

**“HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE BELIEVE?”**

**A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen**

**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**

**2600 E. Philip Ln.**

**P.O. Box 1791**

**Appleton, WI 54912-1791**

**(920) 731-0849**

**Website: [www.fvuuf.org](http://www.fvuuf.org)**

**December 4-5, 2010**

Sermon

From time to time I am invited to speak to students at religious schools in the area. The most unique such invitation came several years ago when I was invited to speak to a class at an evangelical high school. The students were learning how to spread their faith effectively. I appreciate that the minister friend who invited me was straight-forward in why I was there: I was a foil for the students. He hoped to sharpen their skills in converting non-believers like me. I accepted the invitation because it sounded interesting, and because I felt like I would have the opportunity in my own way to witness to my own beliefs.

It was a fascinating experience, starting with a conversation before the class started with a parent who was sitting in on the class. He had been raised Unitarian Universalist. He was curious about what I'd say, and it turns out he wanted to complete some unfinished business with his UU roots. He shared that he had been in a UU youth group in the 1970s. I cringed because I quickly guessed where the conversation was going to go. I was right: like way too many UU youth groups of the era, his youth group had virtually no boundaries. When it came to sex, drugs and booze, “anything goes” was the attitude. He needed to share that experience and the ways it damaged him. There was really nothing I could say except that I understood and was very sorry about what happened to him. I owned that his experience was all too common among UU youth of his generation. I told him that we had learned from that mistake and are doing a much better job today of establishing and maintaining reasonable and safe boundaries for our youth today. I acknowledged that our learning our lesson does not undo the damage done to him and many others.

Then the class began. The students started by sharing the Good News of their faith. “How do you know this is true?” I kept asking. Without exception, they replied by quoting verses from the Bible. Some thumbed through their Bibles to find appropriate verses; others shared verses that had been carefully filed away in their memories. To each one, I responded that while I appreciate the Bible and find meaning in many of its stories, the Bible is not the primary source or basis of my beliefs. Put simply: I don't believe what I believe because the Bible tells me so.

Our conversation went ‘round and ‘round and ‘round—and, like a merry-go-round, went absolutely nowhere. The teacher frequently interjected his observation that the students were getting nowhere in converting me. He challenged them to find some basis other than the Bible for sharing about their faith. He challenged them to find something I might be able to relate to. Much to his dismay, they were utterly unable to meet his challenge. The conversation never went anywhere.

I walked out of the school that day with a jumble of thoughts in my mind. I was humbled by the colossal failure of much of Unitarian Universalist youth ministry in the 1960s and 1970s and how in addition to inflicting serious damage on vulnerable youth, that failure also caused some of our youth to look elsewhere for religious community as adults. Maybe the parent I talked to would have sought a different faith anyway, but maybe not. With our youth ministry, we did the opposite of converting people to our faith: we drove some of our own away. I have enough respect for the potential positive impact of our faith to feel like this was a shame.

As I walked out, I was also thinking how the students and I had focused on the wrong question in the class. Rather than concentrating on what I believed and what they believed, we should have first focused on the question “How do you know what you believe?” Another way to put this is “What do you base your faith on?” Or “What’s the source of your beliefs?” or, to use a word often used in theological circles: “Where do you derive authority for your beliefs?” As long as this fundamental question remained unaddressed, we were doomed to the pointless merry-go-round of them quoting Bible verses that were authoritative for them but not for me.

This past Wednesday evening I posed this question to the high school youth and their mentors in our Coming of Age program: How do people know what they believe? Their answers came so fast that I could barely keep up as I wrote them on the newsprint at the front of the room. In just a few minutes, they came up with thirty-seven—or at least that’s as many as I was able to write down. If you’re interested, we’ve put their list on the Fellowship’s website.<sup>1</sup> Here are a few that particularly struck me:

- Parents (I believe this was the first one. Interesting!)
- Rebellion (a different angle on parental influence!)
- Cultural background
- Peers
- Pop culture
- Science
- Nature
- Books
- The arts
- Mentors and teachers
- Coercion
- What you need in order to get through something (e.g., the death of a loved one)

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.fvuuf.org/images/stories/how\\_do\\_we\\_know\\_what\\_we\\_believe\\_12-2010.pdf](http://www.fvuuf.org/images/stories/how_do_we_know_what_we_believe_12-2010.pdf).

- Personal experience
- Intuition
- Vision quests, meditation and other spiritual practices

So this is the Big Question I'm hoping each of us will ponder this month: How do you know what you believe? This is a great place to begin in figuring out what you believe. And even if you have figured out what you believe (for the moment, anyway), this Big Question is a good one to give some thought to. It will probably deepen your understanding of whatever you believe. It's the perfect Big Question to ponder before we turn our attention in January and February to Big Questions about God and about soul and the Afterlife.

To help you think about how you might answer this question, I'll share how I would answer this question. I trust that you understand that I don't offer my answer in a prescriptive way. Not only do we not have a creed as Unitarian Universalists, but we also don't have a standard answer to this question. There are no doubt a wide variety of different answers to the question "How do you know what you believe?" in this room today. In fact, I would wager that no two people here would answer it quite the same.

So: How do I know what I believe? With a little bit of grouping, I've managed to narrow my list to a Top Six ways I know what I believe. So these are my Top Six, starting with the most important.

Number one on my list is **me: my mind, my emotions, my intuition, my soul**. In saying this, I'm positioning myself squarely in the heritage of the Transcendentalist pioneers of our faith who expanded the potential sources of our faith way beyond the Bible. In particular they lifted up personal intuition and mind as reasons they believed what they believed. So how do I know what I believe? First and foremost, I've thought about it; I've felt about it; I've searched my inner wisdom. The answers I've found within have authority for me. Our human minds and intuitions are an amazing fount of wisdom. For me it would be foolhardy to overlook a resource that is so close at hand.

Of course this is not enough. My mind is not perfect. My intuition is not perfect. I am a fallible human being who makes mistakes and who can never see the whole Big Picture. I am not on my own God. So sometimes my inner resources are flat out wrong. Other times they are off the mark just enough to lead me toward beliefs that aren't good enough or deep enough to help me lead a meaningful and compassionate life. It is hubris to rely solely on one's own mind and intuition. This realization leads to the need for other sources of my beliefs.

Second on my list is **continuous testing of my beliefs through living my life**. Each new experience offers a new opportunity to test and challenge my beliefs. One way I test my beliefs is by being attentive to how I behave. If I behave unethically, my behavior may well point to the inadequacy of my beliefs. New experiences also test my beliefs. Take aging for example: being able to test my beliefs now with experiences of middle age is a great gift. Sometimes beliefs I developed as an adolescent and young adult have proven to be insufficient as I experience life as a middle-aged person. I have no doubt the same will be true when (hopefully) I experience life as an elder. This shouldn't be surprising. We know that our lives constantly change and evolve.

The fact that at any given moment most of the cells in our body are less than ten years old is great evidence to this truth.<sup>2</sup> In this fundamental way, I'm (mostly) literally not the same person I was ten years ago. It would be a waste if I came to the final conclusion about my beliefs at some point in my life and put them away in an impenetrable lock-box. So how do I know what I believe? I continuously test my beliefs with the new experiences of my life.

Of course the testing of my experiences is also fallible. I sometimes come to the wrong conclusion about my experience or misread them or fail to understand them in their complexity. This leads to number three on my list: **spiritual community**. You help me know what I believe. We help each other know what we believe. That's why we lift up the crucial importance of teaching and mentoring within this spiritual community. That's why we so pervasively encourage deep dialogue with one another in the Fellowship—in services, in covenant and other small groups, in religious education and youth ministry, in Wellspring classes. This makes sense to me: at this moment, for example, I have no doubt that the collective wisdom of this room far exceeds my internal wisdom. This is why I don't simply tend to my faith in solitude. Engaging in personal spiritual practice, walking alone in nature, taking a long run, contemplating a moving poem in silence: these things help me know what I believe. But they're not enough. To know what I believe, I need you to encourage me and to push me and to challenge me. We need each other. This is a big reason we come here week after week.

Community of course is also fallible. Just look at the Nazis and how many congregations came to a tragically and horribly incorrect conclusion about their beliefs. Or, less dramatically, look at how many UU congregations in the 1960s and 70s seem to have concluded that promoting an "anything goes" environment in our youth groups was a good idea. So in forming beliefs, I also look beyond myself and my experiences and this particular spiritual community. I look to **the wisdom of spiritual traditions and individuals**. In particular, I look to the wisdom of the Unitarian Universalist tradition—a tradition whose roots go back two thousand years to the early days. I look to the wisdom of individual UUs like Michael Servetus and Ferenc Dávid and Olympia Brown and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Forrest Church and Rebecca Parker. Even more importantly, I look to the collective wisdom that has accumulated over the years as Unitarian Universalism has developed and evolved. The flaming chalice we light at the start of each service evokes for me the importance of our UU heritage for each of us as we go about figuring out what we believe.

I look beyond myself and the Fellowship not just to our Unitarian Universalist wisdom, but also to other religious traditions and other writers and thinkers. To name a few traditions and individuals who have a lot of authority for me: Hinduism, Mary Oliver, Joseph Campbell, the Buddha, Martin Luther King, Jr., Judaism, Diana Eck, Native American spirituality, biblical stories about Jesus, and Mahatma Gandhi. I also look to myths and poetry and novels and theology and movies and music. While none of these traditions or individuals is whole or complete or infallible, all of these help me figure out what I believe.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=198208>.

Next on my list of sources for my beliefs is the old Trivial Pursuits category of **Science and Nature**. Although science cannot now and probably never will completely and infallibly describe everything, it is important for me that my beliefs not fly in the face of science. Scientific understandings—such as the short-termed lives of our body’s cells—help me make sense of things. So does being in nature; nature is the place where I find myself most in touch with the deepest movements and yearnings and understandings in my spiritual journey.

One last (and quick) principal source of my faith is **my spiritual practice**. Without a doubt, the time I spend in meditation and prayer helps me shape my beliefs. This may be a subset of testing through experience (spiritual practice is an important experience for me), but it feels significant enough and distinct enough to briefly list separately.

So these are the six main sources of my beliefs: me, my experiences, my spiritual community, the wisdom of religious traditions and individuals, Science and Nature, and my spiritual practice. These are the main ways I know what I believe. None of these is enough on its own. I need them all. And even then, I may come to a wrong or inadequate or too shallow belief. This is why I choose not to attack or kill others who don’t share my beliefs. This is why I hope I’ll never close the book on my beliefs and considered them once and for all settled.

So: why do you believe what you believe?

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