

**You May be Wrong**  
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Imagine with me, a four frame Peanuts cartoon. In the first frame we see Charlie Brown, standing in front of Snoopy's doghouse. Snoopy is on the roof, with his typewriter in front of him. Charlie says, "I hear you are writing a book on theology", and then in the second frame he says, "I hope you have a good title". In the next frame, a closeup of Snoopy, we see the thought bubble, "I have the perfect title". And then in the final frame, Snoopy is typing and there is a title above his head, "Has it ever occurred to you that you might be wrong?" It is a funny cartoon. I've chuckled at it over the years, when I've come across it. I think the thing that makes it so funny is the idea that we Unitarian Universalists believe, it is, in fact, theological work, to revisit the things we are, at times, so very sure of. I don't know about you, but for the first part of my life I believed the opposite to be true. Theology, I'd been taught, was about faith, about believing the things I was taught, not because anyone could prove them to me, but because I was supposed to believe them.

And isn't there temptation in that, in certainty, in having someone tell you what is and what isn't true? Faith, some say, is about trusting in a reliable source, when we don't have tangible proof. Some traditions rely on faith more than others: The Christian Scriptures have many assertions that faith is the preferred path. Romans, Ephesians, Corinthians, Hebrews and more all have statements that claim faith is a critical element in a Christian life. Hebrews 11 says, "And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him." I think about how, as a child, I wanted to believe what I was hearing at Sunday school, and how I struggled with the idea that I was supposed to 'just believe'. Some of you may have had similar experiences.

Our theology, or our UU approach to theology, is more open. Perhaps we'll find ourselves in Snoopy's book. In fact, Snoopy's title might be key to understanding modern Unitarian Universalism. For us, our practice is not in certainty, but rather in humility, curiosity and growth. Ours, we claim, is a living tradition, one that welcomes insight from other sources. A living tradition means our understanding grows as we grow, continually reinterpreting truth in light of love, reason, and justice. We create it and co-create it together. However much we respect or trust our religious leaders, they are not a definitive source of truth for us. Ministers and scholars may be helpful guides, but they are not, and personally I'm glad I don't have that responsibility, of being theological authorities. We

arrive, if only temporarily, at a place, through our shared life. Through our Sunday experiences, our conversations, our shared practices, our covenant and even through our conflict we come to some common understandings. Ironically, key among those understandings is, our UU tradition does not ask us to be right. It asks us to be open.

And don't we all benefit when we, and others are open. I recently read Bill Bryson's Book, "At Home" in which he uses the various rooms of his home as way to reflect on the ways in which people have lived and died. He recounted that it has been in the past 100 or so years that humans began to understand nutrition and vitamins. Now as a child who grew up with a daily dose of a weird tasting multi-vitamin supplement it never occurred to me that this wasn't long standing practice. Prior to the early years of the last century, people knew food was needed to survive, and they had come to understand that we needed proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. But until the early 1900's scientists believed that if you had enough of these, you'd be healthy. Yet, diseases like scurvy, beriberi, and pellagra persisted. Scientists were baffled. People could be getting enough calories and protein and still get terribly sick. This paradox led to the hunt for "accessory food factors," Finally, in the years between 1910 – 1940 the vitamins we see listed on our food labels were identified. People had thought they had the information they needed- after all, there was some evidence to support the view that if you had enough food to eat you had enough food. But curious people, people puzzled by the persistence of disease, revisited the sure and certain knowledge of the day. Now we know even more about nutrition, we now know about antioxidants and micronutrients. We also know that some foods, particularly in excess, can cause chronic health problems. In the last 115 years what we know about nutrition has undergone a seismic shift. I can imagine the resistance that some of the early food scientists faced. After the British Navy Surgeon, James Lind, observed, through controlled studies, that the consumption of citrus fruit cured and prevented scurvy, it still took decades until the findings were applied. People who are sure of themselves sometimes resist new information for as long as they possibly can!

There is a saying, "You can't know what you don't know". So true, so annoyingly true. And yet in that observation is where we find the key. I can't know even a fraction of what there is to know. Today I'm grateful for so many people who retained their curiosity, even when others were sure.

Contrary to what many of us have been taught, have come to understand, there is no disgrace in being wrong – at least if we are willing to grow and learn. Coming to understand

I may be wrong - about any of the things I believe about the world – my favourite sports team, the ways that organizations should work, or my beliefs and my judgements is the beginning of spiritual growth.

I have told you before about my arrival at a UU congregation, over 40 years ago, in Hamilton. I was delighted to find a spiritual community that wasn't top down, that didn't have a religious leader telling me what to believe, that assumed people were able to do their own discernment, drawing their own conclusions about the big questions. It was refreshing and affirming. I'd left the faith path of my childhood over a profound disagreement with the principle of original sin. The Hamilton congregation was the sort of religious community we wanted for our family. I was delighted, when one of our daughters likened the congregation to the books she enjoyed, where at the end of a plot development you were given a choice; if you want to believe in God, go to page 15, if you are agnostic, turn to page 10 and if you are firm in your atheism, go to page 18, "Choose your own Adventure". You do get to choose here. But there is a catch, here we are each making our own choices and trying to make a story, or a community, while we do so.

This business of choosing, of curiosity is in our UU DNA. One of the First North American congregations to ever call itself Unitarian, in the 1820s, had many years earlier created what we now call the Dedham Covenant. In 1638, they declared, they would :

- walk together in love
- watch over one another for good
- respect the decisions of the community
- seek God's will together

The covenant we share weekly, adapted from one written in 1894 is really a restating of the Dedham covenant. We too declare love is central, and we too acknowledge that we take care of one another and don't insist on theological conformity. We do this together. And our understanding, and our language is changeable. When you take textual authority or priestly infallibility out of the mix you have a tradition that changes. We keep exploring and asking questions, knowing that today's answers, informed by community insight, science – and tempered by humility might not be what works for us in years to come.

I don't know about you, but my UU Spidey sense starts to tingle when someone is so very sure of themselves.

So yes, ours is a living tradition, and yet, it is often hard for us, as individuals and communities, to adapt to new realities. It is hard because changing your mind about the big stuff, the deep stuff can be very disorienting. For many of us, our identity is deeply

connected to our values, our ideas about what is true and what isn't. I think of myself as open minded and open hearted, someone who doesn't adhere to rigid ideas of right and wrong, who likes nuanced thinking, who believes in giving people the benefit of the doubt. I am, I think, quite unabashedly liberal. My sense of self is strongly connected to that way of thinking, being and identifying. If I came face to face with evidence that suggested my ideas about what makes a person valuable and precious, or not, were wrong, I'd struggle. Who am I, if not a feminist or someone who is striving to dismantle colonial racist ways of thinking? I'm not sure I know the answer. It is easy for people, for me, to push away evidence that our thinking regarding the big questions is wrong. Confirmation bias, our tendency to process information by looking for, or interpreting, information that is consistent with their existing beliefs, is alive and well. We don't do it on purpose, it is largely unintentional, and as a result it is easy for us all to ignore information that is inconsistent with our beliefs. And, when the question at hand is highly important or self-relevant we are especially likely to process information in support of our own beliefs. It's the way our brains work. It helps us know who our people are, it helps us feel safe. Undoubtedly there is a deep evolutionary, self-preserving reason for our brains to work this way. And it seems in these particularly polarized times, when social media algorithms ensure we encounter 'more of the same', it is even harder to hit the pause button, to ask if maybe, just maybe, our brains are taking the easy road. I don't think that we are willfully ignorant, or that we cling to our, 'oh so certain' viewpoints because we are arrogant, but rather that it is very hard for us to do otherwise, and because the possible unraveling of our beliefs is profoundly disorienting.

Here we are asked to live, at least some of the time, with the unknown and the ambiguity. We have for almost the last 400 years been holding the relationships among and between people as more important than any one person's interpretation of 'the right way', or 'the truth'. What does this tradition ask of us then? It's a tall order I think, but there are a few things. And knowing it is hard, it is probably useful to think of the work of openness and admitting new truths and beliefs as part of a practice, rather than a place we'll ever truly arrive.

In my understanding a UU approach would be to celebrate people who thoughtfully share that they believe they were wrong. Revisiting previously held beliefs, changing our minds, refining understanding, or perhaps, not shifting our thinking at all, are all ok. What isn't ok, is a refusal to even consider the possibility. The practice of considering other possibilities is important. And in a world where binary thinking - yes/no, right/wrong, good/bad - is becoming so common - I sometimes fear we've forgotten to live with nuance and wonder - in that world of binary thinking, *our* philosophical commitment to community, to curiosity and to openness seems very important. If we can make this our practice, an ongoing

practice, not just here, but in the world beyond our congregations, we'd be living our values in a very concrete way.

History affirms this, people who were brave and honest enough to ask hard questions have helped us undo some of the harms and hurts. Growth for individuals and societies happened when people realized they were wrong. Enslavement, historic exclusion of women and LGBTQ+ individuals - those were wrong. Unitarian Universalism and the world in which we live has changed because people were able to say, "I was wrong about that".

What would it take for us, for me, to truly cultivate a practice of wrongness, a practice where the times when I realized I was wrong were not considered a failure. What would that look like?

Here are a few things that might be key, that might be celebrated and which I believe should be taught.

- Holy Curiosity – characterized by ongoing review, by asking, "What might I be missing?" and a commitment to listen, really listen for understanding and insight.
- Deep Humility – which doesn't mean no convictions, but which pairs commitment and an openness to new information – to a revision of understanding.
- Repair and Accountability – a willingness to name the times when we've been wrong will also, inevitably, require us to acknowledge that we may have caused harm. It will be important then to make apology, repair, and a commitment to growth, our next steps.

Let's face it. We are all human. We are all fallible. The question is, do we want to be people who dig in, and refuse to consider other ideas, approaches and understandings? I don't think we want this to be that kind of community. But rather, I think we want to be a place where minds can change without shame, and where messy human people and all their questions are welcomed. Ours can be a community where others are changed when we share our stories. We want to establish a loving practice of being a brave space, and a safe space. Perhaps, more importantly, the work we do here, clunky and imperfect as it might be, can be a training ground for living in the world. Here we can be wrong, because we have a covenant to hold one another in love. Easier here than in the larger community. But, in my dreams those things we aspire to, for our beloved community, might ripple, imperfectly, of course, out into the world.

Let's start the practice now. You don't have to share with anyone. I invite you to reconsider some of what you believe. You might end up thinking just as you do now. That would be ok.

But maybe, just maybe you might find some of your certainty fading, you might find your heart opening a bit more. Here are a few questions. Let's sit with them for a moment.

- Where might I be holding certainty too tightly?
- Who have I stopped listening to?
- What belief has helped me that might now limit me?
- What would it feel like to loosen my grip?

These are simple questions, hard ones too. They ask a lot of us. Perhaps we can each spend a bit of time, each day, with one or more of them. Something might change; something might not. We won't know unless we try.

I'm not asking us to throw out all the knowns of our life. But I am suggesting that we might find ourselves changed, growing, learning, wiser, if we consider the possibility, Has it Ever Occurred to You That You Might be Wrong?

To close, I offer this wish,

May we be a people more devoted to truth than to being right, more devoted to growth than to certainty, and more devoted to one another than to our own opinions.

Let us take a few deep breaths in silent reflection