

**“You Live, You Learn” ©  
Sermon by Rev. Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick  
Oct. 15<sup>th</sup>, North Parish of North Andover, MA**

**Reading**

**From *The Having of Wonderful Ideas*, By Eleanor Duckworth**

Our Reading this morning comes from a progressive educator named Eleanor Duckworth, it is entitled “The Virtue of Not-Knowing.”

“Knowing the right answer requires no decisions, carries no risks, and makes no demands. It is automatic. It is thoughtless.

Knowing the right answer is overrated. It is a virtue – there is no debate about that – but in conventional views of intelligence, it tends to be given far too much weight. In most classrooms, it is the quick, right answer that is appreciated. Knowledge of the answer ahead of time is, on the whole, more valued than ways of figuring it out.

The virtues involved in not knowing are the ones that really count in the long run. What you do about what you don’t know is what determines what you will know. It is quite possible to help people develop these virtues. Accepting surprise, puzzlement, excitement, patience, caution, honest attempts, and wrong outcomes as legitimate and important elements of learning, easily leads to the further development of everyone involved.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Duckworth, *The Having of Wonderful Ideas and Other Essays on Teaching and Learning*, (New York: Teachers College, 2006.), 63-64

## Sermon

### **“You Live, You Learn”**

“Oh you don’t even know what’s up for you today!” Billy P. bellowed, squeezing his palms together as we all grabbed a sip of water.

For the past couple months, I, along with a few other women have been taking weekly boxing lessons from a retired martial arts fighter named Bill – or Billy P. as he calls himself. It started out as a self-defense class, and still from time to time Bill shows us how to throw an elbow to a solar plexus, or where to kick so you can dislocate someone’s knee.

As the weeks have gone on, though, Bill has had us lifting weights more, jumping rope, pulling on boxing gloves, and working the bag with our undercut, jab, right hook sequences.

“Bill, Bill, I have to tell you,” My partner, Alexis, whom Bill refers to as *Atomic*, hollered across the gym, “I went to a concert the other night, and I walked into this big room filled with all these dudes, you know, and I was standing there and usually I’d feel kind of uncomfortable, but I noticed that I felt strong. I felt big and strong, and I just, trusted myself.”

“That! That is what I am teaching you ladies.” Bill replied with stern enthusiasm. “When you are strong, you have no fear. You have trust. I think you’re starting to notice by now, from week to week we never do the same things in here. You know why? Cause life ain’t the same from week to week, is it? If you walked into this gym and we did the same six things in the same order, for the same amount of time each week – what would you be good at?”

“Those six things,” we responded, somewhat in unison.

“That’s right – you would be *good(!)* at those six things, but you wouldn’t be learning anything, it wouldn’t be doing nothing for your brain, and therefore it wouldn’t be doing nothing for your fears, or your trust, or your strength. Let me tell you – a diversity of knowledge leads to a diversity of experience. I’ll say it again, a diversity of knowledge leads to a diversity of experience. If you know a lot about your-self, your body,– than you will carry yourself with strength and trust where ever you go cause you will be ready for anything, baby.

Now go get your mitts on and let's get to work! *Shoooooot*, do you not know what's up for you today!"

A diversity of knowledge leads to a diversity of experience.

Though we UU's don't tend to agree on everything, one thing I think we can all get behind is that Unitarian Universalism thrives on a particular type of diversity, the diversity of belief.

One of my favorite parts of leading UU worship, is the Prayer and Meditation portion of our services. I like it not only because prayer is important to me and collective silence is sacred, but I find it to be such a powerful practice of ours to sit together as theists, non-theists, pagans, nature lovers, animal lovers, life-long UU's, church shoppers, believers, doubters and those who are a mix of all of the above, and others who are none of the above- and pray, meditate, or do something that involves stillness, presence, trust as one.

As I said, prayer is important to me and collective silence is sacred, but when I participate in worship services and get to view a congregation up high from a distance, I usually can't help but look out at you all during our time of Prayer and Meditation, and just wonder what you all are feeling, thinking, and focusing on during that time. I smile at the thought of the diverse expressions of spirit, goodness, and trust that you are practicing – together. I imagine your breaths, heartbeats, thoughts radiating out in all different directions – carrying light, hope, care wherever they wander. It seems like an important practice we should be doing more of these days.

Our reading this morning, "The Virtue of Not Knowing," was excerpted from a book entitled *The Having of Wonderful Ideas*. It's author, Eleanor Duckworth, is a Professor at the Harvard School of Education and also an Elementary School teacher - an impressive range of teaching ability. She's known for developing a progressive form of education called Critical Exploration. To

quote again from her book, *Critical Exploration* rests on the tenet that “we cannot assume that an experience whose meaning seems clear to us will have the same meaning to someone else.”

I had the privilege recently of participating in a *Critical Exploration* workshop for teachers. I was curious about the pedagogy in relation to religious education. The week began with our teacher, a student of Eleanor Duckworth’s, passing out a poem for us to read silently. As faces looked up from the page signaling they were done reading, the teacher explained that we would now go from person to person around our circle of chairs and share one thing we noticed about the poem. The only rule was that everyone had to say something.

“I noticed that the first stanza is about birth and the last stanza is about death.”

“I noticed that the title is in French and the poem is in English.”

“The author’s name isn’t included on this page.”

“One line has the word walking and the next line has the word waiting.”

“The 6<sup>th</sup> line says “miraculous birth” which sounds religious.”

“I noticed there’s a lot about water in the poem.”

“It feels masculine to me, I think the author is a man.”

Around and around we went 5, 6, 7 times, and with each go round we built on another’s small discoveries until multiple meanings were swirling about the room. The teacher dissuaded us from nothing, and the poem, which upon first read seemed like nothing spectacular, was suddenly profound and worthy of sharing with all of one’s friends to see what *they* noticed about it.

That afternoon, the *Critical Exploration* approach was applied to science. Each of us was given, without explanation, a copper wire, a battery, and a lightbulb.

“Ok! Have at it!”, Eleanor Duckworth, who was leading this exercise, hollered at the room with the grin.

As someone who was never gifted with a talent for scientific reasoning I became overwhelmed and disinterested in the project in a matter of seconds. Those around me though were quick to

create a circuit and make their bulbs light up. Soon many students were heading the front of the room where a collection of other objects - silverware, string, smaller and larger batteries, toothpicks, tinfoil – were available for the taking. I was amazed by their audacity and also their ability to make other electrical reactions occur with the objects. One person even lit a candle on fire! After watching enough people complete the task, I did succeed in connecting the tip of my wire to the right place on the battery and the right place on the bulb and making the thing light, but after that accomplishment I had no idea where to go. And no confidence in myself to get there. No trust, lots of fear.

At the end of the session Eleanor asked us what we noticed. Again, everyone had to share. I told the class that I felt nervous the whole time and didn't experiment much because I didn't have any ideas about what else I could do. I also shared the burn I had managed to sear into my hand when I, not knowing that it would get hot, grabbed onto the wire that had become electric while touching the end of my battery. The class laughed sympathetically, but the teachers were interested: despite my challenges along the way, how and why did I complete the exercise? I liked that they asked, and ended up staying after with them sharing my process and experience. By the end, I wanted another opportunity to try some different materials out with the circuit – under their supervision anyway. I still had no idea what would happen or what the point of any of this was– but I was curious nonetheless.

Reflecting on these two experiences now I can't help but think of my early development as a student. How I excelled at reading and writing and how I was challenged by science and math. So challenged, in fact that I failed out of science and math courses multiple times in high school, and never advanced beyond remedial Algebra and Biology.

Out of shame and self protection, I avoided, and still avoid the maths and sciences. I continue to live out the narrative that "I am not a math and science person," voluntarily excluding myself from conversations or experiences based on those knowledges.

The Critical Explorations workshop was one of the first times in recent memory, when a science teacher, out of a very simple gesture of curiosity, freed me from my anxiety and invited me to share my scientific understandings in my own words from the place where I was at. None of the experiments I tried out at the end of class worked, but the teacher encouraged me to try them anyway, and asked with each run-through what I was noticing and learning in a non-judgmental way. I was being taught through experiences, and was shaping my learning process by what I was actually learning. Not what I was being told.

I've been thinking about Critical Exploration a lot since I've started here at North Parish as your first ever Minister of Faith Formation. It seems like the perfect approach to almost every aspect of my job as it invites the curiosity and individuality of everyone. The ideal scenario in Religious Education classrooms is to have curious, non-judgmental teachers engaging curious, non-judgmental students through a collection of exercises, is it not? In my collaborative work with Rev. Lee, with the RE Committee, with the Board, doesn't it make the most sense for us to operate with the intention that we will keep an open mind, share freely and honestly what we notice, ask questions with a genuine interest? In Unitarian Universalism, aren't our principles based on resisting the assumption that whatever is meaningful to us will have the same meaning for someone else?

This position is in its inception right now – this Ministry of Faith Formation – there is no right or wrong about it. It is an authorless poem with a myriad of meanings waiting to be discovered. It is a collection of objects which, put together in various configurations will enact various reactions.

Ok, I know you're saying it: "Sure Hil, Faith Formation, RE, Board, Lee, cool, cool. Do I, your average North Parishioner, have any role in this Critical Exploring thing?"

Yes. Yes, you do.

The most important Critical Exploring role, in fact. You all have to figure out what this job is. What does it mean to consciously bring the work of faith formation into this congregation? I think that work starts by critically exploring your faith formation individually and as a community.

In my first meeting with our Transition Team, a committee of dedicated souls who will be serving as your listening ear about this job this year, we critically explored the terms Faith Formation and Religious Education. What does it mean for my position to be called Minister of Faith Formation instead of Minister of Religious Education? We noticed lots of things while contemplating and comparing the terms. As I believe the virtue of Not-Knowing is of the utmost importance at this early and creative time, (I don't want to lead any one here into believing that there are right and wrong answers about the purpose of this job), I will share with you only two takeaways we had from our critical exploration. The first is that we believe the terms Religious Education and Faith Formation have very different meanings.

The second is about the word Faith. It seems it can be a hard one for some of us to digest, as it has a theist lean to it. In Ancient Greek, though – a language that shaped much of our Western system of knowledge– the word for faith, Pistis, also means trust. And though, changing the name of my position to the Minister of Trust Formation has an odd ring to it, I think considering the formation of your trust is a worthwhile practice right now.

And so with that, here's your task, explorers:

Ask yourselves, and one another, what do you trust? And how did that trust form?

If you want and it feels right, you could ask:

What do you have faith in, how did that faith form?

Try asking someone these questions at coffee hour – open mindedly, with genuine curiosity – and see what you both notice. If you're feeling adventurous, ask a kid. If you're very introverted, go for a walk, and think it over. See what you notice. What memories arise when

you think about the formation of your faith? What sensations, and emotions do you feel when you think of what you trust about your self and the world? Were you dissuaded from believing something at one point and have never returned to explore it? Have you been focusing on the same six things primarily? What do you not know about your faith? There's no wrong answers – just a series of paths to take, or not to take.

Faith Formation, I believe, requires a diversity of learning, because life, no matter what, will hand us a diversity of experiences. If our faith formation is diverse, is always being explored and strengthened, we will feel good in this world. We will feel strong, and we will trust ourselves and our community.

There is a great diversity of faith, of trust, in this room. I invite you all this year, to really explore, share, notice, learn about each other's trust and faith formation. Do this consciously, with open hearted and open minded curiosity –and find out what we need to keep that exploration going. Then we will be exploring this ministry together.

Now put your mitts on and let's get to work.

Shoot, we don't even know what we might explore today.

So let - it - be - so!



