



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Cherish Your Doubts”

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*Great Doubt, Great Awakening; small doubt, small awakening; no doubt, no awakening.*

Boshan (Hakusan), 16<sup>th</sup> century Chan (Zen) master

*If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.* René Descartes, 16<sup>th</sup> century philosopher

*Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.* Paul Tillich, 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian

### Sermon

Unitarian Universalism is a religion for doubters. I am not saying it is a religion only for non-believers because doubters can be believers. In fact, many theologians believe doubt is a necessary ingredient of a mature faith. Without doubt, faith would be blind.

Unitarian Universalism is a religion for doubters because doubters ask questions, something we're very good at, and we accept little on someone else's authority. Our very acceptance of diverse religious ideas acknowledges that we cannot be certain of any particular truth. Even our own near-doctrinal, highly-valued Seven Principles are not sacred truth. In the past ten years members of Unitarian Universalist congregations reviewed the Principles to see if they needed to be revised or even eliminated. UU history is filled with re-evaluation of religious beliefs based on new knowledge, new analysis, and new experiences. Can you imagine re-evaluating the Nicene Creed?

I imagine if you came to Unitarian Universalism from another faith tradition you probably doubted something in that tradition. That doesn't make those traditions wrong, just wrong for you.

When most people discuss religious doubt, they're questioning whether a supernatural God exists or not. That's not my where my doubt lies, nor is it my particular belief. More importantly, that's not what led me into an actual crisis in faith this week. Yes, Unitarian Universalists can have a crisis in faith and mine was rocked this past Monday. I was not prepared for my intense, despairing reaction to the overwhelming accumulation of evidence making me doubt the basic goodness of humanity.

I want to believe that people are good.

I want to believe that people care about each other, about the poor, and the sick, and the lonely.

I want to believe that people care about the planet and will do what must be done to protect our environment.

I want to believe that people care more for peace than for power.

I want to believe that leaders of nations understand that war comes at too high a cost in human lives.

I want to believe that my prosperity can be had without harming another.

I want to believe that others care as much about the common good as their own good.

I want to believe that the moral arc of the universe bends *toward* justice, not away.

But how can I believe these things?

I believe Syria's leaders used horrific chemical weapons on their own people, and I know adults and children suffer because soldiers were willingly complicit. I don't understand.

I see political and religious fanatics violently rampaging through shopping malls, killing innocent victims for their cause. I don't understand such killing sprees.

I believe Russia ordered its army into a neighboring country against international law. I recall our own country's questionable entry into Iraq. I don't understand how alternate realities come to be which encourage hostile actions and reactions.

I know about a proposed law to protect the right to discriminate against gays, lesbians, transgendered, and inter-sexed people under the guise of religious freedom. I don't understand institutionalized religious hate.

I know about a proposed law to allow guns in houses of worship, schools, and universities. I don't understand how this is to make me feel more safe.

I know about armed robberies, sexual abuse, physical torture, acts of racism, bullying, and other evils against life and property. I just don't understand.

How can I believe, as Anne Frank believed during the Holocaust, that people are basically good? My faith is grounded in the goodness of humanity. But doubt threatens that faith.

Margaret J. Wheatley wrote in *Shambala Sun*, a Buddhist magazine: [Summer 2001 issue, "Relying on Human Goodness" article],

Human goodness seems like an outrageous "fact." Every day we are confronted with mounting evidence of the great harm we so easily do to one another. We are numbed by frequent genocide, ethnic hatred, and individual violence committed daily in the world. In

self-protective groups, we terrorize each other with our hatred. Of the 240 or so nations in the world, nearly one-fourth of them are at war.

In our daily life, we encounter people who are angry, deceitful, intent only on satisfying their own needs. There is so much anger, distrust, greed, and pettiness that we are losing our capacity to work well together. Many of us are more withdrawn and distrustful than ever. Yet this incessant display of what's worst in us makes it essential that we believe in human goodness. Without that belief, there really is no hope.

I want hope. In the midst of my crisis of faith, like the ancient psalmist, I cry, "From where does my comfort come?" Although communing with the glories of the natural world raises my spirits and calms me down, it can't adequately restore my faith in humanity. For that, I need to turn to elsewhere, particularly to Zen Buddhism, called Chan in its original Chinese home. In Zen practice, doubt is essential. Certainty has no place.

Writing in *Exhortations for Those Unable to Arouse the Doubt*, Chan master Boshon says,

In Zen practice, the essential point is to arouse Doubt. What is this Doubt? For example, when you are born, where do you come from? You cannot help but remain in doubt about this. When you die, where do you go? Again, you cannot help but remain in doubt. Since you cannot pierce this barrier of life-and-death, suddenly the Doubt will coalesce right before your eyes. Try to put it down, you cannot; try to push it away, you cannot. Eventually this Doubt Block will be broken through and you'll realize what a worthless notion is life-and-death – ha! As the old worthies said: "Great Doubt, Great Awakening; small doubt, small awakening; no doubt, no awakening."

[http://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/great\\_doubt.pdf](http://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/great_doubt.pdf)

For Boshon, the example of doubt about life and death illustrates that awakening, seeing the world as it really is, must include doubt, for we can't really know anything. And because all things are impermanent, what you think you know now *will* change.

Boshon teaches me that having doubts about human goodness is wise. If I blindly accept human goodness as an unchangeable fact, the daily news of the world would propel me into crisis after crisis, likely ending with me in despair. Doubt allows me to let go of my expectation that goodness is absolute and my faith loses its blindness.

As Unitarian minister Robert T. Weston writes, we must 'cherish our doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth...the testing of belief...let us not fear doubt, but let us rejoice in its help.' [#650, *Singing the Living Tradition*]

Zen priest, Sensei Sevan Ross, recent past director of the Chicago Zen Center, adds this image:

Great Faith and Great Doubt are two ends of a spiritual walking stick. We grip one end with the grasp given to us by our Great Determination. We poke into the underbrush in the dark on our spiritual journey. This act is real spiritual practice – gripping the Faith end and poking ahead with the Doubt end of the stick. If we have no Faith, we have no Doubt. If we have no Determination, we never pick up the stick in the first place." [from a dharma

talk, “The Distance Between Faith and Doubt,” according to [buddhism.about.com/od/basicbuddhistteachings/a/What-Is-Dharma-In-Buddhism.htm](http://buddhism.about.com/od/basicbuddhistteachings/a/What-Is-Dharma-In-Buddhism.htm)]

My faith has been poked by doubt, but I am determined to hold on to it. Even though I know humans fully capable of acting inhumanely, I must hold on to hope, to my faith that people want to be good. Science confirms my faith is not totally misplaced.

Some researchers, such as Dacher Keltner at the University of California, Berkeley, claim we have a compassionate instinct, an automatic response that has ensured human survival. [According to *Psychology Today*, June 2013, “Compassion: Our First Instinct.”] Scientists define compassion as a measurable emotional response to suffering accompanied by an authentic desire or action to help. Research shows that ‘survival of the kindest’ may be a more apt description of human evolution than ‘survival of the fittest,’ because communities that take care of its members flourish better than those that do not. It’s no wonder that kindness is a valued trait within religious groups and for potential life partners. Who wants to be with someone who isn’t kind or caring?

James Fowler, social scientist at University of California, San Diego, has demonstrated that compassion is contagious. [*Psychology Today*, June 2013, “Compassion: Our First Instinct.”] When one person sees another person offering help to someone, it creates an elevated state or mood inspiring that observer to offer help. Corporate leaders engaged in self-sacrificing behavior elicit this changed state in their employees, too. It also yields greater commitment to that leader and greater compassion in the workplace. Fowler calls this a ‘chain reaction of goodness’.

If you and I act for the good, the interconnected web will carry our chain reaction of goodness around here and across the globe—maybe even to Russia and Syria. My uncertain faith in human goodness keeps open the door for me to hope.

Boshon reassures me that my doubt is not misplaced. The findings of scientific research give me hope that my faith in humanity is not misplaced. And when I look at all of you, I know my faith rests in good hands and hearts because I know you join me in creating that chain reaction of goodness daily. You perform acts of kindness in this community and beyond. As Albert Einstein urges me to say, I am grateful to you and to everything that re-ignites a spiritual spark of hope, faith, and love in me.

May you and I be here for each other in our times of crisis. May we continue to spread our love, compassion, and kindness everywhere, in ever-widening circles of love. May it be so because our future depends upon it.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Have you had a ‘crisis in faith’ and has it been resolved? Please share your story.
2. How do doubt and/or faith inform your particular beliefs?
3. Do you have faith in some things you can’t know are absolute truth, and not in others? Share.
4. Are your certainties subject to doubt or beyond a doubt? Might your certainties be idols?