



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“What Socrates Knew”

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Centering Thoughts

The kingdom of heaven is within you; and whosoever shall know himself shall find it.
Ancient Egyptian proverb

The unexamined life is not worth living. Socrates, in Plato’s “Apology”

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately. Henry David Thoreau

The examined life is no picnic. Robert Fulghum

Sermon

A philosopher is often called a lover of wisdom. By that definition, we’re probably all philosophers, because who among us doesn’t wish for wisdom? Who among us seeks foolishness over wisdom, unless it’s foolish wisdom?

Whether this is wise or not, I often look to what’s happening in the world for inspiration for our service themes and I discovered World Philosophy Day occurs this week.

UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, has for the last decade or so, declared the third Thursday of November to be World Philosophy Day. The organization believes philosophical reflection and critical questioning enables us to give meaning to our lives and actions. UNESCO hopes to encourage people to share their philosophical heritage, open their minds to new ideas, and inspire public debate on society’s great challenges. I think Unitarian Universalism echoes that vision. Since we are informed by many sources, including people and ideas from the past, in honor of World Philosophy Day we turn to the wisdom of one of the great founding fathers of philosophy, Socrates. [www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/philosophy/philosophy-day-at-unesco/]

I’m a big fan of So-crates, as Keanu Reeves called him in that fabulous 1989 movie, *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*. Keanu couldn’t have guessed that ten years later he would encounter Socrates again in *The Matrix* movies when Laurence Fishburne introduced him to the Oracle. She had Socrates signature remark, “Know Thyself,” written over her doorway. Keanu’s

character, Neo, had to look within to discover whether he was ‘the One’ to save the world from the Matrix. Socrates has made many surprising appearances in pop culture.

When I went off to college I intended to become a UU minister. I thought the questions of philosophy more in keeping with our tradition than Religious Studies, so I chose to make Philosophy one of my majors, the other being Mass Communication. To fulfill the Philosophy Department’s requirements, I had to take an Ancient and Medieval Philosophy class. The professor, a visiting ex-priest married to an ex-nun, spoke in a beautiful Irish brogue. I loved listening to him but I barely understood a word.

In fact, the entire class struggled to understand him, not because of his accent, but because he was an abysmal teacher. His instructional methods didn’t help us learn. Though I tried to do well, I received a final grade of D, as in Dumb and Dumber. If memory serves me, always a questionable proposition, I recall two students received a B and the rest received a C, D, or F. Though my pride didn’t suffer because I totally blamed the professor, it didn’t make me happy. Philosophy majors like me were not allowed to get a C or below in any of the required courses.

Fortunately, the Chair of the Philosophy Department happened to be my advisor and he didn’t require me to retake the class. He wrote a note to the Academic Dean giving me a waiver on the grade requirement. He also dismissed the Irish professor. Better yet, I found a silver lining in my struggle to understand ancient and medieval philosophy. After I graduated I enrolled in a community college to repeat the course prior to applying to grad school or seminary. If I hadn’t done so poorly in that subject as an undergrad, I might never have the man who became my life partner who had also enrolled in that class.

Our life journeys have a way of taking us places we can’t predict, oracles or not. The late Steve Jobs said during a 2005 Stanford University commencement speech that we can only connect the dots to our lives by looking backward. For that reason we have to trust the future to unfold as it should, giving us opportunities to find silver linings in our struggles and disappointments.

Except for meeting Paul, that second ancient philosophy class was as worthless as the first. I still don’t know much about ancient philosophy. I did learn, like Neo however, that Socrates admonished students to ‘know thyself’. Socrates knew he didn’t know anything and that’s why the Oracle at Delphi proclaimed him the wisest of men. Socrates confirmed this, saying, “The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.” As I’ve just confessed, I know what I don’t know. Since one of my favorite required Philosophy classes was Logic, which I aced, by the way, I can say confidently that the following syllogism must be true:

If ignorance is a sign of wisdom, and if I am ignorant, then I must be wise.

Isn’t logic great? Better yet, isn’t ignorance great?

Socrates sought to end his ignorance. His search for knowledge focused on meaning, rather than facts about the world. He shifted the focus of philosophy from ‘out there’ interest in the

cosmos to more ‘down here’ interest in human living. He particularly sought to understand what it meant to be human. To find out, Socrates asked Athenians to examine life by asking questions of others. Through the process of dialogue he thought we would discover meaning.

In Socrates’ time few people wanted to admit they didn’t know something, not unlike today, I think. Socrates challenged people who claimed to be experts by asking question after question. With every response he received, Socrates wielded further questions like a rapier, cutting into each statement until he revealed there was no knowledge there at all, only ignorance.

Socrates didn’t make friends this way. If that wasn’t bad enough, this man, described as short, ugly, stocky, and even looking like a frog, was an affront to the Greek ideal of beauty. Even before Socrates opened his mouth, people wanted nothing to do with him! Because he challenged their knowledge publicly and revealed their ignorance, they accused him of harming society by denying the state gods and corrupting the Athenian youth whom he was teaching how to think. He was arrested, tried, and executed.

The cryptic ‘know thyself’ was carved on the Temple of Apollo at the Oracle in Delphi, Greece, and some suggest Socrates, a trained stonecutter, may have inscribed it. Regardless, the idea didn’t originate with him. Though it likely came from ancient Egypt, Socrates made it his own. He believed if one didn’t know oneself, it was impossible to know anything about the world. But this knowing oneself was not an ‘all about me’ naval-gazing. Instead, true knowledge begins with oneself, learning what is important, what motivates, what values one holds.

UUs typically don’t accept tradition blindly or take on faith what some book says, though we are informed by these. We filter ideas through our own lives and we test our ideas with one another. That’s one reason why community is so important. We make meaning in our lives through our connections and relationships with others, through questions and reflection on important ideas, and through service to others, whether family, friends, strangers, or something else beyond ourselves.

Ultimately, we seek wisdom that will help us understand what it means to be alive, to live a good life, and to die. Two thousand years after Socrates, another examiner of life, Henry David Thoreau, wrote in *Walden*:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. [*Walden*, Chapter 2, Paragraph 16]

Thoreau examined life by living deliberately, by cutting out all the noise and comforts of society and wealth in order to experience life's essentials more fully.

For some of us, it's easier not examining life. Australian ethicist Simon Longstaff wrote in *New Philosopher* magazine last year [June 2013, www.newphilosopher.com/articles/being-fully-human/]:

In a world of abiding uncertainty and complexity one can recognize a certain attraction in not examining too much, for too long in life. Thus the allure of those who offer to provide clear answers, simple directions, precise instructions (or whatever) so that you may set aside examination and merely comply, or unthinkingly follow custom and practice – perhaps living a conventionally moral life rather than an examined ethical life. One can easily imagine how pleasant an unexamined life might be.

Pleasant, maybe. But not meaningful in my view. I imagine you agree, otherwise it's doubtful you'd be here in a UU congregation where you don't get handed answers, otherwise known as doctrine. Like Socrates, we ask questions and expect you to develop your own answers, maybe even your own questions.

How do we examine our lives? For me, I think it means paying attention, not sleepwalking through life, and becoming conscious or mindful of ourselves and our actions. I think it means reflecting on our lives, on why we are the way we are because only when we know who we are can we change who we are, if we're not satisfied with what we learn about ourselves.

One example for me was learning about white privilege. I didn't fully know myself until I learned that my white identity is a lens I see the world through. Those whose identity is different, see and experience a different world. The racial unrest and anger experienced by Ferguson, Missouri, is an example of how our experiences are different. Only by becoming aware of our own filters can we begin to be in fair and equitable dialogue with others.

I think knowing thyself also means hitting the pause button on our lives occasionally, so that we don't run on without knowing where we're going or why. We should be deliberate or we may come to the end of our lives with regrets. Know thyself and examining our lives are essential philosophical and spiritual practices. We must know ourselves before we can know another.

May this Fellowship be a place for you to get to know yourself, make meaningful connections with others, and ask the tough questions of life.

May it always be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Do you agree with Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living? Why or why not?
2. In what way/s do you live deliberately? What gives your life meaning or worth?
3. What helps you learn about yourself and what it means to be human and alive?