

The Gift of Uncertainty

I remember as a little girl, waking up on Christmas morning before it was even light. My sisters and I would sit on the steps leading to the living room, and peer through the rungs of the stair rail, trying to see the clock on the mantle. It was an ironclad rule: parents were NOT to be woken before 7:00.

As the room began to lighten with the coming of dawn, we'd sigh; it was only 6:15. We had an ETERNITY yet to wait. So we'd amuse ourselves by trying to make out what was in the tops of my father's old fishing socks, which we always used for our Christmas stockings. Was that a puppet? A stuffed animal? The doll I'd been begging for? What could that big bulge be near the toe? Oooh, the anticipation!

In some situations, uncertainty can be the tang that gives excitement and life to our days. It is the unknown and unexpected that makes a sports match fun to watch, or a trip to a new place feel like an adventure.

And yet, uncertainty can also be profoundly unsettling. What is wrong with me? If I just had a diagnosis! I can't seem to find my way home from Linda Clark's house. Google, take me home!

In fact, accurately predicting outcomes is something that has been of great importance to our success as a species. I know, sometimes it seems we've been just a little TOO successful for our own good, but that's a topic for another day.

Knowing what to expect is important in so many areas of our lives. We know what will happen when we flip the light switch, when we turn the door handle, when we light the stove burner, when we turn the car key.

We feel lost, unmoored, if we don't have at least a good part of our lives filled with things we understand and can respond to in ways that we know will work for us. Imagine how it would feel to wake up one morning in a place that is totally unfamiliar to you, where people speak a language you don't understand, where you don't know who you are or how you got there?

Since November 9, I have had the recurring feeling that I have woken up deep in a dark woods, and I don't know how to get home. The wolves are howling at grannie's door, can't wait to take away her social security and medicare. Trolls guard all the bridges and pop out to taunt and threaten those who try to get together with friends on the other side of the bridge. All the paths lead to unknown destinations, and I can't figure out which way to go; and at the same

time, I have this feeling of urgency. It feels like life or death to figure out which path is the right path, but the more urgent it feels, the harder it is to decide.

Maybe some of you can relate to this feeling.

It makes me profoundly uncomfortable to talk about this. It feels risky. But I promised to go deep with you, my friends. I told you we would go deep into the woods, into the place where it is hard to shine a light, where things are not always what they seem, where the path to where we want to go is not always clearly marked and well-lit.

I am profoundly uncertain as to how to proceed. Which path will take me home? Is home really where I want to go? Which path leads to the ability to protect what I love?

In fact, it feels like maybe I SHOULD be taking ALL THE PATHS. At the same time. How do you choose? Which principle is most important – the worth and dignity of Black Lives? The worth and dignity of immigrant lives? The worth and dignity of Muslim lives? The worth and dignity of homeless, or veterans, or people too poor to afford health insurance (as soon as Affordable Care Act is pulled out from under us)? The worth and dignity of women's right to choice over their own bodies? The worth and dignity of small business owners, middle income taxpayers, teachers and health workers, people who depend on safe tap water and safe bridges and safety at home or in school, or any of the other many, many people who WILL suffer from the blitz attack of legislation that is primed and ready to go on January 21?

I feel like I am in a maze, and the more I try to find my way through, the more confused I become.

And yet, as Unitarian Universalists, our faith will not allow us to stand still and stop trying. It does not matter whether we are stopped by apathy or by fear or by uncertainty. It does not matter that we do not see any way to successfully oppose the forces of oppression. It does not matter.

What matters is that we CANNOT stand or sit by and let things slide. We know this. The little light inside each one of us tells us SO STRONGLY that giving up is not an option. Just not an option.

That is nice to know. It is nice to know that I have this fierce coal burning in my belly. It is SO nice, so important, so life-saving to know that YOU have this fierce burning inside, as do so many, many people across the country who are rising up in a myriad of ways to say: THIS. IS. NOT. OK.

And yet, I think so many of us are still in uncertainty, even while we know that many people are fighting the good fight. Ginger and I have a lawyer friend who has been camped out at Standing Rock, giving legal help to the Water Protectors there. I know people planning to march in Washington, and Boston, and Portland and Denver and Atlanta on Jan. 21.

I am not called to do those things. Or is it fear, or apathy? Should I be doing those things? Or something else? I can think of a dozen things that at times I feel I should be doing, but I can't figure out which of these things I really SHOULD do. Is there even a something I SHOULD do?

It is an uncomfortable place to be. Do you want to run quickly to certainty? I do. Do you wish someone, a modern-day Ghandi or MLK, would rise up and show us the way? Yep, I do. I would love to see the coordinated plan, and see my part in it, and be ALL IN, knowing we had the blueprint for success. Oh, how I wish I could see clearly that we will be able to protect all that needs to be kept safe.

Without that clear vision, it is so easy to begin to feel despair. And I know, I do, that ours is no caravan of despair, but of hope. But which way does hope lie?

So far, it seems, we are still here, mired in UNCERTAINTY.

Ok, so here we are. Can we stand it? Can we sit with it, and stop flailing about for answers for long enough to get our bearings? Can we sit and listen for that small, whispering voice calling to us in the midst of our uncertainty?

Maybe, if we can resist the urge to rush to a place of certainty, we can open our eyes and look around. Huh. Uncertainty. Hi, nice to meet you. You make me quite uncomfortable, you know.

What? You are offering me something? I really don't like you; I am not sure I want what you are offering. If I take it from you, can I give it back if I really, really don't like it?

Ok. I'll take a look at it.

What's this? A mirror? Are you trying to trick me?

Me? I'm the gift? But I'm weak, I don't know enough, I really am not a great speaker or writer, and I'm not brave at all. I'm too old to camp out in the North Dakota winter. I'm all full of these cracks, can't you see that?

Oh! What is this? It is warm. It is WARM and GLOWING. It's a fire of very comforting outlines. I HAVE A LIGHT IN ME.

I have a light in me. Perhaps it will illumine the path I should take. Perhaps, among all these paths, there is one meant just for me, one that will take me to where my gifts, my strengths, are just what are needed.

Ok, yes, I see. I do have gifts, don't I? Yes, I am kind. Yes, I do care, oh, I really, really do! Maybe my gift of song, or my gift of being a good listener, or my gift of analyzing a problem, or my gift of telling a story, will be just exactly what is needed somewhere along the way. Yes...maybe!

What a gift. When we let go of what we cannot know, we find we don't need to know it all in order to do what life and love call us to do. When we stop fragmenting ourselves with all the maybes, we find ourselves engaging life in a more wholehearted way. When we become ok with not being able to see it all, we are able to see more clearly that which is right in front of us.

And what we find in front of us is hope. Not the hope grounded in certainty, not the hope of a "good game plan," not even the hope that knows where all the goal-posts are. But the hope that is born of love. The hope that sees Love as the light in the darkness. As Sharon Welch, my dear friend and mentor puts it, "A deeply felt, abiding love is the foundation for a resilient, dynamic hope."

And Love, a deeply felt, abiding love, reaches out and gives us the gift of Uncertainty: the sudden realization that we are the gift. We all bring some broken things, songs and dreams, and long lost hopes. And together, we reach within. As a community, we take a deep, deep breath and begin again.

And, from the pieces, we will build something new. We are sitting together on the stairs, trying to see what time it is, trying to make out the dim outlines of what awaits us over there, in the old fishing socks. Can you feel the anticipation? Can you feel possibility for creative, joyful, life-affirming response to whatever may be coming toward us in the future?

There is a work that only you can do. There is a work that only I can do. If we can sit together through the discomfort of uncertainty, that work will find us, and we will be ready for it.