

**Faith Seeking Understanding**  
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First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto  
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**Reading** from Anselm's *Monologion & Proslogion*

*"I began to wonder whether it might be possible to find a single argument that needed nothing but itself alone for proof, that would by itself be enough to show that God really exists... and so I turned my thoughts to this with great diligence. Sometimes I thought I could already grasp what I was looking for, and sometimes it escaped my mind completely. Then one day the thing I had despaired of finding presented itself in the very clash of my thoughts, so that I eagerly embraced the doubt I had been taking such pains to drive away. I wrote about it, adopting the role of someone trying to raise his mind to the contemplation of God and seeking to understand what he believes."*

**Sermon:** Faith Seeking Understanding

I was probably eight years old the first time a friend tried to convince me to believe in God. If God isn't real, she said, there's no great harm in believing anyway. But if God is real, then my Unitarian refusal to believe in Him would send me straight to Hell. So wouldn't the smart, logical thing, be to drop my religion and switch to hers? And I imagine if I asked for a show of hands, I would not be alone in having had that type of conversation, with someone at some point.

So when I was required, in my seminary studies, to take a Christian theology course, part of me expected to find more of the same, in the texts we studied. Faithful believers trying to convince me that they are right and I am wrong. Instead, what I found was... uncertain and doubting thinkers, doing their best to make sense of their world and their convictions.

Anselm of Canterbury, a theologian born in Italy in the year 1033, was my personal favorite of these thinkers. As a Benedictine monk, Anselm studied Greek philosophy alongside the Bible, and came to understand reason and logic as fundamental to God's perfect plan for the universe. He wanted to find a single logical argument that would prove God really exists. Ambitious!

What I want to talk about isn't what Anselm concludes, but how he enters into his project of proving God; he does so humbly, earnestly, and full of questions. Rather than

addressing his arguments to an opponent, some stubborn nonbeliever, Anselm offers a type of “argument” that is more like contemplative prayer than public debate.

Growing up in the States, as I did, made me very familiar with the kind of theological argumentation that frames skepticism as the mortal enemy of belief, that must be battled against and crushed in order to protect one’s faith. And that framing is bought-into on all sides, right? I came of age during the era of “atheist DESTROYS believer with FACTS and LOGIC” type youtube titles. And the blockbuster success of the God’s Not Dead film franchise, in which a brave Christian college student stands up to his evil professor.

When that’s what you’re surrounded by, there is something almost shockingly subversive about the quiet questioning in Anselm’s writings. “God,” he writes, “if you are everywhere, why do I not see you?” Those are not the words of someone performing absolute certainty for an audience. It’s just a sincere question about the unavailability of God.

Anselm feels so uncertain that he almost gives up his life’s work. He writes, “I decided to stop looking for something that was impossible to find.” But then, “one day, I eagerly embraced the doubt I had been taking such pains to drive away.” And ultimately, this doubt and sincere confusion don’t threaten Anselm’s relationship to his God, but drive him to pursue greater knowledge of it.

In his writings, Anselm says that he is “seeking to understand what [he] believes.” Seeking to understand what he believes. Belief comes first. He is not undecided, or trying to figure out what he should believe. He already believes, already puts his faith in his God at a gut level, and just wants to better understand the why and how of the commitment he feels. This is what he calls “faith seeking understanding”

I admit, when it comes to the existence of God, I can’t relate to Anselm. But, I know that I too have bone-deep, gut level commitments. Belief in the inherent value of life on this planet. Faith in the possibility of mutual flourishing and interdependence. And while I hope I can defend those beliefs with logic and facts, I know I didn’t logic myself into them. I know that they arise from something other than pure reason.

We UUs, I find, are much more likely to think of ourselves as starting with reason, rather than starting with belief. Starting with analysis and discussion and thought, and only then carefully choosing to believe what we feel can be solidly justified, to ourselves and to others. Many come to this faith precisely because it allows for reason to inform belief, in truly healing and liberating ways.

But today I want us to consider what “faith seeking understanding” might mean in a UU context. Many of us got here because we were willing to question beliefs that didn’t

make sense to us. That's an important step on many journeys! And the next step might just be to question beliefs that do make sense to us.

What do you have a type of faith in? What is something you trust and value at your core? Call something to mind, if you can. Maybe you believe in free will. Or believe it's worthwhile to alleviate suffering. You might believe in the power of intuition. Or believe the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. What is something you rely on, that you KNOW bone deep to be true? Actually come up with something, if you can.

We each have faith. And from there, how might we seek understanding? What would it take to question and defend that faith in the inward, contemplative way Anselm does? What would it be like to find the part of yourself that is still unconvinced, still confused, still hoping for better proof of that Truth you believe in?

That part that says, maybe free will is only neurological illusion, the part that asks, on the scale of the universe, what does our suffering matter? Or, what does it really mean for each person to have inherent worth? This is Anselm admitting, "God, if you are everywhere, why do I not see you?" What would it be like to find that doubt within your own belief and rather than avoiding it, or shoving it down, actually have a conversation with it? Show it your evidence, give it your best shot at logically explaining what you believe to be true and why. Allow yourself the relief of admitting there are reasons to be uncertain, and that you might feel certain anyway. Faith need not fear understanding. I'm going to pause, and leave some silence, in which that internal conversation might begin.

What is something you believe, deeply, to be true? And what doubts might still challenge that belief?

This isn't a conversation that can happen over the course of one service, or in the course of one day. It's a practice, a commitment to ongoing internal debate.

This practice isn't about gathering ammo to win your next contentious argument with an in-law or a colleague. This is about your understanding of some of your deepest truths. Proving ourselves right isn't the point. But in trying to prove, trying to argue on behalf of those profound truths, we give them a sacred sort of attention.

The theme this month here at First is "discerning truth," and this commitment to seeking truth is also part of Unitarian Universalism's fourth principle, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. But how does one discern, and keep discerning, over a lifetime? Every single person here has already been on a long journey, whether you grew up

UU, or non religious, or moved through one of the many different faith communities and beliefs represented here. And it can be such a relief to finally land here. (and we are glad you have!)

But this isn't the end point. In fact, now that you are here, another journey can finally begin in earnest. Now that no one is going to give you a list of approved beliefs, it's up to you to look inward and find what lists exist within yourself. And as you find those bedrock beliefs, whatever it is you have faith in, it is up to you to poke and prod at them, to question, to seek understanding. And in doing so, to grow in spiritual depth and rootedness. And it is up to all of us, this community, to support and encourage one another in seeking this deeper understanding, knowing that there is value in, as Anselm says, raising our minds to contemplation.

Contemporary arguments over belief and logic and religion may still play out on a public stage fraught with hostility and political baggage, but Anselm, a voice from another age, reminds us that admitting doubt, being confused, wishing for more proof, is not a weakness. It's part of faith. The world has forgotten that argument, doubt, logic, can be a thoughtful, prayerful practice. The certainty of faith is allowed to include the challenge and ambiguity of understanding.

May we each of us today begin to see our own pathways into the spiritual practice of considering and defending our values. May we go forth willing to understand the truths we already believe, willing to embrace ambiguity, and joyful in the knowledge that our faith and our doubt will together raise us to the contemplation of great things.

May it be so. Amen.