

SOWING DOUBT

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TESTIMONY FROM TWO DOUBTERS

From Michael Specter, “Political Science”,
March 13, 2006, *The New Yorker*

C. Everett Koop is one of the most famously rightwing men ever appointed to a senior position in the Public Health Service.... In 1991 when President Ronald Reagan nominated him to the position of Surgeon General, Koop was a noted pediatric surgeon from Philadelphia with the beard of Abraham Lincoln and a strident opposition to abortion. Even today, his 1979 book, “Whatever happened to the Human Race?” remains a touchstone for those who are opposed to legal abortion.

But he had no public health experience. Surgeons General are usually quickly confirmed and then instantly forgotten – before Koop, few Americans could have named one. No public health official in American history generated more controversy. Liberals on Capitol Hill denounced Reagan’s choice for what it was: a blatant attempt to place ideological fealty over the demands of public health. The battle for Koop’s nomination dragged on for nearly a year but, in the end, he was confirmed.

Koop then proceeded to alienate nearly every supporter he had on the religious and political right. To fight the growing epidemic of AIDS, he recommended a program of compulsory sex education in the schools and argued that children should be taught to use a condom. He campaigned vigorously against smoking in public spaces, enraging the tobacco companies. When President Reagan asked him to prepare a report on the psychological effects of abortion, the conservatives finally felt certain of the result. Yet, after meeting with activists on both sides and reviewing hundreds of scientific publications, Koop declined to say that

abortion was always more dangerous than the alternative.

The Administration was shocked. “You know, I never once changed my stripes during all that time, Koop said. “What I did in that job was what any well-trained doctor or scientist would do: I looked at the data and then presented the facts to the American people. In science, you can’t hide from the data.”

From Rainer Maria Rilke, “Letters to a Young Poet”

Your doubt may become a good quality if you train it. It must become knowing, it must become critical. Ask it, whenever it wants to spoil something for you, why something is ugly; demand proofs from it, test it, and you will find it perplexed and embarrassed perhaps, or perhaps rebellious.

But don’t give in, insist on arguments and act this way, watchful and consistent, every single time, and the day will arrive when from a destroyer doubt will become one of your best workers – perhaps the cleverest of all that are building your life.

REFLECTIONS

With respect to doubt – the all-too-human propensity to question and to challenge assertions that don’t square with our experience – the Bible delivers a decidedly mixed message.

The Gospel of John may be the most overtly hostile toward those with a skeptical turn of mind. Of the four canonical accounts of Jesus’ ministry, this is the only one that includes a post-resurrection interchange between Jesus and the disciple, **Thomas**.

As you may recall, **Thomas** wasn’t present when the crucified **Jesus** suddenly and unexpectedly first revealed himself to his

companions. “We have seen the Lord,” they reported excitedly. But **Thomas** is doubtful. Wishful thinking can cause people to visualize things that aren’t really there. “Unless I see in his palm the print of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe,” he insists.

A short time later **Jesus** makes a second appearance and he challenges **Thomas** to inspect the risen body. Abashed, **Thomas** quickly confesses his faith in the Lord, but **Jesus** scolds him. “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.”

It would not take many more years for the lesson to take hold: doubt is a symptom of spiritual weakness and human willfulness. For subsequent generations of Christians, that meant accepting the Gospels at face value, resisting the temptation to quibble about even their most dubious claims.

By contrast, the author of the Old Testament book of **Ecclesiastes** (“the Teacher”) invokes his own life lessons to call into question much of what then passed for conventional wisdom. It simply isn’t true that good people invariably prosper, that justice is meted out fairly, that wealth and power ensure happiness. All of this, The Teacher says, is poppycock or, as he puts it, “mere vanity and a striving after wind.”

The creator of this ancient text is no cynic, however. He urges his readers to find pleasure in life’s small graces, to live righteously but without harboring illusions. As **Jennifer Hecht** says, “The teacher makes a simple appeal to experience, the evidence of history and our senses.”

Ecclesiastes was almost certainly composed by someone imbued with the questioning, skeptical mood of Greek philosophy, which was very much in vogue in 3rd century B.C.E. Palestine. There are tantalizing hints of Buddhist thought as well, which also places a premium on personal experience and discernment. **Ani Tenzin Palmo**, a teacher in the Kagyu order of Tibetan Buddhism recounts a story in which a

group of villagers once sought an audience with the **Buddha**.

“Many teachers come to us,” they complained to him, “and each has his own doctrine, each one claims that his particular philosophy and practice is the truth, but they seldom agree. We are totally confused, so what do we do?”

The Buddha listened sympathetically to the villagers and said, “You have a right to be confused. This is a confusing situation.” Then the Buddha offered the following counsel:

Do not take anything on trust merely because it has been passed down through tradition, or because your teachers say it, or because your elders have taught you, or because it is written in some famous scripture. When you have seen it, and experienced it for yourself to be right and true, then you can accept it.

Here again the teacher points to the primacy of personal experience, which is not to say that the ancient scriptures have nothing worthwhile to say to us, or that the sage does not deserve an open and respectful hearing. The kind of doubt both the author of **Ecclesiastes** and the **Buddha** recommend is more akin to the “fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone truth may be found” that has guided students and faculty at the University of Wisconsin since 1890.

This is also the kind of doubt that I, as a Unitarian Universalist, subscribe to. It is a commitment to that process which, as **Robert Weston** put it, “eats away the false,” while simultaneously revealing precious nuggets of truth. To be sure, we shouldn’t place doubt on too high a pedestal for then it risks becoming a caricature of itself. The British novelist and Unitarian **W. Somerset Maugham** had just this in mind when he jestingly described his co-religionists as people who:

...very earnestly disbelieve in almost everything that anybody else believes, and they have a very lively, sustaining faith in they don't quite know what.

We should not presume that doubt is ever and always profitable. An open mind, curiosity, a healthy skepticism are essential preconditions for the cultivation of wisdom and understanding. But just as faith can become arrogant and exclusive, so can doubt. I suspect we have all met people who doubt, not in the constructive spirit of **Buddha** or **Rilke**, but in the condescending manner of the early 20th century essayist **H.L. Mencken**, he who once dismissed faith as “an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.”

As “reverent doubters”, we UU’s employ this tool in order to become more discerning and secure holders of, not absolute, but provisional truths that can always be improved upon. The ultimate objective, as **Jennifer Hecht** puts it, “is enlightenment; it is to teach us to live, well and awake, in our strange place between meaning and meaninglessness.”

Nevertheless, even as people who prefer to “live the questions” rather than passively submit to pre-ordained answers, we may at times rue that choice. Doubt can be discomfiting, and over the years I’ve heard more than a few staunch UU’s say that it must be nice to have a bedrock belief system to fall back on. The good news, though, is that people who are “cautious in their certainties” and open to alternatives are less likely to be severely traumatized when the bedrock buckles under the weight of disconfirming evidence.

So, the bottom line is that, despite some reservations, UU’s see doubt as a good thing, a highly serviceable tool as we try to make sense of the many truth-claims that cross our path. As **Alfred Lord Tennyson**, the great 19th century British poet once wrote, “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in all the creeds.”

It should also be pointed out that, despite the bad press **Doubling Thomas** received in John’s Gospel, not all Christians think his reservations were misplaced. Take **C. Everett Koop**, the former Surgeon General whose story I shared earlier. **Koop** was a conservative Christian who was appointed to his post with the expectation he would establish public health policy on a strictly ideological basis. But **Koop** was also a scientist, and like any self-respecting scientist, he entertained his doubts and they ended up taking him in a direction he had not expected. His early supporters took him to be a true believer first, and a medical practitioner second. But, as he later said, “I never changed my stripes...I did what any well-trained scientist would do,” which was to follow the data.

It’s truly unfortunate that more religious conservatives haven’t followed **Dr. Koop’s** example. When he was president, **George W. Bush**, a self-described evangelical Christian, claimed to be guided by God in his decision to invade Iraq. The original pretext was, of course, the need to discover and destroy **Saddam Hussein’s** stockpile of WMD’s or “Weapons of Mass Destruction.” If **President Bush** had relied on the data that had been painstakingly gathered rather than on his faith in God’s guiding hand, he would have let **Saddam’s** floundering regime topple of its own accord. There were no WMD’s, as numerous experts had predicted.

Jim Wallis, another evangelical leader with more progressive views, tried to engage the President on the issue, but was rebuffed. Later **Wallis** said, “Faith can cut so many ways, and when it’s designed to certify our righteousness – that can be very dangerous.” Fifteen years later, the people of Iraq are still living with the fatal consequences of too little doubt.

But here’s the thing: so far today we’ve been discussing honest doubt; doubt employed for the purpose of exposing error, deepening our understanding and creating more legitimate and trustworthy institutions.

Unfortunately, in recent times we've been witnessing the spread of dishonest doubt, the kind of doubt that's deliberately designed to sow confusion and mistrust, and to manipulate public opinion. The fact is, some things deserve our skepticism more than others, and when well-established theories and facts are called into question it leads to, as **Russell Shorto** writes, "...a world riven by doubts and confusions without an arbiter or any rules."

Examples abound, from the fruitless debate over **Barack Obama's** birth certificate, to the alleged criminality of undocumented immigrants, to the hollow Second Amendment claims of the NRA, to the "unsettled science" of climate change. Our current president sows doubt continually: doubts about the integrity and fairness of the media; doubts about the motives and character of a whole host of dedicated civil servants; doubts about our allies abroad; doubts about **Hillary Clinton's** margin of victory in the 2016 popular vote. It's no wonder so many Americans feel bewildered and eager for some source of authority that can cut through all the confusion.

So, what happened to bring us to this perilous point in our history? Perhaps not the whole, but at least part of the answer may lie in a strategy American tobacco companies began rolling out back in the 1950's to protect their financial interests. It's a strategy that worked amazingly well for several decades, the last chapter of which is detailed in the 1999 film "The Insider" in which **Russell Crowe** plays a biochemist employed and then harassed by the Brown & Williamson tobacco company.

A fuller summary of this sordid tale is contained in a recent book by **Naomi Oreskes** and **Erik Conway** entitled "Merchants of Doubt." Realizing that a growing body of scientific evidence confirmed the harmful effects of smoking, and of second-hand smoke as well, the executives of Big Tobacco knew that no ordinary publicity campaign would save their bacon. If consumers were

convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that smoking was dangerous, they would either try to quit or never start.

Thus, as **Oreskes and Conway**, write, "The industry manufactured an artificial 'debate'"

...convincing the mass media that responsible journalists had an obligation to present "both sides" of it. The industry didn't need to win this debate, its leaders realized; only to keep it going. "Doubt is our product," explained a tobacco executive's 1969 memo, "Since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy."

While tobacco products sold in this country now are accompanied by clear warning labels, tobacco advertising I banned from the airways and smoking prohibited in most public facilities, the "tobacco strategy" of sowing doubt lives on. Some of the same scientists who shilled for Big Tobacco subsequently went to work for **Exxon Mobile**, in an effort to refute the threatening data related to climate change. The same strategy has been embraced by forces opposed to the Affordable Care Act, public education and a host of other programs and policies that serve the general public but that raise the hackles of certain vested interests.

So dense has this cloud of doubt become that it sometimes feels like American society is being gaslighted. It's a psychological term that was first used as the title of a 1938 stage play, and later in a suspense film starring Ingrid Bergman in which a sociopathic husband tries to convince his wife that she's crazy. Gaslighting is defined as those "strategies, behaviors and statement a person uses to cause another person or persons to doubt their memory, perceptions, or sanity."

There is now an extensive literature on the subject, and therapists can help clients

determine whether a partner, coworker or acquaintance is acting or speaking in a manner designed to create serious and disabling self-doubt. Not just individuals but groups can be gaslighted. Charismatic cult leaders practice it so that followers will lose trust in themselves and place their exclusive trust in him or her. It's also a strategy a dictator like **Vladimir Putin** has used masterfully to command the loyalty of the masses.

So, the long and short of it is, doubt can be a double-edged sword. We can lose our freedom and independence of thought by binding ourselves too tightly to certain beliefs, but also by allowing wholesale doubt to overwhelm our powers of private judgment. Both pose a threat, but it may well be that the latter is the graver one we face today.

So if we must have faith, and if we must be trusting, let it be with our eyes wide open. And although we must never cease from questioning, let it be with due diligence and undying respect for the wisdom of the ages. As **Francis Bacon** put it some 400 years ago,

If a man begins with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.