

Questions, Answers, and Hunches

A Conversational Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones ~ UU Society of Sacramento, Sunday, July 30, 2023

Hymns #1024, When the Spirit Says "Do," #175 We Celebrate the Web of Life, #298 Wake Now, My Senses

Beth asked: Which one (or two) of the banners hanging in our sanctuary most speaks to you?

The banners around the walls were created by members of the congregation and hung in the early 1980s, and they reflected many of the religious traditions of the world. In 2015 after our building renovation, a group of members put new backings on them and created a few new ones, including earth-based spirituality, one for freedom from oppression, and one celebrating the arts. We had a rededication ceremony too. This question caused me to spend some time reading the posters on the wall in the back of the sanctuary. The summary descriptions of them are quite eloquent. You can pick up a copy of it here in the library/bookstore. I like them all, especially the colorful ones, but the most memorable is the blank banner. It represents our openness to individual perspectives on religious meaning and to insights yet to come.

Erin asked: How can I be tolerant of all (traditional) religions when they espouse so many values which I find offensive, such as homophobia, sexism, American exceptionalism, and (currently) authoritarianism?

Tell me when you figure it out! I find those values offensive too. But I think it's important to recognize the diversity in every religion. On the Christian spectrum, there are many mainline and traditional churches which work for gender equity and are trying to end homophobia, transphobia. American exceptionalism and authoritarianism are dangerous aspects of Christian nationalism, which to me is more about power politics than it is about Christian values.

But if we end up in the unfortunate situation of having to listen to someone from such a group, I think we have two choices: one is to hear them and then tell them the values that guide us cause us to disagree with them. We believe in human dignity, respect, fairness, love of one's neighbor, and human freedom. We are not afraid of democracy or diversity. But if they are not curious enough to have a conversation, our other choice is to ignore them and make sure to support our values when we vote.

Linda asked: What are you going to do during your five-month sabbatical?

A sabbatical is a gift from a congregation to give its clergy some paid time for rest, renewal, and doing things that the busy pace of church life doesn't allow. Thank you! In September I'll co-lead a 16th century Unitarian heritage tour to Poland with the Rev. Dr. Jay Atkinson, who has led earlier tours. Two UUSS members will join us; more welcome. In addition to this and other travel, I plan to catch up my reading, meditate, pray, and maybe take a course in something creative. I forgot to add that I need to take time to create a will and trust document so my assets go to places and causes I support rather than to next of kin, who don't need it and whose values are not the same as mine. No more procrastinating for me!

John asked: If you hadn't become a UU minister, what would you be doing and what would your life be like?

In college I had a lot of interests, but I didn't have a lot of confidence in myself to pursue them. I was interested in economics and good in Spanish, and I liked languages in general. I might have gone to grad school in Latin American studies, otherwise. I thought about going to law school and took the test for it (LSAT) but half-heartedly. I didn't understand all the ways a person could use a law degree, so I couldn't see myself in that field. Also, I thought the amount of reading in law school would have killed me. I received encouragement from professors and academic counselors toward various graduate pursuits, but still didn't think I was up to it. I was my own worst enemy. I loved journalism in high school and edited the school paper. In college I was a newspaper reporter for two semesters on the Indiana University Daily Student. But the weekly deadlines made me terribly anxious, and I thought I'd never get better.

After getting an English degree and an MBA in finance, my first career was in Illinois State Government. (So if I had not switched out of that to pursue the ministry, I might be retired with a pension right now.) Thanks to my UU church involvement, I soon started thinking about the ministry. I had the same lack of confidence about that also, but over the years I raised my concerns with a lot of ministers. They provided good advice and encouragement. Also, volunteering with UU congregations gave me a chance to try out various parts of the role, so my confidence grew, and I finally took the seminary plunge in 1993, graduating in 1997.

Judy asked: What do you say when someone asks if you believe in God?

I would say that I don't know. It might depend on the context—who is asking, and why. But since you are asking my answer is that I try to speak and act as if there is a Source of Love that transcends all of us and who lures us toward love and courage. I act as if I believe in Divine Spirit that cares for us and cares for me, and I turn over my will and invite God's guidance. I don't think it matters if there is a God or not, so long as I realize that it is not me.

Jim asked: What is the best place in Sacramento for a spiritually deepening meal?

Uh, Gunther's Ice Cream. Actually, I like a lot of cuisines and restaurants, and tend to visit those with vegetarian options. I'm grateful for the cultural diversity of our restaurants. Near this church are Afghan, Middle Eastern, Japanese, and Ethiopian places, plus upscale places that focus on seasonal ingredients. What makes a meal spiritually deepening is the authenticity of the conversation. Also, it's important to me to reflect on the connections that each dish represents—the geographical sources of the ingredients, the workers who grow and harvest the food, those who transport it, and those who prepare it and then serve it to me. Every meal can provide a spiritual reflection on our interconnectedness.

Elizabeth asked: Please talk about religious or spiritual beliefs versus direct experiences.

People of different religious beliefs can have very similar spiritual experiences. For example, a non-theist or an agnostic may be moved by an experience in a forest or in the mountains, and so may a Christian or a Jew, but each of them would say different things about how it expresses their framework of beliefs. In both cases, the experience may be humbling or inspiring, or both.

Joyce asked:

How often does UUSS redo our strategic plan? Does it have to be approved by any UU body, or is it just for our congregation? Who works on it? Who keeps track of how we are doing?

Our current five-year strategic plan will carry us through 2025. The plan was the result of a process over several months; members and friends came together for conversations that were facilitated by a Strategic Planning Team. After narrowing down the goals, the plan was approved by vote at a Congregational Meeting. We had the support of some UUA denominational staff members in this process, but the plan was our own creation. So it's up to us to keep track of how we are doing—in particular the Board of Trustees and the Program Council.

A strategic plan is a good idea for a congregation that has a lot of interests and activities. It helps us to set priorities. You can find it on our website under [Board Board of Trustees](#).

Dan asked: What is your favorite book, and why?

A recent wonderful read was [Like a Complete Unknown](#), a novel by our own Anara Guard. I've been influenced by a lot of books, but I can't claim one as a favorite. For nonfiction, I like history, especially religious history. But a few of the novels that have shaped me include *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain; *Midnight's Children*, by Salman Rushdie; *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood, which feels too relevant in these reactionary times.

My favorite things to read are magazines and newspapers. I subscribe to about 10 magazines including *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Sojourners*, and the *New York Review of Books*. During my sabbatical I actually hope to read some of them. *(I didn't actually get to answer this at church.)*

Note:

Roger drafted these answers to think about the questions in advance but did not read these aloud; after the service he edited these to add a few things he had forgotten to say when answering in person. A few other questions are not here; they were asked live and Roger gave answers that were off the cuff.