FUSIT Spiritual Journey Archive Project: Summer Sermons, 2022

We're All Philosophers, Like it or Not

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These last two and a half years have changed many things, both in the nation and the world with a pandemic, and at FUSIT with the resignations of a minister and interim minister. The first has compelled us to reach out to others and connect in new and creative ways. Without zoom, email, and the Internet we would have been trapped in our homes. The second—our losses at FUSIT—has forced us back on ourselves in many ways. We have been invited, even compelled, individually and collectively as a beloved community to rethink many things—what is really important and meaningful in our lives, how do we best respond to changing circumstances, what needs to be held fast and what let go, and so on. It is also a chance to reflect on our interactions with others—all others, those in our families, in our precious congregation, in the wider world which we encounter day-to-day. And, just as important, how do we care for ourselves?

The title of this reflection is "We're All Philosophers," and I want to share with you how this is so. As we grow up, we are influenced by many things, from our own DNA to our immersion in family and society. Like fingerprints, we can be sorted into types of various kinds—

psychological types (introvert or extrovert, for example), economic types (lower class, middle class, wealthy), political types (Republican, Democrat or Independent), religious types (Unitarian Universalists, ecumenicalists, believers, agnostics, atheists), and on and on.

But, like fingerprints we are each unique, for we each have our own set of experiences, and while we may share many similar experiences—births, raising children, illness, job promotions, friendships, marriages, divorces, etc—our experiences are *our* experiences, no one else's, and they are unique to each of us. Being aware of just this much tells us that we cannot fully know any other person. And it tells us that we have to reflect deeply to know ourselves. There is that which will ever remain a mystery in anyone and everyone we meet or connect with. Those of us who are or have been married, or who have a brother or sister, or who have had parents, know this only too well. And there is a mystery in each of us, to be penetrated but perhaps never fully known. Curiously, this mystery is too easily ignored in the distracting rush of everyday life. This is one reason why monks and nuns of every tradition retire from that rush into cloistered contemplation. But most of us do not have that option, and it is not a necessary one for anyone who knows a little of what it is to reflect.

Our individual uniqueness matters. I meet someone and we talk, first of the weather of course, then of other things. Imagine that at some point this individual says that she or he is a Christian. What do I now know?

Not much. I've been given a broad direction to pursue, away from Confucianism, Islam or Judaism, but little more. I suspect that this person believes in God, but what kind of God is unknown to me. Are they biblical literalists and fundamentalists? Are they evangelical, believing their duty is to convert me? Are they denominational? Do they even read the Bible or go to church? I don't know. So I ask questions to find out what being a Christian means to them. They may be reticent or tell me a great deal. In the end, I know only the type I can classify them in. This tells me many things, perhaps, but it does not enter the mystery of their being.

I look at a flower and ask, "What kind of flower is it?" You say, "It's a rose." Now I know a name, but I hardly know the flower. Then you say, "It's a Queen Ann or a Melba rose." So now I know the name of this specific rose—but I don't know the rose. You give me the botanical classification, even the biology involved, and I know more about this particular kind of rose, but nothing of this individual rose itself. So it is with all labels—we can classify but classification is only a very superficial knowledge of any particular thing. So it is with human beings. Labeling others—or ourselves—tells us very little. Yet we react to labels, and this can be a very misleading thing to do.

In the last fifty years or so, scholars of religion have increasingly tended to speak of Judaisms, because there were so many different kinds of the religion we call Judaism throughout history and today. We could speak of Christianities for the same reasons. And so for all religions past

and present. And equally so for political parties, and any groups that we lump under one or another label. Giving the uniqueness of our individual life experience, labels can do no more than provide a direction in which to look; they cannot delineate the rich scenes that are found in that direction.

As we gradually emerge from the pandemic in the world and from our changed conditions as a congregation, we have the opportunity to reflect on how we see the world, ourselves, others, and the communities to which we belong. Einstein once said that in science the answers we get depend on the questions we ask. Ask a poor question and you will get a poor answer—one that is vague, or confused, superficial or even deeply misleading. When we encounter others, we are always asking questions, consciously or not—what did he or she mean? What is the reason or motive for saying that? Why that reaction to what I said or did? How was I understood or misunderstood?

But the questions I ask and the conclusions I reach depend as much on what I think of myself, others, and the world, as they do on what I am observing. I bring a cart of groceries to a checkout counter. The checker is curt and distracted—as if I'm an annoyance rather than a welcome customer. My reaction is that is the unwarranted, unprofessional, and aimed at me personally. But what do I know? Did the checker just receive some tragic news—a close relative just died? The biopsy came back as cancer. A migraine is setting in? The two previous customers were quite

rude and demanding? I don't know. If I firmly believe that humans are naturally cooperative and generous, I will react kindly, or at least I will not return curtness for curtness. But if I think people are only selfish and mean-spirited, I will take the curtness personally and react in kind. I bring a cart of predispositions and attitudes to the check stand with my cart of groceries.

What I think of people in general, and what I think of this or that particular individual, deeply affects how I interact with them. That is not the nature of the world—that is my set of beliefs about the world. And so we should look at those beliefs, attitudes and dispositions that we bring to everything we do. Are they based on facts? Yes, but we of course, select the facts that we believe count and dismiss anything contrary to them. Even Mother Teresa had her detractors who believed that she was power-hungry and selfish. How much easier to attribute motives of every kind to those we know? But the point most often is: we don't know.

So why do I have the beliefs, attitudes and dispositions I do? To attribute it all to biology is to claim to be a helpless victim of heredity. Doubtless heredity deals many cards, but biologists recognize that environment affects DNA in many ways. So do I blame it on the environment? The trick there is to exclude my own thinking processes and self-awareness from the environment, though both are very much a part of it. And I can examine and change this dimension of my environment.

We have all seen, heard, or read self-help gurus advocate positive thinking and attitude adjustment for experiencing a happier life. But bits of advice about being positive, looking for the silver lining, and being upbeat don't seem to help much. Bumper stickers can be amusing and even a little informative—reminding me not to drive too close or to vote one way or another—but they are not really helpful to me in any very useful way, and bumper-sticker psychology is no more helpful.

In our beloved community, we have seven principles—and now eight—which point to the path of meaningful existence. They do not tell us how to tread it or what we have to experience to follow that path. They don't tell us what they mean in thought and practice. That is because we are unique and our paths will each be singular. And that is why we often speak of growth and transformation. Think of the struggles an infant goes through to gain control of limbs, to learn to sit up, to learn to walk, to speak. Think of the teen-ager wrestling with developing personal relationships, including how he or she thinks of himself or herself. Even think of the famous mid-life crisis when a person's mortality registers as more than an idea and compels looking at one's whole life and sensing whether it makes sense or not.

Transformation is difficult and can be quite painful. To assess my beliefs, attitudes and dispositions and decide to change them is hard work. Think of the prisoner who comes to realize that the crime for which he or she was imprisoned was actually wrong and who acknowledges that and

reforms. That is not easy. But think of the results. In some important respects, the prisoner has become a new person, whether our own attitudes allow us to recognize that or not. Since each of us is a force in the world, affecting our surroundings at many levels, the prisoner has become a different force, and the effects of that change radiate into the human environment. We know that a little glacial melt here and a little there does not appreciably change the level of the ocean. But if the glaciers all melt, the ocean rises by about 300 feet. Given present climate change, ask the people of Florida, the Outer Bands of Georgia, or of New Orleans, what they think of glacial melting. Our actions make a difference, even when we can't see consequences. This has been called the butterfly effect, when a miniscule change in conditions results in vast differences in the future. If a spaceship is off course by only a sixtieth of a degree after launch, it will miss its planetary target, such a Mars, by thousands, even millions, of miles. Hence the need for mid-course corrections—something we may often need ourselves.

A great and puzzling reward sometimes comes to those of us who were and are teachers. A student from years before—usually not remembered—encounters the teacher and says, "When you said this or did that, you changed my life." How gratifying! Suddenly all the frustrations of teaching become meaningful. Of course, I don't remember saying this or doing that, but being told that one has made a difference is quite affecting. We should tell one another such things more often. If what

one says or does can affect others, sometimes very profoundly, what we think about ourselves can do the same, even if the effort is sometimes painful.

So what criteria should we use to reflect on our own beliefs, attitudes and dispositions? One criterion is this, and it is the starting point. What beliefs and attitudes do I have that I take on blind faith, for there is no evidence? Of course, I can muster reasons and point to facts, including the whole of my experience, but they are facts selected out of the ocean of facts that surround us at every moment, and are equally selective from my experience. My basic beliefs and attitudes are faith-based. Recognition of this fundamental fact is the first step. The second criterion is: does this belief, attitude or disposition support a meaningful life, both in respect to myself and to others? If not, why do I have it? And if it should be changed, I understand that only I can change it.

The third criterion is: what is the affect of this belief or attitude on my relations with others? Does it support meaningfulness in their lives? If not, why do I have it? Do I want to poison the well that others must drink from? If not, what must I do to change that?

If we see ourselves as a victim of the world, as a creature of rights without responsibilities, as immersed in a hostile world, we cannot be happy or find much meaning in what we do. At best, we can catch a little

happiness here or there, but it is only thin frosting on a dark, dry cake. Why do we want to live in that kind of world?

Two lessons I have learned support this process of self-reflection. One is old Hindu and Buddhist idea of absolute and relative truth. There is truth and reality, but we only aspire to it in our thinking, speaking and acting. Our truths are always relative. That does not mean they are false, but that they are limited, partial, never the whole story. This realization is humbling, adding a large dose of salt to one's opinions, views and conclusions about anything.

Someone says they are an atheist materialist; another says guardian angels are real. I need to see what in the opinions of each makes sense to me, for like minute flakes of gold in ore, it is worth mining the ore for them. For that "gold" is the basis on which we can interact with others in meaningful ways. It is where we can build real relationship with one another, however much we disagree on this or that. This recognition of the relativity of one's views—even those deeply held—renounces having to have an opinion on everything under the sun. Most of these opinions will be partially true at best and often misleading or just wrong. "Behold, I know," is an attitude unworthy of the self-reflective human being. Unlike the prophets of the Old Testament who claim to speak the words of God, Buddhist religious texts, those called sutras, invariably begin, "Thus have I heard." This invites reflection and gleaning what one can

and one finds meaningful and useful from them and never demands thoughtless acceptance.

The second lesson comes from all the major religions of the world, both past and present. Only love is a sure guide to discernment, thought and action, for it responds to what is meaningful and ignores what is not. This love, of course, is not erotic or aimed exclusively at some other individual or group. It is closely akin to what Buddhists call *karuna* and we usually translate 'compassion.' It is not feeling sorry for someone; it is empathy for them, and for ourselves, understanding that we are all struggling to live meaningfully—and we each define meaningfulness for ourselves. This, of course, is the spirit of our UU principles, which can always serve as a sure guide. We, however, give them life in how we think and what we say and do.

May we grow in this capacity to embody our principles and exercise that capacity well. Amen and blessed be.