

West Branch Friends Meeting  
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“What do I do With My Doubts?”

Many of us grew up in a cocoon of religion in a smallish church – especially if it were in a Quaker Meeting. We went on hayrack rides with youth groups, sat through Sunday after Sunday of Sunday School classes and – as a kid – boring sermons. We learned the hymns (and although I still know many of the words, around sixth grade I decided I wanted to sing alto so my focus was on the notes, not so much the meanings of the words). We were married in the church, raised our families in the church, and we all believed pretty much the same theology. We read the Bible word for word, literally, could quote scripture, and in my case, learned to recite the books of the Bible and had Bible Sword Drills to see who could find the scriptures the fastest.

Faith and believing were pretty easy when you were surrounded by friends and family who thought like you did, prayed like you did, considered the future in heaven the same as you did, and viewed the world the same as you do.

It was never suggested in any of my SS classes or sermons that it would be beneficial to question what we were being taught, even if it were to prove whether or not what the teachers really told us was the ‘truth’. Sometimes if we did questioned our faith – much like I did when I was 14 or 15, we were told we were sinners and without believing in Jesus – his death for our sins, we would not see heaven. And sadly, I also believed that people who were part of any other religion, like Judaism, Mormonism, Buddhism, etc. were really doomed, because that’s what I had been taught.

So eventually, in my case, after my period of doubting God’s existence in my youth, I ‘saw the light,’ came back into the fold, and thought all was well; I was confident that I knew truth about God...and although my life as a young mother raising four children wasn’t always easy, I had faith that I was following the one, true religion.

Oh....but then, much later in life I started asking some of those important questions again, and I've come to the conclusion that perhaps doubt and questioning must exist if we want to discover genuine faith! We have definite examples in both the Old and New Testaments that some of the most faithful of God's followers also, at times, experienced doubts. First, there was Abraham's wife, Sarah, who doubted God in this passage from Genesis 18: 11-14:

***"Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure? Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old.***

***"Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."***

And probably the most famous of all doubting Biblical characters was Thomas, in John 20: 24-25:

***"Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"***

***But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."***

It seems like these days, there are more and more who grew up under that blanket of security in our Christian churches, and have now begun to have doubts about some of the past teachings, and are now asking a lot of questions such as:

- Why do almost all the world's religions work to exclude so many?
- Why do churches refuse to acknowledge personal choice for women, and the place that women in ministry should have?
- Why does the church frown upon anyone who is of a different color, sexual orientation or political party?

- And then, the more doubts some of us have, why is it **we** begin to criticize those in our Christian faith who are still fervently clinging to the old, narrow beliefs?

Thomas Plummer says, “***Clinging to doubt means you can stay that soulless, materialistic, hedonistic, ranting against organized religion; that bundle of religious certainty you posture so hard to be to your friends and family.***”

And I wonder...is it because we doubters want so badly to believe in something that eases our doubts, our questions, and maybe, even, our fears – especially about the afterlife? But what if we consider that doubt is simply not yet **knowing** all the answers, but believing enough to ask the really tough questions? What if doubt keeps us questioning, and seeking for a God we have not yet found?

I was thinking about the very first time I shared a message with this congregation three years ago, and how I wanted to be brutally honest with you, so you would know exactly what you were getting with me as pastor. And so I shared some of my questions. And, if I can still be brutally honest once again, there remain questions that I ponder each and every day! But I also firmly believe there is a ‘more’ if you will, something beyond the physical world we inhabit.

So let me share some of my more recent questions about spirituality.

- What is the character of God? When we hear the word God, what are we imagining?
- What is the content of my faith? Al Qaeda is a faith-based initiative that also promotes violence, so just to say ‘I have faith’ can mean a lot of different things to different people.
- What is the function of our meeting, and worship? And what should worship really include if we are supposedly worshipping God?
- And finally, this big one for me: what about prayer? I gave up thinking there was a theistic God up above the earth who granted our wishes and answered our prayers...

- I had no way to rationalize how a loving God would pick and choose who got to be healed, rescued, protected. I do believe in prayer, but the purpose for me is not the same as it was in the past.

I could go on and on, but I think you get what I'm saying. I don't believe it's wrong to doubt or question; instead, perhaps it may very well be wrong to give up doubting and questioning if we are to be seekers. The way we think and speak about God ripples into every aspect of our theological thinking. That's why it's really worthwhile to step back and ask questions about why we say the things we say about God and Christianity.

The Bible offers a multitude of images and ideas about the Divine. On their own, not one of them is purely right. But taken all together, they testify to the liveliness of theological thinking over the ages, and the wisdom of including all the ancient writers' experiences of the Divine.

We do need to be careful in our doubting, and our questioning, in order to save our criticisms of others who both seem to cling to the old, or simply ditch the whole idea of religion, and love to quote Karl Marx, whose most famous line was probably, "Religion is the opiate of the masses." In other words, our religions are just drugs we use to make us feel better.

I will choose to read, explore, question, discuss with others, and never give up finding those thin spaces where my spirit touches that of God, and I gain a new glimpse of what is beyond our physical world, and into the spirit world.

I think Plummer is on to something when he writes,

***"Doubt is the lever that makes faith real; because questioning and challenging open more doors to the possibility there is more beyond our current lives. Doubt makes us question, and questions keep us searching for a God not yet found. Doubt is not disbelief; doubt is just not yet knowing everything about spirituality."***

So how do we proceed with our doubts and questions? We read authors who challenge our thinking about all things spiritual, we listen to

podcasts that do the same, we look for that of God in everything around us, and we do our best to, as I have been saying for the past couple of weeks, live a life infused with love that makes a difference for our world and our fellow humans.

I found this quote by Quaker William Barclay that really sums up this whole idea of questioning. He writes (in gender neutral pronouns):

***“If we fight our way through our doubts...we have attained to a certainty that the person who unthinkingly accepts things can never reach.”***

Please....share your questions with me! Let’s discuss the vision we have of God, and our purpose as followers of Jesus’ teachings as we travel together on this spiritual journey!