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Northbrae Community Church

Living the Questions – Letting in the Light

We are living in times of uncertainty. This is not news. On the brink of war only a fortnight ago, followed by a Ukrainian passenger airline shot down by another country's military, a debate with six Democratic candidates each with different visions without knowing what will actually greet them were they to be the next President, an impeachment trial, homeless women being evicted from an empty house in Oakland Each one of you could add to this list. What a time we are in!

How do we, as we read together in our responsive reading, find our way through the jangling echoes of our turbulence, to a deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear, to a place where our questions are answered and spirits refreshed?ⁱ

We are only 3 weeks away from having begun a new year and decade. What questions should we be asking at this time? Not ones about power, false intelligence, political self-preservation at the expense of justice and equity. No, questions on a global scene are about climate change, international cooperation rather than isolation, and peace. And on a domestic scene they may be the same: preservation of resources, community, peace, and – yes – racism and discrimination which may be particularly on our minds with Martin Luther King Jr. being honored tomorrow. In fact, it should be on our minds every day.

It's hard to know what some of the answers may be but this doesn't stop us from offering them. Speaking for myself, I am often full of ideas and think I know the answer. I can even sound convincing when I share these. Don't be deceived! It is often when I live with the questions circling inside of me, sit with them during my morning meditation, voice them in a conversation with a friend, and then listen –really listen – that out of the silence or quiet mutuality with another, the answer may evolve. Not one I thought I knew but one waiting for the right question. I think the key is, "What are the questions?"

What are the questions we are asking before we rush into answers? How can we keep our hearts and minds open at times of turmoil?

I love questions. In fact, I have plagued my parents and teachers with questions from the time I could talk. I see some smiles. I suspect I may still be plaguing friends and colleagues.

30 years ago, during the end-of-the -year retreat at the independent, highly competitive school where I taught, we had a panel discussing "What is learning? How do we know if our students are really learning?" I was not alone in believing that grasping how to ask the right questions was key to learning. As a librarian, it was not surprising I thought this, as virtually everyone who walks into a library for help begins by asking a question – which is really scary because it has them admitting they don't know. Yet, this is when we open space for learning.

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I am sure you are familiar with the story of the Zen Buddhist Empty Cup Proverb which tells of a wise Zen master to whom people came from far away to seek his counsel and tap his wisdom. On one particular day, a scholar came to visit the master for advice. At one point the master re-filled his guest's teacup but did not stop pouring when the cup was full. Tea spilled out and ran over the table. "Stop! The cup is full!" said the scholar. "Exactly," said Master "You are like this cup; you are full of ideas. You come and ask for teaching, but your cup is full; I can't put anything in. Before I can teach you, you'll have to empty your cup."ⁱⁱ

As a librarian, I was in a privileged position. My training and expertise lay not in a particular body of knowledge but in mentoring students to think critically, ask questions, and consider variables.

On the other hand, my colleagues in other academic departments treasured their hard fought for disciplinary expertise, the content of which they now wished to impart to their students.

I have fond memories of having lunch one day with a senior psychology professor with whom I had collaborated over the year. She wanted to know more about this new field of "information literacy." Yes, a buzz word but it had some merit. And at the end of the lunch, with a slight tone of desperation, she said, "You mean that my senior research seminar will have been a success, if my students are left with more questions than answers and are hungry to find out more about them?" Yes, that's exactly what I meant.

Northbrae Welcomes Questions!

And here, at Northbrae, a non-denominational, ecumenical, interfaith church, we are ideally situated for asking questions and hosting those of others. We are not heretics if we are dissatisfied with the core message and practice of the Christian faith in today's world. In fact many of us thrive on listening to theologians who are exploring how Christianity continues to unfold, one prime example being former Catholic, now Episcopal priest, Matthew Fox who has celebrated the way each of us was born not with original sin but as an original blessing. And there is the Franciscan, Richard Rohr, who talks about the Universal Christ by which he means that each one of us incarnates the Holy. We each have a Divine Spark within. Both theologians believe we are integrally involved in the sacred unfolding of Creation. It did not stop with the two Creation stories in the book of Genesis.

We are not alone if, while rejecting dogma and doctrine, we still long for meaning and are working through what the Lutheran Protestant theologian Paul Tillich calls issues of "ultimate concern." Christianity and other world religions are continuing to evolve and at the heart of faith conversations are questions and open dialogue. This is what Northbrae is about.

Many of you will have heard of the Dutch Catholic theologian, Henri Nouwen. In 1985, he taught a very popular course at Harvard Divinity School. The room was packed and I suspect fire laws were in

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jeopardy. Students loved his discussion groups, requirements to keep journals, meditate, and pursue ongoing self-evaluation. However, at the end of the year, in spite of successfully feeding students who were hungry for guided self-reflection and deep spirituality, Nouwen was told that his course was not rigorous enough for Harvard and that it must change. So, he resigned his post at Harvard, procured a Lily Foundation grant to research “What is teaching. What is learning?” and left the United States permanently to spend the remainder of his life in the L’Arche Communities living and working with people with intellectual disabilities from whom he learned some of what he valued most.

During these troubling times, do we take the risk to open our hearts and minds to learn differently and live into the questions, as Rilke advised? ⁱⁱⁱ

“There’s an old joke about a man talking to his rabbi. He asks, “Why is it that rabbis always answer a question with another question?” The rabbi answers, “So what’s wrong with a question?” ^{iv} **Jesus’**

Example

Jesus was a typical first century rabbi. He rarely gave straight answers to a question, instead leaving his questioner with uncomfortable ambiguity. Not a surprise given the turmoil surrounding first century Palestinians but I don’t believe that he was just playing it safe, for we know he wasn’t. He was pushing against those who preached doctrine, dogma, and obedience. He led by example on behalf of love, healing, and compassion. He pushed against persons with power who didn’t hear the voices of those without. His parables are hard to decipher and filled with paradox. He seldom gave a straight answer but instead raised questions that ran counter to the wisdom of his day. Full of ambiguity and contradictions they often tripped up first century folks and still do today when we presume we know.

I think Jesus knew that presuming we have the answers may get in the way of our deeper knowing of Divine Mystery. I do not throw away my religious beliefs. On the contrary, I encourage each of us to start our journey within a faith tradition, if that is comfortable, supported by familiar scripture and the voices of poets, theologians, and writers we know and love. But, upon this foundation, let us open the door to questions and uncertainty which may be where we experience ourselves held by Mystery. Not an easy place to be which is why I have played with the idea of putting above the ministers’ door, “Ye who dare to question, enter here.”

Not allowing ourselves to ask questions allows others’ experience of the Divine to define ours and, as pastors David Felton and Jeff Proctor-Murphy maintain, “Asking difficult questions are all at the heart of theological integrity.”^v I love the fact that one of the “8 Points of Progressive Christianity,” is to “Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning than in absolutes.”^{vi} It’s in living the questions that we discern our path.

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Paul Tillich is quoted as saying, "Everyone seeks answers, mostly to questions that are not very important. The great concern in life should be to discover which are the right questions. Then, even if you rarely get answers, you are at least journeying in the right direction." ^{vii}

For years, as an academic librarian, I repeatedly tried to persuade my colleagues that the process of research with its mistakes and challenges, certainties and disillusionments, was just as important as the product. Curiosity and courage are some of the hallmarks of a spiritual seeker where the journey may be both rewarding and perilous. Nevertheless, it holds the potential to be a rich one, perhaps even richer when done in the company of fellow seekers with whom you build community and who may broaden your horizons with new and different questions that challenge your certainties yet again.

The Light Shines in the Darkness

And during dark times such as those we may be experiencing, this is where I see the light ... in community. In a recent AARP magazine article about loneliness, a quote by a late neuroscientist caught my attention, "We all need a witness to our lives and people to look after. Our survival and well-being depend on our collective well-being not our individual might." ^{viii}

This was Jesus' message and also Martin Luther King Jr.'s message. You just heard Suzanne read King's words where he said:

I am convinced that love is the most durable power in the world. It is not an expression of impractical idealism, but of practical realism Love is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization.

King never gave up believing that peace and love were the answer to injustice, to questions raised during times of turmoil. Repeatedly he spoke of love. He said,

I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love. I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. I have seen too much hate.... I know that it does something to the faces and personalities of those who hate, and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love

Love is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There's something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies. Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.

Or, we heard

Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.

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And finally,

I want to tell you that it is not enough for us to talk about love. Yes, love is one of the pivotal points of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love.^{ix}

I have just read about the most amazing woman.^x Rachael Rollins, an African American, age 48, is now Boston's first female attorney general. She is inspirational, controversial, and a heck of a fighter. "Shortly after taking office this year, she issued a memo to her staff instructing them to stop prosecuting a list of 15 nonviolent, lesser offences pointing out that they are often committed by those suffering from opioid addiction, homelessness, and mental health issues – people who need rehabilitation and social welfare programs, not jail time."^{xi}

Now, I would call this love and community building.

She pointed out that for those who are too poor to afford bail being in jail can be catastrophic – they can lose their jobs and even custody of their children. She says, "I represent the victim, the community, and the defendant."^{xii} She speaks bluntly about the inequities of the justice system. She has social workers touch base with jurors to make sure they are stable after hearing violent crime cases. She believes in students and asks why there are 25-28 students per teacher but only four prisoners for every corrections officer. She talks to students about opportunity and hope saying, "I think the most important dates in your life are the date you were born, and the day you find out why you were supposed to be here."^{xiii}

This is love! This is community building

Each one of us has a special birthright gift. Each one of us is part of Creation's ongoing sacred incarnation. If, when we see another who appears different, we can remember they too are sacred, then we begin to build community.

When we find ourselves facing hard questions and looking for the answers perhaps they are right here with us. Let us remember that floating up through all the turbulence, hope lies in love and community, with the peace of the Eternal at our side if we stop and listen.

This was King's belief when he said, "In some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty."

So let us hear again –

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“The light shines in the darkness. And the darkness does not overcome it.”^{xiv}

Readings for January 19, 2020

Live the Questions – Rainer Maria Rilke

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

Love is the Most Durable Power – Martin Luther King, Jr.

I am convinced that love is the most durable power in the world. It is not an expression of impractical idealism, but of practical realism. Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, Love is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. To return hate for hate does nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil, and this can only be done through love.

Gospel of John 1: 5

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

ⁱ Howard Thurman, “How Good to Center Down,” *Meditations of the Heart*. Retrieved January 17, 2020. Online: <http://theopenedbox.com/spiritual-disciplines/how-good-to-center-down-by-howard-thurman-blog/>. ⁱⁱ Told by Barbara O’Brien, “The Saying, ‘Empty Your Cup’” *Learn Religions*, July 4, 2018. Retrieved January 17, 2020. Online: <https://www.learnreligions.com/empty-your-cup-3976934> ⁱⁱⁱ See today’s readings quoted from Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 34.

^{iv} David M. Felten and Jeff Procter-Murphy, *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*, (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 3.

^v Felten and Procter-Murphy, 8. ^{vi} “The 8 Points of Progressive Christianity,” <https://progressivechristianity.org/the-8-points/>. ^{vii} Tillich quoted by Felten and Procter-Murphy, 8. ^{viii} Stephanie Cacioppo quoted by Lynn Darling, “Is There a Cure for Loneliness?” *AARP THE MAGAZINE*, 63:1C, December 2019/January 2020, 60. ^{ix} All quotes from Martin Luther King Jr. are found on “201 Best Martin Luther King Quotes.” Retrieved January 17, 2020.

Online: <https://christiananimaethics.com/martin-luther-king-jr-quotes/>. ^x The following story about Rachael Rollins is taken directly from Peter DeMarco, “Rachael Rollins ’89: The DA Fighting to Make Our Justice System Equal for All,” *BB&N bulletin*, Fall/Winter 2019, 14-17. ^{xi} DeMarco, 14. ^{xii} Rollins quoted by DeMarco, 14. ^{xiii} Rollins quoted by DeMarco, 17. ^{xiv} Gospel of John 1:5.