

Questioning Faith

Reflections by Darin Kaeb, Jim Reid and Rev. Jackie Clement
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Reflection: Look, Listen, Repeat by Darin Kaeb

Think back in your life, have you ever knowingly questioned your faith and beliefs? Have you ever had a random event happen in your life that made you wonder why? If so do you feel like you ever got any answers? Or are you currently out there wondering what a 32 year old with no ministerial experience is doing talking about questioning faith? I know I was when the idea first came to me and I asked to help lead the service. But I will share with you from my own experience to see if you can tell when, why and how I questioned my faith and to show how I got my answers if I ever did.

I am an Army Brat with my mom's side mostly Catholic and my dad's side mostly Apostolic Christian. However I grew up with the choice to follow whatever religion I wished as long as I had faith. I also grew up believing everyone is created equal and should be treated as such. I believed that things happen for a reason and that the Lord works in strange and mysterious ways at times. With that I always had a hard time making and keeping friends sometimes getting bullied for standing up for what was right. So when my father had retired after 20 years of service the trick for me became keeping friends. By the time I was in the third grade, and done moving, I had three best friends and ways to keep them. Tiffany who I met in the first grade lived next door to my grandparents in New Jersey. So I always had an excuse to see her when visiting them. Tom I met in the second grade. Cubs Scouts, sports, his music lessons, my brother and his sister dating were all good reasons for us to keep in touch. And John who I met in the third grade, well church functions and charity events became our excuses to see each other.

A little over a month before I was to turn 17, I just got home from work to have a deep conversation with my parents and my brother. They had delivered the news to me that Tiffany had died. Devastated, depressed, and terrified after the conversation I had locked myself in my room and began to blast my music as loud as I could get it. I was suicidal and ready to die then and there. Before I could do so I questioned "What do I have to live for?" Instantly thoughts of my now oldest nephew and niece came to my mind. I calmed down and then began to think of other family and friends.

But I knew I needed to continue my goals in a different way. So I joined the Army National Guard as an infantry soldier. I knew the risk that could be involved but I thought that if I were to die at least it wouldn't be by my own hand and hopefully for a cause greater than myself. During my time in service I met Sara at Heartland Community College thanks to John. I fell in love with her so much, that when I got sent on active duty to Ft. Polk Louisiana I brought her down there and married her.

As my time on active duty, as well as my over all service was coming to a close, I tried to re-enlist on the active side and do the twenty years and retire. When my unit was to return to Illinois I skipped out on my "get out of rent free policy" just to be told by the recruiters that I could not

re-enlist when I had returned to their office. I was angered and confused when I had left their office asking “Why can’t I provide for my family the way I want?” Over the next couple of years, and a move back to Illinois, I found out within conversations that the three choices of duty station I had would have got me sent over seas and injured if not killed. After that I joked with Sara saying “I now know my place, but what is my purpose?”

Since my days at Heartland with John and Sara, family and friends have lovingly called me Mr. Psychologist, because even long after I was done with my schooling I could still understand and speak psychology. It wasn’t until after one of my fellow church members here told me that just talking to me filled a void in their life it then dawned on me. My purpose is just to be there for people in whatever way I can be.

Then came by biggest test. Sara was out of state, my father recently having had lung cancer removed and my brother calls me, devastation in his voice. I was prepared for the worse if something had happened to my father just to be run over by a Mack Truck when he told me Tom had died. Torn to shreds once again, I still managed to count what blessing I have. Family all helped each other, but I got a true testament back to my faith as well. People I had helped were helping me to keep going, and my church family here never fell short on love for me.

So what is the point of all this? Why share my story? Well when you questioned your faith did you ever look for or listen to your answers? Or are you now realizing you got answers to questions you didn’t even notice you asked? The answers may come in form of thought, thru a conversation, or by a random event. But the biggest thing I wish to stress is to just be there for people because you never know what answers you may hold for each other and like we will sing in the postlude, “We all need somebody to lean on.”

Reflection: A Leap of Faith by Jim Reid

My search to understand what matters in my life has played a major role in the evolution of my relationship to God. My family attended a Congregational church in Connecticut. When I was in seventh grade, I became upset that my Sunday school teacher was requiring us to memorize the Beatitudes and pass a test on them, even though I had no idea what their importance was. Meanwhile the minister had told the congregation that each of us has a direct relationship with God. I thought about this, then told my mother that I did not believe I should be tested on my knowledge of the Bible, since that was between God and me. My search for what mattered to me took the form of an inner search for God.

Only decades later did I realize that I was identifying God with the father I wanted to have, one who would give me guidance, rules for getting along with others, and support... one who would tell me what to do in life. My real father earned the money we needed, paid for my music lessons and college, grew vegetables, took us camping, all despite his significant heart problems. That was amazing. He gave guidance in yard work and repairing the house, but no guidance in how to deal with others, no rules, no discipline, no praise for my school work, and, most important for me, no recognition of my musical performances, including at state and national contests, on that time-honored classical instrument, the accordion. So I sought my mother's attention. She was unhappy and needed support. I learned to listen compassionately to her woes and I tried, vainly, to solve them. I dreamt that in return she would give me compassion and praise. But she

sincerely believed that I needed to be "put in my place," as she told me when she was 90. To praise me or show sympathy would only reinforce what I assume she saw as my pridefulness. Solely correction was appropriate. So I sought the attention she alone would give me, but at the price of feeling more and more guilty for making mistakes and failing to cure her unhappiness. From time to time I would turn back to my father, only to re-experience his silence, which I increasingly saw as a sign of his dissatisfaction with me. And so I went back and forth between my parents, failing to find guidance or love, doubting myself more and more, and concluding that no matter what success I had in school or music, it was never good enough.

One day during seventh grade, the doctor told us that my father had at most 2 years to live. Although my father survived two heart operations and died only ten years later, it became clearer and clearer that he would never become the ideal father I wanted. This changed my opinion of God. One summer, after I had studied algebra, a minister at a Congregational summer camp asked the boys in our cabin to write a letter to ourselves about our faith. He would send it to us at Christmas. I thought and thought, then concluded that God, my ideal father, was just man's attempt to understand infinity. He was a creation of man's imagination. I became an atheist. In reality I was mourning the death, not of God, but of my ideal father and my ideal self who would please him.

After seventh grade I began to seek a solution to my self-doubt. I turned away from reading fiction and playing classical music, both of which I loved, and chose, according to my mother's urging, to become a chemist and mathematician like my father. Unlike music and fiction, my father's field seemed to be rational and objective. It would give me a sense of certainty, I thought, that would free me from self-doubt. It also would help me repress my painful feelings, unlike fiction and music.

In college, however, a philosophy of science teacher assigned a paper on whether science was objective or subjective. I thought and thought, then wrote that science, my father's field, was neither totally objective nor totally subjective. Reason required that I should doubt rational distinctions like those in my father's field, but also those that had led me to deny the existence of God, to be an atheist. Clearly I was creating God in my imagination, but that did not prove that what I was imagining was totally subjective. There might be some truth in it. I became an agnostic.

Fortunately, as I rationally doubted rational distinctions, I began to listen to my own feelings and desires, rather than to what I imagined to be my father's or mother's. I admitted to myself that I hated working in chemistry labs and that I did not want to devote my life to mathematics. What then did I want to do? I wanted to teach, to help others. And what did I want to teach? Well, I had just come back from a summer in France with all kinds of romantic dreams, so I wanted to teach French.

In graduate school, my drive to rationally question rational distinctions found support in a theory, deconstruction. I applied this theory to novels in which narrators and characters search for what they want to do in life. I got a job at UCLA and began to write a book. But I kept doubting all my conclusions. I wrote, then questioned my logic, corrected what I wrote, rewrote, re-questioned, re-corrected, and on and on, until it I realized, in despair, that it was too late to finish

and publish the book I needed for tenure. I fell into despair that I might have to abandon the career that I wanted to pursue.

Paradoxically, this despair marked a positive turning point in my life. Once I had accepted that tenure at UCLA was impossible, I began to see a pattern in my writing and in the works I was reading. This pattern took the form of a story which began with a highly rational, self-questioning search to comprehend and control one's thoughts and actions. That search then ends in failure and despair. But despair then opens up to feelings and desires that make faith in oneself or in God possible. For the philosopher and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, the failure of self-reflection and the resulting despair lead to what he called a leap to faith in God and indirectly in oneself. For Blaise Pascal, the irrational leap from despair to faith in God is made possible by feelings: "The heart has its reasons," he said, "that reason does not know." For Marcel Proust's narrator, the despair of having failed to find meaning in life leads him to discover faith in his ability to write a fictional autobiography. The chance taste of a cake-like cookie that he had last eaten as a child suddenly enables him to remember and recreate through his imagination the way in which he once saw the world.

After leaving UCLA I began my own experience of an irrational and emotional leap to faith, not in God, but in myself and others. I have found a father who can give me guidance and a mother who can give me compassion. They have always existed, but within me. I alone can feel them, formulate them, live them, give them... with the wise counsel: of those who care for me and for whom I care; of Buddhist meditation; and of the values of this church.

Reflection: Questioning Faith by Rev. Jackie Clement

I remember walking through the parking lot of one of the first Unitarian Universalist churches I ever visited. A bumper sticker said, "Question Authority," and I knew I was home. It might as well have read "Question Faith," or even "Question Everything" since this is one of the principal motivating forces at work in our history, in our denominational DNA and in many of our individual faith journeys.

It is not at all a stretch to say that I would not be here this morning without having questioned the Presbyterian faith I was born to, without questioning the ideas of the divine that I learned in my childhood and youth. Without questioning I would most likely not be part of any religious community. It took no effort to know that I did not fit into the church of my childhood, but it did indeed require questioning to appreciate the good that I found there, to set aside what reason and experience could not reconcile and find something new, something that fit for me, to find Unitarian Universalism.

As Darin and Jim's reflections on their faith journeys highlighted, there are often distinct moments of discovery, sometimes driven by what others ask of us, sometimes by our own questions, frequently by the falls and heartaches life hands us. Both spoke about moments in their work lives when things took an unexpected twist that at first seemed like a blow but turned out to be a blessing. My own career path to this moment has had a few twists and turns. I meant to be an engineer, and I was for awhile. But the reasons I chose engineering had more to do with other people and what they wanted for me than what I felt called to myself. So then I meant to be a cook, and I was for awhile. But even though the reasons I chose cooking still seem like good

reasons, it did not fulfill the needs I had for my own happiness and growth. Ministry chose me, and like Unitarian Universalism, it is home for me.

But what do the bumps and turns of our career paths have to do with questioning faith? Simply this: what we believe and how we are in the world are not unrelated. The work we do to support ourselves and our families is as much a part of that as how we treat people, what faith community we choose to belong to or how we spend the money we make. What we choose to do, when we are lucky enough to have a choice, says a lot about who we are, what we value and hold as important.

And it is not a one way street. We spend a large chunk of our lives working, whether it is paid or volunteer, chosen or by necessity. What we encounter in those hours helps shape our values, our understanding of the world; helps form our sense of purpose, even if it is the knowledge that our purpose lies elsewhere.

If not for the curve balls our careers threw us, Darin, Jim and I would have missed valuable opportunities of discovery. Without these moments of awakening and years of seeking, we might, all three, have been in danger of losing the good that religious community offers along with the things that dampened our spirits. For it has been through questioning that we have clarified our values, come to understand what is of real value to us and have come to better see our place and purpose unfolding before us. Without such questioning I would not have come to whatever clarity of place and purpose I now hold. I would not have come to the Unitarian Universalist ministry that fills my spirit.

This is one of the things I most cherish about our tradition and about this church—that questioning is actively encouraged. My first experiences as a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation solidified my thinking about the nature of the divine since it was the first time I gave it any actual thought. Seminary dispelled anything I might have thought of as solid, and I am happy to say that my faith remains a fluid thing, not changing with the winds of popular fashion, but free to change as reason and conscience tempered by lived experience dictate. This is one of the hopes that I most cherish for us—that we remain a questing people, dedicated to accompanying each other along the way though our individual itineraries may differ.

Namaste.
Por lo tanto puede ser.

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