WHOSE ARE WE?

It's not my question. Never was.
Been at this whole ministry thing for over four decades, and never asked the question!
I have asked the classic Hillel trio:
   If I am not for myself, who is for me?
   If I am for myself alone, what am I?
   If not now, when?

But to demean me and any greater meaning by supposing that I am only meaningful in relation to another personality, or that a meaningful other reality who somehow creates a relationship with me based on possession – that's just bad theology.

WHOSE QUESTION IS THIS?

So, I ask myself, who is worrying about this question? I can conjecture, but almost every supposition leads me to a place I don’t want ministry, my ministry, Unitarian Universalism, my Unitarian Universalism to go.

Was it the seemingly least offensive question that could be asked?
   I can think of many more meaningful questions, but they might offend.
      Why aren’t we doing better?
      Why are we so limited by the physical?
      Why have we had no vision since the 19th century?
      Why do we keep diluting “ministry” until it is a Milquetoast term?
      Why are our leaders so concerned about having us ask prescribed questions?

That’s just the start.

HAVE WE LOST OUR NERVE?

I suspect that there was a time . . . maybe it was when the Diet of Torda spent days considering matters of deep theology . . . maybe it was when Servetus put pen to paper and dare to think lively and freely (do you suppose he was sent a question to answer from Geneve, with a bonus prize if he found others to answer it too?) . . . maybe it was when Henry Ware was being proposed for professorship at Harvard . . . maybe it was when the Universalists and Unitarian ministers considered signing the Humanist Manifesto . . . maybe it was when BAWA dared to exist in the face of BAC, BUUC, and FULL-BAC . . . maybe it was when we published both the Pentagon Papers and About Your Sexuality. At various times we have had the nerve to do things, sometimes without any sense of vision but with a sense of urgency, but never with a donated question.
DOGMATIC PRACTICE

I have been a curriculum developer for most of my ministry. I have learned from some of the greats: Sophia Fahs, Gabriel Moran, Maria Harris, Thom Groome, Parker Palmer.

I remember the admonition of William Ellery Channing: *not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own . . .not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own.*

The great curricula remain the same – invitations to consideration for a variety of intelligences, appealing to different styles of learning, diverse in personality types, welcoming of varied theological understandings. They always feel like you are being challenged and invited to be yourself, not living according to the agenda of others.

But when inviting curriculum is replaced with limited-vision lessons, even when no creed is presented dogma creeps in as practice. I remember a time at a forgettable (except for this) Meadville Winter where the speaker repeatedly invited the bell to ring. Damn it, just ring the bell!! Don’t make me captive to the idiosyncracies of your own style of learning . . . just because they work for you does not anoint them.

A BADLY ASKED QUESTION IS WORSE THAN NO QUESTION

So the leadership of the UUMA can now say “See, we can get the chapters to talk about what we want them to talk about!” No, you can get the questions asked, but you cannot make it the question that needs to be asked. I suspect we, as a community of colleagues, are no closer to answering the question than when we first began. If we had lived without the question, we might be able to suppose we had dealt with it and might therefore be anticipatory about a real question arising from our midst. You know, as soon as some thought the Messiah had come, people stopped looking for the Messiah. Same with the central questions.

SO WHAT WAS NOT ASKED?

I doubt anyone really wanted to know about a more inclusive spirituality that includes Unitarian Universalist as an element of understanding but then proceeds in new and old directions to suggest a persistence of spiritual existence. The curriculum left no room for emergent theology, since the question was so totally embedded in the familiar. Nothing of real consequence in my own faith journey nor in my ministry was even vaguely inquired into by asking “Whose Are We?” What we needed to ask, in my humble opinion, is suggested by Thomas Jefferson (no, not by any “Southeastern”) when he invited his compatriots to endorse a statement about things of ultimate value: What truths do we take to be self-evident?

WHAT TRUTHS DO WE TAKE TO BE SELF-EVIDENT?

Dare we ask this - - - in such multiples styles, formats, linguistic modes, exercises that
respect both the very private and also respects the whole group, knowing that asking
the question will be much more important than finding a collective answer.

AND

Don’t ever, ever, ever, suggest that I need to articulate a prayer for anyone on any
terms other than the congenial confines of my own spirit. That one exercise, for me,
dis-qualified the whole curriculum because it was so disrespectful of me, the other, the
transcendent, and prayer that I then knew I was attending something more akin to a
Sorority or Fraternity hazing than to a theological inquiry. Just making something a
question does not an inquiry make.

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