Once upon a time, in Virginia, there lived a man named Thomas Potter. He was a quiet, unassuming man, but he had faith. Mr. Potter had heard of a new religion called Universalism, that taught that God was too good to damn anyone to hell, and that every single person would be saved.

Now, in order for this story to make any sense, you have to realize that at that time, in that place, the accepted belief in the Puritan churches was that God would only save some people, and that no one knew who he would save, or why. Predestination was the word they used. The idea that God decided before you were born whether you would go to heaven or hell after you died. How you behaved on earth had nothing to do with it, although they did believe that people who were predestined for heaven probably would act well on earth.

But Thomas Potter didn’t believe this. Instead, he believed that God would save everyone. This was a pretty radical notion at the time. But Thomas Potter wasn’t a preacher. He was a farmer. And, while it’s true that some farmers could preach, Thomas Potter just couldn’t.

But he had faith. He had so much faith, that he built a church on his farm. A nice little wooden chapel. He said that someday God would send him a preacher to preach in this nice little church he’d built. He waited, and he waited, and he waited.

How many of you have ever waited for something? I’m sure everyone has waited for something. Sometimes it’s your birthday. Sometimes it’s lunch. Sometimes it takes longer than that.

For me, 2000 was the year of waiting. I had one child, Mika, who turned 2 in the middle of that year, but I had been trying to get pregnant, and we’d signed up and done training with a foster care agency, who worked exclusively with teenage girls who were in long-term foster care.

We were matched with two girls over the course of 9 months. We met with one, who’s biological grandmother didn’t approve the placement, because we were lesbians. Another girl was all set to arrive for dinner, which was in the oven, and the social worker cancelled. We never knew why.

January 7th, we met Jess, who ended up being our daughter for a year. January 8th, the day we both approved the placement, I discovered I was pregnant.
Thomas Potter had to wait five long years.

I can only imagine what his wife must have said.

“Thomas, you have this perfectly good building going to waste! Can’t we use it for a guest house, or a stable, or something?”

But Thomas Potter continued to wait.

In the meantime, there was Universalist preacher in England, by the name of John Murray. Rev. Murray was a nice man, but, sometimes bad things happen to good people, and he had a string of very bad luck. Both his wife and his child took sick and died. Their illnesses put him into debt, so now he has no wife, and no child, and he’s in debtor’s prison in England in the 1700’s, which wasn’t a very nice place to be. During this time, John Murray abandoned his Universalist faith and swore he would never be a minister again. Maybe, an accountant.

He was reflecting on this in debtor’s prison when someone gave him an ultimatum, or perhaps an opportunity. Go to America, or stay in prison. Well, he was on the next boat, thinking maybe he’d be a farmer. Anything but a preacher.

The next part of the story is about as close as Unitarian Universalists get to miracles. John Murray’s boat got stuck on a sandbar, just offshore of Thomas Potter’s farm. They waited for the wind to come along, but it remained still. John Murray and a few other men got in a skiff and rowed ashore, asking for supplies for those still on the ship. When Thomas Potter heard that Murray had been a Universalist preacher back in England, he begged him to come preach in his little church.

“No way,” said Murray. “I’m not a minister anymore.”

“But God sent you!” Potter implored. “I know God sent you to preach in my church. I’ve been waiting for you for so long.”

The two men argued, but came to an agreement. If the wind came up before Sunday, Murray and his ship would be on their way. But if the wind stayed still, he would come preach at Potter’s church.

I told you this was a miracle story. The wind stayed quiet, John Murray preached, and preached again, and remarried the very accomplished Judith Sargent Murray and Universalism flourished in the United States.

What does it mean to sit with the questions?
Every human being, whether we have a particular faith or not, waits. We don't know what will happen in the future. We can guess, prepare, consult tarot decks and psychics, plan for the worst and hope for the best.

For some people, their faith in God, or Allah, or whomever they believe in is what keeps them going in the midst of uncertainty. Religion is a source of great comfort for many people in times of trial, and a way to make sense of good things that happen. Humans are a meaning making species. The idea that there is a higher being out there who controls the randomness of life can be a comforting idea for some people.

But this belief can also lead to pain. If I believe that God is omnipotent, and that prayer changes outcomes, what do I do when my child has a fatal disease? I pray, I pray fiercely, and my child dies anyway. What does this mean? Is there a greater plan that I can't understand, or have my prayers been ignored?

If you accept the existence of Heaven, that concept can offer a great comfort in times of death and sorrow. Everyone will die, prayers or not, at some point in their life. But the existence of heaven is a powerful consolation. The idea that goodbye is not forever. We will be reunited with our loved ones after we die. They are out of pain after this life on earth. Sickness, poverty, death--all will be no more. They are “in a better place.”

But many Unitarian Universalists don’t share some or all of these beliefs. We don’t have a particular creed that we believe in, and are encouraged to pass all of our ideas through the fire of our own experiences in deciding what we believe to be true.

Some of us believe in heaven, not many of us believe in hell. Some believe in some sort of afterlife, others are convinced that we only live on in the memories of those we leave behind. But if I had to guess, I’d say that a lot fewer of us are “sure” of the existence of heaven, than say, Presbyterians.

Partially, this is because the Afterlife is one of those things we can’t pass through our own experience. Unless we remember what happened before we came around to this life, we have no way of knowing what any other world could be like.

Marcella, when she was tiny, was so very clear on reincarnation, it was kind of strange. She’d say things before she was two like, “Mommy, when I die and go up into the sky, and then get born again, can I still use my same high chair?”

But most of us don’t remember those experiences anymore, so we wonder.

In some ways, I think this is a really good thing. I think the lack of conviction about an afterlife makes us more oriented toward making this world a better place, in the here and now, because we don’t necessarily have some glorious reward waiting for us.
That promise of a heavenly reward has been used to justify oppressive systems, and to give the oppressed a sense that they would be rewarded for their patience, or their complacency, in heaven.

And yet, it’s also been used to give people suffering through truly horrific occurrences or situations a sense of hope. It will not always be like this. Things will get better. Perhaps not in this world, but at least in the next one. God will gather all of us up to him, and we will live in a place where there is no more suffering, no more hunger, no more war, no more brutality. Some religions go on to say the streets will be paved with gold!

It’s interesting the different ways the Abrahamic religions and Buddhism handle suffering and death. With the Monotheist Abrahamic traditions, suffering is transitory, because the promise of heaven awaits us, or at least those who’ve followed the tenets of the various religions. Sadly, although it seems pretty likely it’s the same God all of these religions worship, it’s only been pretty recently that they’ve acknowledged that people of different faith traditions will get into this same heaven-- and some branches of these faiths haven’t acknowledged that yet.

But in Buddhism, the wheel keeps turning. The vast majority of creatures, including humans, can look forward to a nearly endless cycle of repeating a life on earth in some particular type of physical body over and over again. Therefore, there isn’t a big payoff in the foreseeable future. So for folks who practice Buddhism, it’s not just the transitory nature of this one life, it’s that life itself is transitory. We’re all changing constantly--moving through stages, relationships with others, everything. Because we’re always changing, and others are always changing, Absolutely everything is transitory. We will never be stuck in the same place for too long, because everything is changing all the time.

Now I have to say, I think if I were in short-term pain, the Buddhist idea would be more comforting. Stub my toe? End a relationship? All changes & sufferings are a necessary part of life. We will move through these stages also.

But I think if I were in a chronically difficult position, enslaved, for example, or suffering from a painful, chronic disease, I think that heaven would hold a great deal of appeal.

And this may be part of the demographics of Unitarian Universalism. On the whole, we are not a particularly oppressed people; Garrison Keiler jokes don’t qualify as oppression. We are overwhelmingly educated, middle class people. Interestingly, we’re a statistical blip in surveys of religion that focus on a link between people’s religious affiliation, level of education, and income, because we tend to take those advanced degrees and become social workers and professors instead of captains of industry, but still, on the whole, our lives are relatively privileged.
I wonder, and I’m certainly not the first to do so, if our relative privilege has something to do with our comfort with uncertainty in religious matters. Certainly Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs theory indicates that people only have the ability to wonder about self-actualization if their more basic needs--food, shelter, safety, companionship--are being met.

I remember when I was ministering to a woman who had had some painful surgery that just wasn’t resolving right. She spoke to me about being jealous of her friend who had a strong Christian faith. “I don’t believe what she believes,” she told me. “And I don’t even think I want to. I’m just jealous that she has something so firm to hang on to.”

I think, if we’re willing to admit it, that many of us sometimes have that feeling of Wanting to believe something that we just can’t quite buy.

Now, as a minister, I’ve had to develop and articulate my faith a great deal, to a great many people. Interestingly, because we’re Unitarian Universalists, I don’t think I’ve ever been particularly judged on what I believe, just, frankly, that I believe something, and that I can articulate it.

I think that’s where we all need to be.

One of the Great things about being Unitarian Universalist is that we get to pretty much choose what we want to believe about a great many things, especially what we see as Holy, and how we view our relationship to the divine, and to each other.

One of the hardest things about being a Unitarian Universalist, is that we have to choose what we want to believe about a great many things, especially what we see as Holy, and how we view our relationship to the divine, and to each other.

It’s not an easy religion, with easy answers. At it’s worst, it is certainly possible to enter into a Unitarian Universalist congregation and never engage with the questions of what you believe. As a clergy friend of mine once said, “there are people who are UU’s simply because they think it means no one ever, ever gets to tell you what to do.” Certainly, you can come, sit in a chair, listen to the service, eat potluck, put away chairs, serve on a committee and never, ever, actually have to think about what any of it means.

But at its best, Unitarian Universalism demands an engagement that is rare. As my friend Sunshine Glynn once put it, Unitarian Universalism doesn’t mean believing in nothing, or believing in anything you want. It means believing what your soul must, and living your life accordingly.
This concept, of actively working to establish one’s own beliefs is a somewhat unusual thing. We are encouraged to ponder our own spirituality—to question what we believe about life’s ultimate questions. Is there a God? What does that mean? What is Holy? Who do we serve? Why?

Sometimes, we fall into the trap of thinking ourselves superior to other religious traditions, finding their adherents to be mindless drones who don’t think for themselves, but instead blindly follow the party line. I think the number of catholics who support abortion rights should absolve us of that false idea. Sure, there are adherents of most religions who believe blindly, just like there are Unitarian Universalists who never think about what they believe, but I think that there are a great many Christians, just to use the most prevalent example, who begin with a basic set of beliefs, but then do engage with those, and discover what they believe—and that these beliefs vary over time. Anne Lamott, Barbara Brown Taylor, and Nora Gallagher are all Christian authors who write engagingly about wrestling with their faith. We do not have a monopoly on questioning.

And yet, we are unusual. Most other faith traditions at least have a party line to rebel against—to give structure to one’s theological wrestlings. We have our seven principles: a set of guidelines about how we wish to be in the world, and how we wish to treat each other. They’re not a bad foundation to develop a theology around, but it starts from an unusual place. Rather than begin with a belief in God, revealed through a particular prophet, who wants us to behave in a certain way, Unitarian Universalists sidestep that question in favor of guidelines that tell us how to act independent of any higher power. We are allowed, and encouraged, to decide for ourselves what, if any authority we choose to believe in. We are encouraged to find some form of spiritual practice to get us in touch with our own souls—that source of quiet strength we all draw from, no matter what we call it.

It’s funny, when you come at it from a different angle, sometimes we discover that even though we call it different things, our ideas are not so different. I remember shortly after I started seminary, my then-partner Jill and I were discussing religion. “Do you think I believe in God?” she asked. “Yes.” I said. “No.” she said.

But as we discussed it, my definition of God, and her definition of not-god were, in fact, remarkably similar. What we call it isn’t the most important thing. What it calls us to do in the world is far more important. Whether we believe in God, or Humanity, or the Holy, or some nameless mystery is far less important than what this belief calls us to do. Love our neighbors. Work for justice. Honor the earth.

At it’s worst, our lack of a creed can inspire a smug sense of superiority, a wholesale appropriation of other people’s spiritual practices, and an annoying tendency to go wide, but not deep.

But at it’s best, we are a faith tradition that sits comfortably with questions. That requires honest engagement with those questions, but doesn’t pretend to have all the
answers. We can sit humbly, appreciative of different paths, understanding that what I believe to be true, based on my experiences, may not be what my neighbor believes to be true. At it’s best, our faith teaches us to honor the experiences of others, that our way is not the only, or even the best. It is merely what we believe to be true for ourselves.

Edwin Markham wrote a poem in 1913:

He drew a circle that shut me out —
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

Let us find that truth for ourselves. Wrestle with the big questions. Share our questioning and our own experiences with others, and engage in the work of the holy in the world. Go deep.
Blessed be, and amen.