

**Blessed Assurance**  
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One of the things newcomers to Unitarian Universalism are often struck by, especially if they have lived in a religious tradition that did not welcome questions or doubts about foundational statements of belief, is that our faith seems to be comfortable with a high degree of uncertainty about Truth with a capital T.

It's surprising for some of us; I know it was for me. I was used to thinking that religion was about choosing to believe a set of propositions—God made this; this is who and what Jesus was; the prophet says that; the gods and goddesses expect this. Instead, our tradition has learned over the years to say that ALL such propositions are uncertain, more likely to be metaphor than fact. Religion for us is about how we live in relationship to one another, to the society into which we're born, and to the world which sustains and nurtures our life.

We even have a reading in our hymnal that reminds us: "Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth. . . the key to the door of knowledge. . . the servant of discovery." Yes, we are happy, as UU theologian Paul Rasor says, to practice "faith without certainty."

For some religious believers, though, along with the certainty of refusing to doubt comes a deeper sense, that's often called "assurance." Assurance is more of a feeling than a conviction—an embodied sense of being held by the truth, rather than an intellectual decision that something is true. Assurance is different from belief; it is a fundamental experience of the way things are in the world. Assurance is what we know in our bones, as people say.

"Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine!  
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,  
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood."

That's the first verse of an 1873 hymn, offering the doctrinal foundation, the intellectual belief that becomes a sense of assurance in the third and final verse:

Perfect submission, all is at rest,  
I in my Savior am happy and blest,  
Watching and waiting, looking above,  
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

That's assurance: All is at rest. That is a deep, sure *knowing* that all is well with me and with the world: filled with his goodness; lost in his love. Assurance for the believer of this hymn is *experiencing* the love of God as ultimately trustworthy; utterly reliable.

Oh, but my skeptical spirit, my cherished doubt got me into trouble back in the first verse. Would a loving God really demand a blood sacrifice of his own son to redeem other

children of God's own creation? And what about those who know nothing of the ancient story of Original sin and salvation; is the glory divine closed to them? Is that fair?

When I ask such questions, when I decide that whatever metaphorical truth I might find in the Scriptures of any faith, I simply cannot believe they are literally accurate—am I also giving up all the assurance of that final verse?

That's the question Christopher and Skyler posed in our conversations about the service they purchased in last year's Auction. To be honest, that's only one of a lot of topics we covered, but it's the one we settled on for today. Does assurance, that bone-deep experience that I am at peace, reconciled and at home in Creation—does that feeling of being “happy and blest” belong only to those faiths offer certainty?

I am no longer persuaded that the sacrifice of Jesus saved me from a well-deserved eternity in Hell. I am not convinced that the words of any Prophet are a blueprint of Creation and a roadmap for a virtuous life. I cannot make myself believe that incense and gifts of flowers and fruit combined with the right prayers and songs will make the Gods hear and smile on me. And yet I still need to feel that I am safe and at home in an existence interfused with a Cosmic purpose and meaning.

Surrendering old certainties, I might come to believe that I'm on my own, adrift in a vast and chaotic universe whose only meanings are the ones I adopt from others or discover for myself. Worse, perhaps there is no meaning at all, only the illusions of miniscule beings whose brief lives are less than a fleck of dust against the vast canvas of the Cosmos. If that's true, how shall I decide what is worthy of my devotion, my life's energy, my heart's commitment?

Without that sense of assurance, the struggles of the world or the troubles of our own life can seem too much to hold on our own. So I think it's important to ask: We with our faith that embraces uncertainty, we who cherish doubt—is anything ultimately trustworthy, utterly reliable for us?

Michael Dowd offers up one possibility, one I find persuasive: The Universe, he says, the unfolding creative reality that has formed us across eons of evolutionary change; the Universe itself can be trusted absolutely. We don't have to take this, as the saying goes, *on faith*: we've got 14 billion years' worth of evidence. Since the moment the Universe originated as a burst of pure energy, it has moved in the direction of greater diversity and complexity, greater awareness and intimacy with itself; it has held onto its breakthroughs and developments, and it has provided itself an unending stream of challenges that open the way for more creativity. It is utterly reliable and ultimately trustworthy.

Now, that might seem a little abstract: Fine to think about, but hard to really *feel* in the way we need a sense of assurance to feel. Here's the thing, though: Our personal relationship with that vast, 14 billion-year-old Universe is as intimate as it is possible to be. As Dowd puts it: “We human beings are not separate creatures *on Earth, in a Universe*. We are a mode of being *of Earth, an expression of the Universe*.”

That movement of the Universe toward greater awareness, toward increased intimacy with itself? To the best of our knowledge, at the present moment, the leading edge of that movement—is us. Not just us in this room, although I think some of you are pretty far advanced; not just Unitarian Universalists, no matter what we think when we're impatient with what seems like a stubbornly senseless society, but the whole undivided human family. We're it. As far as we know today, we are the most developed current expression of the Creative, Sustaining Life Force of the Cosmos.

In Buddhist teacher Tara Brach's words, life is living through us. All of us, and each of us. All the time.

We are born from an act of intimacy that encompasses millions of years of evolving life. When we see, hear, taste, touch, smell, the Cosmos experiences itself inside and out. When we love, when we laugh, when we weep, life knows its own heart. When we learn, the Universe discovers itself. When we act in the face of injustice, crisis, or catastrophe, we are the Universe unleashing its creativity to meet the challenges it provides. And when we die, the elements of our body and the conscious connections we have made with each other go forward as part of the emerging, unfolding reality that gave birth to us and takes us back into itself.

Does it *mean* anything, does it *change* anything, to know this? Well, here's what it suggests to me: No matter what life brings, no matter what the need or the struggle of any given moment, we are always intimately in relationship with an inexhaustible source of energy, interconnection, and creativity. We know this, quite literally, *in our bones*.

When I am wondering where I should direct the gifts and the hours and the energy of my life, I am seeking what will advance the movement toward greater diversity, greater awareness, more intimacy and interconnection which is woven into the very nature of the world around me—and into me.

When you are assailed by an onslaught of loneliness, or struggling with loss or some isolating experience, you can withstand the hurt of it, because you know in your own body that life is so much larger than any one moment's longing; you can turn outward again knowing that there is love everywhere, and that it comes to meet us when we open our own heart to others.

When racism and injustice are threatening the lives of our black and brown siblings in this human family, when children are being killed by the failure of nations to care more about lives than power, when the very planet whose life is our life is under threat, we can move toward the front lines of the struggle to make things right, because we know that our actions, however small, *are* the creative power of the Universe in action, shaping and transforming the course of existence one particle, one atom, one cell, one system, one body, one idea, one movement, one nation at a time.

And if I wake some morning to the voice of my own inner accuser snarling that my life is a story of failure, shortcoming, and pretense, I can get out of bed and meet the day because I know, I know in my bones that I am so much more, that I am part of a story so infinitely long and rich that I can barely imagine its beginning or end.

I don't always know this; I don't always feel it. None of us always knows it or feels it, and when we forget it, we suffer fiercely. It takes practice—and practice doesn't make perfect; it just makes progress. But when we *do* remember, we *know* we can always turn toward wholeness, toward healing, toward love, toward life. That's what assurance means: When we remember where and how to search, what we need to find is always, always there. We do not need to be certain of its name, or its exact nature, or how many of its angels can dance on the heads of what kind of pins. We do need to know that it is always there, and that we can find it when we need it.

The unimaginable, holy spark of life that was given birth in the hearts of the stars, the unfathomable consciousness that arose in the deeps of time and inhabits and transforms every living thing—it is here, right here.

It lives in the small everyday beauties Carrie Newcomer sings about. It sounds along the ages in every human faith. Its tongue speaks in the voices of the ocean and the wind, the dunes and the trees and the creatures all around us. It opens the rose and it opens our hearts. It greets us as a presence that disturbs us with the joy of elevated thoughts. It calls us to compassion; it urges us toward justice; it draws us toward love; it invites us toward understanding.

What is utterly reliable lives in each of us and all of us; it is everywhere around us in the vast fabric of a living, breathing Universe, and each of us is a unique, irreplaceable, precious thread. Filled with its goodness. Lost in its love. If that isn't a blessed assurance, I can't imagine what is.