

“Living the Questions,”
a reflection followed by queries
delivered by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist
on Sunday, December 30, 2007

We’re doing things a bit differently this week. This Sunday, the one that falls between Christmas and New Year’s, is a good time to consider the year just ending, and the one to come. To take some time to check in, to take stock, to wonder if we might want to make some changes, and to consider what they might be. This is a good time to ask questions, and that makes me think of some words that have meant a great deal to me over the past few years. You may have heard them before; they are from a letter by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. He writes:

“I would like to beg you . . . as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

Live the questions. Thinking of this, I considered doing this week what’s called a “question box” sermon, where you get to ask me anything you want, and I try to answer. That would be fun to do sometime, but I realized, this week, that that sends the wrong message. It implies that I have the answers.

I am interested in and attracted to the Quaker tradition—its love of silence, the liberal and non-dogmatic way it interprets and practices Christianity—and Quakers have some things in common with Unitarian Universalists. They believe that each of us has wisdom within—they call it ‘the inner light’—and they put their trust in this individual search for truth and meaning rather than in church doctrine or dogma. They believe that the spirit will lead us by the right way, if we are just able to discern that.

Quakers are ones who know how to live the questions. They trust that living with questions deeply will lead us in the way that is right for us. That sitting with important questions will support us in our spiritual lives, and help keep us focused on what matters.

One way Quakers do this is by sitting with questions when they meet for worship. They call these questions queries. Like us, the Quakers don't have a creed. They use queries to help themselves think about what they believe, and how they are living out those beliefs. The queries are not value-neutral, but this process clearly places the trust and responsibility in the persons hearing the questions—it's up to them how they might respond.

This practice of asking questions, and pondering them; this process of living the questions is a spiritual practice. I've come up with a list of queries, in three groupings. In place of a sermon today, I'll share these queries with you. I'll read a brief quote, and then the queries, then we'll sit with these queries, in silence, for a minute or two. Then we'll sing a hymn of your choosing.

For today, let's try, as Rilke advises, to live the questions. In this way, you are the writers of today's sermon. May the questions that you hold in your heart and mind, and your responses to them, may this help to lead you closer to your own inner light. Let us begin.

The first set of queries address how we are living our individual lives. The reading is from Virginia Woolf, and is a restatement of words from Goethe's Faust:

"If one does not lie back & sum up
& say to the moment, this very moment,
stay you are so fair, what will be one's gain, dying?
No: stay this moment.
No one ever says that enough."

Queries:

Do I make time to attend to matters of the spirit?

Is there balance in my life—between work and play, action and contemplation? Do I know how to feed my own soul?

Is the life I'm living the life that wants to live in me? (Parker Palmer)

If not, what am I waiting for? What is keeping me from living my life? How do I need to change?

If I had one year to live, what changes would I make?

Silence and Hymn

The second set of queries is about our life in community. The reading is from a woman who knows something about this, since she has lived most of her adult life in a monastic community. Listen to these words from Elaine Prevallet:

"We need a community . . . to help us recognize that our own individual gift--who I am--is for something, has a unique role to play, a contribution to make. We need them to help us name the gift and find its place within a frame; we need them to keep us accountable and honest and steady in a culture geared toward constant change. The pull of individualism is so strong that we cannot afford to go it alone. We have to find or create communities--containers--if we are to be faithful to God's call."

Am I an active and contributing part of this community?

Do I participate regularly in worship?

Do I look for ways to enrich our community life?

Is this community worthy of my time and effort? If not, am I willing to help make it so?

When I'm unhappy or disappointed with the community or its leaders, how do I respond?

How do we as a community need to change?

Silence and Hymn

The final set of queries is about how we live our lives and our faith in the wider world. Our reading is the last lines of Marge Piercy's poem, "To Be of Use":

"The work of the world is common as mud.

Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.”

What are the ways I live my faith and values in the world?

Do I promote social justice and fair treatment of all?

Do I try to understand and appreciate differing cultures and social values?

Do I care for those in our society who are disadvantaged and marginalized?

Do we as a community practice what we preach?

What should we be doing more of, and what should we be doing less of?

What one thing will I commit to doing to serve others in the next three months?

Silence and closing hymn