

Faith and Reason

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Faith and reason are often posited as opposites, as if they had nothing to do with each other and every person had to choose between them. Nothing could be farther from the truth. There are three realms of thinking about our lives; whimsically named, they are the realm of fact, the realm of wild theory, and the realm of the absurd. *Fact* is what is solid in front of us, not only matter, but logic, math, the scientific method, and—to the extent that this is possible—uninterrupted history and science. The *absurd* is any thinking that goes against observable fact or agreed-upon logic.

In between the world of fact and the world of the absurd is the world of the *wild theory*, the world of mystery. This is the area of human endeavor that cannot be proven or disproven by science, that is part of the lived experience of some people but not of all people, and the world of all that we can never know. It's the world of meaning, of hope, of speculation, and it's the biggest realm of all.

Every society and every religious and belief system makes a characteristic balance between faith and reason and how each is used in the three realms—the realm of fact, the realm of mystery, and the realm of the absurd. Here's how Unitarian Universalists tend to manage.

1. We reject the absurd

The vast majority of Unitarian Universalists reject the absurd in religion, and the great thrust of our tradition is to reject the absurd. We put our faith in science and reason as primary ways that we understand our world. We don't put much stock in believing, as Mark Twain quipped, "what any damn fool knows ain't true." We reject the kind of circular reasoning that children, at least, so often hear in matters of faith: "The Bible says that the Bible is the word of God; therefore, the Bible is true." When one hundred years of science tells us about the evolution of life on this planet, we're not inclined to think that God created it all in a few days, just as it is now. When we hear stories about water being turned into wine, we think it is simpler to believe that someone got their jugs mixed up.

It's not always as easy as it sounds to reject the absurd, because we must take great care to distinguish carefully between what can be proven false and what does not fit our prejudices about truth. I grew up in a family that considered chiropractic to be a useless form of quackery, an irrational foolishness. None of us had studied this carefully, mind you, but in the middle of the last-century in intellectual circles, chiropractic was considered absurd. Well, it turned out that

this was sheer, uninformed prejudice, and it all had to go out the window when one family member developed a problem for which the only real help was chiropractic. We who put so much stock in reason must always remember that “reason” has proclaimed many, many things over the centuries that have not proven to be true in the end.

We also must be careful to distinguish between the absurd—that which is contrary to reason, science, and logic—and that which falls into the realm of the nonrational, the realm of mystery, those areas of human speculation that fall completely out of the realm of science. Is there a divine energy directing the process of evolution? I may say I believe so, and you may believe not, and we can discuss and disagree, but neither of us can properly accuse the other of being absurd. There is nothing within science that precludes divinity, no scientific proof that a divine spirit *does not* exist.

Anyway, the force of our tradition does suggest to us that we ought not to put stock in the absurd. But the exploration of the nonrational, or the mystery, is one of the reasons we exist as a people of faith, to explore together this vast and interesting realm and to develop the wild theories that can take our experiences and intuitions about the nonrational into account.

The disciplines of science, logic, and epistemology give us some good rules for winnowing the true from the false, the valid from the invalid, in matters of reason. What rules should we use for our explorations of mystery? There are so many things that we do not know, the universe is so much larger than our minds can easily comprehend, that a large dose of humility in the face of mystery is definitely called for. In that realm, we also use the tools of reason to evaluate our theories and to make sure that our pursuit of mystery doesn’t get us into the realm of the absurd.

2. We use our reason to evaluate the nonrational

I’m a comfortable agnostic, happy not to know what I can’t know. I don’t need to speculate much in the realm of wild theory. But sometimes, one has to in order to account for one’s own experiences or the experiences of others that one must sometimes deal with.

I have two tools of reason that I apply to wild theories in the realm of mystery. One of my evaluation tools is something I call “the Golden Rule rule.” You know the Golden Rule, I’m sure: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” or one of the many variations that pops up in virtually every culture. The fact that this formulation of ethics is nearly universal gives it a great deal of weight, to my mind. My Golden Rule rule states that the more cultures and faiths have independently discovered the same wild theory, the more attention needs to be paid to it. When applied to a claim of the nonrational, the Golden Rule rule asks, “Has anyone noticed this before?” If virtually every religious system ever developed has this element, then it probably warrants a second look.

For instance, one Memorial Day several years ago, I had one of those intense and memorable dreams. It was about my best friend from college, with whom I had once been very close but had had only a Christmas card relationship for years. I dreamed that she had died, and it was a vivid, wake-you-up-all-emotional sort of dream. At the time I just thought this was, perhaps, a sign from my subconscious that I'd enjoy being in closer touch with this old friend. This theory of dreaming, that our dreams bring subconscious material into our waking mind, is so mainstream and developed that I think we have to put it in the realm of fact, although there are plenty of people who don't believe it. Anyway, it took a couple of months to actually act on this impulse, and I finally gave my friend a call. When I discovered that she'd spent most of June in the hospital, very seriously ill, I told her about that Memorial Day dream. Well, it turns out that Memorial Day had been the start of her ordeal, and on the night I had my dream, she was fighting for her life and sure, in her own mind, that she was going to die.

Well the idea that my friend's distress had been somehow communicated to me in my dream, that my dream gave me access to knowledge that I otherwise would not have had—that idea is definitely in the realm of wild theory. It's not absurd; no one can prove that it doesn't happen, and I had to come to terms with the fact that I had had this experience. I used my reason and the scientific method to sort out this experience. Could it be a coincidence? Hardly. I'd never dreamed vividly about her before, I don't often dream about people dying, nor have many of my friends died or almost died, and the fact that I'd had such a vivid troubling dream about her on the very day of her ordeal just couldn't be a simple coincidence. I had no other way of knowing about her illness. The fact that there is no known mechanism for the transmission of information in dreams does not mean that there is not one. The whole business was very mysterious indeed.

So how do I apply reason to such a wild theory? One way is with the Golden Rule rule: have any other human beings experienced having dreams that put them in touch with knowledge they wouldn't otherwise have? In a word, yes. Virtually every human culture *except* ours believes that dreams bring knowledge, and plenty of people in this culture have had experiences like mine. (I'll bet that some of you have stories like that, too.) Times of great trauma and death seem most likely to be projected out to other minds in ways that we don't understand at all.

Now just because lots of people believe something does not prove it right, but it does make it worth taking seriously, especially when one's own experiences confirm it. And the more that different people from different times and places have discovered the same thing, the more it is worth taking seriously. That's the Golden Rule rule.

A second way I use my powers of reason to evaluate a wild theory is to ask myself whether it has its own internal system and logic. For instance, some people believe both that God is loving and that God has a plan for all of our lives.

Oh, yeah? God planned for the earthquake in China, the typhoon in Burma, which caused unimaginable suffering and grief? This is love? Sorry, that just doesn't compute. Reason rebels. I believe that there is an order and explainability to the universe, including the spiritual side of the universe, and I look for that order when I'm making my judgments about what to believe in. The more order in a wild theory, the more seriously I take it.

So let's take the wild theory that praying for someone who is sick helps them. You might be aware that this has been the focus of many scientific studies. These studies are suggestive but inconclusive. It is very hard for a rational discipline like science to address the nonrational, and most studies have been flawed. I myself have not experienced the efficacy of prayer in the same vivid way I've experienced the power of dreams. For much of my life, I have prayed for others, not because I think it is likely to affect them but because their predicament was in my heart and I wanted to keep it there. Which is one definition of prayer. I'm sure that prayer helps me; that theory fits easily into the world of fact. To the extent that prayer helping me helps the one I'm praying about, to the extent that the one I'm praying about knows I'm praying for them and feels bolstered by that knowledge, all of these effects of prayer fit our scientific understanding of how mind and body work together, an understanding which, by the way, has in our lifetimes moved from the realm of wild theory to the realm of fact. But back to prayer.

If we wanted to use the tools of reason to ask whether prayer affects health outcomes, one way to proceed is to look at the studies that have been done about prayer and ask whether we see any of the patterns or logic that make sense to us.

One interesting thing I notice in the prayer studies I've read about is that when praying is making a statistical difference in outcomes, it seems related, not to any particular theology or religion, but to emotions like compassion, relationship, empathy, and love. These qualities seem to make the difference, not only in studies of sick people but in more basic experiments. In one experiment, for instance, volunteers prayed for simple machines, and the machines that were prayed for did their simple job a little better. Not a lot better, mind you, just a little better. One thing that the researchers noticed was that some volunteers got much better results than others. The volunteers were all asked what they had tried to do, and the more successful volunteers were more likely to say that they had experienced a sense of being in sync with the machine, or empathizing with the machine, or some such thing. In another experiment people gave blood, which was put in petri dishes and then returned to random persons, who were instructed to pray for the well-being of the blood cells. Overall, the people who, unbeknownst to them, were praying for their own blood, got better results than people who were praying for a stranger's blood. Interesting, but if we're following the "compassion and connection" theory, it stands to reason that it would be easier for us to connect to our own blood than to the blood of a stranger.

Here's some more interesting evidence of the power of relationship in prayer. When praying in a team, husbands and wives, that is, bonded pairs, did better than randomly matched volunteers. While distance, lead walls, and other barriers to physical energy did not seem to make any difference in any of these studies, it appeared to me that qualities like empathy, relationship, and love did seem to make a difference, over and over again, in a variety of different ways. Wild, isn't it? A completely different kind of medical research shows that people who are isolated from the care, empathy, and love of others are very likely—even more likely than cigarette smokers—to become ill and die. To me this coalesces into a kind of a pattern. The patterns don't prove anything; we're still taking wild theories, here, but when my reasoning mind finds logical patterns, even in non-logical events, I'm inclined to pay attention. And if I also ask myself about the Golden Rule rule, I discover that the world over, people have related prayer, not only to God's celestial messaging system but also to compassion.

3. We use reason gently in matters of the spirit

So Unitarian Universalists use reason in matters of faith to reject the absurd and to evaluate our experiences of mystery. What we don't do, we UUs, is bludgeon and shame persons who advance theories of mystery. This has most vividly been seen lately in the writings of the New Atheists, whose writings are light on explaining the atheist reality or delighting in its beauty, and heavy on witty, bitter, and often ignorant criticism of those who delve into both mystery and the absurd, categories that the New Atheists insist on merging into one, scorned mass.

Unitarian Universalists, who come in for even more scorn from the New Atheists than fundamentalists, by the way, don't use reason in this way. It is our belief that reason is joined by other core values, such as tolerance and delight in diversity. It is especially important in a religious community that our faculty of reason is used delicately in matters of mystery.

Our spiritual life is delicate, precious, and personal, mostly wordless, and very much dependent on our expectations and demeanor. The development of a spiritual sense of life is a little like making friends with a skittish or aloof cat. If you want that cat to come and sit on your lap, giving it rational arguments won't work. Nor will calling it names, ordering it to obey, or chasing it with a broom. Some of those tactics will work for dogs, who are much more like people than cats are, but they won't work with cats. If you want the cat to sit in your lap, you have to sit down and go about your business, and just think lightly about the cat. Whether your light thinking is that you want the cat to sit on your lap or that you don't want the cat to sit on your lap, you will attract the cat.

Our faith, our thinking about our faith, and our conversations with others about faith are a bit cat-like in this regard. They don't do well around belligerent language, close questioning, and scorn. These dog-like tools of college debate teams and scientific laboratories are fine for those enterprises, but they are

problematic around matters of faith and spirit. Very few people are willing to talk about their spiritual lives if they think they will be laughed at or misunderstood. We need to use the tools of reason in our spiritual life, for we don't want to find ourselves involved in the absurd, or even in eccentric acceptance of any old mystery. But if we don't use the tools of reason gently, especially in conversation with others, we will never grow in spirit or find the truth of mystery. It's those realms that make our lives rich.

Every human being, excepting only the very young and severely mentally ill, uses reason to some extent in their faith life, and every human being, even the most "scientific" makes some forays into meaning and mystery. We Unitarian Universalists rely on our reason in matters of faith more than most religious people. We reject the absurd. We welcome the insights of science and reason, and we use tools of reason when we encounter mystery. But we use those tools gently and humbly in our own thinking, and even more gently and humbly when we are conversing with others. May we honor our minds and our hearts, our intuitions and our experiences, in our life of faith, and in all we do.