

March Theme: Ambiguity

“To learn which questions are unanswerable, and not to answer them: this skill is most needful in times of stress and darkness.” – Ursula LeGuin

We humans don't like ambiguity much. We're not wired for it. It can be scary when events are unfolding in a way unknown and even threatening to us. Certainty, often cloaked in authoritative stories of salvation and rightness, has the power to make us feel secure, providing simple answers to the complexities of life. We see the increasing popularity of stalwart convictions being grabbed like life rafts when the world around us appears deeply precarious. It is natural to want to pin things down, but ultimately, they can't be.

Yet there is inherently good news in embracing the reality of 'not knowing.' It is in these very moments of change that the greatest transformations and possibilities can and do emerge, individually and collectively as a society. Ambiguity holds differing notions to both be true and exist at the same time. It allows for double meanings, inconsistencies, and nuance. In Mandarin Chinese, the word crisis is represented by two symbols: one is danger and the other is opportunity. Holding and outlasting the tension between the two fosters resilience and invites our own discovery of who and how we want to be. This is an invitation.

It means we have to get comfortable with the uncomfortable. Doubt and indecision are inevitable. Not acknowledging the fact that life is mostly uncertain doesn't make it any less true. We can practice ambiguity in a way that positively changes us by accepting and welcoming the contradictions and complexities in life. When we work with a mind certain that it *doesn't* know all the answers, we can rest a little. We can be curious about the questions and allow for new discoveries and insights to arise.

Ours is a faith without certainty. Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt is a human response to that which is unknowable. It takes courage. Living in this human form is the very essence of ambiguity. It takes a boatload of faith. Our faith grows over time, like we do, learning and unlearning beliefs and ideas so that we can be of greater service to those around us and to ourselves. Our 4th principle reminds us that as Unitarian Universalists we “continually search for truth and meaning, to exist beyond bonds of dogma and oppression, and to wrestle freely with truth and meaning as they evolve.” We remain humble and open to awe before the great mysteries that life offers.

This period of multiple purgatories we have been experiencing has depleted the most buoyant of us at times. Wrestling with ambiguity may gift us, not only with a new way of *doing* things, but even more importantly, help us *to be* in different and wiser relationship with ourselves and the world. We have love on our side. Love, itself a leap, bringing meaning to our lives. It is at the heart of our covenant together. And, in a world of change and shifting sands, love is perhaps the only thing that's not ambiguous.

This month's theme was composed by Katherine McHugh and the Worship Associates.

Questions to Contemplate:

1. How do you deal (or not deal) with ambiguity?
2. Would you consider doing things differently in response to change and uncertainty?
3. What does ambiguity feel like in your mind? In your body?
4. How does other people's ambiguity affect you? How do you respond?
5. What role has doubt played in your own spiritual journey?
6. When have you held strong convictions in your life that were unwavering? What ones do you still hold and why?
7. Who in your life eases your own sense of uncertainty? Who increases it?
8. What notions can you think of that have double meanings?
9. Do you find yourself more often saying yes/and or either/or?
10. What poems have you found helpful in managing ambiguity?

Quotations to Consider:

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. 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." – Rainer Maria Rilke

"As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it." – Simone de Beauvoir

"The ideal art, the noblest of art: working with the complexities of life, refusing to simplify, to "overcome" doubt." – Joyce Carol Oates

"...I've come to realize that the only truths that matter to me are the ones I don't, and can't, understand. What's mysterious, ambiguous, inexplicable. What doesn't fit into a story, what doesn't have a story. Glint of brightness on a barely-there chain. Patch of sunlight on a yellow wall. The loneliness that separates every living creature from every other living creature. Sorrow inseparable from joy." – Donna Tartt

"Isn't life a collection of weird quizzes with no answers to half the questions?" – Pawan Mishra

"The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; so to say it is ambiguous is to assert that it's meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won. Absurdity challenges every ethics; but also the finished rationalization of the real would leave no room for ethics; it is because man's condition is ambiguous that he seeks, through failure & outrageousness, to save his existence." – Simone de Beauvoir

"Whether it's ourselves, our lovers, bosses, children, local Scrooge, or the political situation, it's more daring and real not to shut anyone out of our hearts and not to make the other into an

enemy. If we begin to live like this, we'll find that we actually can't make things completely right or completely wrong anymore, because things are a lot more slippery and playful than that. Everything is ambiguous; everything is always shifting and changing, and there are as many different takes on any given situation as there are people involved. Trying to find absolute rights and wrongs is a trick we play on ourselves to feel secure and comfortable." – Pema Chodron

*"I will complain, yet praise;
I will bewail, approve:
And all my sowre-sweet dayes
I will lament, and love."* – George Herbert

"The real secret to freedom seems to lie in the ability to deal with ambiguity, the capacity to tolerate noise and yet hear within its wild randomizing abandon the possibilities of innovation and transformations." – William Thompson

"In a time of danger, the person sounding the paranoid continual alarm will eventually be right. A voice arguing for our complete rightness and the complete wrongness of our enemies, a voice constantly broadening the definition of "enemy," relieves us of the burden of living with ambiguity." – George Saunders

"Mystics seem to have no shame about contradicting themselves left and right. They blithely proclaim that the cure for pain is in the pain itself and that the cry of longing is the sigh of merging. That's because the path of the mystic reconciles contradictory propositions (such as harrowing sorrow and radical amazement) and blesses us with an extended capacity to sit with ambiguity, to treasure vulnerability, to celebrate paradox as the highest truth." – Mirabai Starr

"The fundamentalist mind...is essentially Manichean; it looks upon the world as an arena for conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, and accordingly it scorns compromises (who would compromise with Satan?) and can tolerate no ambiguities." – Richard Hofstadter

"The rage for 'identity' too often bespeaks a preference for simplicity rather than for complexity." – Robert Boyers

"History often teaches us to embrace ambiguity, to understand there aren't simple answers to complex questions, and Americans tend to like simple answers to complex questions. So the challenge is to use history to help the public feel comfortable with nuance and complexity." – Lonnie G. Bunch III

"But there's a reason we recognize Hamlet as a masterpiece: it's that Shakespeare told us the truth, and people so rarely tell us the truth in this rise and fall here [indicates blackboard]. The truth is, we know so little about life, we don't really know what the good news is and what the bad news is."

The Worship Associates are: Susan Barrett, Jennifer Breault, Jeff Brown, Jen Ryan-Brown, Alan Cantor, Aimee Dalrymple, Jess Jonas, Nora Kempner, and Katherine McHugh (chair).

And if I die—God forbid—I would like to go to heaven to ask somebody in charge up there, “Hey, what was the good news and what was the bad news?” – Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

“In transitions, we must learn to be still. Being still is, in part, about learning to be comfortable with ambiguity.” – Janet Rebban

“In times of extremes, extremists win. Their ideology becomes a religion, anyone who doesn't puppet their views is seen as an apostate, a heretic or a traitor, and moderates in the middle are annihilated. Fiction writers are particularly suspect because they write about human beings, and people are morally ambiguous. The aim of ideology is to eliminate ambiguity.”- Margaret Atwood

“It was all very isolating to think about, what people use to define themselves and their actions. And at the end of the day, did it make people feel better? Maybe it did. Maybe it gave them something to grasp at in the ambiguous vein of life on Earth.”- Rhian J. Martin

The Worship Associates are: Susan Barrett, Jennifer Breault, Jeff Brown, Jen Ryan-Brown, Alan Cantor, Aimee Dalrymple, Jess Jonas, Nora Kempner, and Katherine McHugh (chair).