

“Why?”

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Why? It's a question you'll hear again and again as we move across this next bardo, this transitional time between my ministry with you and the announcement and arrival of your new interim minister who will bridge congregational life at UU Meriden and the Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society in Woodbury. More accurately, the questions are “Who” will this be and “What” will this mean for your congregational life, and “When” will this person arrive?

This morning's focus is on the most challenging of the who/what/where/when/why questions that every journalist knows well and every curious child asks in some form every single day. Resilience, imagination and grace are key to moving through the why's that you may be asking, not necessarily about our ministerial transition, but the “why's” that fill your individual hearts and minds as “life happens when we are busy making other plans,” (Thank you, John Lennon).

In the story you brought to life from e.e. cummings' “The Old Man Who Asked ‘Why?’” this question of questions was posed like a broken record. I'm guessing that some of you don't remember records. Would one of you like to describe them?

[Responses]

And a broken record?

[Responses]

Alas, there was no needle to lift near the old man atop the steeple, so on he went. And what happened to the townspeople? (Ask...)

And who helped the townspeople....or tried to? (Ask...)

For those of us who are adults and certainly for me as minister, we are called to encourage the why's. For Unitarian Universalists, questions are sacred. “Why?” May be the most challenging form of the questions we hear and ask ourselves, but questions and the curiosity from which they spring arise in an infinity of forms.

“Love the questions,” preached the late Denise Davidoff, my good friend and past moderator of our Unitarian Universalist Association. For me, Deni was a model of one who could cut through the small stuff and take on the big stuff, the hard questions, the complicated issues. Questions were a mantra in Deni's life, as she saw our larger UU world through so many tough ones.

Who can explain a mantra?

[Responses]

The anti-racism venture for which Deni was a strong advocate was known as the Journey toward Wholeness. It was our faith's effort to dismantle racism in ourselves and our institutions. It continues in other forms and is more recently recognized in our faith as the stark realities of white supremacy and a complicated word called "intersectionality," a blending of oppressions.

So many why's erupt from the harsh realities of white supremacy and the seemingly endless forms that oppression takes. Deni's questions live on. She asked if a racially and ethnically diverse congregation can "still be oppressive." She asked if we can begin a process that we are unlikely to complete in our lifetime. Deni's "why's" are thankfully interrupted with thoughtful analysis and visioning, but she still bids us to "love the questions." Love the questions, for "there are no answers, just the process inherent in living the hard questions."

So it is with us, with this congregation, as you and I, young and old, long-time members and newcomers, raise the questions, reframe them, revisit them, discover new ones, and honor them as we honor the flame that dances atop our chalice, symbol of a tradition that lives. There are responses, some complex, many varying, most hope-filled, but there is no easy path.

There are no clear maps, no straight lines.
 Our choicest plans
 have fallen through,
 our airiest castles
 tumbled over,
 because of lines
 we neatly drew
 and later neatly
 stumbled over.

How well this bit of verse from the Danish poet, mathematician, painter, and inventor, Piet Hein, describes the inevitable stumbling we experience if we expect the questions we raise and the plans we craft to be neat and tidy in whatever journey we're on. Such quirky word-smithing served Hein well when he joined the Danish Resistance during World War II. Hein sought a code language to communicate with others who fought back. It was a code language he invented in his peculiar verse, which he termed "grooms," and it passed far outside the range of Nazi sensitivities in the struggle for liberation. No straight lines; no airy castles!

I wonder if Piet Hein knew e.e. cummings. They spoke the same language—quirky, imaginative, profound.

In our religion of faith and doubt, we encourage "Why?" because we want to know. We encourage curiosity, because we honor wonder. We're right up there on top of the steeple with "Why's" that may make others crazy, but hold an integrity of free spirit and soaring soul. We're right down here on planet earth with "Why's" that may make others look askance at us and imagine that we stand for nothing at all. On the contrary, we have chosen to wade through the muddy waters of humanness with our restless curiosity in full play.

“Why?” It’s the most instinctive question of childhood. If our own children are encouraged in their curious ways and persist in uttering more and more “Why’s,” they reflect that child newly touching the earth in Cummings’ fairytale, that child who moved backwards through time from the old man who perched atop what was surely a Unitarian Universalist steeple, smiling knowingly at the faerie whose mission of conciliation was about to backfire.

Children are masters of playful questioning and the toughest of questions. “Why am I here? Where did I come from? Why did you say this and do that? Why is so and so sad all the time? I’ll always be here, right? You’ll always be here, right? Why is my goldfish so still?”

Is it any wonder that those “why’s” become whines when a big one renders us mute or we spout flip answers because it’s easier to be too busy rather than anxious? Of course, some of that whining spews from the common mantras of childhood: “Why can’t I have it? How much longer ‘til we get there? Why do I have to go to bed now? Why do I have to share; it’s mine!” Why did e.e. Cummings’ man on the moon drive the earthlings quite mad with his “Why’s?” Why was his “punishment” to fall to earth filled with his “Why’s” at the moment of birth? As the son of a Unitarian minister, the young e.e. didn’t have a chance. Just listen to this theology that he probably inherited:

when god decided to invent
everything he took one
breath bigger than a circustent
and everything began

when man determined to destroy
himself he picked the was
of shall and finding only why
smashed it into because

The tough questions, the big “why’s,” stick with us, from childhood on. Sometimes they go underground, and it takes an event that shatters us to the core to hear the echoes of our long-ago wondering and return, however reluctantly, to the big questions.

I recall a three-year-old, a sprightly little boy, whose life was snuffed out by a freak accident. He had pulled out a drawer from the dresser that held his munchkin-size jeans and polos and T-shirts, a tall bulky chest-of-drawers that tipped and crashed to the floor—just too much weight for his tiny frame. I recall a young man of brilliance and grace and wit, lauded and recognized in the circles of a great university, who could not take any more of whatever was swirling within him. These were the most wrenching memorial services I have ever done.

Why? Why did this happen? We’re left reeling from the stark reality that someone we were close to, so close to, was rendered mute by a stupid instance of gravity, or that another we were close to, so close to, snuffed out his very own life, a choice that emerged from a place so deep that none of us could know or guess the moment of decision that became irreversible. Why is the question; why is the answer. All we know is that love was there and persists, and we are the richer and poorer because of it.

Our tears, our anxieties, and our questions need large sanctuaries, sanctuaries as refuges, safe spaces where we can trust that our thrashing about will be honored. We need large spaces of the spirit so that we might learn to love the questions and recognize the peril of simplistic answers. Our scars of body and soul remind us how often we have tripped over lines neatly drawn.

We ask “Why?” and are free for possibility, no matter what the circumstances. We hear the “Why’s?” of young children and very old men atop celestial steeples and remember the child crouching not too far down inside us and the sage fallen from his steeple but still persistent as only a sage-child can be. Together, in this community of faithful doubt and dubious faith, let’s resist the temptation to take those troubling and terrifying “Why’s?” and smash them into “because;” for those “Why’s?” are bound and determined to catch up with us. And catch up they do when we reel with a loss that shatters all certainty, when we plumb all possible knowledge for answers that last, when presence and absence trade places with no warning, when life happens.

As we go forward into the day and into our life together and yes, apart, let’s stay with the questions, love the questions, and respond—not answer, but respond.

So may it be. Amen.

Sources:

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Denise Davidoff, “Loving the Questions,” a sermon preached at Fountain Street church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, September 27, 1998.

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