



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Gospel of Doubt”

© by Kate Blane and Dan Everett

A sermon dialogue delivered on July 3, 2016

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.* Margaret Mead

They also serve who only stand and wait. John Milton

There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. Leonard Cohen

Sermon

[Dan] Good morning! Once again Kate and I are honored to provide summer filler for UUFA. We found this story to be very evocative for us, and we hope it's thought provoking for you as well. And as is our custom, Kate and I will give this message

[Both] IN STEREO!

[Kate] On December 31, 1999, a twelve-year-old African-American boy sat in a church in Texas and awaited the end of the world. His tight-knit Pentecostal congregation firmly believed that the second coming of Christ would occur at the turn of the millennium. When midnight came and went, the elders were too proud to give up. But young Casey Gerald had learned that it was possible not to believe. Only later that night, as he watched Peter Jennings announce the New Year in various time zones, did Casey realize how absurd the prophecy really was. Jesus would have had to return over and over again, as midnight struck in different places. Can you imagine what that must have felt like? To have your entire belief system yanked out from underneath you at the age of twelve? Where there was once a mountain of certitude, there was now a spring of doubt.

Time went on, and young Casey turned to other paths. He was obviously a brilliant student and despite his poor origins, he was able to graduate from Yale. But when he found himself tied up and at the mercy of an armed robber, he learned that the best education could not protect him, Casey believed that a prestigious professional job could transform his life, when he arrived as an intern at Lehman Brothers in 2008.

[Dan] Not so. Casey Gerald came to Washington when he heard the call of a voice from Illinois, telling him that real change for America was at hand. But when he experienced the reality of

partisan gridlock, he lost his belief in political salvation. Hear his words: “As the political system ground to a halt, hope and change began to seem like a cruel joke. I had knelt faithfully at the altar of the American Dream, praying to the gods of my time: success, money, and power. Over and over again, midnight struck. And I opened my eyes to see that all these gods were dead. And from that graveyard I began to search once more. Not because I was brave, but because I knew that I would either believe or I would die.”

[Kate] And so Casey Gerald took a pilgrimage to another Mecca: Harvard Business School. But this time, he and his classmates were looking for meaning, not success. On an 8000-mile road trip to see the real America, from the cow pastures of Montana to the desolation of Detroit, they found men and women who were starting small businesses to bring purpose into their lives. And having been trained at the West Point of capitalism, Casey and his friends saw this as a revelation. So they set up a nonprofit called MBAs Across America to help these social entrepreneurs. He had found something to believe in, something to inspire his life. MBAs Across America spread and grew because it spoke to a great hunger across America, a hunger for purpose and meaning. Casey Gerald became a hero, a young black entrepreneur who was doing well by doing good. But there was another midnight in store for Casey Gerald. At a gala for alumni of the Harvard Business School in lower Manhattan, he sat among the business titans of our time. There was pride in a room where assets under management surpassed half a trillion dollars. They looked over all that they had made, and it was good. But then, 50 blocks away in Harlem, he met a man who was spending his entire pension from his life as a taxi driver to fund an urban farm called Harlem Grown. This man was going without a salary so that hungry kids could eat. And seeing this shook Casey Gerald to his core.

[Dan] Hear his words: “It wasn’t the glaring inequality that made me want to cry. It wasn’t rage at the One Percent or pity for the 99. I was disturbed because I finally realized that I was the dialysis for a country that really needed a kidney transplant. I was disturbed because I realized that my story stood in for all those who were expected to pick themselves up by their bootstraps when they didn’t have any boots. That my organization stood in for all the structural and systemic help that never went to Harlem or Appalachia or the Lower Ninth Ward. That my voice stood in for all those voices that seemed too unlearned, too uneducated, too unaccommodated. And the shame of that washed over me like the shame of watching Peter Jennings announce the end of the millennium again and again on television. I had been duped, hoodwinked, bamboozled again, but this time the false savior was me.”

[Kate] Casey Gerald had experienced the ultimate midnight, the time when he realized that he himself might be part of the problem. He lost his belief in his own role with his organization. Put yourself in that position! You have worked for years to build up a nonprofit organization to do important social justice work, and you have become admired and respected for your success. Then suddenly you realize you were doing it wrong, completely wrong. How would that feel? What Casey Gerald did was to put his organization, MBAs across America, out of business. He shared his staff, closed his doors, and shared their model freely to anyone who saw their power to do this work without waiting for his permission. He renounced his role as savior that some had placed on him.

[Dan] For he said: “The time is too short and the odds too long to wait for a second coming. There are no miracles and when the paths laid out seem to lead to our demise, it will not be blind faith. It will be humble doubt that sheds light... For why with so much power in our hands do people still suffer so bad... If you are disturbed by the unconscionable things we have come to accept, then it must be questioning time. It is possible not only that our answers are wrong, but that our questions are wrong.” Yes, it must be questioning time. This is Casey Gerald’s Gospel of Doubt.

[Kate] Dan and I have really struggled with this sermon. We felt so inspired by Casey Gerard’s story—

[Dan]— which he presents as a TED Talk eloquently and poetically. It’s a delight to listen to. Look up “Gospel of Doubt” on TED or YouTube—

[Kate]—that we knew we had to share it with you. But we could not figure out what was so inspiring about it! He experiences all these doubts and does not give any answers. So we went back and asked what is so significant about this story. The first thing we noticed was this young man’s remarkable journey from a poor African-American boy in Texas to a graduate of Yale and the Harvard Business School. We are used to poor people and immigrants focused on material success and wanting access to the “good things in life.” Only the next generation, people who are raised in privilege like us, have the mental luxury to question the system. To question if the “good things in life” have brought us happiness. For some of us the psychic disturbance of pain, suffering, poverty lessens the pleasure of happiness in our material world. But Casey Gerald did all this in a single lifetime; in fact he is still a young man.

[Dan] But what really puzzled us was why he would feel ashamed at meeting the retired taxi driver in Harlem — so ashamed that he would disband a successful business that was providing real help to social entrepreneurs. He was revered as a hero — a person who had done much more to end poverty than we would expect of anyone in our society. What happened is that Casey Gerald had seen through those expectations. Like most of us, he’d been brought up on the idea that “the poor will always be with you.” He had drunk the Kool-Aid of neoliberal capitalism. He had bought into a worldview that takes pride in half a trillion dollars under management and accepts the fact of hungry children 50 blocks away. Perhaps he was ashamed because coming from a poor background himself, he had become part of a system that oppresses poor people.

[Kate] That’s why he called his organization “the dialysis in a nation that needed a kidney transplant.” We accept individual acts of charity as a substitute for the systemic, social investments in our people that are not forthcoming. And those social investments are not forthcoming because, in the richest country the world has ever known, we think we can’t afford them. This is absurd, but we accept it because we’ve drunk the Kool-Aid too. We’ve unconsciously accepted that the rights of private property trumps the right of a poor girl in Harlem to eat. We have created a social standard that says we should pay the smallest amount of taxes possible, and give some charitable contributions, and that is good enough. Yes, there is still poverty remaining outside our door, but we volunteer and we contribute and accept the system

more or less. We have forgotten, not heard, or remembered how the prophet Isaiah railed against ritual tithing as a substitute for real social justice.

[Dan] Leonard Cohen sings, “There is a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in.” Sometimes something very small, an encounter, a question asked, a person met will bring us an epiphany. Casey’s epiphany came from meeting a humble servant in Harlem. That encounter came as a crack in the shell of social expectations that enclosed him. The light that came in was the realization that his business solution, which seemed so significant, was insufficient to deal with the scale of poverty in our society. This led Casey to give his business away, contributing to what could be described as the gift economy.

[Kate] Some of you might remember a couple of young men who came and gave a forum here at the UUFA on the gift economy last year. They had started off on a road trip across America and realized that money prevented them from meeting different people. So they gave their car away and all their money and then started out again hitchhiking, asking for the grace of strangers to feed and shelter them. If they received money from strangers, they turned around and gave it away. For they believed that \$1.00 spent on mosquito nets to save lives in Africa is better spent than a \$1.00 on themselves. They too asked Casey’s central question “Why if we have so much power at our hands are people still suffering so bad?” I believe many of us ask that question. And it is a hard question. We don’t need to go to Harlem to see dire poverty. It’s right here in Athens. Why, with all the good hearted people here in our beloved town, is there still so much poverty? If we take Casey Gerald’s words to heart, then it is questioning time – more deeply, right down to the economic system in which we live.

[Dan] Social justice is very much a part of UU’s central focus. UUs have been on the forefront of so many issues from civil rights to LGBT rights. It is understandable that we already feel stretched for having been on the cutting edge for so long! So perhaps an idea such as a gift economy stretches the limits of our belief system even further. It does mine! It seems hopelessly idealistic but nevertheless inspirational. This was part of the power of Casey Gerald’s story for us as well as the young men who gave the forum last year. The gift economy is a big dream, but we might as well dream big, for a small dream never inspired anyone.

[Kate] Also almost all of our past prophets and big dreamers preached detachment from the material system and service to the poor – a carpenter in Nazareth, a Hindu prince under the Bodhi tree, an Indian man in a dhoti on hunger strikes, a young woman with a Red Cross on her sleeve, an older Catholic nun in the slums with the poor, a Black preacher with a dream of Justice. Each of these people, famous or unknown in Harlem, challenges our limits, and stretches us to be better versions of ourselves. I believe all of us have limits to our generosity. Also it is worthwhile to explore this edge and to figure out why it is there and if we want to expand it further.

[Dan] The biologist E.O. Wilson outlines his hypothesis about the evolution of human nature which he discusses in his book “The Meaning of Life.” With such a title, no one can say that Wilson thinks small! Wilson points out that humans, like the ants he studied for most of his life,

are social organisms. There are only about 20 species of social animals, with humans being the only mammals among them; but all social species have been very successful in an evolutionary sense. Wilson's hypothesis is that social species are shaped by two conflicting selection pressures. Within a group, the more selfish individuals tend to be more successful; but in competition among groups, the more cooperative groups will win out. Wilson sees human nature as an inherent dynamic between our selfishness and our altruism, with both traits creating a tension that is essential to our creativity.

Based on this idea, it seems that America has been veering towards the selfish direction, celebrating Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, movie stars, and football heroes but not the metrics of social cohesion, Gross National Happiness, or progress on poverty. This leads to a situation in which many individuals are doing very well, but society as a whole is not thriving.

[Kate] In Michael Moore's latest movie, "Where to Invade Next," Moore visits several Western European social democratic countries. He finds social institutions, such as Finnish schools and Italian vacations, that far surpass anything America offers. Moore shows a woman in Iceland saying that you could not pay her to live in the U.S. because we do not take care of each other. On the eve of the Fourth of July, when we celebrate the inspiration of our Nation's founders bringing a new birth of freedom and democracy into the world, are we still inspiring other people with our social models? The ironic ending to Michael Moore's movie is that a lot of the ideas he encountered so wonderfully developed in other countries started in the U.S. but are now languishing here.

[Dan] It seems to be the Millennials leading the charge on change. Perhaps they view capitalism differently because they lived through the bank meltdown but not the collapse of communism. And as Bob Dylan would say, the times they are a-changing. The Arab Spring and democracy movements around the world show that young people everywhere are not buying the old systems. The Brexit — British voters deciding to leave the European Union — challenges 70 years of belief in a unified Europe. And millions of American voters are just plain fed up with the existing two-party system. These events are symptoms of a breakdown of trust in existing social institutions and leaders.

With all this worrisome news, we want something to believe. And yet this modern day prophet, Casey Gerald, challenges us to question our belief systems.

For he says: "It is not true to say we live in an age of disbelief; no, we believe as much as any time before. We may believe in the Bible or the Harvard Business Review; but we desperately need to believe. We speak in the tongues of charismatic leaders who promise to solve all our problems; we take the text of technological progress as infallible truth, and see suffering as a necessary act of capitalism which is our God; and we hardly realize the human price we pay when we fail to question one brick, because it may shake our whole foundation. But if you are disturbed by the unconscionable things we have come to accept, then it must be questioning time. It is possible not only that our answers are wrong, but that our questions are wrong."

Doubt should come easy to Unitarian-Universalists. They say that when UUs want to run someone out of town, they burn a question mark on their lawn. But still, as humans, we do have a powerful need to believe. We may not believe in religious dogma, but we base our lives on some foundational beliefs: affiliation with an ideology or a political movement, our place in our community, our work for social justice, or just our relationship with family and friends and pets. What Casey Gerald is asking us to do is to identify and question our foundational beliefs, not necessarily to deny them.

[Kate] Wes Nisker suggests that we should make this questioning into a communal ritual, similar to how Jewish congregations gather to atone for their sins on Yom Kippur. The appropriate date to hold this ritual would be April Fools' Day. The ritual would feature the Homer Simpson forehead-slapping mudra, like this: How many people believed that the end of the cold war would bring peace?

[Dan, *slapping his forehead*] Duh-oh!

[Kate] How many people believed that electing a black President would end racism?

[Dan, *slapping his forehead*] Duh-oh!

[Kate] How many people believed that when scientists explained what we know about climate change, our leaders would do the right thing?

[Dan, *slapping his forehead*] Duh-oh!

[Kate] This is so fun that I hate to stop! Maybe you all want to add this to your 4th of July party? In closing, when Casey Gerald says, "I knew that I must believe or that I would die." He does not need to believe in charismatic leaders, or education, or capitalism; he needs something that would give meaning to his life and to push forward the justice that the world so desperately needs. He needs to know that what he does matters and so do we. There needs to be people to create the crack where the light gets in! In summary, we would like to encourage you to keep doing what Unitarian-Universalists do best. That is to keep questioning our beliefs as we work on our own spiritual path, while being active in social justice. And above all never doubt that each one of us can make a difference, for each of you DO.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Was there ever anything that you firmly believed but then came to doubt? If so, how did that affect you?
2. Are you ever paralyzed by doubt: unable to act because you don't know what is going on? If so, how would you handle that?
3. Do you ever doubt that you can make a difference? If so, what would it take to help you change this belief?