

Living the Questions – “Faith and Doubt” - November 2012

QUESTIONS

Does faith without doubt prohibit growth?

Does doubt without faith lead to groundlessness?

What do you sacrifice, and what might you gain, by being willing to ask hard questions that challenge your own beliefs?

Does our call to ask questions and reverence for doubt make it hard for us to claim faith?

Do you consider yourself a “person of faith” and what does that mean for you?

QUOTATIONS & EXCERPTS

In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few.

—Shunryu Suzuki

Doubt is the beginning, not the end, of wisdom.

—George Iles

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

—Hebrews 11:1

There are two ways to slide easily through life: to believe everything or to doubt everything. Both ways save us from thinking.

—Alfred Korzybski, linguist & mathematician

The ability to question, the ability to take a skeptical position, is absolutely central to my understanding of myself and my understanding of myself as a religious person. It's very important to experience doubt. I think faith without doubt is just either nostalgia or a kind of addiction. And I'm not interested in that.

—Mary Gordon, writer on contemporary Catholic life

You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is like an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.

— Mahatma Gandhi

All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Therefore, dear Sir, love your solitude and try to sing out with the pain it causes you. For those who are near you are far away... and this shows that the space around you is beginning to grow vast.... be happy about your growth, in which of course you can't take anyone with you, and be gentle with those who stay behind; be confident and calm in front of them and don't torment them with your doubts and don't frighten them with your faith or joy, which they wouldn't be able to comprehend. Seek out some simple and true feeling of what you have in common with them, which doesn't necessarily have to alter when you yourself change again and again; when you see them, love life in a form that is not your own and be indulgent toward those who are growing old, who are afraid of the aloneness that you trust.... and don't expect any understanding; but believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance, and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat and death.

—Nelson Mandela

Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.

— Paul Tillich

But there were some things I believed in. Some things I had faith in. And faith isn't about perfect attendance to services, or how much money you put on the little plate. It isn't about going skyclad to the Holy Rites, or meditating each day upon the divine. Faith is about what you do. It's about aspiring to be better and nobler and kinder than you are. It's about making sacrifices for the good of others - even when there's not going to be anyone telling you what a hero you are.

— Jim Butcher

“When you’re unsure of yourself, when you start pulling back into doubt and small living, she’s the one inside saying, ‘Get up from there and live like the glorious girl you are.’ She’s the power inside you, you understand?”

- From The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd

Yes, Kālāmas, it is proper that you have doubt, that you have perplexity, for a doubt has arisen in a matter which is doubtful. Now, look you Kālāmas, do not be led by reports, or traditions, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, not by the delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, not by the idea: 'this is our teacher'. But, O Kālāmas, when you know for yourself that certain things are unwholesome, and wrong, and bad, then give them up... And when you know for yourself that certain things are wholesome and good, then accept them and follow them.

— The Buddha

Not All There

I turned to speak to God,
About the world's despair;
But to make bad matters worse,
I found God wasn't there.

God turned to speak to me
(Don't anybody laugh)
God found I wasn't there—
At least not over half.

- Robert Frost

Originally written in Middle English, "The Cloud of Unknowing" documents techniques used by the medieval monastic community to build and maintain a contemplative knowledge of God. Scholars date the anonymous authorship of Cloud of Unknowing to 1375, during the height of European monasticism. The work embraces the reader with a maternal call to grow closer to God through meditation and prayer. —Christian Classics Ethereal Library:

BUT now thou askest me and sayest, "How shall I think on Himself, and what is He?" and to this I cannot answer thee but thus: "I wot not."

For thou hast brought me with thy question into that same darkness, and into that same cloud of unknowing, that I would thou wert in thyself. For of all other creatures and their works, yea, and of the works of God's self, may a man through grace have fullhead of knowing, and well he can think of them: but of God Himself can no man think. And therefore I would leave all that thing that I can think, and choose to my love that thing that I cannot think. For why; He may well be loved, but not thought. By love may He be gotten and holden; but by thought never. And therefore, although it be good sometime to think of the kindness and the worthiness of God in special, and although it be a light and a part of contemplation: nevertheless yet in this work it shall be cast down and covered with a cloud of forgetting. And thou shalt step above it stalwartly, but Mistily, with a devout and a pleasing stirring of love, and try for to pierce that darkness above thee. And smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love; and go not thence for thing that befalleth.

Excerpt from the screenplay of Doubt by John Patrick Shanley, playwright:

[Catholic priest conducting Mass]

What do you do when you're not sure? That's the topic of my sermon today. Last year, when President Kennedy was assassinated, who among us did not experience the most profound disorientation? Despair? Which way? What now? What do I say to my kids? What do I tell myself? It was a time of people sitting together, bound together by a common feeling of hopelessness.

But think of that! Your BOND with your fellow being was your Despair. It was a public experience. It was awful, but we were in it together. How much worse is it then for the lone man, the lone woman, stricken by a private calamity? 'No one knows I'm sick.' 'No one knows I've lost my last real friend.' "No one knows I've done something wrong." Imagine the isolation. Now you see the world as through a window. On one side of the glass: happy, untroubled people, and on the other side: you.

I want to tell you a story. A cargo ship sank one night. It caught fire and went down. And only this one sailor survived. He found a lifeboat, rigged a sail...and being of a nautical discipline...turned his eyes to the Heavens and read the stars. He set a course for his home, and exhausted, fell asleep.

Clouds rolled in. And for the next twenty nights, he could no longer see the stars. He thought he was on course, but there was no way to be certain. And as the days rolled on, and the sailor wasted away, he began to have doubts. Had he set his course right? Was he still going on towards his home? Or was he horribly lost... ..and doomed to a terrible death? No way to know.

The message of the constellations - - had he imagined it because of his desperate circumstance? Or had he seen truth once...and now had to hold on to it without further reassurance?

There are those of you in church today who know exactly the crisis of faith I describe. And I want to say to you: *Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty.* When you are lost, you are not alone.