Living the question

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Questions are usually one thing that is in abundant supply in UU churches. We may not have enough hymnbooks, enough money in the bank, we may not have enough people to staff committees, we may not have enough time to do all that ought to be done, but we will always have plenty of questions.

The order of service this morning has a question mark on the cover and if I could only draw I would have drawn a cartoon illustration of one of the most popular UU jokes: what does a UU terrorist organization do to intimidate someone? It burns a question mark on their front lawn.

Some days it seems that the question mark should be our symbol instead of the chalice.

For years I've used an elevator speech for describing Unitarian Universalism: a religion based on the proposition that some questions are too important to have only one right answer.

Questions come in all different shapes and sizes. There are big questions, thorny questions, little questions, trivial questions. There are questions that grab you like a hawk and keep you up late at night, and there are many questions which don't interest you at all. There are hard questions and easy questions. There are questions each of us is scared to ask, and others we are scared to answer.

W.H. Auden said

To ask the hard question is simple;
But the answer
Is hard and hard to remember.

And it was H.L. Mencken who said "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong."

I want to talk this morning about the big questions, but I realize that each of you will have different perspectives on which questions are important and which are unimportant, and that is as it should be. We need not agree on what the questions are; there are come thing we can say about big questions in general.

All my life I have had a fatal attraction to the big questions, fatal because I often get overwhelmed by them. I came of age in the mid 1960's and decided to try to get a handle on the cultural change I saw happening in that momentous decade by majoring in anthropology. I figured that would give me the widest perspective on the social change I saw around me. So I asked the big questions. I'll never forget one day in my senior year in college, trying to frame

the question for my senior thesis on urban violence in anthropological perspective. I chained myself to the chair, but after seven hours the only thing I had to show for my efforts was thirteen first paragraphs wadded up in the wastebasket. The big questions fascinate me, but I rarely know how to handle them.

Here's how this sermon came about: there was one occasion right after a large natural disaster that I preached about one of the biggest questions of all, the question of theodicy, why God allows awful things to happen. At coffee hour after the service, one parishioner was quite wrapped up in this question, and not at all satisfied with the answers that I had suggested. As we talked it through, another parishioner of a poetic bent, said, that's just one of those questions you have to live. I agreed wholeheartedly, but as I thought about it later, I said, living the question: that's really important, but who said it? I caught up with that parishioner, who pointed me to this fine little book by Rainer Maria Rilke, *Advice To a young Poet*. The title rang a bell – this was my second encounter with the book, for a couple of years before, I had taken a songwriting class with the fine folksinger Bob Franke, and we had started each session with readings from this book.

Before I give you the Rilke quote, let me set it in context. The book is a collection of letters Rilke writes to a young poet named Kappus. The passage I will quote comes from a letter of July 16, 1903. Rilke says he is responding to a letter from Kappus of May 2. We don't know exactly what the questions were that Kappus had put before Rilke in that letter, but they must have been big ones, I think probably concerned with love and marriage and sex and career and calling.

With this context, let us move on to the quotation; Rilke says

> "You are so young, you have not even begun, and I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can to have patience with everything that is unsolved in your heart, and ... try to cherish the questions themselves, like closed rooms and like books written in a very strange tongue. Do not search now for the answers which could not be given you because you could not live them. It is a matter of living everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, one day live right into the answer."

Notice right away a couple of things about this advice. First, he seems to say there is a time aspect to questions and answers. Rilke implies that the answers to some of your questions couldn't be given to you because you are not ready to live them. This implies that there is a time for the answers, that we must grow into those answers in the fullness of time. The questions that the rosebud asks when it is still a tight little node may be answered when it has bloomed into a full lush flower. It's almost an echo of St. Paul: Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face; now we know in part, but then we shall know even as we are

known (I Corinthians 13:12)

Then there is the advice to "Cherish the questions." What odd advice. For most of us, a question is something to be answered, something to be gotten out of the way so we can go on increasing our store of knowledge. People or experiences or pleasures can be cherished, but it is odd to think of cherishing a question. Most of us see a question as a stepping stone, a byway, something to be passed in reaching a goal. We think, "as soon as I can solve this question, I'll be able to go on to the next one and then the next and then one day all my questions will be answered." Indeed, there will come a day for each of us, when all our questions will be answered, but we won't be around to savor the satisfaction, because they'll be shoveling our bodies into the casket. The day your questions are answered is the day you are dead. Rilke is saying that short of the grave, you can hang around with the questions.

He's saying more than that. He's saying "live the questions." We don't ordinarily think of questions as something to be lived. Living is something we do with our whole selves, while answering questions is something we do with our minds, right?

I think Rilke is suggesting here something really profound: that the big questions are not principally an intellectual exercise. That is very hard for us to realize in this achievement-oriented culture. We are so used to seeing questions as primarily a mental exercise. The great sorting out of life chances that happens in our educational system is designed to see how well we can answer questions. In the primal rite of passage, you answer questions with your mind on the MCAS or the SAT and it determines whether you get out of high school or into the college of your choice. But however good you may be on reasoning by analogies or extracting cube roots or identifying the errors of logic in a paragraph, you may find that the big questions, the really important questions aren't as amenable to reasoning.

Now answering questions is important; in what I say here today, I don't want to sound like I'm justifying an attitude of indifference to the truth. We need to actively seek all the truth we can. James Fallows just pointed out in an article in the Atlantic the intellectual failings of our current President: first, he starts from a base of ignorance about policy in general and foreign affairs in particular; second, he is generally incurious, doesn't ask questions at all, let alone the right questions, and third, he acts decisively and defends his decisions stubbornly. It's a deadly combination. I don't want to harp on Mr. Bush politically but to hold him up as a negative example intellectually. There has been a lively debate in this country for the last six years over the doctrine of preventive war. Our President has not participated in that. In saying that some questions need to be lived rather than answered, I'm not advocating indifference or ignorance.

Nor am I advocating playing fast and loose with truth. I'm reminded of the story of young CPAs interviewing for a position with one of the Big Ten accounting firms. The first interviewee was asked "what is two and two?" and she said "four." The second was asked

"what is two and two?" and she said "four." The third was asked "what is two and two?" and she said "what do you want it to be?" and she got the job. Questions which have answers should be answered and answered honestly and fairly.

But I return to my elevator speech: some really big questions don't have one right answer. This category includes not only the big religious questions about God and where everything comes from, but also intensely personal questions. At some point, probably all of us have faced a question whether to link up with a certain person; maybe we've had to choose between two suitors. You don't get a grade on that question, because there is no teacher who knows the right answer.

Maybe there is a right answer that you know: maybe marrying Sue is the right answer and marrying Ellen would be the wrong answer. But you're not going to get to that answer by logic alone. You're only going to get to that answer by living it. And twenty years after you've married Sue, you still may wonder whether you oughtn't have married Ellen instead.

Live the question and you may live into the answer. One of the most important question any of us can ask ourselves is posed in this famous line from Mary Oliver:

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?"

I've related at length how I have lived that question, from the immersion in Movement values in the 60's through a trying of several alternative vocations and finally settling on a radical law school. I've related how I got immersed in raising a family and practicing law until that Sunday in about 1993, when I was brought back to the original question sitting in the Unitarian Church of Charleston. The sermon was given by a lay person, a woman who had started the homeless shelter in that city. The topic was "changing the world," and she invited us each to tell about how we were changing the world. I spoke, but what the question did was to bring me back to the questions I had asked early in my adult life: how can I be most effective in bringing about the change that this world so sorely needs? I didn't really recognize it that clearly at the time, but somehow I lived it for months until the day I picked up the car phone on a trip to the courthouse and called both the UUA and Harvard Divinity School and asked each to send me brochures about what it would take to make me a UU minister.

And I have been a UU minister for nine years now, and I'm still living the question of what to do with my life.

Maybe these big questions don't ever get fully or finally answered. Maybe the philosopher George Friedrich Hegel had it right in his theory of the evolution of ideas. You start with one idea which is the thesis. That idea generates its opposite, which is the antithesis. The thesis and the antithesis clash with each other, but neither of them ever really wins. What they do is end up creating a new idea, called the synthesis, which takes a little from both of them.

Then this synthesis becomes the new thesis, and generates a new antithesis.

Now there are a lot of you who are retired, and I imagine that involves asking yourselves a bunch of questions. Before you retire, while you are still in the thick of your career, you are asking yourself whether it makes sense to keep on going day after day doing this thing that you've been doing for so long. You ask the question whether there's something else you could be doing.

Then comes the day when you do finally retire, and you move to your dream home in Cape Cod, or maybe you just winterize and move into the vacation home you've had all along, but in either case, you then are faced with the question, what am I going to do with my days? How can I live them to the fullest, how can I make them count? And for many of you, the answer to this question involved getting active in this church. You are living that question every day.

Spiritual maturity does not consist, I think, in having the ultimate answers to the great questions, but in being able to live with the knowledge that we will never have final answers. A certain amount of ambiguity and uncertainty is built into the system, as is a certain amount of paradox. I think that is what distinguishes the people in these pews from people in other pews across town at this hour. UUs are comfortable living with paradox. In fact, some of us delight in it.

Underlying our embrace of paradox, I think, is a profound truth about the nature of reality and our apprehension of it: that life, real life, is always more complex, nuanced and richer than our ideas of it. Answers are important and we are trained to look for answers, but no question or answer will ever completely encapsulate our lived experience.

And this influences my own sense of divinity. I am inclined to define God as that which doesn't admit of definition. I have a bumper sticker on my car which says God is too big for any one religion.

Questions and answers belong to the realm of words; words are an important way of knowing, but they are not the only way of knowing. Evolution, that fount of so many blessings, has wired into in our neural structure many older ways of knowing the world. We know through our sense organs, through smell and touch and taste and feel as well as sound and sight. We know through our immune systems. We know through our very blood and bone. We live all our ways of knowing, and in doing so, we live our questions.

> At the collection in a few minutes the choir will sing a hymn which has the lines
> We seek elusive answers to the questions of this life. We seek to put an end to all the waste of human strife. We search for truth, equality, and blessed peace of mind. And then, we come together here, to make sense of what we find.

The church is a place where we live questions together. One of the richnesses of small

group ministry is that it considers large spiritual issues in the context of our particular and individual lives. In this and in many other ways we can share the questions we are living.

We answer questions not just with our minds, but with everything we are, everything we say and do. Listen again to the words of Rilke:

> "try to cherish the questions themselves, like closed rooms and like books written in a very strange tongue. Do not search now for the answers which could not be given you because you could not live them. It is a matter of living everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, one day live right into the answer."

Amen.

Readings:

Gospel of Thomas

2 Jesus said, "Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find. 2When they find, they will be disturbed. 3When they are disturbed, they will marvel, 4 and will rule over all."

5 Jesus said, "Know what is in front of your face, and what is hidden from you will be disclosed to you. 2 For there is nothing hidden that won't be revealed."

1 Corinthians 13

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.