

The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“The Authority of Personal Experience”
Sam Trumbore March 27, 2011

Spoken and Silent Meditation

Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love, Spirit of Truth,
Let us feel your presence in us this morning.

Let us give thanks for

the warmth of the sun,

just across the equator, galloping toward summer

at the rate of several minutes a day;

the sound of birds feeling that warmth

and sharing their excitement in song;

the crocuses just coming up to remind us

winter cannot defeat life's yearning to flower;

Yet our feelings of gratitude are diminished by the hardships of existence
each of us has our aches and pains, our setbacks and our losses
each of us knows others who are struggling right now
each of us carries grief and hopes for relief.

We are born, live and die in need of support and care
may we and those we love get that support and care
may the many, many others around the world
also get the support and care they need,
may our hearts soften toward our enemies,
and may their hearts soften toward us.

Whatever happens tomorrow,
whatever joy or sorrow comes our way;

May we remember how precious life is -
the awesomeness of being alive
and knowing we are alive;

May that celebration of life itself
be the foundation to support us
and see us through the hardest, sleepless night.

Sermon

The source most Unitarian Universalists rely on when building their sense of inner authority is their personal experience. This is also the first source in the Purposes and Principles of our Association, the:

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

But just how reliable is our experience to guide us?

In relationships, personal experience can be quite deceptive.

Think of the intoxication that comes with meeting someone you experience as very attractive. We laugh at the comedic insanity of falling in love. Awareness focuses on the object of our affection. The body tingles with the flood of endorphins to the brain. The heart rate and the breath quickens ... and the rational brain turns off.

Recent scientific research has discovered some of the subtle biological processes operating when men and women meet. When women are ovulating, the pitch of their voice can change, their dress can become more showy and, most importantly, their bodies release pheromones that strongly influence whether men think women are attractive or not. These influences often sneak past our rational consciousness.

How well I remember this process happening with each of my romantic relationships and with my wife Philomena. And how I remember the crashing return to sanity as each courtship period came to an end. I warn couples who come in for wedding consultations about this disturbing result of getting married. The honeymoon will come to an end. You will snap out of the delusions evolution has designed into you. When that happens, it will be time to build a relationship with the reality of who the other person is *rather than* the fantasy of who we *imagined* the other person to be. Trying to mold the other person to fit our fantasy of him or her is one of the big mistakes newlyweds make.

Ill health can also impair our perception. My mother, who died over twenty years ago, and suffered from depression, was someone who might have benefited from Prozac. Periodically, she would go to the doctor, and tell him she felt something was wrong. He would run tests, not find anything physically wrong and send her home. This was very frustrating for her because she knew she didn't feel normal but had no way of dealing with the disruption in her inner world.

Doctors are often suspicious of the symptoms patients report because they may not be reliable, often because the problem may be affecting the patient's judgment. This is one reason doctors are discouraged from treating themselves. Doctors want facts: blood, urine and imaging tests can give them that the patient can't. Often those facts aren't there when the problem has a psychological origin.

Choosing what to eat is another place personal experience may not be our best guide. If I were guided by what gives me pleasure, I'd eat Fruit Loops and Captain Crunch for breakfast every morning. I have a vicious sweet tooth. I'd avoid celery, spinach, and kale and eat meat and potatoes and cake and doughnuts. That's what I crave.

And I know from external sources of authority, that I'm likely to suffer if I eat that way. Maybe not right away. But my teeth will rot. I'll gain lots of weight. And, as I age, I'm likely suffer health problems like diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

My attraction to sugar has a strong addictive component to it. I don't experience satiation when I eat sugar, I only want more and more. Defects in our responses to substances can strongly contribute to substance abuse. Alcohol, opiates, cocaine and nicotine, to name a few psychoactive substances, change how our brains work, warping brain function, often leaving lasting changes. Thus personal experience can be dramatically changed by the substance.

Initially, the positive effects of a substance enhance experience or medicate an existing problem. At first, the experience of the substance is as a friend, until use becomes a compulsion through habituation and brain chemistry changes. And tolerance to the substance can increase the use with increasing harm.

Addiction often effects perception and judgment. As substance abusers become more dependent, they resist messages of growing concern and alarm around them. They particularly resist authority figures like parents, doctors and police officers. As use of the substance becomes more and more compelling, inner authority breaks down. The use of a substance *becomes* the authority in their lives, driving their choices.

Addicts aren't the only ones to suffer from perceptual distortions and lapses of judgment. Our senses are prone to error too. Look at the optical illusion on the cover of the order of service. Those are straight lines. I couldn't believe it until I looked at it sideways – try it! Think of mistakes you've made confusing names and faces. How many times have you called relatives or children by the wrong name. How many times have you heard something very different from your partner than what they have actually said, substituting what you'd rather hear? Add to that the impairments that come with the aging process and sense experience can be pretty unreliable. Too often, seeing isn't believing.

Even if we accurately perceive with our senses, we all haven't had the same experiences. In doing anti-racism, anti-oppression, multicultural work recognizing differences in personal experiences is crucial. I will not get stopped for questioning by a police officer when jogging through an exclusive neighborhood. I'm almost always treated with solicitous respect by store clerks. After having my eyes opened to this, I'm acutely aware now of the unearned privilege I enjoy being a white male. I just don't know, from my own experience, how it feels to encounter discrimination on a daily basis. I also don't know what it feels like to be sexually objectified. (If you're doing that to me now, I'm still oblivious to it) And I've forgotten the hunger for significance I felt as a youth. I don't know what growing up facing a world with so many overwhelming problems feels like either. And I don't know how all these experiences would shape my personal experience of being human.

I recently tasted this lack of shared experience. Joan Didion, in her book, *A Year of Magical Thinking*, talks about what she calls the vortex of grief. The vortex gets triggered for her when she encounters something that reminds her of her dead husband. I know many here are intimately familiar with this experience and recognize it right away. I have had many losses in my life, but I've never experienced the kind of overwhelming grief she vividly describes. And she hadn't either till her husband dropped dead of a heart attack in front of her.

And let's face the fact that each of us has limitations to our intelligence, understanding and wisdom. Think of how many people didn't grasp the potential problems with taking out mortgages with adjustable rates. There are aspects of particle physics and quantum mechanics that I don't understand. I struggled with electro-magnetic field theory in college, squeaking through the class with a 'C'. I mistakenly believed that dropping the neutron absorbing rods in a nuclear reactor would completely shut it down. I didn't realize the reactor still needed water to cool it because the individual fuel rods react with themselves and generate enough heat to melt them. I'll bet most of you didn't know that either.

Before the dawn of civilization the knowable universe was much smaller and more manageable. The elders were vitally important repositories of communal wisdom needed to survive. The young needed the elders to locate medicinal herbs, good hunting and gathering locations, technological skills for making hunting tools and home construction. Their authority had meaning.

Today, if you want to know something, you google it. Knowledge is advancing so quickly that people's technical skills are obsolete in 5-10 years. My web programming skills are still back at the beginning of the web in 1995. What foods are good for you and which ones aren't change every few years. Now coconut milk is in. It used to be bad for you. Parenting practices keep changing too.

All this adds up to making both the authorities and personal experience suspect sources of guidance for our lives.

So what are we supposed to do to live a good life?

I say, we need both authority and personal experience. And we need to test them in action.

This is how I've handled my chronic intestinal problems. Many of you know that I've suffered since childhood with them. At the time and still today, my doctor only knows how to treat the symptoms not resolve the causes. Given how much pain and discomfort I experienced as a youth, I anticipated a short and miserable life ahead of me.

I remember dating a young woman in 1981 who had a severely restricted diet. While I recoiled in horror watching her eat carrots, celery and rice cakes ... it planted the idea in my head that I too might have food sensitivities. She also got me thinking about taking responsibility for my own health rather than leaving it up to my doctors.

So for the last 30 years, I've monitored what I eat and the correlation with the effects on my intestinal health. Through trial and error, repeated many, many times, I've removed foods, spices, and additives from my diet. Gradually, my intestinal health has steadily improved. Today my gut is healthier now than at any time in the last 40 years.

But I don't go just with my own experience. I go to the doctor and get my nutrition checked with blood tests. I read up on what the experts think about food and health. I strive to increase my omega-3's and decrease my omega-6's. I'm eating whole grains and lots of fiber. I'm decreasing my protein consumption and striving to eat more vegetables, particularly the leafy green ones. And those changes are making a big difference too.

We can do the same with our religious lives. Realizing the limitations of our experiences and our ability to experience, we need to be open to the experiences of others, particularly those many others respect. Their experiences, insights and revelations may be quite strange to us. I certainly haven't seen or received revelation from angels or witnessed someone risen from the dead or spoken in tongues but that doesn't completely rule out any value I might glean from those who have had those experiences.

What matters is testing them in action - not just once but over and over again. And then using our inner compass, our inner guidance to evaluate the results. Do the actions affirm our core values? Do the actions create suffering or relieve suffering? Do the actions bring happiness and joy into the world? Do the actions affirm and encourage the breaking forth of more love in the world?

The difference between direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder and delusional thinking will be revealed in practice. As Jesus so wisely observed, “the tree is known by its fruit. (Mt 12:33)”

And the fruits keep on coming. This process is never done. Remember both the authorities and our personal experience are unreliable. There is no final resting place in the pursuit of truth, only rest stops along the way.

May we remain open to being changed by our personal experience and by authority,
testing everything in the fire of daily life,
carefully analyzing the results again and again,
and courageously making changes based on what we find is true.

Benediction

Each of us has, what can be spoken of metaphorically as,
our inner compass or our inner guidance system.

We can use this ability to discern a healthy and life affirming direction
from a harmful and life denying direction.

May we learn to recognize and develop this ability,
this inner guidance system,

to navigate and to validate

outer authority and personal experience.

May we commit to following our inner compass
as we seek a healthy and life affirming true north.