



TOUCHSTONES

Reason

September 2021

This month, our theme is “Reason.” Reason is a precious word to Unitarian Universalists. Back in 1819, one of the ways that William Ellery Channing explained Unitarianism was that “Reason was a gift from God,” and should be used to understand the bible and our lives. Unlike some at the time (and now) who suspected that reason was a temptation of Satan, or an obstacle to faith, the Unitarians and Universalists held that reason was good, and that we should use it in our religious life. They denied then, as we deny now, that religious and science were contradictory. Our religious ideas should be shaped by our minds, by our reason, and by science.

And here this church, we affirm each week that “reason is our guide.” We say that “love and reason” are central to how we think and live.

But what is “reason?” I’ve been listening to a podcase about the French Revolution, and the “Age of Reason” was closely connected with the “Reign of Terror.” Reason can be a weapon – when we say that people who disagree with us are “unreasonable”, or when we define reason as male, white, rich, and so on.

But reason, properly understood, can be a gift. It can clarify, question, build, and discover.

What does “reason” mean to you? That’s what I you to think about this month.

What it means to me:

- A commitment to curiosity, humility, and the scientific method. The mind wants to learn, to discover, and to explore. A commitment to reason means to test our hypothesis, to be open to new information, to learn from the wisdom of others.
- A elevation of the power of the mind. Like Channing, I affirm that reason is a gift, not a curse. We are called to use it, to think, to wonder, to converse with others, so that we will know more. Education is a good thing and we should do it our whole lives.
- A willingness to shift things when they don’t work. Reason asks “does this make sense?” When it doesn’t, then we need to think about how to make it better, if possible. This “reform impulse” can be good when paired with humility and love. It can be domineering when isn’t, so we want to be careful here. But “reason” can help us make a better world.
- Finally, a commitment to the truth. We should speak the truth about the world and our lives. We should search for the truth. And we should let go of things that are not true, even if they serve our interests well.

Understanding what reason teaches us and following it is hard work. But it’s important work, and part of who we choose to be. I look forward to discussing this question with you this month.

In faith,
Matthew

Readings from the Common Bowl

Day 1: "Children must be taught how to think, not what to think." Margaret Mead



Day 2: "You must never feel badly about making mistakes ... as long as you take the trouble to learn from them. For you often learn more by being wrong for the right reasons than you do by being right for the wrong reasons." Norton Juster

Day 3: "A concept is a brick. It can be used to build a courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window." Gilles Deleuze

Day 4: "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use." Galileo Galilei

Day 5: "To argue with a man who has renounced the use and authority of reason, and whose philosophy consists in holding humanity in contempt, is like administering medicine to the dead, or endeavoring to convert an atheist by scripture." Thomas Paine

Day 6: "Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* 'Have courage to use your own reason!'—that is the motto of enlightenment." Immanuel Kant

Day 7: "The heart has its reasons which reason knows not." Blaise Pascal

Day 8: "Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who said it, no matter if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense." Gautama Buddha

Day 9: "Those who will not reason, are bigots, those who cannot, are fools, and those who dare not, are slaves." George Gordon Byron

Day 10: "Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear." Thomas Jefferson

Day 11: "How quick come the reasons for approving what we like." Jane Austen

Day 12: "There's nothing more annoying than cold logic and reason when you've got a good fit going." James Patterson



Day 13: "The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing." Albert Einstein

Day 14: "I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith." Immanuel Kant

Day 15: "In questions of science, the authority of a thousand is not worth the humble reasoning of a single individual." Galileo Galilei

Day 16: "You cannot reason people out of a position that they did not reason themselves into." Ben Goldacre

Day 17: "I hope you weren't looking to me to be the voice of reason. I keep to a strict diet of ill-advised enthusiasm and heartfelt regret." Leigh Bardugo

Day 18: "It was my first clue that atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith. Like me, they go as far as the legs of reason will carry them—and then they leap." Yann Martel

Day 19: "One good schoolmaster is of more use than a hundred priests." Thomas Paine

Day 20: "Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." Albert Camus

Day 21: "Reason is not automatic. Those who deny it cannot be conquered by it." Ayn Rand

Day 22: "All our knowledge begins with the senses, proceeds then to the understanding, and ends with reason. There is nothing higher than reason." Immanuel Kant

Day 23: "It is useless to attempt to reason a man out of a thing he was never reasoned into." Jonathan Swift

Day 24: "The human brain is a complex organ with the wonderful power of enabling man to find reasons for continuing to believe whatever it is that he wants to believe." Voltaire

Day 25: "Reason with yourself when you have lost your reason." Andrew Solomon

Day 26: "I mean, you could claim that *anything's* real if the only basis for believing in it is that nobody's *proved* it doesn't exist!" J.K. Rowling

Day 27: "If someone doesn't value evidence, what evidence are you going to provide to prove that they should value it? If someone doesn't value logic, what logical argument could you provide to show the importance of logic?" Sam Harris

Day 28: "Faith and Reason are like two wings of the human spirit by which it soars to the truth." Pope John Paul II

Day 29: "Human reason can excuse any evil; that is why it's so important that we don't rely on it." Veronica Roth

Day 30: "All human actions have one or more of these seven causes: chance, nature, compulsion, habit, reason, passion, and desire." Aristotle

Day 31: "Just because you're an atheist, that doesn't mean you wouldn't love for things to have reasons for why they are." Jonathan Safran Foer

Family Matters

Questions & Answers

Michelle Richards

Dale McGowan estimates in his book, *Parenting Beyond Belief*, that children will ask approximately 427,050 questions between their second and fifth birthdays. That's an awful lot of questions! And not all of the answers are able to be articulated, let alone explained in a fashion that can be understood by the mind of a young child.

When it comes to Unitarian Universalist parenting, this can be a real challenge. After all, at the very heart of our religious tradition is the idea of questioning, seeking, wondering, exploring, and even changing our minds when new things become important. Children have a natural curiosity about the world and about life. One of the most frequently heard questions is "why?"



... While children in the elementary grades (kindergarten through fifth or sixth grade) remain concrete thinkers, they are more able to grapple with what is real and what is not. Children of this age are naturally curious about the really profound mysteries of life and are capable of being appreciative of the universal and enduring values that bring meaning to the world. Their curiosity can be revealed through lots of questions not only about what is real, and what is true, but also about what is fair.

They want to know not only "why" but also "how" about everything in their world. Children of this age want to keep track of everything, place things into categories, and classify all the newly acquired information. They may also insist upon proof or fact or be adamant about testing it out. At this point, children have a strong need to know not just what their parents think and believe, but why.

Source: <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/questions-answers>

Critical Thinking

Gwen Dewar

...Consider these recommendations made by Peter Facione and [others]....

Start early. Young children might not be ready for lessons in formal logic. But they can be taught to give reasons for their conclusions. And ...evaluate the reasons ...by others. ...

Avoid pushing dogma. When we tell kids to do things..., we should give reasons.

Encourage kids to ask questions. ...If a rationale doesn't make sense to a child, she should ...voice her objection or difficulty.

Ask kids to consider alternative explanations and solutions. It's nice to get the right answer. But many problems yield themselves to more than one solution. ...

Get kids to clarify meaning. Kids should practice putting things in their own words....

Talk about biases. Even grade school students can understand how emotions, motives—even our cravings—can influence our judgments.

Don't confine critical thinking to purely factual or academic matters. Encourage kids to reason about ethical, moral, and public policy issues.

Get kids to write. ...the process of writing helps students clarify their explanations and sharpen their arguments.

Source: <http://parentingscience.com/teaching-critical-thinking/>

Family Activity:

What Belongs? What Doesn't?

One way to help children develop critical thinking skills is to help children to create categories and classify items appropriately. You can do this by gathering together a lot of items in your home (e.g., tools, kitchen items, toys, office items, clothing, food, etc.), and then work with your children to group them into categories and even sub-categories. As your children learn the concept, invite them to gather things from around the home and have you sort them. The questions to ask again and again are: "What belongs? What doesn't?"

Better, Wiser, Loving

Earthy and Practical Reason

Rev. Dr. Jack Mendelsohn

...Second only to the free mind is our belief in reason and responsibility.

Freedom requires responsibility, and responsibility requires reason. Humans must accept responsibility for their choices and their acts.

...A realistic study of human nature reveals a plethora of impulses and a rich diversity of motives within which the process of moral selection proceeds. We find some things are better and others are worse, by trial and error, by measurements of happiness and welfare, by comparison and reflection. For Unitarian Universalists, a chief resource is reason. With us, reason holds a place ordinarily accorded to revelation in other religions. Those who are likely to behave best exercise their reason most.

Thus I ...remain hopeful about the human estate. I find a basic capacity for goodness....

This does not mean that I am unmindful of the limitations of human reason, nor that I look upon it as an infallible guide. In the Unitarian Universalist way of life there are no infallible guides. But central to my faith and that of my liberal religious forbears, is the notion that reason is crucial to our functioning. How else shall we discuss our feelings of truth, beauty, and goodness? These matters do not, as some would say, defy discussion. Our religious community, our church, is grounded in just such community. E. Burdette Backus ...describe[d] our reasoning ability as an instrument that developed in the process of evolution, enabling us to satisfy our needs more adequately.

...Discover what commends itself to your reason as truth and then accept that as your authority. And by working at it faithfully, with one another's help, we can become better, wiser, and more loving human beings.

Source: *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age* by Jack Mendelsohn, 1964, Skinner House Books, Boston.



The Unitarian Universalist Church
4848 Turner St.
Rockford, IL 61107

-Coffee Hour on Sunday. 337-267-3668. 11:10 a.m. Grab a cup and jump on to say hello!

- Touchstones: contact your touchstones group facilitator for the time and meeting ID, if you do not already have it.

Want to have a group – a book group, a parent group, a “circle supper”, or whatever you like?
– just email Autumn at office@uurockford.org and she can give you the Zoom login and password

Reason & Repairing the World

Reason, along with science, is under assault, a bizarre and tragic occurrence in the 21 st century. This comes at a time when the earth is in greater peril than ever before from the devastation of climate change. Human avarice and the quest for power mock virtue, while the repair of the world is urgent and daunting. Pseudo-science, climate denial, alternative facts, fake news, and lies suggest that reason doesn’t matter, yet it does. While reason is not infallible, it is an important guide and tool for repairing the world. This is not a momentary interlude but the work of generations. Reason, critical thinking, science, philosophy, technology, political will, and more are crucial to this endeavor.