

March 18, 2018

“No Idea”

David Weiss

A few weeks ago, I received an email from our minister requesting that I send her the title of my upcoming sermon. My snappy response was “no idea.” Shortly after that, I was browsing around the Church website – there it was under Sunday March 18<sup>th</sup> – my photo with the following words in large boldface type, **David Weiss “No Idea.”**

Last Tuesday, in a class at the Academy of Lifelong Learning, I saw a video in which journalist Kathryn Schultz (author of the book *Being Wrong*), said something that moved me. “If you want to rediscover wonder, you need to step outside your tiny terrified space of rightness ... and be able to say, ‘Wow, I don’t know. Maybe I’m wrong.’” Immediately following that video, a classmate - and friend - turned around and said to me, “I guess this means you’ll have to change your sermon.”

Even if you stay awake for this sermon, you may judge it nothing useful – a disjointed, self-conscious merry-go-round, mental gymnastics. Whenever I’m up here, I like to remind you that I’m not a minister and I never will be. I am one of you. What I intend is that this sermon serve as testament to my continuous search, and that I remain thoughtful about truth, meaning, responsibility, and especially about my participation here, not unlike the periodic presentations by our youth as part of their rites of passage. In fact, I’d challenge **you** to consider

what makes this your church, or what – if anything - **would** make this your church – a place you could inhabit without a sense of hypocrisy or compromise.

In any event, I'll try to provoke thought, not dissuade it. Maybe there will be something here for you – maybe just one little phrase or idea - that will cause you to raise an eyebrow and think and scratch your head.

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The Abstract Expressionist painter Robert Rauschenberg wrote: “I have various tricks for myself to actually reach that point of solitary creativity. One of them is pretending that I have an idea. But that trick doesn't survive very long, because I don't really trust ideas – especially good ones. Rather, I put my trust in the materials that confront me, because they put me in touch with the unknown. It's then that I begin to work ... when I don't have the comfort of sureness and certainty.”

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How do **you** confront the unknown? What “tricks” do you employ? Do you feel nervous or uneasy with emptiness and silence and therefore, like me, offer a deluge of words marauding as answers? In order to search freely and responsibly, it may be **necessary** to be in a state of “no idea.” Why speak? Or, as my father used to tell me, “If you have nothing to say, say it.”

Sometimes we have a foreseeable goal– for example a physical destination. Even then, we don't always know it when we arrive at the destination. Sometimes we have to look under rocks or work backwards in order to complete the route. But how do we search when we don't know where we want to go? What does that

word signify for you? Is it synonymous with “look” or “listen,” “smell,” “observe,” “explore,” “think,” or “dream.” I like to search while making pictures or composing poems, or a sermon. We can search by closing our eyes and listening. We can search by observing each other.

We are also capable of ignoring each other, of pretending that the words we hear are merely sounds.

A word about music. Music forces me to reboot. I stop everything else. Isn't it curious how I welcome uncertainty and imprecision in music? Less so when it comes to words, because words are supposed to have meanings. Aren't they? But when we make sound, both the composer and the listeners of those sound are engaged in a search. Musical notes do not convey common meaning unto themselves. Yet isn't it kind of amazing that we can often identify a composer by the sounds she creates?

And another thing – as we rely on words, so the potential for misunderstandings and misinterpretations increases - in **any** attempted communication. I'm reminded of Dustin Hoffman in “Rain Man” when he recites in monotone both Abbott's and Costello's lines from the comedy routine “Who's On First.” Without context, the routine's meaning disappears, the humor evaporates, and astonishment becomes impossible.

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One of the aspects of **this** community that I find attractive is that we advocate a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I have come to consider that principle – the search – **not** the arrival – as bedrock here. That principle has

stimulated my thought for the 15 years I have been coming here to this First Unitarian Society (which has come to be referred to as a church). That engagement was unexpected for me, an individual who had happily attained adulthood (plus) without utilizing – or wanting – the companion called religion. By coming here, I was seeking new perspectives which might help me create an expanded world, to know myself. I imagined that I'd come here and receive inspiration, that **this** sanctuary was conducive to the formulation of a philosophy and an ethic.

I have appreciated sermons that cause me to **think** or act – and not just while I'm here. There are so many things of interest and importance to address in Sunday morning classes, from the pulpit, in the pews or in the parish hall after the service, so many things worthy of close observation and investigation. Kindness. Growing old. Racism. Divorce. The warming of planet Earth. A bowl of lentil soup. An empty nest. Evolution. In response, I sometimes follow up by changing my behavior. Curiously, I might feel impelled to follow up by **eliminating** something from my life.

I respectfully report that church has sometimes fulfilled my expectations. And that sometimes it has not.

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I'll try to explain how First Unitarian sometimes falls short of my desire for a neutral venue where free thought is encouraged. It comes down to the sentence, "Solve for x, where x = God." In an environment that actively promotes a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, I can understand x (or God) only insofar as it is a placeholder, a tool to help us reach a richer, more accurate appreciation

– of everything. We might be able to solve for x (God) if we try. But it seems to me that we don't always try, that we are sometimes content to abandon our search and settle for x. I think the church should take one of two approaches: either more actively enlist commitment to the principle of a free and responsible search (and for that matter to all our seven principles), or else, in order to more honestly represent our current practice, pose these principles as optional.

Although I am unaware of any Unitarian Universalist vernacular which instructs us to either include or preclude the existence of any god, we caution against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

No accident that we give our children and youth groups names like “explorers” and “seekers” and “rainbow walkers.” We celebrate when our kids reach watermarks – we ask each of our kids to offer evidence of their religious **exploration**, but what do we ask of the adults? Can we at least find ways **not** to derail each other's journey? How about a deep breath and, “Wow, I don't know. Maybe I'm wrong.”

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I can dwell in the serene peace of libraries and museums and laboratories. I can search while reading a book or sketching my foot in the comfort of my home. So – why come **here**? Is this **the** place, or at least **a** place, I can come in order to conduct an unexpurgated search?

I continue to come here **not** because I think we always hold true to our stated principles, but because I like the principles, and so I see the possibilities for my participation here. Such as involvement in the ongoing development of an

organizational ethic (both denominational and congregational) with which I tend to overwhelmingly agree. And I'm confident that when we emphasize the sharing of our varied search processes and progressions instead of the serial proclamation of our varied beliefs, we'll have something unique and attractive for all seekers!

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Much of the time, I have no idea what I want or need. I work with resources that are available and convenient. I certainly don't follow a direct path.

What am I supposed to observe? What am I supposed to search for? Truth and meaning. Questions, and the answers to questions like, "Where did I come from? Where am I? Where am I headed?" A gardening technique, the contextual significance of minimalist art, a person's face when he's disappointed, angry, or fascinated, hot wax in a cold gust of air, how to tell your husband he's wrong, dealing with difficult people, plumbing tips, how to give unsolicited advice to a friend, caring for an ill parent, how to access help within the community, the subjugation of elephants, the plight of Southbridge, being good, excavating a nineteenth century perfume bottle in a post hole, respecting personal space, a three-year-old's sense of humor, the holiness of a minute particular, the palm of my hand.

The affirmation we read every Sunday – in unison no less - includes the words, "At First Unitarian Church of Wilmington we seek to embody growth and discovery, wonder and joy." I trust that this church could – **can** - facilitate our never-ending expeditions through wonder and joy. I'm just saying, I think each of us might well begin exploration with the words, "I have no idea."