

Doubt

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I heard this song (references to a song that was played during the Offering..."Wondering where the Lions Are" by Bruce Cockburn) many years ago and liked it right away. To me this song is talking about how when we face a new challenge we seem to always fear the worst. As we get closer to the actual event our doubts grow stronger and stronger. Yet, often times, after we've faced our particular challenge we are, almost always, relieved that things were not as bad as we thought they would be..."Wonder where the Lions are...weren't as frightening as they were before". I've often thought of these words as I face a new challenge. I believe this is probably something we have all experienced.

Here's what a UU minister had to say about this song:

Funny how some songs change their meanings as one gets older. I have always liked this song. I now see the lions as the great prophets, like Gandhi, King, Emerson, Parker, and others whose words challenge us to live our lives differently. "They were not as frightening as they were before. Some kind of ecstasy got a hold on me"... Once we know and understand their message, the fear of their challenge fades away. Where are they now? Who will be seen as the prophets of this age?

But then Bruce Cockburn says the song was in reference to a nuclear war threat between China and Soviet Union but every good poet knows, that the reader / hearer adds their own meaning to the words. Blessings,

I had a very difficult time coming up with the title for this talk. My first choice was "The Courage to Doubt". But, I found out someone published a book with that title and I didn't want to get sued for copyright infringement so I decided to come up with a different title. I found it difficult to come up with a short descriptive title so I settled on simple title "Doubt".

However, this is really just some ruminations about Doubt. So, let's begin.

Many of us here have gotten college degrees in various subjects or have worked in our field of choice long enough to be called an “Expert”.

But, there’s one field that none of us majored in, or worked in, but most of us are experts in “The art of Doubt”.

I think there are two types of doubt – First there is doubt in ourselves, our abilities, our self-confidence, and then there’s doubt about our beliefs like politics and religion.

First, let me take a few minutes to firmly establish my credentials as a “semi-professional” doubter.

I personally can’t remember doubting much before I was 17 or so but I can say for certain that I’ve doubted every major, and minor, decision I’ve made since then. I actually feel like an expert in the field of “doubt”. It used to bother me that I doubt things so much. In fact it now seems to be my natural inclination to doubt that I can achieve a certain goal or what I’ve been told or read. Typically, when I hear something new I do some research on the subject before forming my final opinion. It’s become such a habit that I now actually enjoy the art of doubting.

I also enjoy, sort of, overcoming personal doubt. I agonize over every new challenge that I’m presented. I used to think that it was a fundamental flaw in my character but now I believe that it’s simply human nature to have doubts about new situations. It’s a sensible form of self-preservation to have doubts about taking on a new task or getting involved in a new situation. For instance, 40,000 years ago it would be very judicious to stop for a few minutes to contemplate the consequences of attacking a sabre tooth tiger with your club. Your doubt about challenging it with your club maybe well founded. You can think, well I was able to successfully bring down that armadillo with this club but, will I be as successful if I attempt the same thing with this sabre tooth tiger. This, obviously, is a new situation, a new task, one that would tax your capabilities. So, a moment of doubt many actually save your life!

Well, today we’re not placed into that type of decision making but we are often faced with tasks that challenge our capabilities. Getting married, having children, choosing a career, deciding to apply for that new job or change your religious affiliation.

There are so many challenges we face during our lives we literally can't count them all. Some of us shrink from some of these challenges and as a consequence live lives full of discomfort, as the line in the Pink Floyd song "Time" says "hanging on in quiet desperation" or the line in another Bruce Cockburn song that says "the trouble with normal is it only gets worse". Others welcome new challenges and actually are energized by them.

While, I believe, there is yet another class of people that don't view anything as a challenge. They are so full of confidence that they are unafraid to undertake any new opportunity. Now, there are not many people out there like that and I'll simply refer you back to the man with a club if he was completely unafraid of attacking that sabre tooth tiger with a club.... That DNA strand got thinned out a bit over the years!

Our main challenge is to find techniques to help us deal with our doubts.

Often times we may find that support from family and friends is helpful for the small challenges you face, but the big challenges, the ones that tax your soul to your very core.

I've accepted many job advancements where I seriously doubted my personal capabilities but I knew that if I could keep from immediately screwing things up I could get a firm grasp on the new job and be successful with the supporting help from those around me.

However, there are times where you have accepted a task that challenges your capabilities and you have no one to support you...you are truly on your own.

Giving a presentation or speech is a great example of a challenge where you're truly on your own. You must muster all the inner strength you have and walk out in front of your audience and perform. You're on your own.

I've had many moments of great personal doubt. And I don't believe I've dodged any, or at least many of them.

While I was working at APL I was asked to participate in an "Exercise" that would require that I fly in P3 aircraft over the ocean for flights lasting 12 hours each. My response was "let me think about it for a bit". Now I, for reasons I won't go into, had great doubts about my ability to fly in

an airplane at all let alone for 12 hours. So, I went down to a local small airport to pay to have someone take me up in an airplane for a bit just so I could see if I would still be alive when we landed. I was very hesitant to do this so when I got to the airport I just sort of sauntered around the various airplanes parked at this airport. I happened to see this guy working on this plane and I walked over to talk with him...I was actually still stalling about paying for my airplane ride. This guy and I struck up a conversation and I mentioned that I had a bit of fear about flying and was there to see if I could conquer this fear. He replied that he was going to take his plane up for a check out flight and that I was welcome to go up with him. So, I helped him finish working on his plane and reluctantly climbed into his plane and off we went. We flew around for about an hour, buzzed our house and landed successfully. Fear conquered? Not quite, fear quelled, maybe.

So, I went back to work the next day and said yes. I would be “happy” to participate in this exercise.

I distinctly remember the ride down to Patuxent River Naval Air Station to participate in my first real flight. I distinctly remember thinking “What in the hell have I gotten myself into and How can I get out of this?” Well, I successfully completed that first flight and the 30 or so additional flights associated with that Exercise.

Facing my doubts and accepting that work assignment led to me being asked to participate in other Exercises that, this time, involved being out on the water. I spent some time in the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Maryland and the Channel Islands of the coast of California.

These Exercises allowed me to travel a fair amount and many times Terrie would fly out to meet me at the end of an Exercise and we would work in some vacation time.

So, I had worked at APL for about 30 years, from the time I was 19, when I was asked if I would be interested in taking a job outside APL. The position would require me to head up a \$5 million dollar contract to provide computer and network security consulting services to the FAA for their operational network. Well, I had never considered taking a job outside of APL so my immediate response was thanks for the offer but...NO THANKS. However, over the weekend I

thought about this offer and came to the conclusion that it wouldn't hurt to at least discuss this job offer. So, I went back to work, contacted the person and said I would be interested in exploring this offer.

They said great and about two days later I was asked to go to lunch with the president of the company and a few representative from the FAA. I met them for lunch, we had a pleasant conversation, lunch was over and I left. The odd thing was that we never REALLY talked about network security, there were some general discussions and I think I mentioned the word "encryption". My impression was that the actual interview would be the next step if I had not offended anyone during lunch. To my surprise I got a phone call the next day and they offered me the job and asked what kind of salary I would accept. I was stunned but came up with a figure that I actually thought they would refuse and that we could negotiate down from that..again I was stunned with they said OK no problem when can you start?

Taking that job was a huge step for both Terrie and I. It meant that I would work in Atlantic City NJ during the week and be home on the weekends. When I took this new job I was told that I would only need to work in NJ for about 6 weeks and that by then they would have work at FAA headquarters in DC....which after 3 years never happened. So, while the money was very good the living circumstances were not so good. I can remember lying in bed at night thinking "What in the hell have I gotten myself into and how can I get out of this?"

After 3 years of travelling to Atlantic City every week I was offered an opportunity to support a different FAA task supporting a new person. My condition was that I would take the job if I could come onboard as an independent consultant. He agreed and I worked out a very good deal were I was a subcontractor to ITT on a \$5 billion dollar 10 year project. When they had to do a re-compete for that contract they asked me to partner with them. We won a renewal of this contract.

My purpose in relating these stories is that some of these things I was able to do with a lot of help and emotional support from Terrie as well as those people that I worked with.

But, in the final analysis, regardless of all the help you get, when you get on that plane, stand up in front of a group of people to deliver that presentation or attend that one-on-one meeting with an Admiral, you do it alone. You have to dig deep to find an inner strength that will allow you to perform the task or do the job. We've all faced our own unique situations that required us to find our own personal inner strength to perform that task that is required of us.

But where do we find that inner strength?

For some people it comes from their belief in A God, for others it comes from their belief in Jesus Christ, and for others it's an inner strength that comes from a life of challenges and knowing that no matter what the challenge, no matter how much doubt you might have, you can do it...Somehow, some way, you know from experience you have the inner strength, resourcefulness, and determination to be successful.

Now, let's step back for just a minute. Are we going to be successful in EVERY challenge we take on? I don't think so but, that's the vehicle for building confidence. If we are not successful at something but try again, in a different way, and are successful you are taking a moment of doubt and turning into a strength.

An example in my life is that back in the early 70's I helped transition APL's library from a manual card catalog system to a computerized catalog system. I was involved from the ground floor concept and design all the way to the implementation of this new system. The Librarians at the Johns Hopkins University's main campus in Baltimore were interested in our system so they came out to our location in Scaggsville, MD to hear about what we had done. I was assigned the task of putting together a presentation that would explain the new system to our visitors. So, I put together a talk and practiced it many times with my supervisor. When the big day came and it was my time to give my 15 minute talk, I panicked, I gave my 15 minute talk in about 5 minutes. I, literally, could hear myself talking but my conscious brain was, somehow, disconnected from the words I was saying. I can honestly say, I don't know what I said! The people from Hopkins were, of course polite and asked follow-on questions which I was easily able to handle. But, this experience was very traumatic, I was devastated, no amount of consoling could make me feel better.

A little while after that I became aware of an APL sponsored Toast Masters club. I immediately joined and started their program of giving speeches. I, of course was terrible at first but after I got through a few speeches I at least didn't feel like I was going to pass out by simply walking up on the stage! I'm not saying I became a skilled and proficient speaker but at least I'm willing to face my doubts and give a presentation or speech. Will I any awards for my speeches? Did it make me completely comfortable speaking in front of other's? No... but, it did get me through my problem of going into a complete panic when I speak in front of other people.

Do I still doubt my abilities to take on new tasks and be successful? Do I have doubts when I get up in front of others and talk? Do I sweat a little when I get on an airplane? Do I have doubts about the existence of God, do I have doubts about my political views? The answer is, of course, yes, I have doubts about all of these things and many others. But, I've learned through experience that doubt is good. Doubt can allow you to grow, personally, professionally, and intellectually. By facing your doubts head-on and going forward anyway you become a stronger, more capable person. There's a saying that goes something like "the best thing you can offer the world is a better you". Or, maybe I just made that up....I'm not sure. But, it sure sounds like someone wise, from a long, long, time ago, would have said.

Let's move on to doubts regarding views on politics, religion, race, sports teams, cars and tractors.

Many people, as adults, believe in the same religion and politics they were born into. That's a simple, comfortable choice to make. Their beliefs conform to the beliefs of everyone in their family and community.

For instance, when I was young most people in my immediate community were Methodist, Democrats, Orioles fans. There are exceptions of course...we were equally divided between our preference in cars...Ford or Chevy and our preferred tractor...John Deere tractors or John Deere Chalmers. I guess when you get down to this level of detail they were not big dividing issues. We had to have something to argue about!

Religion, politics, and race however were clearly dividing issues. I personally don't remember the religion or politics of anyone when I was a kid. But I think that's because we lived in a very homogeneous community of blue collar families that had the same belief system.

Race was also not an issue when I was young because in the 50's and early 60's we were totally segregated and there was very minimal interaction between races. I do remember that the older generation had attitudes about African Americans that would be considered racist.

It was in the mid 60's that our Jr High school was integrated and I meet my first African American kids. I can say that it was with mixed results that we kids "integrated ourselves". We had our share of conflicts but I can also say that we did a pretty good job. We did have a few fights erupt but I would judge them more personality conflicts rather than racially motivated. So, for the most part we got along just fine. This, of course, extended into high school where I counted as some of my close friends several African American kids.

By the time I went to work at the Applied Physics Lab I had strong doubts about the attitude my parent's generation had about African Americans. APL was a scientific society that treated all races equally so my experiences were all positive. So, my acceptance of African Americans began to differ from most people in my neighborhood

Religious doubt came later in life. Terrie grew up Catholic and I grew up Methodist. We raised our children in our local Methodist church where Terrie and I served on several committees. Terrie also taught Sunday school, worked for several years for the Church preschool and served on a couple of committees. I was part of the men's group that worked to keep church facilities in good shape and served on the Pastor Parish Relations committee.

Our Religious doubt began when we started to see that the inner workings of the church was more concerned about material issues and simply perpetuating itself rather than about serving the local community.

It was at this point I believe that Terrie and I started the long process of moving away from traditional church beliefs. We started "Doubting". And I'll tell you that the day I said, out loud, to myself that I don't believe in THE Jesus Christ that is promoted by traditional Christian

religions it was very unnerving! I felt sort of like Wiley Coyote when he runs off the edge of the cliff, looks down, and realizes that there's nothing beneath him but the valley a couple of hundred feet down. But, I didn't fall. I slowly began the process of becoming comfortable with the idea that I could define Jesus, and God, the way I wanted to. The way that I could draw the most strength from my beliefs.

My process felt a lot like the quote by Bertrand Russell that's printed in the bulletin:

"Throughout the long period of religious doubt, I had been rendered very unhappy by the gradual loss of belief, but when the process was completed, I found to my surprise that I was quite glad to be done with the whole subject."

How can we deny the existence of a God when we have absolutely no idea how we, and when I say WE I mean the entire universe, got here. We can't even fathom the extent of it much less fathom how it got here or how it works. Was it a GOD like person that set it all in motion? To me that makes no sense what so ever. It generates more questions than it answers. Did it spring into existence, as scientist say, out of a single super dense dot that exploded...the Big Bang Theory? Well, maybe, but to me that answer, like the God answer, also generates more questions than it answers. Where did that super dense dot come from?

In my life time no one will ever figure out how we all came into existence so, the God answer is just fine with me. How can I actually deny it? When I need strength to move from one minute to the next and I can't seem to find the strength within myself to move...I have no problem calling on a higher force, God, to give me the strength to move.

Jesus is a different story for me. This is the one that has caused me the most emotional problem. Being brought up as a Christian of course meant that you believed in all the things Christians believe in. My problem was that once I started actually reading the bible and reading about how Christianity became the religion it is today it sounded nothing like the Christianity that we are all supposed to believe in.

Any religion that has to murder people that don't believe the way they are told to believe CAN'T be a good religion. We, as Christians, have been told that the bible was infallible and was written by hands inspired by God. But, if you actually read the bible it contains many contradictions.

So, I now prefer to believe in Thomas Jefferson's Jesus, a good and decent man that tried to teach people to live a new way. Not the eye for an eye way of life that's depicted in the old Testament, but a turn the other cheek way of life that Jesus preached.

I'm not going to talk about politics but I will say that Terrie and I have political views that differ sharply from most the people in both our families.

As far as cars go, I have a sneaking suspicion that Terrie and I differ on the make of car we like. When we were dating she really like the Mock 1 Ford. Her father was a "ford man" and her grandfather owned and operated a Ford dealership in Laurel. While I, on the other hand, liked Chevys. But somehow we found the strength to overcome that difference and I think we both now prefer whichever car gets the best gas mileage and won't get us run over while attempting to merge into high speed traffic.

My point here is that it takes courage to doubt the foundational truths that were part of your life from day one. Many people would shrink from the challenges come across in life instead of actually facing these doubts and moving ahead by doing some independent thinking. But the reward is the satisfaction of being true to yourself and not believing in something simply because everyone else around you believes it. One of my favorite sayings is: "If you want to go nowhere, follow the crowd".

Does it make you an "outcast" in your family or current circle of friends? Maybe! While it does make for awkward moments at family gatherings, overall it's not that bad and for most of us big family gathering don't occur that often. It can be handled and is worth it if the rest of the time you are more comfortable with your life because you are true to own beliefs.

Many of us here have made these kind of choices. Few of us were born into or raised in Unitarian Universalist families so somewhere along our lives we questioned...we doubted, what we were brought up to believe. Something about us made us question the "fundamental truth" of these believes and we started to investigate alternative ideas and we find ourselves here on this day in this room with this group of fellow doubters. What was it, was it an earth shattering moment or was it a slow process, like mine, that one day, for some reason the thought bubbled

up to the top of your consciousness and you finally make the decision to buck the system and go your own, independent way?

We're in good company. The Unitarian Universalist religion has been called the religion of doubt. So we're all experts in the art of doubting...we do it well. Maybe that's the way we're wired, it's our nature to question things and to not just be satisfied with the status quo.

I found in a passage in the book "A Chosen Faith" that's handed out to all new members of our fellowship an interesting quote. This quote is from an exchange between D. H. Lawrence, who is a famous British novelist and his mother's pastor. The mother had asked the pastor to send young Lawrence a selection of sermons. Here is Lawrence's reply to one of those sermons:

"I believe that one is converted when first one hears the low, vast murmur of life, of human life, troubling one's hitherto unconscious self. I believe one is born first unto oneself – for the happy developing of oneself, while the world is a nursery, and the pretty things are to be snatched for, and the pleasant things tasted; some people seem to exist thus right to the end. But most are born again on entering maturity; then they are born to humanity, to a consciousness of all the laughing, and the never-ceasing murmur of pain and sorrow that comes from the terrible multitude of brothers and sisters. Then, it appears to me, one gradually formulates one's religion, be it what it may. A person has no religion who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it; and one's religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification."

Finally, if you still feel a little bit bad for always doubting things, take heart, you're in good company!

Jesus had his doubts about the task God had laid out for him. In Mathew 26:39 while praying he said "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: never the less not as I will, but as thou Wilt. Then in Matthew 26:42 He goes away a second time and again prayed " Oh my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done. He had doubts about being crucified to save mankind but he accepted this task.

Muhammad also had his doubts. Muhammad's immediate response to receiving his first revelation from God in the cave of Hira was not to be overwhelmed by conviction but to doubt. According to Lesley Hazleton author of the book "Muhammad the First Muslim", in her TED presentation titled "The Prophet Muhammad and Doubt" Muhammad's first impulse to his experience in that cave was NOT to celebrate but to jump off a cliff to end the madness he felt he had just experienced. Obviously, he didn't and he slowly accepted the task laid out for by God.

Lesley Hazleton quotes the writer Graham Greene as saying "doubt is the heart of the matter" and adds that if we abolish doubt then all that is left is absolute heartless conviction – in short, the arrogance of fundamentalism.

I hope all of you continue to doubt everything you see and hear. But, don't ever let these doubts stop you from moving forward but use them to motivate you to become a better you...for you, your family, your community, and your country.