

“Forty-two!” yelled Loonquawl. “Is that all you’ve got to show for seven and half million years work?”

“I checked it very thoroughly,” said the computer, “and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you’ve never actually known what the question is.”

~*~*~*~

Douglas Adams, author of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, has said over and over again, in interview after interview, on radio, television, and in print, that the number 42 was chosen at random. In one such interview, he said, “it’s a completely ordinary number, a number not just divisible by two but also six and seven. In fact it’s the sort of number that you could without any fear introduce to your parents.” Stephen Fry, a friend of Adams’, claims that Adams did tell him the REAL reason the answer is 42, but also says he promised he would take the secret to the grave. It is, Fry claims, “fascinating, extraordinary, and, when you think hard about it, completely obvious.”

The real meat of this tale, what turns it from idiotic farce into something meaningful enough that the farce really *sparkles*, is Deep Thought’s understanding – long before any of the humans and aliens he’s angered – that the problem lies not in the answer, but in the question – or lack thereof.

Our theme this month – our season on the liturgical calendar, if you will – is The Long Search, and it points directly to our fourth principle. That is, we, as a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, affirm and promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

The Long Search – for many it’s a search that lasts an entire lifetime. For some it’s a short journey, which starts and ends in the same place: with their parent faith. Some people are uninterested in the journey in the first place. I recently heard the term “apathetic agnostic,” and it got a giggle out of me because it seemed very descriptive of me – like, I’m agnostic, and I don’t think my being agnostic really matters much either way? But the word apathetic annoys me, because it has lots of negative connotations. I may not think my belief system matters much when it comes to heaven or hell, but I think our shared values and ethics and moral compass matter a LOT when it comes to life here on earth – I’m hardly apathetic. If anything, I’m overly enthusiastic. I’m the Labrador retriever of agnostics.

Okay, wandered off track a little there. My point – and there is one – is that there are lots of different journeys to be taken, when it comes to the search for truth and meaning. I don’t think it matters which path you take, but I think two things about your path really DO matter: (a) I think how you feel while on the search for truth and meaning matters, and (b) I think how you behave toward others while on the search – and after it – matters. Actually, that “after it” thing – that counts for A *and* B.

Starting with (A), it hurts my heart when I see people in the midst of a crisis of faith blaming themselves for some sort of wrongness. When so many religions, though, start from the basic notion that we are inherently weak, impure, and tainted, I don't see how that stage in spiritual growth can be avoided.

I was looking for some object lessons or stories to tell the kids about water last week during the Spark for All Ages. Of course many of them focused on Christianity, which is fine – Christianity is one of our faith sources, and a deep well from which to draw, when it helps us. But one of the object lessons really disturbed me. I'm going to read it to you, because I don't want to be alone in my disturbance:

This object lesson demonstrates the salvation we have in Christ Jesus. Supplies needed are two jars, one larger than the other, four colors of food coloring, and bleach. You fill the larger jar 3/4 of the way with water, the other you fill completely with bleach.

To begin the lesson, you explain that the jar of water is a representation of our lives. Without sin we are clear and pure, like water. But because we are sinners, it is impossible to stay clear. The Word of God teaches us that we have ALL sinned. Then you demonstrate... say "how many of you have disobeyed your parents before?" Explain that disobedience is a sin and place a drop of food coloring into the water. Now repeat that step 3 more times, each time using a different sin (color) as an example, until the water turns an ugly green-brown.

Then explain that Jesus wants to come into our lives and fill the void (the 1/4 of the jar that is empty). Pour Jesus (bleach) into the jar of colored water and watch the transformation begin as Jesus takes away the sin in our life! You can put more drops of food coloring into the jar after Jesus has been poured in, and the food coloring will continue to disappear...just as Jesus continues to forgive and cover our sin, making us righteous before God.

We need Jesus. Without Jesus, we continue to get darker and blacker inside, as our sin makes us unrighteous. You can show this with another jar if you wish. Just add a third jar to the lesson, and don't add Jesus (bleach) to that one.

This is a lesson for *small children*. This is the starting place for so, so many in our culture – how in the world can they start on a journey of self-confidence, an individual search for truth and meaning, when the first thing they are told is that purity lies in an outside source, that they shouldn't even THINK about venturing out without Jesus as a shield to keep them clean and pure?

Let me throw in a disclaimer here. I also found lots of cool object lessons using water as a metaphor, which came from an explicitly Christian place. The Christian

faith is not on trial in this sanctuary, in the same way that paganism, Buddhism, Judaism and atheism aren't on trial here.

But there are aspects of every faith that should be examined. In fact, I think EVERY aspect of every faith *should be examined*. And this particular aspect of some sects of Christianity – and other religious movements as well – to create fear and self-loathing in those who might have questions about religion, makes the long search so much more painful than it should be.

I started off this whole (A) section by saying “It matters how you feel while on your spiritual journey, and after it.” It does.

If your search for truth and meaning makes you feel frightened and alone – and it may – you are in the right place. There are others around you, here, who are or have been frightened and alone, as they took the first steps on their spiritual odyssey.

If your search for truth and meaning makes you feel exhilarated and jubilant – and I hope it does, if not now then someday – you are in the right place. There are others around you, here, who are or have been exhilarated and jubilant as they set off at a run on their faith journey.

If your search for truth and meaning makes you feel faintly bored, and you think you'd like to just see if singing awesome songs around a campfire all night leads to some spiritual awakenings, maybe, or if not it's at least a really darn good time – you are in the right place. I promise you, there are others around you, here, who are or have been faintly bored with the whole pursuit of religious enlightenment, and now they want to pursue some happiness with others who share their values, passions, and moral compass.

Okay, on to Part (B) of my prescription for a healthy, workable search for truth and meaning. Part (B), if you'll recall, was that how you behave toward others while on the search – and after it – matters.

Nearly every faith has some version of the Golden Rule, from Christianity's *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*, to the Wiccan rede, *An it harm none, do as you will*. There's also the recent addendum of the Platinum Rule, which adds *Do unto others as they would have done unto them*. This allows us to respect others even when their values differ from our own. For instance, going by the Golden Rule, you are free to say to yourself, I love bacon, therefore my neighbor loves bacon, and I should add some bacon to his sandwich. However, going by the Platinum Rule, you may want to find out if your neighbor is a vegan, in which case it would be better NOT to share your bacon with him.

Sidebar: This is also a great rule when it comes to discussing religion and politics. There are lots of people who assume that because THEY would want to be prayed for/at/over, or told all about the latest Demopublican scandal with glee, that you

will ALSO want to be prayed for/at/over, and told all about the latest Republicrat scandal with glee. The Platinum rule would dictate that we all keep our big mouths shut until we know for certain whether a person wants to be prayed for or not, or told about how evil those OTHER PARTY PEOPLE are.

Okay, back to (b): Right behavior while on the search. This is a case where the Golden and Platinum rules should really shine. As Douglas Adams knew, human beings have a real desire to know The Answer with a capital A, even if the answer is or appears to be, well, nonsense. This is a good thing to keep in mind when on your search.

At various points along our journey, it may be tempting to believe we have stumbled upon The Answer, you know, the REAL Answer. And the idea of a search for truth and meaning does imply that there is at least the possibility of finding them. So it's fine to think – to believe – even to KNOW – that you have found truth and meaning. But just remember, your truth and meaning may be my... forty-two. So act accordingly, because your neighbor may not want your bacon, and you may not want your neighbor's forty-two.

After all, they are the answers to two different questions. One is the answer to the question, "What food does a vegan not want on his sandwich?" The other is the answer to the question, "What appears when you type into Google's search bar, *'the answer to life the universe and everything?'*"

As Douglas Adams knew, and as I am learning, the question just might be more important than the answer. And perhaps our spiritual journey, our search for truth and meaning along the various religious and irreligious highways and byways of the world, is more important than the destination. At the very least, it's not a journey, or a search, we have to undertake alone.

Namaste, and forty-two.