

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist**  
**“Lifelong Learning (About Faith)”**  
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**July 18, 2010**

Premise: we spend a great deal of time and effort learning...about ourselves, our work, our families, etc. But all that self-reflection, for many of us, doesn't include a constant examination of our faith and its evolution. The goal of this sermon is to explore that dichotomy and suggest some ways we can routinely learn about our own beliefs.

**The Introduction.**

Our interim minister, the Rev. Dr. Morris Hudgins, has served this congregation faithfully for nearly two years. He's been in the pulpit for nearly 40 years, and has really become a master of the craft of preaching. He brings honesty, passion, deep intellectualism, and a wide range of emotions to his sermons. But he is also an old hand at the art of the sermon. I'm about to steal one of Morris' rhetorical devices to introduce my sermon. One of his strengths as a preacher is his directness--he often starts his sermon by reminding us all about the context of the sermon, the way the sermon fits in with other sermons, and the overall trajectory of the message he's providing. Well, here's my version of that approach.

Today's sermon is called “Lifelong Learning (About Faith)”, and it's the third in my series of sermons about faith and spirituality in a Unitarian Universalist context. You may have been here for part one of this series, two years ago, entitled “Carrying the Fire”. The message that day was inspired by the Cormac McCarthy book “The Road”, and it described my belief that divinity is present with within each of us. In fact, the very definition of divinity, to me, contains a reference to the human. Our highest goal in life is to find ways to get the divinity within us, out. And so this first part in the series was about the inherent existence of divinity--the raw ingredients of faith and spirituality--in us all.

The second part of this series was last summer, in which I talked about the evolution of faith from a fairly naive, literalist interpretation of religion to a more nuanced understanding. For instance, when we're young we might be enamored by the magical qualities of stories from sacred texts, things like burning bushes and parting seas. And as we grow older and reflect upon our faith, we settle on a more adult interpretation of the words composed by the authors of the sacred texts all those years ago. You might also remember this sermon as the one when the preacher nearly got sick all over the pulpit. I'll be forever indebted to Elizabeth Breeden for heroically stepping in to finish the final 20% of the sermon as I rushed from the sanctuary. So this second part in the series was about an initial evolution of our ideas and attitudes about faith as we grow older.

Today's final part of the series explores evolution of faith from today onward. How can we continue to challenge ourselves to learn more about our world, to continually evolve our world view and refine our understanding--and, in fact, definition--of faith, and strive for being the best, most spiritually whole person we can be? To borrow a term from the education community, this idea of continuous improvement, reflection and evolution is called “lifelong learning”.

Let's take a moment to parse out what lifelong learning about faith might mean...

**Let's define “learning.”**

Some of you may know that I am a teacher, and when it comes to teaching and learning, one of the key distinctions we need to make is the difference between “information” and “knowledge”. “Information” involves facts, events, dates, locations, and the like. “Knowledge” involves interpretation of information, using information to make sense of the world, to answer specific questions, and to draw conclusions. In short, knowledge implies the use of information to understand something. For me, learning has three essential elements: (i) ACTIVE: accessing and gathering information, (ii) EVALUATIVE: assessing that information and reflecting on it, and (iii) ACTIVE: acting on/making a decision based upon that information, or perhaps we

draw wisdom or insight from that information that impacts how we live or how we view the world. “Learning” is therefore an active process whose outcome is useful knowledge. And typically we set about on this process because we have specific questions we’d like to answer, or a specific skill or ability we’d like to develop. Maybe we’d like to know more about retirement planning and investing, or we’d like to learn a new language, or perhaps we just want to balance our checkbook and develop a household budget. Regardless of the task, “learning” involves those three steps: first collecting, then analyzing, and then acting on information to create useful knowledge.

### **Let’s define “lifelong learning.”**

Lifelong learning is a term we often use in education. It’s sort of a buzzword these days in education circles. The basic idea is that we certainly want students to learn when they are with us at our institutions. But it also means that part of our goal is to help students develop a love of learning which sustains them after they are done with their formal schooling. It means that students will develop and sustain a curiosity about themselves and the world around them, an interest in understanding, and an ability to access the skills and resources they need to continue learning. We want to train students to continually ask “why”, to probe, to question, and to ensure that any information they collect is critically evaluated. Here’s an example: I teach sophomore-level engineering courses. I want my students to learn the course content, for sure. But I also want them to know how to access resources if they come up against a problem some time in the future that we have not covered in class. I want them to question conventional wisdom about problem solving. In fact, many career paths including engineering essentially require lifelong learning--for example, teachers keep their skills up to date by earning continuing education credits, pilots train in simulators, lawyers periodically update their knowledge or learn new areas of the law, and doctors and nurses keep abreast of the latest developments in treatment of patients. In short, lifelong learning is something that’s deeply engrained in many professions--in addition to providing benefits which are actually self-evident. And once again in these examples, there is typically a specific question we’re trying to answer: what does that recent court decision mean, or what are the possible complications to that new medical procedure, or what does the recent research say about how students learn math?

The duty to pursue this sort of path in my professional life seems completely self-evident; nobody would question the need for continuous improvement in skills and, indeed, lifelong learning. But when I spent some time reflecting on my own faith development, I realized that I didn’t spend nearly as much time or effort in phases 2 and 3 of learning--critically evaluating information, and developing useful knowledge based upon that information--as I probably should. Maybe you are in the same boat as me, so let’s explore some potential reasons why.

### **Let’s define “faith.”**

Now for the hard one. What is faith, and what does faith development mean? In our church, we have a Lifespan Faith Development Council. In fact, on our church website under “adult faith development”, it says: “Grow your religious life, deepen your understanding of Unitarian Universalism, and meet others interested in lifelong learning”. Faith can be described as a belief in things unseen. Or maybe a strong belief which does not rely on logical proof. Or maybe it’s the act of logical thought submitting to some mysterious and unknowable truth. I think our “faith” is a statement about our understanding of the transcendent questions of life. Our “faith” reflects many ideas: our beliefs, our factual and perceived experiences in the world, our wishes about the world (or, how we wish it were), our values, our human connections, our very identities. So when we think about faith development, we can think about two things: (i) actions which allow us to accumulate more of whatever we think “faith” is, and (ii) actions which allow us to continually refine and evolve our definition of “faith”. Now, we could spend a month of Sundays attempting to uncover an agreed-upon definition of faith--maybe that will be my next sermon series, starting a few summers from now...mark your calendars. But for now, let’s focus on that second question--evolving our definition of faith. If faith really is our understanding of the transcendent questions of life, then almost by definition we are all engaged in lifelong learning about faith. But do we do this in an active, or a passive way? Let’s explore that second question by starting with things that we take for granted--the existence of data and information in our everyday lives.

## **Basic ideas about lifelong learning in our lives.**

Remember that learning is about accessing information, evaluating that information, and then shaping that information into useful knowledge. Well, in today's world, collecting and/or accessing information and data is easier than ever. We have search engines which give us hundreds of thousands of sources for information about a particular topic in mere seconds. We have syndication approaches which allow us to "subscribe" to our favorite sources of news. We have social networking tools so that we can "follow" people and they can follow us. All this is in the service of sharing and accessing information. Much of the information that is shared by these and other means is about the world, current events, sports, entertainment, and so on. But how much information do we share about ourselves, our lives, and our experiences? And how do we catalog that data so that we can evaluate it and eventually derive useful knowledge from it?

There was an interesting article in the New York Times back in April entitled "The Data Driven Life", by Gary Wolf. The premise of the article is a play on the well known quote attributed to Socrates--"the unexamined life is not worth living"--taken to some sort of extreme. If focused on the small but growing group of people (called "self trackers") who had dedicated their time to personal development based upon meticulously recorded details about their lives--what they eat, when they sleep, their mood, their productivity, their job function, how they spend their leisure time. In short, a complete record of how they spend their time in intervals as short as two minutes. Every thought, idea, emotion, and interaction. For these self trackers, the goal is to mine this data for nuggets of truth about their lives. When are they at their best, most focused, most alert, or most productive? How much coffee should they drink? At what time of day should they exercise? How does sleep affect their mood? These are very specific questions which can be explored using data, and tracking our daily lives seems like it might actually provide some useful information.

*The Quantified Life.* Anyone who has spent time with a vocation like running or swimming or biking knows that the idea of a training log is as old as time itself--and remember that data collection is the first step to learning. In a training log, you write down what you did ("ran 4 miles"), how you felt ("last 3.5 miles was a struggle"), when you went ("after work, 6 pm"), the location ("in the park with one large hill"), what you ate beforehand ("had a sandwich for lunch and coffee at 2 pm"), who you ran with ("was alone today"), how you recovered ("drank a gallon of Gatorade"), and so on. The idea is that over time, you can study this data for trends and relationships among performance, time, mood, food, and other factors of interest. This personal examination can be both fun and fulfilling--what better way to feel that you are optimizing your self improvement than to pore over the numbers--and it can be useful. This is how we track progress. In fact, all our lives are already filled with different versions of training logs, and we call them bank accounts, credit card accounts, electric bills, cell phone bills, and grocery bills. All of these sources are filled with actionable data--we only need to look for the patterns contained in the information.

People engaged in the so-called "quantified self" movement take this idea to its extreme. Not only do they commit every thought, idea, and interaction to paper, they also take advantage of a wide range of wearable sensing devices to passively collect data about what they are doing. The most basic of these is probably a pedometer, which tracks how many steps we take. But there are also various kinds of electronic devices that enable us to capture a huge array of other personal data every day, including things like heart rate or blood pressure.

*Nike+ iPod.* I've actually dabbled in this on a very much less obsessive level over the years, and here are two examples. I am a periodic runner, and I wanted an easy way to track how far I was running. Well, back in 2006, Nike (the shoe and apparel company) announced a partnership with Apple (the technology company) for a personal tracking system targeted at runners. There are two pieces of hardware in this system. One is a domino-sized sensor that fits into a specially-made recess in the bottom of your Nike running shoes. This sensor does nothing more than detect when your foot makes impact with the ground. The other piece of hardware is a receiver which plugs into the data port on your ipod. The sensor in the shoe communicates wirelessly with the receiver in the ipod, and when put together these two pieces of hardware give you a complete record of how many times your foot has made impact with the ground. If we throw in a few

assumptions about stride length and a lot of computer science, we can get a good estimate of how far you've run. Your ipod also talks to you about your pace (minutes per mile), your total distance, and it can help you set goals. You can of course customize the music playing while you run. When you're done, you plug your ipod into your computer, the data is uploaded to Nike's website, and you can do endless analysis on your runs. For instance, you can couple your running data to a Google map, tracking your route, mapping out the uphill and downhill sections, and if you really like that route you can share it with other runners. You can compete online, rack up the miles in friendly competition, and engage in all sorts of social interactions with other runners. In my experience, all that data boils down to this: over many months, I ran over 200 miles across a handful of common routes--that's the question I was originally trying to answer--and over those many months, my pace gradually improved. On individual runs, when going uphill, I ran slower. When going downhill, I ran faster. At the end of the run, I was more tired (and therefore slower) than when I began. The one bit of data I wanted--the total distance I'd run--was swimming amidst this vast array of other stuff which I was largely unable to act on--and remember, this is the critical third piece of learning...action.

*RescueTime.* I've also tried this at work. Several weeks ago I installed a program on my desktop computer at work called RescueTime. It's a time tracking application that passively collects data about how you interact with your computer in six-minute intervals. My suspicion--or maybe I should say fear--was that I was spending an incredible amount of time on email. Like, 3 hours a day. So I decided that RescueTime might be a useful way to catalog all those emails, my work on documents and spreadsheets, and my schedule of meetings and phone calls as well. If your computer is idle for more than six minutes, the software asks you what you were doing. So I've been collecting data for about 3 weeks now, and here's what I know. So far, in the month of July (that's 10 business days), I have spent 19 hours on email, 9 hours in various meetings, 2 hours talking to students, 2 hours on web searching, about an hour on the phone, and almost an hour managing my calendar. Presumably, the rest of the time I was doing productive things, or perhaps eating lunch. Once again, I answered my one specific question--how much time do I spend on email--but what's the action I can take? Can I stop responding to email? Can I stop going to meetings? Perhaps a bit. But generally this data is interesting, but not actionable. This is information, not knowledge.

*The data paradox.* Both these examples from my own life highlight the basic problem with data overload and self improvement. We have access to a tremendous amount of data, but how do we interpret it? What's our goal? How do we look at that data through the prism of our intentions? What meanings are hidden deep within the data? Here's a quote from the article in the Times:

“But I soon realized that an emphasis on efficiency missed something important. Efficiency implies rapid progress toward a known goal. For many self-trackers, the goal is unknown. Although they may take up tracking with a specific question in mind, they continue because they believe their numbers hold secrets that they can't afford to ignore, including answers to questions they have not yet thought to ask.”

Sounds familiar, doesn't it. We believe that there is data that holds “secrets”, things we can't ignore, but don't know how to unlock. Or there's an answer there, right in front of us inside all that data, to a question we don't know enough to ask. Sounds a little bit like faith, or spirituality, doesn't it? An effort to quantify the unknowable? An effort to define the transcendent?

### **But faith is different.**

In all these other cases I've mentioned, access to data is no problem. We might have some trouble interpreting the data, or making good decisions about the data, or in sticking to those good decisions, as in a New Year's resolution. But access to data isn't the issue. But when it comes to faith, where do we get the data from which we learn? There are several sources, each with a different impact on our faith development, but they are different indeed. And I can make three basic observations about the data, or information, that we can use to evolve our understanding of faith.

*Faith data can be wrenching to collect.* Sometimes there are specific life events which provoke questions about our faith, and influence our understanding of the transcendent. A tragic death, the sudden loss of a job, an unfortunate and serious accident. These are the types of events which give rise to the “why do bad things happen to good people” kind of questions. The events often represent data which has been thrust upon us--these are not events we seek, experiences we wish to have, or circumstances we particularly enjoy. Moreover, the interpretation of these events can take years as we sort through all the intellectual and emotional issues. It can take many hours of deep reflection to build constructive knowledge out of these events. In psychology, the “adversity hypothesis” states that our greatest opportunities for growth occur post-trauma. I would extend this and say that our greatest spiritual growth, and our most profound faith evolution, can occur by living through some very difficult events. But again, these are not event which we ask for, they are not circumstances we can exactly “count on” to give us the opportunity for growth. Nobody looks forward to this method of lifelong learning because of the challenges and anguish associated with these events.

*Faith data can be unrecognizable.* Every day we have interactions and events that on their face appear to be fairly typical and mundane, but how often do we intentionally interpret those events in the context of our faith? Is it easy to interpret getting cut off in traffic as an opportunity to learn about patience? How can we connect a rude remark from a colleague at work to a question about transcendence? What does answering email for two hours each day teach us about our place in the world? I believe that clues about the transcendent are all around us, every day, in every interaction and transaction, in all our encounters with each other. As I said in part one of the sermon series, I believe that our greatest role in life is to find the way to release the divinity inside us all. But do we really visualize every incident in life through that prism? In the hustle and bustle of life, it’s difficult to develop the discipline to routinely savor those moments when the divinity of others shines through.

*Faith data can lead toward exclusion, rather than inclusion.* But how many of us are drawn to our faith, Unitarian Universalism, because we’ve done a comparative study of the UU faith against other possible options? Many of us have the personal experience of the church of our youth--in my case a mainstream Protestant congregation in Pennsylvania. And perhaps you, like me, know that that’s not what you want. It’s not what you believe. It does not represent a faith, or perhaps a culture, that you can accept. Many of us are attracted to the UU church, and this UU church in particular, because of its commitment to various important issues--the environment, social justice, equality. And our faith is, at least in part, a social gospel which has as a central piece the promotion of “doing the right thing”. An absolutely noble pursuit. But where do we get the evidence to evaluate our faith? Where’s the proposition of what faith is, what it means, what it’s worth. How do we measure it? Quantify it? Express it in concrete terms? For some of us, our UU faith is what doctors refer to as “a diagnosis of exclusion”. I don’t know exactly what I’m looking for, but I know that all these other options over here--these aren’t it. These are not what I’m looking for. What’s left, for me, is the UU church. The UU church, for me, is an incredibly affirmative--and affirming--choice based upon its values and principles, but an exclusionary choice when it comes to questions of transcendence.

And this is terribly unsettling to me. It’s remarkable that in a world awash in data and information, my lifelong learning about faith has led me to a conclusion based upon excluding all other reasonable possibilities. I’m not Catholic, or Jewish, or Muslim, or Buddhist, or Atheist, or...so I must be... It’s uncomfortable, this idea that a rational evaluation of the available evidence leads me to what I described earlier: “the act of logical thought submitting to some mysterious and unknowable truth”.

As difficult as it is to admit, my faith is the messy, disorganized, yet genuine interpretation of incidents, and events, and circumstances, and relationships which have unfolded before me. It’s an amalgam of ideas from other sources, combined with my understanding of the world, merged with my observations about relationships and human behavior, and informed by my day-to-day engagement with the world around me.

### **Riding the wave**

In this sense, the way to engage in lifelong learning--to collect information, analyze information, and act on it--is to live your life and savor those moments every day which reveal faith in action, both yours and others’. It’s

always a work in progress, always involves questioning, always involves evaluation of new information. It's an appetite, this search, an appetite which goes through cycles of being satisfied, and then wanting. We feel comfortable in our faith...until we don't. We think our understanding of the world is sufficient...until it isn't. We believe our conclusions about the transcendent...until we can't. For it's the constant collection of new data, and the critical evaluation of that data, that changes our view of the world. I do believe that if we're breathing, we're learning. But like the self tracker trying to unlock the secrets in his personal data, we must all remember to mine our every day for insights about our faith. We must continually be open to new information, to challenge our assumptions and ask good questions. And most of all, we must routinely engage in the exercise of creating new knowledge and new understanding from the information, and the gifts, embedded in every day.

So may it be.