

What if? The Power of Open and Honest Questions
Service for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Springfield, Vermont
December 1, 2019
Charis Boke

Opening words

STLT 439, We Gather in Reverence (responsive)

We gather in reverence before the
wonder of life—

the wonder of this moment

The wonder of being together, so
close yet so apart—

Each hidden in our own secret chamber,

Each listening, each trying to
speak—

*Yet none fully understanding,
none fully understood.*

We gather in reverence before all
intangible things—
That eyes see not, nor ears can
detect—

*That hands can never touch,
that space cannot hold,
and time cannot measure.*

--Sophia Lyon Fahs

Opening Song: **#188, Come, Come Whoever you Are**
Song 2, **# 90 From All the Fret and Fever of the Day**

Reading

A Gift

Denise Levertov

Just when you seem to yourself
nothing but a flimsy web
of questions, you are given

the questions of others to hold
in the emptiness of your hands,
songbird eggs that can still hatch
if you keep them warm,
butterflies opening and closing themselves
in your cupped palms, trusting you not to injure
their scintillant fur, their dust.
You are given the questions of others
as if they were answers
to all you ask. Yes, perhaps
this gift is your answer.

by Denise Levertov

Sermon: What if? The Power of Open and Honest Questions

Last January, during a time I felt I was, as Levertov puts it in her poem, nothing but a flimsy web of questions, I went on a retreat in northern Vermont. Held at Rock Point Center on the shores of lake Champlain, twenty of us gathered for a few days of winter reflection facilitated by WholeHeart, a Vermont-based reflection and action group.

All of us knew that part of the process of the retreat would include a portion when we would hold space for the questions we were living with. That was part of the purpose—the retreat was called Winter Wellness, and its calling to participants was to step out of the hustle of daily life and reflect on what, really, nurtures us and brings us toward wholeness. And because we had filled out a form before the retreat, we also knew that a few folks would have volunteered to offer their story, their questions, in a more formal small-group setting. We knew that we would split off to listen to another participant's deep question, and to practice asking them open and honest questions.

The arc of the retreat moved us towards the capacity to open such questions. It's harder than you might think! Or maybe you know exactly how hard it is, to ask a really open and honest question. That's one thing I've been reflecting on, these last few weeks—how hard it was for me, and I suspect for many of us, to listen deeply enough to each other that we can reach for the question that someone is asking without knowing they are asking it.

That's what I want to think about with you today—the process of discernment that we are called to when we are called to witness each others' challenges. This process of discernment is about cultivating the ability to listen to ourselves, so that we can truly listen to another and hold a space for them.

Quaker elder, educator, and activist Parker Palmer suggests that when we are called together with a friend or colleague or other close one, the call is more often than not, to sit, and listen deeper. To sit in witness of the unknown heart that is in front of us, rather than in advising and fixing. To descend past the impossible layers of our own experience

and memory in order to craft a question in conversation with that unknown heart, and offer it to the person in front of us. He says that when we make our way towards the really open and honest questions, we are making room for the person in front of us to tune in to their own knowledge. Here he is, in his own words:

Here's the deal. The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed — to be seen, heard and companioned exactly as it is. When we make that kind of deep bow to the soul of a suffering person, our respect reinforces the soul's healing resources, the only resources that can help the sufferer make it through.

Aye, there's the rub. Many of us "helper" types are as much or more concerned with being seen as good helpers as we are with serving the soul-deep needs of the person who needs help. Witnessing and companioning take time and patience, which we often lack — especially when we're in the presence of suffering so painful we can barely stand to be there, as if we were in danger of catching a contagious disease. We want to apply our "fix," then cut and run.

[Parker Palmer, On Being blog](#)

I bring Parker Palmer into our conversation today because his methods to support humans sitting in deep witness of each other, through his Courage and Renewal facilitation trainings, was the basis of the retreat I went on last year. Let's go back there for a minute.

On the first day of the retreat, we learned each others' names and a number of other things, including the amount of silent paying-attention we would be doing, with ourselves and each other over the course of our time together. We also learned who would comprise the small groups for the final evening, and who would be the person bringing their question to each small group. I remember thinking, prior to the retreat, how surprised I was that I did not want to share the tangle of my current life dilemma with a group of willing listeners at the time, as I am usually willing to talk about just about anything with just about anyone.

But I had not filled out that part of the form. Somehow, with that particular tangle I was in, it felt like too much, too vulnerable. Thus, it was with a sense of respect and gratitude that I regarded at my new friend who would be the focus of our small group's attention on our final evening together. It really did feel like she'd offer us a gift—the gift of sharing a story about where she was feeling most tender, most bruised, most without-a-good-compass on the map of her life.

Most likely it seems clear to each of us why this act that my friend undertook required courage. To sit in front of people one doesn't know well, and tell one's story, and ask for questions. She was invited to share as much of her story as needed, in order for us to have the context to ask good questions. Even with people we do know well, telling the real story, opening the real vulnerable spots, can feel intimidating. Her story was one of a major decision in a relationship. The tenderest of tender parts, her heart, the shape of her life, was on the line. She was at choice, in a moment of decision. Especially in the social context we live in now, when communication that is "efficient, clear, and well-managed" is most profitable, and profit is most valued by many people, it is an act of vulnerability

to bring forth such a story to a group. Such stories are always tangled, unclear, layered, and slow.

It's also an act of courage and vulnerability to listen—that is, to really listen. Stories offered in settings like this take on a stretchy, clingy weight of their own. Each participant has some tender part of themselves that aches with the thrust of past decisions; each listener immediately remembers a friend, or relative, or partner, for whom such a story would also resonate. Each person listens, first, embedded in their own lives, because that is after all how we experience the world.

And that is where the act of vulnerability comes in, for listeners, for those who will be seeking the open and honest questions. Not only might the story we hear resonate with our own experiences and create discomfort or recognition. But also, then, we are called to sort through those feelings and reflections and discomforts with a fine toothed comb so as to get to the open question for her. What is mine, and what is hers? I must ask myself with each reaction that rises to the surface. I must be willing, as a listener seeking an open question, to fully acknowledge the edgy, surprising memories that are mine alone, that will not be of use to forming an honest question. If I form a question based on my experience of her story alone, I am asking a question that is about me, and I already think I know part of the answer.

Much more vulnerable, much more difficult, then, to ask a question to which I do not know any part of the answer, because it is a question for her.

Not a question *about* her. Not about her story, or about her situation, or about the other people involved. Those are fact questions. An open question is a question *for* her—a question that is essentially, at its best, *in service to* the person telling the story. It is not possible for me to even begin to know the answer to a question like this.

I and the other three holders of space for my friend took our time to craft questions for her. In my case, I took three full minutes (which is a long time, as any of you who teach or facilitate will know—even thirty seconds can feel like an eternity in a silent room, depending on the context!) of silent sitting. In that time, I peeled back layer after layer of my own thoughts and stories, in order to discover a question that could perhaps be in service to her.

“What does love feel like?”

What does love feel like. Not what does it mean, or how does it make you feel, or what do you love about the world, or the person, or do you feel loved when they do X. Generally, those questions are things that I thought I knew something about. I've read bell hooks' book on love, and a one or two other things that help me understand healthy connection. I know what I love about the world, and I think I know what my friend loves about the world because I know her a little now. But there is literally no way I could possibly know what love feels like to her.

When I got down to this layer of questioning, I was startled. It felt so unusual to be asking a question that I could not imagine the answer for.

How much of our lives do we spend doing this? Asking each other questions that we, consciously or subconsciously, think we already know the answer for? Or the beginning of the answer?

Most of us out here in the daily world of our lives prefer to have at least the illusion of control. We like to move around with some idea about what is going on, and where we fit in it. Much of the way advice is offered, or conversations unfold, revolves around the crux of shared knowledge. At the very least, advice emerges from what WE think is happening, how it relates to our own lives and memories, and what WE might do in a situation.

But with another human, there is always more information than we could absorb. Even with ourselves, in fact. This is why the open and honest questions of Parker Palmer's work are so important. Making space to ask them of others requires of us that we are willing to not know what they will say, or where the conversation will go. To not even think we know.

Asking questions in service to another person is both a way to hold the gift of their question and a way to offer them a gift in return. And looking for that question, at least in my experience, is a process of peeling back layer after layer of my own assumptions, judgments, and stories. Noticing that my first question inside my head is a leading question—one that assumes I know the answer I want the person to give. Noticing that the next layer in my head is one that makes me feel defensive—why wouldn't they do it this way, my way, the RIGHT way? Noticing another layer where the story the person in front of me is telling me about their lives gets tangled again in my own experience, as I think about my own relationship transformations, decisions about schooling or children, process of coping with emotional turmoil. Noticing how much effort it takes to root out the tendrils of my own stories from that tangle to really hear their story.

This effortful noticing, I think, is what Denise Levertov refers to when she talks about holding the questions of others in empty hands. She says they are

songbird eggs that can still hatch,
if you keep them warm...

She says the questions, like butterflies,
trust you not to injure
their scintillant fur, their dust.

Digging through the layers, gently removing the viney tendrils of my own attachments to a story from the actual story I am hearing, is the work required to be in service to the stories and questions of others. To ask a question for another is to seek not to injure the other's story, the other's path of discovery.

What might it feel like, if we were more routinely able to stand witness to each other? TO not shrink back from the difficulty of a tangle, but also not to move on our impulse to fix it? What would happen if we allowed ourselves to occupy that witnessing space in our bodies for one another? Perhaps a profundity could open up—the enormity of inhabiting the fundamental unknowing, the gulf that separates us from one another’s internal worlds, that also joins us in the universal unknowing. And the enormity, at the same time as inhabiting that unknowing, of holding and being held, of offering and receiving through vulnerable witness.

This is a far cry from the advice-giving world of bullet lists on the internet, or easy memes and quotes telling us how to fix it. The swiftness of networked communication may leave many of us feeling that pressure—to fix, fix, fix it all. When really, we are called to listen, listen, and listen again. To help each other listen. To sit in stillness long enough that we can truly cup our empty hands to hold the questions of others as gifts that they offer us, ones that might even help us to listen to ourselves more clearly as well.

Song 3, #108, My Life Flows on in Endless Song

Closing Words

STLT 680

Because of those who came before,
 we are;
in spite of their failings, we
 believe;
because of, and in spite of the
 horizons of their vision,
we, too, dream.

Let us go remembering to praise,
 to live in the moment,
 to love mightily,
 to bow to the mystery.

-Barbara Pescan

“We must come together in ways that respect the solitude of the soul that avoid the unconscious violence we do when we try to save each other that evoke our capacity to hold another life without dishonoring its mystery never trying to coerce the other into meeting our own needs.”

– **Parker J. Palmer, Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation**