

## The Dark Side of the Moon

Recently, when I was being poked and prodded and sent for X-rays and such, it occurred to me that a lot of strangers knew more about my innermost self than I did. There are ways that I could have used to remedy some of my ignorance. I could have learned a little anatomy and physiology. I could have taken a look at pharmacology. However, even if I had been armed with that knowledge, it would have felt like someone else's innards that were being described. It is hard to feel like the diagrams and pictures are what's inside me, making up who I am. It's not how I experience myself.

If it's hard to relate, in a truly intimate fashion, to what goes on in below my neck, what goes on in the space between my ears is even harder to understand. Partly that's because we don't have an agreed on model for that area. Oh, we have the terrain mapped out pretty well, now, much, much more than what we used to have, and we have some idea about how it all works, which part does what and how they interact. Yet with all this knowledge, what goes on inside our heads is still an inexact science with lots of competing theories about why we do what we do. The space in our heads is one of, if not the greatest, last frontier.

The phrase, The Dark Side of the Moon, is not only the name of an album by Pink Floyd, it also refers to anything we don't know. That's because the dark side

of the moon was only first photographed in 1968. That may seem to some people here like a time when dinosaurs still roamed the earth but to me it's just yesterday. We have learned so much, much of it so fast, because we have invented ways to see beyond the level of our human eyes. What we have been able to probe, since the inventions of microscopes and telescopes and x-rays and other devices, have often left us with more mysteries than we had before. Each of these discoveries has enabled us to see what we couldn't see before and, most importantly, we have learned to build from generation to generation so that we can accumulate knowledge rather than having to begin all over again.

The process by which we do this means that we are always disproving as much as we prove. Every step in furthering knowledge means that we are saying to the last generation of scientists that the understanding that was won with such effort was, at best, incomplete. That is how we are able to advance. It is not that those who came before were stupid; their discoveries were necessary but also necessarily unfinished. The discoveries of this generation are also incomplete. There is always a dark side of the moon. There is always something more to know.

Perhaps especially in that dark space we call our minds. We think that we know how we think. But there is so much evidence that our minds work as much to fool themselves as to bring enlightenment.

But we carry on, hoping that what we find comes closer to what is “really there”. In other words, in scientific endeavor we take a leap of faith that there is a reality out there and that we can draw nearer and nearer to mapping that reality. When we say we believe in the scientific method, we are saying that we believe that there is truth and that we can learn more and more about how the whole big shebang works. It’s a bit like all those x-rays and CT scans. Even when we know more about how our minds work, it still doesn’t feel like that’s what’s going on inside our particular mind.

To make this more enterprise more difficult, we have lately learned that, no matter how hard we try, we are part of the experiment, not just the experimenters. In addition, we are very good at fooling ourselves. Our minds, the only tool we have for uncovering truth, have a million ways to distort what we are seeing. We tend to see things that we want to see. We project onto others those things about ourselves that we fear or that we dislike. We tend to see things that are familiar to us and not see those things that are not familiar. We seek out the information that will make us comfortable. Everybody wants their world view confirmed and it’s not for nothing that the phrase, ‘Denial is not just a river in Egypt’ was coined.

So, the greatest dark side is often the one that is closest to us, the one just above our hairline. There are, as far as we know, only a few ways to open up that

space, only a few ways to let us see inside that black hole. All of them involve other people.

We can go into therapy and have someone guide us through our blind spots, especially those blind spots that are doing us a lot of harm. Or we can try to engage with a larger group of people, sometimes called a community, to give us further information about the world. But to do either of these things involves an openness to the goal of seeing ourselves more objectively, of trying to understand ourselves, even when that understanding sometimes feels difficult to painful. We used to have this poster of a rag doll being put through a wringer. The caption said ‘the truth shall make you free, but first it will make you miserable’. It also means that we commit to the idea that the truth is bigger than our own opinion. Just as with the physical sciences, it means we commit to the idea of a truth that can be discovered and that, to a great extent, is shared by other people.

At this time, it is easier than ever to remain in the bubble that reinforces our self-image and our limited understanding of the world. Paradoxically, as the world becomes smaller and each community becomes more diverse, we are, less and less, forced to live with, talk to, work with, people who are different than we are. Technology has made possible our ability to insulate ourselves from different ideas, different ways of thinking, from the physical presence of difference. And,

lest I romanticize the past too much, to a great degree this was always true. It's just now, as globalization is the watchword for this generation, that we see the possibility of understanding between people slipping away.

Communities, including churches, have always held out two possibilities. They can widen our horizons or they can reinforce prejudice. Communities, including churches, are much like individuals. They, too, have blind spots, have dark sides, have places where they cannot see themselves very well at all.

Let me reference David's sermon on humor last week. To quote Chaucer, "Many a true word was spoken in jest," and David's sermon highlighted many ways in which UU's have been defined in jokes. We all enjoyed the sermon, I imagine, and it is to our credit that we can laugh at ourselves. It's one of the healthiest things we can do. At the same time, it is also a good idea to look at the role of humor in letting people look at things that might otherwise be too uncomfortable to look at. Humor also lets us resolve some of our discomfort. I thought it was interesting that most of the jokes about UU's revolved around one notion, the idea that at heart, our inclusiveness, our lack of creed or dogma, have left us with emptiness. I will give you one example of a joke about UU's, in case you weren't here for the sermon. It's one that David gave last week and that I've heard before, that I think sums up the message of most of the jokes. "What do you

get if you cross a UU with a Jehovah's Witness? Someone who knocks on your door but when you answer, doesn't have anything to say." Ouch!

At the heart of that joke is the idea that many people have about what makes a religion a religion. It is as if the only role for religion is to deliver some truth, whatever that truth is, to its audience. Agree with this version of the truth or disagree with it, there is no other role for a religious body except to market a belief, a claim, that they have the truth. In modern, diverse, American society, the model is much like it is for the rest of consumer society. If the truth that is offered by one religious body is not what we agree with, then we go shopping for another truth.

We as UU's say something a different about truth, but I think our difference is not always noticed or understood. Our openness sometimes gives people the wrong idea. We are often defined by our lack of definition. Indeed, people who admire us (even if they often do not join us) usually say that they like us because we don't tell anyone what to believe. It's nice to be admired for our open-mindedness, but I think this is a definition that misses the point. It is also a negative definition, what we are not, rather than what we are.

We are also admired for our commitment to social justice and we have admired ourselves for this quality as well. We say we are living out our principles,

but so also do many Christians, Muslims, and Jews claim their sacred scripture as inspiration for their deeds. And yet many can point to the hypocrisy of those who make that claim. How are we different?

I grew up thinking that UU's were always just, always progressive, always on the right side of history. And, like a child who grows up and finds that his or her parents are not the gods he or she thought they were, I've had to absorb the shock of finding that UU's are not always right. There were UU's on both sides of the slavery issue. Everyone was not an abolitionist. There were UU's on both sides of gender equality. There were UU's on both sides of peace issues. Whatever the arc of history is, we have as not always been on its cutting edge. Understanding that, without apology, is part of growing up and accepting that people, all people, can have blind spots, contradictory loyalties, and all the other qualities that make us human, not machines. We, too, can be blind to people's suffering, to people's oppression. Sometimes, just like the rest of humanity, we overlook a lot about the tragedies of our times.

So, if we are just as flawed as the rest of the world, is there anything that does distinguish us besides a rather vacant idea of inclusiveness? Of course, I think there is. When I think about why Unitarian-Universalism is still my chosen faith, I think the most compelling reason for me is that we are willing to engage with

reality, not a fantasy of perfection. It is the desire to struggle with the truth, not have it handed to me, that makes us distinct from other religions and that keeps me here.

I no longer think of UU's as always perfect or always right. I don't even always think we're on the right side of history or even on the right path. I think we can delude ourselves just like other mortals, both as individuals and as a denomination.

But I still come back to this faith, uncomfortable word for many including myself, but let's talk about that. Let's talk about faith, here. Let's talk about the faith that we define every week by our actions, even when we never name it. Let's talk about our faith in ourselves, our faith in each other, our faith in the human race. Let's talk about our faith that truth exists, even if, limited and mortal creatures that we are, it is never completely within our grasp. Let's talk about our faith that truth is bigger than we are, bigger than any community or nation and then let's talk about the need for us to be part of something bigger than ourselves in this search for truth. Let's talk about our openness to other viewpoints and let's have faith that, in the process of coming to understand each other, we understand a little more about ourselves, our world, the universe. When we search multiple sources, and take a look at the wall over there, or the section just below the Principles in the



hymnal, we are saying that no one tradition will help us understand everything. When we encourage people to try different paths, when we do not insist that one book or one holy person is sufficient to define the truth, we are saying that we acknowledge that the dark side, the mystery, what we don't understand, is a vast place, whether it's the far reaches of the universe or our own minds. We are saying that truth is worth seeking and we are humble enough to think that this will not be accomplished by one person in one lifetime or even by many people over many lifetimes.

The goal of science is the same as the goal of any discipline. The methods and the tools may vary, but the goal of any pursuit of knowledge should be to bring what we know closer and closer to reality. We know the earth is not flat. We know that angels and demons do not rule our thoughts. Over millennia, we have come closer and closer to understanding ourselves and the universe around us. In this house, we want to know more and have the humility and the courage to say that what we discover is always provisional, always subject to revision. We are in search of truth, we say, and, no matter how complicated that search may be, that is the business we are about. The search for truth is like walking toward the horizon. No matter how far we walk it is always ahead of us. But while we walk, we are exploring places we have never seen before. We are getting closer to putting a little

light in places that were obscured before. Let us all turn on our flashlights and walk together into the unknown.