

THE QUESTIONS THAT EMPTY THE ROOM
Richard S. Gilbert – Chautauqua – July 31, 2011

READING: SISYPHUS'S PET ROCK
Thomas Carper, American poet

I have my rock, my hill. So, every day
My task, though hard, is known. And as I roll
My rock, its weight seems always to convey
A certain satisfaction to the soul.
Near sunset-time, just before I can see
The highest point, I purposely let go.
My rock responds and, thanks to gravity,
Takes its own way back to the plain below.
I follow willingly, our duties done,
And grateful that another day's in store,
And glad to think my rock and I are one
In labor and in meaning. Surely, more
Is not to be expected; surely we
Will have our task throughout eternity.

SERMON

Several years ago I developed a sermon series just before my summer vacation: - Question Box Sermon Sunday. I'd reached the time in the year when I didn't have too much to say, and very little time to say it. It was, frankly, an attempt to fulfill my preaching obligation without the rigors of preparation. Though, in a sense, all of my life was preparation for this congregational interrogation.

I would suggest a general question like: "What does it mean to be religious?" Then members of the congregation submitted questions written on a card. I tried to answer as many as time and capacity permitted. The sermon was totally spontaneous and unrehearsed. I'd say "I trust you will enjoy it as much as I hope to."

I think the congregation relished seeing their minister put on the spot – sans script, sans notes, with only a stool, a music stand and a stack of cards. It was challenging, if somewhat presumptuous, trying to boil down in a few well-honed sentences answers to questions that the sages of the ages have been grappling with without evident success.

Religion is about the ultimate questions and answers of life and death and what comes between: the questions that empty the room. These are the questions we don't ask or don't dare ask in our mostly casual conversations. In traditional catechisms questions are put to the learner, but the answers are right there to be memorized, believed, internalized. Perhaps some of you have grown up in such religious communities.

In Unitarian Universalism, we have no catechism, no creed; no specific answers to specific questions. We are essentially left on our own to develop both questions and answers. Of this we are quite proud. We do, however, get a little help from our friends, those who have gone before and those who sit next to us here and now. They, and we, seek the courage to question.

I think our minuscule size among American religions suggests this is not the way most people want their religion served. It is just too hard. It is simply too difficult to figure out the essential religious questions and then to answer them. This liberal religious faith of ours is not for the faint of heart or the lazy of mind.

We are called to question. Our questions build our faith. The happy thing is that we are all in this together. We are not alone.

Some have raised this question: Is to question really the answer? Is it enough to raise the questions if we do not have satisfactory answers for them?

What Unitarian Universalist minister has not quoted poet Rainer Maria Rilke in his Letters to a Young Poet?

“Be patient, toward all that is unsolved in your heart.
Try to love the questions themselves
Do not seek the answers which cannot be given
Because you would not be able to live them.
And the point is to live everything.
Live the questions now.
Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it,
Live along some distant day into the answers.”

You may recall the deathbed story about poet Gertrude Stein. Her partner, Alice B. Toklas, leaned over and whispered, “What is the answer, Gertrude?” Replied Stein, “What’s the question?”¹

I believe there are three kinds of questions that empty the room: mystical, theological and ethical. My responses to them are why I call myself a mystical religious humanist.

The first question that empties the room is mystical in nature: why is there something and not nothing? This question bewitches, bothers and bewilders me. I reject the idea of a Creator God who has personality or will. That just does not make sense, even though I grew up with a strong belief in a personal god and even preached a sermon at 14, bravely entitled “My Friend God.”

The silence of that God has moved me from youthful theism to seminary atheism to ministerial agnosticism. I have become a fanatic agnostic who says, “I don’t know – and you don’t know either!”

I am steeped in a philosophy of science that requires proof. I am immersed in a history of religion that has seen science and human experience strip away one false religious belief after another. Copernicus undermined the whole Ptolemaic universe by looking into a telescope and determining the earth revolved around the sun, not vice versa. Darwin’s evolutionary theory demolished Bishop Usher’s belief that creation dawned in 4004 B.C.E.

I defend evolution against creationism and its more sophisticated successor, Intelligent Design. I decry attempts of politicians to guide public policy with a pseudo science that comes from religious fundamentalists and threatens the future of the nation.

And yet. And yet. When I stand transfixed by a sunset over the west shore of Seneca Lake and enjoy the Great Blue Heron flyby while sitting on my dock; when I peer out over the multi-stratified Grand Canyon; when I observe a tiny baby become a human being who becomes my son; when I behold the heavens through even an amateur telescope or look at pictures of our blue-green earth ball from outer space, I am driven to wonder. I just can’t help myself.

I revel in the story of two scientists who isolated the quark as the most finite particle of matter. At the moment of discovery, looking through their microscope, they exclaimed, “My God. It’s beautiful.” God then becomes a kind of ejaculatory poetry of discovery.

I recall reading of a gathering of MIT professors of science some years ago at Woods Hole discussing the rewriting of science textbooks for elementary and high school students. The big question was, “At how

early an age dare we tell children that we are uncertain?" Honesty is worth something. Ignorance before the ultimate is no sin. And so I say, "Thank God, I'm agnostic!"

When I ask myself why is there something and not nothing, I am humbled by my ignorance. I haven't a clue. I simply rejoice in this incredible mystery. Here the question is quite simply unanswerable. So I call myself a mystic.

The second question that empties the room is illustrated by the story, very possibly apocryphal, of the skeptical minister whose doubt finally burst out one Sunday morning. After repeating the Lord's Prayer for the 4,000th time, he heard himself saying, not "Amen" but "So what?" There are times when I raise the same question, and I suspect you do too. What is "it" all about?

Here I repair to Albert Camus, the late French existentialist writer. In *The Stranger* his central character, in prison facing execution, opens himself to what Camus called the "benign indifference of the universe." The universe is not made explicitly for us, but we do find it basically good. In his novel *The Plague* Camus asks what he calls the ultimate philosophical question: "why live?" I identify with Camus, who retells the myth of Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to roll the great stone up the mountain, only to see it roll down again. He descends once more to lift that stone to the top. Camus concludes, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

I believe the twin questions "so what?" and "why live?" are utterly central to religious consciousness. Victor Frankl, the Viennese psychiatrist, found reasons for living even while near death in a concentration camp. He found meaning in the sheer feeling of being alive, in serving his fellow prisoners and even in enduring suffering. Carl Jung found that fractured meaning was the main cause of mental illness in the second half of life. People kill themselves because they can find no meaning in life.

To the question why live? I would speak a provisional "why not?" for it almost always beats the alternative of not having lived at all.

To the question "so what?" I would echo Camus, who said there were no inherent meanings in the universe for us to discover; rather we create our meanings in the day-to-day of our living. Religion is about growing the meanings by which we live. And so, I add the adjective religious to mystical – which brings me to humanism.

The third question that empties the room is this: how shall I live? Abraham Joshua Heschel reflected on the famous words from the prophet Micah, "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God?" Heschel noted this quintessential religious statement was in the form, not of a mandate, a command or an obligation, but of a question.²

Here is a question that demands an answer. While the question of why something and not nothing does not require and probably does not have an answer; and why the second question of human meaning is one about which we can speculate and differ, we really do have to respond to what we are going to do with our lives. We really have no choice. I have concluded that the Jews have it right with their ethical mandate to repair the world – *tikkun ha olam*.

I cannot unravel the mysteries of the cosmos, I cannot do more than posit reasons for living, but I am sure that one of my missions on earth is to ease the lot of those who suffer; struggle against the growing and glaring gaps between rich and poor; place the stubborn ounces of my weight on the side of those who are trying to treat the earth as a garden, and not a mine and speak truth to power. As our national political leaders grapple with budget issues, I feel compelled to speak as powerfully as I can for the vulnerable who

will be hurt with a budget that is all cuts and no taxes. The struggle in Washington for a budget is my struggle for justice, our struggle for justice.

I am utterly convinced that I owe to succeeding generations a decent environment, some semblance of peace, and some approximation of justice. While I'm not sure how merciful I ought to be, and while I have my doubts about God, I do know that I must invest my life in doing justice for the sake of those who live after me. And so I am a mystical, religious humanist.

Being able to engage the questions that empty the room, however, is not enough. It is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a faith. Though I would prefer humility in the face of unanswered questions to arrogance in the face of easy answers, I must at least be able to develop some provisional answers to the hard questions. That is one of the main functions of our faith, not to give glib answers to easy questions, but to struggle with hard questions that often have no answer. I have suggested at least some provisional answers. You will have to work out your own.

I confess I am tempted to repeat the answer composer John Cage gave to those who asked about the meaning of his music. "That is a very good question. I do not want to spoil it with an answer."³

These are the questions that empty the room. And it can get quite lonely here on the creative edge of things wrestling with questions that perhaps have no final answers, struggling with questions that have only tentative answers, dealing with questions that help shape the way we live our lives.

This attempt to present the questions that empty the room reminds me of the Roman Catholic bishop of Pittsburgh who broke open his fortune cookie at a Chinese restaurant and found this message: "Many a short question is evaded by a long answer." And so I must leave you with these words:

We are the askers of questions.
 It is we who wonder about the worlds beyond us
 and the worlds within.
 It is we, creatures of earth, who must ask why,
 The eternal question of why anything.
 Why are we at all?
 By what miracle were we born and to what mystery do we go?
 What is the meaning of our brief sojourn?

We fling our questions into the great beyond,
 Hoping beyond hope that someone, something,
 Somewhere will hear our cry and respond.
 We wonder hopefully in the great cosmic silence.
 Sometimes a still small voice responds –
 Coming from without or within we do not know.
 Sometimes we hear answers to our questions,
 Some hint that our lives are worthwhile,
 That it is good to ask even if we are not answered.
 Sometimes we sense the great cosmic approval that we belong here,
 That asking the questions is part of what it means to be human,
 That we are part of the answer ourselves.

¹ Gertrude Stein.

² See *A House for Hope*, p. 88.

³ John Cage. Afternote to *Lecture on Nothing*, from *Silence*.