

## When We Question

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 15, 2023

There is an ancient Jewish tale of the great Hasidic Rabbi Zusya. As the story unfolds, Zusya was in his final hours laying on his deathbed when he began to cry uncontrollably, surrounded by his students and disciples trying desperately to soothe him. One of the group asked, “Rabbi, why are you so sorrowful? You are almost as wise as Moses, you are almost as hospitable as Abraham. Surely you will reside favorably in heaven.”

Between tears, Zusya replied. “I believe you are right. I will go to heaven, yet when I do, I am not worried about God asking me, ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Abraham? Why were not more like Moses?’” Zusya continued, “I know I can answer those questions. I was not given Abraham’s righteousness nor Moses’ faith, and yet I lived a hospitable and thoughtful life. No, the question I fear is, ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Zusya?’”<sup>1</sup>

May each one of us be truly us. Not to become another – no matter how wise or insightful our heroes may be. Not to become what society expects or a façade who will be accepted or emulated, but to use each one of our experiences to draw us closer to who we are, at our core, each day finding our own center. When you lie on your deathbed will you share Zusya’s panicked final thought?

We each connect to our true selves as we authentically react to the problems of which we are presented. Problems facilitate questions which encourage solutions. We talked last week of heart space, that truth and wisdom held deep in our core that can always guide us in the next best step, if only we listen, if only we engage. What happens when we ask ourselves intimate questions about the basic difficulties inherent in life, and craft solutions that guide us in each of our days? We never have to fear the question, “Why were you not more like you?”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://rabbisylviarothschild.com/tag/why-were-you-not-zusya/>

We each face societal problems, and we each face individual problems. I spent some time reflecting on those problems held deep within society, perhaps all societies. There is evil, injustice, various stigmas and -isms, there is unwarranted sorrow, and unprecedented violence. Within our individual hearts and souls, we face, potentially, addiction, illness, disability, dysfunction, grief. What we identify as our core problems and how we react to them – this makes each individual unique. It helps us to be our true selves.

People have been grappling with these questions for millennia. And just as individuals indicate a problem and craft a solution, so, too, do entire societies. Often, the solutions have been found through faith communities struggling with what they identify to be the basic problem faced by humanity. In the seventh century in Mecca, the modern-day Saudi Arabia, the essential problem was identified as human pride, and Islam was crafted as a solution, guiding followers to strip away pride by submitting to their God. In the first century in Judea, Christianity began to grapple with the problem of sin, guiding faith followers towards the solution of salvation in their God. Around 500 BCE in China, Confucianism was crafted as a response to what was identified as the societal problem of chaos, shaping the solution of social order. Buddhists in the fifth century BCE identified the basic problem of life to be suffering, the solution awakening. More than 3,500 years ago, Jews began to grapple with the problem of exile by guiding followers towards a return to God. These problems and their respective solutions have shifted and guided lives for millennia, crafting meaning and orienting believers.<sup>2</sup>

Today, for example, we celebrate a prophet of the ages, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A Baptist minister, one can safely assume that King grappled with the problem of sin and found solace and meaning and guidance in his own understanding of salvation. King worked to eliminate sin found in racism, sin found in oppressions of all forms. Sin, injustice - the true problem of society, in King's eyes. What were his solutions? Love, nonviolence, and a call for everyone to be maladjusted to evil. Love – towards each and every person, even in the face of great adversity and harm. We will hear more about this in a moment. Nonviolence. King's

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<sup>2</sup> *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* by Stephen Prothero

dream was a non-violent society and he found that the only way to achieve this was through non-violent means, like his predecessor, Gandhi. King offered, “In spite of temporary victories, violence never brings permanent peace.” Thirdly, maladjustment. King called for all of us to never conform to, accept, or live alongside this innate human problem of injustice – but to respond, always, in opposition. His identification of a problem and its solutions crafted meaning and action in his own life and beyond, fostering and igniting a revolution.<sup>3</sup>

Most of us can never act on such a platform as King. Yet, we can each be fully and authentically ourselves. This work is soul work; this is heart work. Identifying and grappling with these inherent problems and shaping our own solutions – this allows us to find our essence. We allow our souls to be seen and heard and questioned – inviting our true selves to bloom.

In preparing for this sermon, I grappled with my own core, my own soul, my own heart space. What do I see as our basic societal problem? Evil and unexplained hardship. My solution? Love, and faith. What do I do? I minister. I work to bring as much love as I can to my little corner of the world – this dictates my actions and decisions each day. I, too, sought to reflect on those personal problems I have struggled with that have shaped and formed me. My primary problem has been mental health, struggling for decades with debilitating anxiety. It was a problem that for many years dictated my life, interfering with my ability to make friends, to love myself, to simply sit without self-criticism echoing in my ears. What was my solution? Acceptance and compassion. I learned to love myself for just who I am. I learned to comfort myself, not to get angry with myself. I took this love and compassion and sought help so that I could live a life of peace. While anxiety will never leave me, I carry compassion and acceptance with me each day. I now feel free.

I think our problems shift and change as we undergo different life experiences throughout the decades. In our later years we may grapple with death as our own finite lives begin to come to

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<sup>3</sup> “Don’t Sleep Through the Revolution” Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

an end. In response to tragedies, our problem may be grief or hopelessness. In our teen years our problem may be related to identity. If we truly engage, we find the solutions within ourselves. Often, we can find it in our faith.

What is the societal problem identified by Unitarian Universalists? I think it is a lack of love in this world. Our solution, in my mind, is to find, cultivate, and enact love. I think this is woven throughout our principles – the very first covenant we make is to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person – every person. This may be the hardest of our principles to live by. A lack of love in the world is the problem that fuels our faith’s call to justice – to be the good we want to see in the world, to create heaven here on earth and destroy hell. This worldly, not otherworldly. We again draw wisdom from one of the prophets of our faith, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He practiced agape – redemptive love. A love which overflows for all and “seeks nothing in return.” He offers us a model for loving the person but hating the deed. King offered the sentiment, “We must live together as [siblings], or we will all perish together as fools.”<sup>4</sup>

I want to return to this idea of identifying problems and solutions on a societal, cultural level. This has helped entire societies find their basic core; their heart space shared by thousands, if not millions, of seekers. I share with you a hypothesis of a religious scholar: each religion began with a “simple observation: Something is wrong with the world.”<sup>5</sup> I want to take our own exploration further and delve deeper into the monotheistic faiths. I chose these three faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – because of the similarities in their origins. Even with common roots, different societies – different people – face and expand upon entirely different problems with their own unique and life-giving solutions.

As I mentioned earlier, Judaism began as a group of people grappled with the problem, with the crisis, of exile with the solution of returning to God. Can you imagine being these ancient

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<sup>4</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

<sup>5</sup> *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* by Stephen Prothero pg. 11

people, exiled throughout millennia – repeatedly – from places they had called home? These are Jewish stories of exile and return, of slavery and freedom. How could one make sense of this? As a people of faith, they found their solution in God. They shifted and molded their relationship with this powerful, divine figure. Mirroring these experiences of exile and return was an understanding of divine covenant – promises broken and mended, respectively. To make sense of both hardship and peace the God they worshiped both punished for wrongdoings and, subsequently, offered mercy. Terror followed by safety. Punishment followed by compassion. A promise broken; a new promise made. They crafted their faith in response to the unique problem they were presented with – exile.<sup>6</sup>

From Judaism came Christianity. Early Christians made sense of their world through the conviction that the problems of the world arose from human sin. Their solution was salvation in God.<sup>7</sup> This faith crafted a worldview through the origin story of Adam and Eve. God created the first two humans and gave them a home in paradise. The humans ultimately disobeyed God, and as part of the punishment, each of their descendants – every human to exist – was born with original sin. Poverty, war, illness – any hardship, and malady, any suffering, arises from sin. As such, each person is called to a life of faith which, if followed closely, will lead to eternal paradise. No matter what a person experiences in this life, if they are devout and if they offer remorse to God, their suffering will end with death. This trust in eternal salvation offers millions of Christians solace and strength and purpose and meaning and allows them to persevere through immense hardship. A problem, and a solution.

Let us explore Islam a bit. Islam saw all of the world's hardships arising from human pride. In order to overcome pride, they cultivated a belief of submission to their God, Allah. I want to offer that even in their prayer poses they strive to embody this unique interaction with Allah, prostrating themselves, which means laying their heads on the ground before them. Complete submission – a release of pride by giving oneself to God. This calls for a way of being in the

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<sup>6</sup> *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* by Stephen Prothero pgs. 243-245

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* pg. 14

world. There is a divide – believers and nonbelievers. What makes one a believer? What rids life of pride? Service to the world – what is understood as performing their religion – giving themselves fully to those in need. In this way they craft peace both in this life and prepare for the beyond. Living one’s faith has offered meaning for millennia.<sup>8</sup>

So let us return to Rabbi Zusya, devastated on his deathbed that he had not lived his life as Zusya. Each of these religions sought to create meaningful, purposeful faith in their own, unique, life-giving way. Each responded to what they found to be a fundamental human problem, and in doing so shaped faith communities that have offered solace and guidance to millions of people of faith to this day. They each found who they were at their center, their core. May this serve to guide us. May this serve to help us understand others. Unlike the ancient rabbi, may we end our days in peace.

So, why do we talk about this today? For one, today, we celebrate our thirtieth anniversary. For thirty years, we have come here grappling with the problem of Unitarian Universalism, what I hypothesize to be a lack of love in the world. We answer this through the call of our faith – to respond with love. We have come to the aid of Afghan refugees, we have countered stigma through awareness, we have strived to see the inherent worth in every person. Both as individuals and as groups, you have worked to make this realm more like heaven. And we tend to what we see as a key, significant problem with the world. I think we, as a church community, find that the world is aching by lacking life-giving spirituality and faith – no matter what that may look like. Our solution? To craft and delve deep into our own spirituality, and to try to extend this to our community. And so, we foster our faith, and we join in reflection and discussion, and we question and read and worship and reflect some more. Through a commitment to love and a dedication to spirituality, we have crafted a community that changes lives; a community that has thrived for decades. What we create together here – this is life-giving, this is needed, this heals. And this is uniquely us. So may you rest in this. May you find sustenance in this. May you bring this to the world. This day, and every day.

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<sup>8</sup> *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* by Stephen Prothero pgs. 27-32

May it be so, and Amen.