

Uncertainty and Faith

a sermon by Rev Jim Robinson

There are very few things in life that are certain. As the old proverb goes: “There are only two things in life that are certain: death and taxes.”

We live each day, not by certainty, but by probability. We will probably wake up tomorrow morning. We will probably still have our job. Our children will probably be healthy. But one day all probabilities fail. Nothing is forever – except change.

This high level of uncertainty makes life messy. Unexpected things go wrong and our careful plans fall apart. Two years ago our grown daughter became partially paralyzed for three weeks, due to a muscular virus. She is now 80% back to her former health. It made her life very messy and our lives anxious. Bad things happen to good people. Often there is no one to blame – just the probabilities of bad luck and good luck. And it happens to all of us. So we human beings feel anxious. We want safety, yet there are no guarantees – only probabilities.

We humans have trouble dealing constructively with this uncertainty. We try to avoid its harsh reality by negative coping strategies. Here are a few of them:

+We often feel shame. We think: “Other people don’t seem anxious, and they seem to have their act together. I must be less than them.”

+We try to sedate our self. When life seems too uncertain, and we start to panic, we grab for alcohol, drugs, over working, too much television, sex, too much or too little food, or what ever. We are all tempted by an addiction to one thing or another.

We blame other people for our own unhappiness. We cannot tolerate feeling uncertain and anxious, so we project our frustration onto someone else. “If they would only change, then I would be happy.”

+We adopt a rigid set of beliefs, either religious or secular, to give us an illusion of certainty. Yet, as Cliff Reed wrote: “The most dangerous thing in religion is certainty. It is certainty that causes you to despise people with beliefs different from your own.”

These are all strategies which, in the long run, cause more human misery. In the short run, they are a sedation (alleviating our anxiety), but in the long run they are damaging to human dignity. Any repressed anxiety will resurface later, often with greater force.

So, my friends, let’s face reality. In this world of impermanence, it is impossible to eradicate uncertainty. Uncertainty, messiness, and anxiety are part of the human condition, and instead of resisting them, we need to work with them in a positive manner.

To begin with, it seems to me, that there are two types of anxiety about uncertainty. One is realistic and one is not. Imagine that after chapel, a friend offers you a ride in her/his new sports car. She/he says: “Watch me hit sixty miles per hour in ten seconds along this crowded boulevard.” In this case, anxiety is realistic. The probabilities of having an accident are too high to tolerate. The uncertainty is too great, and we can do something about it. In this situation, anxiety is our friend - it causes us to act in a safer manner.

But often anxiety about uncertainty is not realistic. We are at a social gathering, and worry that people will find us boring. We are at the air port, and become terribly anxious that our plane will crash. We feel an ache in our body and immediately think we must have cancer. Now in the great uncertainty of life, it is possible that someone may find you boring, your plane might crash, and you could get cancer. But to be paralyzed because life is uncertain is not helpful to us or anyone else.

However, there is a gift in this unrealistic anxiety. The noted psychiatrist, Harry Stack Sullivan, wrote: “The areas in our personality marked by anxiety often become the areas of most significant growth when...the individual can deal with his or her underlying anxiety constructively.” In short, anxiety is an opportunity to grow into a deeper human being. Instead of saying: “I must not feel this – it makes me a bad person,” we can say: “Here is my anxiety inviting me to grow.” At the social gathering, we can feel the anxiety and still reach out in conversation. At the airport, we can feel the anxiety and still get on the plane. If we can tolerate the uncertainty and anxiety of life, then we have greater flexibility to make positive choices. Doing this, we grow into a fuller human being.

To meet anxiety and uncertainty with an open heart and open mind, and to respond in a constructive manner, requires a mature faith. What is mature faith from a Unitarian Universalist perspective?

Faith is not the absence of anxiety. Faith is not a desperate attempt to control life and end all uncertainty. Faith is not having a “stiff upper lip” while we forge ahead in life, trampling on other people’s feeling, and our own as well. Faith is not a rigid belief system to hide behind or judge others with.

Faith is the inner knowing that no matter what happens in life, we are loved and can grow into a fuller human being. Faith is the inner knowing that no matter what happens, we can always reach out to help another human being. Faith is the inner knowing that no matter what happens, there is a Power greater than human here to guide us and comfort us. There is a larger spiritual context in which we place our little life.

Life is uncertain - we cannot change that. But we can change our response to it. No matter what happens, down to our final breath, we can love and be loved, serve and be served, being grateful for the miracle of life.

Faith, from a UU perspective, is not a creed or dogma. It is a way of living in the world. I met a Unitarian Minister in Romania, Ferenz Balanz, who expressed his Unitarian faith in these words:

“This world is wonderful, enormous, full of miracles ... astonishing and mysterious, and when I am filled with it to the brim, when infinitely it overwhelms me, its immediacy lifts me up, its joyousness elates me, then it bubbles up in me: God. Don’t ask me what that word means ... to me it is like the sigh of the sufferer, like the “Oh!” of the astounded ... it expresses everything because it says nothing. I don’t get into arguments. I don’t declare. I don’t attest. I am not consistent. I don’t cite reasons. I just keep sighing, crying, rejoicing, keep burning with fervor: God.”

This is not the faith of a naïve man. Our older Unitarian ministers in Transylvania faced many hardships. Several have described to me what it was like to be forced into a hard labor camp by the communists for their Unitarian ideals. This is not the faith of a romantic, but a realist, who says: “No matter what happens in the uncertainty of life, I can love and be loved, I can serve and be served, I can sing, cry, sigh, and rejoice “God”.

Faith gives us a spiritual centre. The centre of a healthy faith is not in controlling behavior. It is not in being rigid or judgmental. A healthy faith is expressed in loving kindness. As the Dalai Lama once said: “My religion is loving kindness”. And Jesus kept on loving whether he got good luck or bad luck. A flexible spiritual faith is not about easy or hard, good luck or bad luck – it is about love, humility, kindness.

When we meet someone with such a faith it inspires us. I received word this week about the death of a man named Alan, who was a member of my former church. He lived a long life, but I want to tell you just about the last five years of it. His wife had died, his children were grown, and he was aged. So Alan went into a nursing home. He did not have significant memory loss, but he was frail and needed a wheel chair.

First he decorated his room. He made it a room about hope and beauty, not despair. He was wheeled every morning to the day care centre next door, where he read stories to children. He became known as “Uncle Alan”. He did not complain about his condition. When his grown children visited, he enjoyed them but did not burden them. I am not sure if Alan was a theist or humanist or both, but he was a person of faith. He did not need to argue about religion or profess his beliefs. Instead, he quietly lived them. In the uncertainty of life, in his final years of aged disability, he knew: “I am loved and will love others, I will serve and be served, I will be grateful for the miracle of life.”

How do learn such a faith? It comes to us from the examples of other people, famous like Mother Theresa or unknown like Alan, but most of all (in the Unitarian tradition) it comes from our own experience.

We see colors in a flower – and we know there is beauty;

We see the bus driver patiently doing his job – and we know there is integrity;

We listen to a beautiful piece of music – and we know there is inspiration;

We hold a hand – and we know there is love;

We visit someone in the hospital – and we know there is compassion;

We apologize – and we know there is forgiveness;

We sit in chapel – and we know there is community;

We attend an AA meeting – and we know there is redemption;

We see a child – and we know there is hope;

Faith is a way of living. It is loving kindness, which accepts uncertainty as a friend.

Meditation

We join now in a time of meditation. I invite you to sit comfortably with your eyes open or closed as you wish. After a minute of quiet, I will invite you into a time of contemplation.

I invite you to contemplate several questions.

What uncertainties and anxieties are bothering you in your life?

Pick one uncertainty or anxiety to think about?

What is it?

In this dilemma, how can you love and be loved more fully?

In this dilemma, how can you serve and be served more fully?

How can you grow into a deeper human being?

Let us join in the spirit of prayer

To the Spirit of beauty, integrity, inspiration, love, compassion,
forgiveness, community, redemption, and hope ...

To this one Spirit we call God, knowing that word can never be
big enough ...

We pray:

In the uncertainty of life

With the anxieties we feel

Help us to choose loving kindness

Not romantically, but realistically

In this messy world of good luck and bad luck

Help us to choose loving kindness

For our self and all beings

Amen