

The Gift of Doubt: Wisdom

In her book, Welcome to the Wisdom of the World, Joan Chittister notes "Certainty is a blessing if it means that we know there is something beyond us, something worth seeking, something beyond either human arrogance or human desolation. On the other hand, certainty is a curse on the human race when it refuses to recognize, to respect, the equally sincere search of the world around it." The fourth principle of Unitarian Universalism states that "We affirm and promote A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Today, I explore the idea that a degree of doubt keeps the search alive and promotes community, while certainty closes us to new and different ideas, perhaps precludes relationships with people with different beliefs and potentially promotes acts of violence.

"Doubt" or uncertainty has been explored by authors/thinkers throughout history. A few examples include:

Voltaire (1694 -1798), "Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd."

Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), "For my part I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream."

Erich Fromm (1890-1980), "The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold his powers."

Saul Alinsky (1909-1972), "The human spirit glows from that small inner light of doubt whether we are right, while those who believe with certainty that they possess the right are dark inside and darken the world outside with cruelty, pain and injustice."

And contemporary productivity consultant, Tony Schwartz, "Let go of certainty, The opposite isn't uncertainty. It's openness, curiosity and a willingness to embrace paradox, rather than choose up sides."

Picking up on Saul Alinsky's view that certainty can lead to cruelty, pain and injustice, it seems to me that only people who have no doubt about the rightness of their views can participate in mass suicides and acts of terrorism. The 39 people of the Heaven's Gate UFO "religion" had to believe that their suicide in 1997 would bring them to the alien craft they believed was following a comet and would take them to the "next plane of existence." And similarly, the terrorists that flew the planes into the World Trade Centre had to believe, beyond a doubt, that they would go to a better place for their actions. Of course, other factors are involved such as charismatic leaders and mental health issues but the absence of doubt about their actions must be a significant factor.

On a more positive note, belief and doubt are not mutually exclusive. Recognizing the absence of empirical evidence for a belief and choosing to believe represents a more powerful commitment than an unexamined belief. The discomfort associated with challenges to a belief is more manageable when a belief has been chosen while weighing the evidence. Many people seem threatened by discussion of alternate beliefs, suggesting that their belief is fragile and they fear the loss of belief. The

question, "How do you know how to behave, if you don't believe in God." seems to represent such a fear. Doubt, on the other hand, allows for open examination of belief and the free and open exchange of ideas. And with doubt comes the realization that many people make ethical and moral choices in the absence of religious belief. In this way, doubt can be considered the lubricant for community.

In light of the value placed on the search, and on community, the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara "welcomes as members individuals of different religious beliefs ranging from explicit atheism through ranges of agnosticism to a committed belief in a transcendent power, be it envisioned as a traditional God, or goddess or a mystery beyond a literal language or imagination. The general idea is that we ought to be a caring and loving community not because we all believe the same thing, but regardless of the diversity of our faiths. The church is not the seat of a final truth that should be accepted, but rather a community of seekers." (From our website, www.unitarian-stcatharines.org)