as ours that values critical thinking, intellectual and ethical integrity, and the open mind. I think some of the conflict we experience when people come together who do not think, believe and analyze alike results from confusing the two.

Doubt can, of course, take a variety of forms, from trivial to grave. We can name scientific doubt, relativistic doubt, moral doubt, and philosophical doubt as examples. I want to focus on doubt as it approaches the search for meaning. We occupy an existence fraught with ambiguity, yet as thinking people we want to live lives of moral and intellectual integrity. We yearn for solid ground as much as we seek to explore the uncertainty.

Both doubt and skepticism address epistemology, the theory of how we know what we know and how we validate it. But they begin in different places and point in different directions. First, doubt is the larger of the two categories and sometimes includes skepticism. Grammatically, doubt can be both a noun and a verb. Doubt is a particular attitude or feeling. It carries an emotional charge. Doubt is also an action. I doubt. You doubt. He, she, it, doubts. Skepticism remains a noun. You can doubt, but you can't "skept." Probably one reason we often confuse the two ideas is because we can't say, "I skept that." Doubt has to do for the two.

Doubt and skepticism have different focuses. I want to distinguish between the two, if I can, in a general way. Doubt is a state of being. One can live with it a lifetime. The focus of doubt tends to be inward. It is a capacity of the heart. Therefore it tends to involve emotion as much as intellect. You might also say it is a capacity of the "mind," using mind to indicate the wholeness that involves intellect, emotion, sensation and intuition. Doubt focuses not only on what I believe or do not believe, but how that affects my being, my perceptions, my identity, and my ability to move and act in the world. It affects the wholeness that I know as self and the place of my self in the universe of meaning. In this sense, doubt involves the capacity to be positively self-critical.

In contrast, as a methodology and an attitude derived from methodology, skepticism is a capacity of the intellect. It is detached from the emotions, using logic and rationalism as tools. It claims to be subjective. Its focus is outward, concerning "the other." It is more likely to consider abstractions. One is rarely, if ever, skeptical about matters dear to one's self or one's being, but can easily focus on the matters dear to another's self or being.

There is a relational difference between doubt and skepticism. If doubt asks, "What if?" skepticism says, "Prove it." If doubt leads the doubter to dig deeper into the meanings of living and one's place in it, skepticism exposes inconsistencies in the other's digging.

As a state of being, doubt heads toward resolution, even if it is death, even as it

recognizes complexity and ambiguity. Doubt is epic. Therefore doubt is a journey, a process. It leads toward mystery, toward further seeking, toward knowledge or toward acceptance. Faith, that is, an examined trust in what one finds as life's meaning, despite uncertainty, may be one of doubt's resolutions. Continuing doubt may also be.

Skepticism, a methodology, does not travel well. Radical skeptics believe that nothing can be known, nothing confirmed or denied. Timon, a disciples of skepticism's founder, Pyrrho, wrote, "I do not lay it down that honey is sweet, but I admit that it appear to be so." Where do you go from there? Even the more moderate and modern forms of skepticism do better at negating than affirming.

Doubt, it is true, may induce paralysis. We call this state the "dark night of the soul." But because it is so often underlain with a sense of faith, a sense of connectedness to the Whole, the paralysis is often temporary. In contrast, skepticism, while a useful tool in science and logic, can too often yield to orthodoxy. It admits too easily a damning pride and arrogance.

### The Limitations

It is always false to compare and contrast two concepts as I have doubt and skepticism. It glosses over subtleties and erases rough edges. Yet I am granting myself the privilege in order to make a point. Of the two concepts, as you have probably guessed, I feel skepticism possesses the greater capacity for destruction. That is because it is an offensive tool, as the quarterback is an offensive tool in sports. It comes from the outside of the idea or problem, brings its analytic tools to bear, cuts and slashes and departs. It rarely turns its knife on itself. I do acknowledge skepticism's importance in science, in politics, in ethics, in education, in research and in many other fields. I also acknowledge the gifts of sober and rigorous analysis it can bring to the human situation. These are no small advantages. But I do highlight its limitations. Too often skepticism is detached from the human and relational pieces of the equation. Too often it yields to the false certainties of ideology and orthodoxy.

Doubt also has its limitations. We still need to wrench doubt out of the orbit of doctrine in order to claim it. Moreover, doubt can be tawdry. It can be self-centered. It can be so self focused that it does not recognize its own boundaries. But, doubt has one superior quality, risk: the risk of one's faith, the risk of understanding, the risk of relationship, the risk of clarity. Without risk we gain no momentum, no forward motion. If the risk is taken, one can often look back and see not what is lost, but what has been gained by risking.

### Why Doubt?

In Hecht's words, "the point of the exercise [of doubt] ... is to teach us to live, well and wide awake, in our strange place between meaning and meaninglessness." God and no-God are only one piece of this strange place. The real discussion is meaning, no meaning and making meaning. Doubt is a natural and necessary component in this

exercise. It keeps the discussion in motion.

We Unitarian Universalists have prided ourselves on our capacity for doubt, even heresy, for centuries. We were born before the great minds of the Enlightenment, of the proto-reformers who stirred even before Martin Luther, reformers who declared the capacity of the human mind to be responsible for its own thoughts and to apply reason to meaning-making. Our capacity for doubt and for skepticism stood out and for four centuries opened doors around the world.

Where do we stand now? Is the discussion still in motion? We now live in a culture where doubt is a given and skepticism the practice, at least of the educated elite. Who are we in this context? Are we still doubters? Or are we merely skeptics?

I'm not sure we have decided yet. For one thing, I think too many of us have lost the capacity for doubt as we have forced the definition of faith into too narrow a space. We are very good at being skeptical, very good at seeing the flaws of another's belief system. We have a hard time naming our own, a hard time knowing our centre. And in this fearful time of political correctness – and it is fearful whatever side of the debate (or the border) you may be on -- it is even hard to speak of the doubts. Even if we know the words we want to use and what questions to ask, we feel reluctant to say them because we don't know what others will assume the words say of us. What kind of response we might incur? What if someone says, "You don't belong here?"

There must be room for change among us. For without doubt, we face ossification, individually and as a movement. John Ralston Saul calls us to a new humanism through doubt. Humanism, he writes, is "an exaltation of freedom, but one limited by our need to exercise it as an integral part of nature and society.

"We are capable of freedom because we are capable of seeking the balance which integrates the world. And this equilibrium in society depends upon our acceptance of DOUBT as a positive force. The dignity of man [sic] is thus an expression of modesty, not of superior preening and vain assertions."

### Humility

Thus we arrive at humility. Humility, related to humanism, through its Latin root, calls us to balance. It allows us to let go of arrogant attitudes and beliefs, to take advantage of doubt. Doubt encourages us to avoid ideology, which is those assertions of ostensible truth we make to control life and society. Without the balance of doubt, even reason becomes an ideology. Humanism, says Saul, is a quality of the equilibrium that includes common sense, imagination, intuition, memory, experience and reason – to which I would add compassion.

Hecht argues that the Enlightenment, which popularized humanism in the West, was, above all, "a social act of mutual education." During this "Great Experiment" we witnessed the rise of the salons, the public debates, the pamphleteering. Taking up

the new humanism encourages us to return to that great experiment of the Enlightenment, in contemporary terms, but with the same receptive openness. We are perhaps seeing its re-birth in small group ministry, Appreciative Inquiry and Philosophers Clubs that are beginning to bloom among us.

I hope this is true. I hope we are finding out how to let go of hard attitudes and become open to doubt. For this great experiment is what we lose if we continue to accept our allergies as a given. Humility is one antidote for allergies. It encourages us to add doubt in equal measure to skepticism to our repertoire of responses to ideas. Humility does not ask us to grovel. Humility does not ask us giving up our own authority. Humility does not ask us to believe what we cannot. Humility does ask us to recognize that we are "limited by our need to exercise our freedom as an integral part of nature and society." Humility calls us to accept our responsibilities toward nature and society and, in our case, our congregations.

### The Past and the Future of our Movement

As Phillip Hewett writes in his lecture, "Re-appropriating the Living Tradition," "A living tradition [such as ours] looks back to the past – our past – not to venerate it uncritically, but to learn from it and draw power from it as we find our own original insights for today." Alice Blair Wesley, one of our movement's best keepers of history and polity, writes that "Historically, radical laicists of the 17th c. held the whole process of persuasion in the church - including the unrestricted voicing of dissent - as sacred, as the functioning of the holy spirit in the group. James Luther Adams used to say the 17th c. Puritan, radically lay doctrine of the church was a doctrine of the holy spirit. I.e., the question for the radicals was: What can the free church (unsupervised by a bishop) trust as the ultimate authority? Answer: the ongoing conclusions of a covenanted congregation when all sides have been heard, in the spirit of love, with total candor and humble thoughtfulness."

We can continue to live as congregations and as a movement with our allergies and our prejudices. If so, we will continue to stagnate. Or, we can relearn the excitement of learning and encounter. To do so demands risk-taking, not only accepting doubt, but also pursuing it when we would rather not. Doubting takes time. It takes the full exercise of democratic principles that give each of us the right to be heard whether we make up a majority or have softer voices than the rest. Doubt asks for us to listen with an open mind. It asks us to chew on and mouth words they may feel alien just to give us an idea of how they might feel. It asks us to accept that though others may perceive, think and see differently than we do, they are no more right or wrong than we. Doubt encourages us to accept others as who they are, not as the labels we give them: Canadian, American, Christian, Theist, Humanist, Native, Immigrant, Gay, Straight, male, female....

My Unitarian Universalist church, the Unitarian Universalism of my life and heart, makes room for all manner of believers and non-believers, doubters and skeptics as long as each of us is willing to travel the road with the others. I believe as Francis

David believed that "We need not think alike to love alike." If we can be this openness, our church will remain a place where there is room for doubt and skepticism, faith and certainty. We are but a microcosm of a large world in which all manner of people live, with all manner of faiths and doubts. As a movement that lives in this world, it is our mission to live our diversity with integrity, authenticity, trust, and most of all, hope.

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