

Let the Mystery Be

Readings 'Tonight' by Agha Shahid Ali
 'Quiet Grass, Green Stone' by Dean Young
 'Mysteries, Yes' by Mary Oliver

Have you heard of the man they called 'The Great Agnostic?' His name was Robert Ingersoll. He was a lawyer, a lecturer, and a Civil War veteran who fought at Shiloh. He lectured widely across this country in the last decades of the nineteenth century on topics related to religion, science, and reason. In an era when public lectures were a major source of entertainment, he was among the most entertaining. He was regarded as one of the best English language orators of his time. Some said he could have been president, had his subject matter been different, but he was unwilling to compromise his convictions. Robert Ingersoll was an agnostic evangelist, spreading the word, sharing the truth as he understood it, sharing that he was unsure about the existence of God.

People's people are more inclined than most to know about Robert Ingersoll. I've seen a few of you nod your heads already. His story is intertwined with this congregation's story. Robert Ingersoll was a personal hero of Roger Greeley, who was the minister of this congregation from 1957 to 1985. Roger was a reenactor of Ingersoll. He would dress up like him and travel around giving presentations as him. Roger also edited a book of Ingersoll's writings and speeches. I've known People's people who were here during the Greeley years to quote Ingersoll or use his writings as opening words in small gatherings here. Ingersoll's legacy lives here.

But the story of Robert Ingersoll and People's Church goes back even further. In 1896, Ingersoll was passing through Kalamazoo on a speaking tour. Rev. Caroline Bartlett Crane, the minister of People's Church at the time, ask to meet with him. After some persuasion, he agreed to let her show her the church and talk about its programs, which included the first kindergarten in town. Church members were also in the midst of conducting a detailed study on social welfare in the city, working with a sociologist from the University of Chicago. At the end of their conversation, Crane told Ingersoll, 'I believe in God and immortality and prayer but I grant perfect freedom to every member of the church to believe what is believable to [them.] If I could stand your prayerlessness, Colonel Ingersoll, could you stand my prayer?' Ingersoll responded, 'Yes, if all churches were like this – free, always open and working to make people better every day—I would never say one word against churches or religion. If I lived here, I would join this church, if it would receive me.'

Later that night, during his lecture, he said even more, '[People's Church] is the grandest thing in your state, if not the United States. If there were a similar church near my home, I would join it.' The Great Agnostic called our ancestors in this community the grandest thing in Michigan. That is quite amazing.

This story was picked up in national newspapers, with people proclaiming the conversion of 'The Great Agnostic.' People didn't understand a church like this one, that doesn't have uniformity of belief. Many people still don't understand how we can be a religious community when we don't believe the same. Then, Crane was bombarded by people wanted to learn more about how she converted him, while other faith leaders called People's Church heretical. Of course, there was standing room only at the church the

next Sunday as Crane described the fellowship of the church as wide enough to welcome all who wish to be good and do good.¹

Back to Ingersoll and his agnosticism. In describing his views, he wrote, 'Let us be honest with ourselves. In the presence of countless mysteries, standing beneath the boundless heaven sown thick with constellations; knowing that each grain of sand, each leaf, each blade of grass, asks of every mind the answerless question; knowing that the simplest thing defies solution; feeling that we deal with the superficial and the relative; and that we are forever eluded by the real, the absolute, let us admit the limitations of our minds, and let us have the courage and the candor to say: we do not know.'² Let us have the courage and the candor to say we do not know. That is a powerful idea that echoes across the ages.

Robert Ingersoll was among the first generation of people to call themselves agnostic. The idea of agnosticism, of uncertainty about the existence of God, has existed since people evolved the ability to wonder about the holy. Religious and philosophical writings that predate the birth of Jesus by centuries make agnostic arguments. The word agnostic itself is much newer – celebrating its 150th anniversary this year.

Thomas Huxley, an English biologist who earned the nickname "Darwin's bulldog" for his spirited defense of evolution, created the word agnostic in 1869. He explained that the formulation of his word for uncertainty about the existence of God was in response to the Gnostics, an ancient Greek sect that claimed to have special knowledge about the nature of God, that took their name from the Greek word for knowledge, gnosis. As Huxley claimed no special knowledge about the existence of God, he identified as a-gnostic, or agnostic.³ The word spread into common usage quickly – less than a decade later Robert Ingersoll was proudly proclaiming his agnostic identity to anyone willing to pay his speaking fee.

It's hard to be agnostic in this world and in this culture that so values certainty. Robert Ingersoll aside, agnostics tend to keep a low profile. They can be found in all religious communities and faith traditions, as well as among the secular. They tend not to identify themselves so it's hard to get a sense of who they are. In a 2012 survey, The Pew Research Center found that about three percent of the US population identifies as agnostic.⁴ I trust that the percentage in this room is much much higher than that. Still, in my experience as your minister, I've found that the agnostics tend not to identify themselves as readily as the atheists and those who believe in some sort of higher power. That puzzles me, but it is in keeping with larger patterns.

Agnostics are not particularly organized – at least on their own. They don't have explicitly and exclusively agnostic organizations, as far as I can tell, as far as google searches could show. And who could blame them for keeping a low profile? Disdain for agnostics seems to unite many of those who are certain about God's existence – certain that God exists and certain that God doesn't. Atheists sometimes consider

¹ Rickard, O'Ryan. *A Just Verdict: The Life of Caroline Bartlett Crane*. Kalamazoo: New Issues Press, 1994. Pages 81-3.

² Rinaldo, Peter M. *Atheists, Agnostics, and Deists in America: A Brief History*. Briarcliff Manor, NY: DorPete Press, 2000. Page 87

³ Le Podevin, Robin. *Agnosticism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010. Kindle Edition Loc. 552-5

⁴ "'Nones" on the Rise.' Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life. October 9, 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

agnostics “lazy atheists,” people who can’t be bothered to make up their mind, people trying to chart some nonexistent middle path, people trying to please everyone and consequently pleasing no one, people lacking the courage and candor to declare themselves atheists. An opinion that is shared among many God or Gods-believing folks is exemplified in this description of the views of Catholic historian Hugh Ross Williamson who “respected the committed religious believer and also the committed atheist. He reserves his contempt for the wishy-washy boneless mediocrities who flapped around in the middle.”⁵ Lazy, cowardly, wishy-washy boneless mediocrities. Those are some harsh words. No wonder agnostics don’t always make themselves known.

So what is agnosticism, exactly?

There are two kinds of agnosticism – weak agnosticism and strong agnosticism. Weak agnosticism is a personal claim, an individual statement of faith – or lack of faith. Weak agnosticism is simply proclaiming “I don’t know if there is a God or Gods or not.” It can be a temporary state, one that could change over time, with new knowledge or new experience. It might be a lifelong state. Some weak agnostics spend their whole lives uncertain about the existence of a higher power. Weak agnosticism makes no claims about what other people should or shouldn’t believe and no claims about humanity’s ability to know about the existence of God.

In contrast, there is strong agnosticism. In addition to stating, “I don’t know if there is a God or Gods or not,” a strong agnostic would add “and it is impossible for any human being to be certain about this.” Strong agnosticism is not about the limits of an individual’s understanding, but about the limit of humanity’s capacity to know. Strong agnostics assert that people cannot possibly know if there is a God, because we do not have the ability to know that. Our understanding is too limited. We might think that there is or is not a God in our limited realm of understanding. Strong agnostics urge us all to have the courage and the candor to say we do not know.

We live in a time when certainty is demanded in matters of faith and politics. There are religious fundamentalists proclaiming that they have access to the one and only truth. There are secularists and atheists who are equally certain in their convictions. In our politics, we too often act as though changing one’s mind is an indication of poor character. As if uncertainty or recognition of our own limitations are something to be ashamed of. Our Unitarian Universalist tradition boldly proclaims our right to change our mind religiously, to keep growing into new understandings of the nature of the world and our role in it.

Strong agnosticism and the recognition of the limitations of human capabilities that it is based on is a powerful, necessary voice in Unitarian Universalism – and more broadly. As we engage in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning, we would do well to recognize our own limited capacities to know. There are things about the holy, the universe, human nature, that we don’t know, that we presently don’t have the capacity to know, that we might never be able to know. Those of us who believe in a higher power of some sort are often agnostic about aspects of the divine. What is the nature of the holy? How could a loving and powerful God allow evil in the world? Where is the divine when bad things happen to good people? Many of us struggle to answer those questions – and perhaps we lack the capacity to ever be able to answer those questions.

It is no different for those of us whose primary understanding of the world comes from science and reason. What happened before the big bang? Is there life on other planets? We humans lack the capacity to

⁵ Le Podevin, loc. 316-8

answer these questions right now. Things might change in the future, as humans discover more about our universe, but for now, "I don't know – and we can't know" is the best we can do.

We—and the world—would be well served to follow the examples of our strong agnostic friends, neighbors, and fellow congregants and recognize our own limitations and not claim more knowledge than we possess. We need not fear the limits of our minds or view our limits as a short-coming. They are simply part of the human experience. This is not to say that we should proclaim uncertainty about topics in which there is a scientific consensus, like vaccines and climate change. We should trust the teachings of science – and recognize that science presently cannot answer all of our questions. Many of our most profound questions simply cannot be answered definitively right now.

What if we follow the advice of the song we heard earlier, that Darryl sang so beautifully? What if we recognize that 'But no one knows for certain and so it's all the same to me I think I'll just let the mystery be?' There is something powerful and almost liberating in naming, as the poets do in the poems we heard earlier, satisfaction with partial explanations, and keeping distance from those who think they have the answers – or that part of ourselves that thinks it has the answers. There is something powerful in recognizing the truth spoken by Jack Miles, author and religion scholar, that 'religion is a ritualized confession of ignorance.' I'm going to say that again, that 'religion is a ritualized confession of ignorance.' That phrase has stuck with me and echoes in my mind and my heart. What if what we are doing, is partly coming together to remember what we are certain about – and all that we don't know? That's a really powerful idea. We proclaim love and justice and the dream of beloved community and our own limitations. What if we are coming together in part, to remember to let the mysteries be?

Today, in this day that we let the agnostics take center stage for once, I suggest that it would serve all of us gathered today – atheists, agnostics, theists, and those for whom these labels don't quite fit – to be a little more agnostic. To speak – and live – with courage and candor about our own limitations, what we as individuals and we as a collective do not know and cannot possibly know. Let us be honest with ourselves. Let us ignore demands for certainty about things that we do not know and cannot possibly know. Let us view changing one's mind as a virtue and not a shortcoming. Let us name the answerless questions and mysteries in our lives. Let us follow where our free spirits lead. Let us puzzle and question and imagine. Let us search and search again without losing hope. Let us ultimately, admit the limitations of our minds, and let the mystery be.

May we continue to ask the big questions, recognizing we may never know the answers. May we have the courage and the candor to say we do not know. May we follow the star of truth wherever it leads us. May we let the mystery be. May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.