

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula**  
**Sunday August 19th 2018**

**Sermon:** “Life, the Universe, and Everything”

“It was a long time before anyone spoke.

“Out of the corner of his eye, Phouchg could see the sea of tense, expectant faces down in the square outside.

“We’re going to get slaughtered, aren’t we?” he whispered.

“It was a tough assignment,’ said Deep Thought mildly.

“Forty-two!’ yelled Loonquawl. ‘Is that all you’ve got to show for seven and a half million years of 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.’

“But it was the Great Question!’ howled Loonquawl. ‘The Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything!’

“Yes,’ said Deep Thought with the air of one who suffers fools gladly, ‘but what actually is it?’

“A slow, stupefied silence crept over the men as they stared at the computer and then at each other.

“Well, you know, it’s just Everything... Everything...’ offered Phouchg weakly.

“Exactly!’ said Deep Thought. ‘So once you know what the question actually is, then you’ll know what the answer means.’

“Oh, terrific,’ muttered Phouchg, flinging aside his notebook and wiping away a tiny tear.

“Look, alright, alright,’ said Loonquawl, ‘can you just please *tell* us the question?’

“The Ultimate Question?’

“Yes!’

“Of Life, the Universe, and Everything?’

“Yes!’

“Deep Thought pondered for a moment.

“Tricky,’ it said.

“But can you do it?’ cried Loonquawl.

“Deep Thought pondered for another long moment.

“No,’ the computer said firmly.

“Both men collapsed onto their chairs in despair.

“But I’ll tell you who can,’ said Deep Thought.

“They both looked up sharply.

“Who? Tell us!’

“I speak of none but the computer that is to come after me’ intoned Deep Thought, its voice regaining its accustomed declamatory tone. ‘A computer whose merest operational parameters I am not worthy to calculate — and yet I will design it for you. A computer that can calculate the Question to the Ultimate Answer, a computer of such infinite and subtle complexity that organic life itself shall form part of its

operational matrix. And you yourselves shall take on new forms and go down into the computer to navigate its ten-million-year program! Yes, I shall design this computer for you. And I shall name it also unto you. And it shall be called... the Earth.'

"Phouchg gaped at Deep Thought.

"'What a dull name,' he said."

This passage comes from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams, and describes events just after the supercomputer Deep Thought has completed seven and a half million years figuring out the Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything. The only problem is that the Answer turns out to be forty-two, leaving the two men who had spent their entire lives training for that moment, who had been selected at birth as those who would first know the Answer, it leaves them rather disappointed, not to mention worried about how they will explain it to the anxiously waiting public. The problem, as Deep Thought explains to them, is that they never knew what the Ultimate Question actually is, and without knowing that, the Answer isn't very helpful. And so, Deep Thought explains, an even more powerful computer must be built, a computer the size of a planet that turns out, in fact, to have been planet Earth.

I don't know if Douglas Adams was familiar with the following Albert Einstein quote, but the great scientist is supposed to have said that if he had only one hour to solve a problem and if his life depended on the solution, he would spend the first fifty-five minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once he know the proper question, he could solve the problem in less than the five minutes remaining. Asking the right question is, in other words, a crucial part of getting the right answer, and the importance of the problem is irrelevant. After all, the conceit of Douglas Adams' forty-two is that because the people who built Deep Thought assumed that the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything was so important that it was self-evident, they had no idea what actual question was answered by the computer.

There's actually an example of this in science, and ironically it's thanks to Einstein. In 1916 and 1917, he published papers considering the quantum mechanics of absorption and emission of light by atoms, and noted that the equations only work if it's also possible to stimulate the emission of light, rather than just allowing it to happen

spontaneously. In other words, the excited sodium atoms in a street light randomly emit photons of yellow light if left to their own devices, but if a photon of that wavelength of yellow light hits an excited sodium atom, then the atom can emit its light there and then, resulting in two photons of yellow light that are in sync with one another.

Other scientists wondered how such stimulated emission could be used to amplify light or other forms of electromagnetic radiation, and in 1953, Charles Townes and his graduate students built a device for amplifying microwaves in that way. Within ten years, a number of researchers had figured out how to do the same for visible and infra-red wavelengths; since such a device operates on the basis of light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation, they took the initials l-a-s-e-r and called it a laser.

Soon after that first laser was demonstrated, Townes or one of his colleagues called it “a solution looking for a problem”. It would have been just as accurate to have called it an answer in need of a question. After all, nobody had ever expressed a need for a highly coherent beam of narrow-spectrum light. For most purposes, there were ordinary incandescent lamps, and there were arc lamps when you needed something really bright. And yet now, almost sixty years after their invention, you can find lasers everywhere, from DVD players to fiber optic communications, from cutting and welding in industry to many different applications in medicine. In other words, the laser may have begun as “a solution looking for a problem”, but we have since found plenty of questions for which the laser is the answer.

I think the same happens in religion, though perhaps not as obviously. I have to wonder, for instance, about all those parables that Jesus told. I imagine the completely baffled looks on his disciples' faces, and when one of them finally speaks up, it's to say, “Okay, Jesus, thanks, that's great, but what question of ours did you actually answer there?”

Actually, I think it happens all the time in religion, only we're all very good at pretending that it doesn't. We talk about religion as if it's all about giving us answers to our questions, that all we need to do is open the right book to the right page and everything we need to know will be right there, even if we didn't know that we needed to know it. And unfortunately it's all too tempting to want to listen to the person who does

the best job convincing us that they have all the answers, and all we need to do is follow them and do what they tell us. Yeah, right.

If anything, religion is about getting us to ask better questions, to help us distinguish between good questions that will help us move forward and bad questions that will only hold us back. I worry that what we usually consider the big questions — Who am I? Why am I here? What's my purpose in life? — are not actually very good questions. They are our own version of the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything, and then we wonder why just about every answer that is offered to us makes no sense.

So I think we have it backwards. I think we already have the answer. The answer is that we are here. The answer is that we are alive. That we can experience the world as it is and we can imagine worlds that are different. That we can be happy and we can be sad. That we can be the cause of happiness in other people and we can be the cause of sadness in other people. That we can fall in love. That we can use words and music and pictures and touch and even smells to share meaning with one another. In other words, each of us has received the incredibly precious and utterly unique gift of our own existence, and our existence is the Ultimate Answer. The challenge, then, is to figure out the Question.

And it's not just each of us as individuals who find ourselves in this situation. For those of us gathered here, it's us as a congregation, too. After all, we spent the last church year figuring out our Mission. We identified four Values that are at the core of who we are, that represent our theological essence, that name what is of most importance to us. And we articulated what it is that we actually do with those values, and that's our Mission: to grow in wonder, connect in love, engage in service and inspire generosity. Great! We figured out the answer! So... what's the question?

And no, it's not "What is our Mission?" That would be like saying that the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything is, in fact, "What is the answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything?"

Let me put it this way. If the answer is the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula, then what is the question?

I don't ask this out of some theological perversity or to freak you out. And I'm certainly not asking this to take away from all the work that was put into identifying the Values and articulating the Mission, because that was important and worthwhile work. Rather, I ask this because that work was the first step. It was, really, the easy step. Figuring out what to do with it is going to ask rather more of us, but the good news is that we are up to the challenge!

That doesn't mean that we can't do some training for the challenge, much as a marathon runner doesn't begin by attempting a marathon the very first time they put on running shoes. Maybe, rather than starting with finding the question that is answered by the gift of our existence as a congregation, we can try to find the question that is answered by a more modest gift. Let's say that the UUFP gives you, for the sake of argument, five dollars. If the answer is five dollars, then what is the question?

Now I can imagine some of the wheels that are already turning. What, the Fellowship's going to give us some money? And not just to have, but to do something meaningful with it? Is he going to talk about the Parable of the Talents, too?

Well, now I have to talk about it, or else it'll be the elephant in the room.

This is one of Jesus more well-known parables, though that doesn't mean that anyone really understands it. According to the parable, a wealthy master is about to leave his house for a while, and so he entrusts his property to his servants. Specifically, he gives each of them a significant amount of money, a talent being worth about half a million dollars in today's money. When the master returns, two of the servants report back that they used the money to make more money, doubling what was entrusted to them. Not surprisingly, the master is pleased with them and rewards them. But the third servant reports that he wanted to keep the money safe, so he buried it, and is now returning it as it was given to him. This makes the master angry, and he punishes the servant severely. The apparent moral of the story, as spoken by the master, is that "to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

This is a terrible moral. Taken literally, it seems to be a shameless promotion of capitalism at its most mercenary. Taking it figuratively, that it's about making good use of the spiritual "talents" that have been given to us, doesn't make that much better. By

apparently endorsing a Calvinist “gospel of prosperity”, it also seems to be in direct conflict with what Jesus says only a few verses later about feeding the hungry and welcoming the stranger and taking care of the sick and visiting the prisoner. There’s one interpretation, based on the fact that the third servant pointedly comments on how the master made his wealth through if not unlawful means then at least dishonest practices, that the servant is being punished for speaking truth to power, rather than for failing to make a profit, but I don’t know if that’s enough to redeem the parable. So I’ll just leave it here by quoting one of the disciples: “Okay, Jesus, thanks, that’s great, but what question of ours did you actually answer there?”

So now that I’ve talked about the Parable of the Talents, I want you to forget about it, because either it has a terrible moral or we have no idea what the moral actually is.

So rather than worrying about obtuse stories from two thousand years ago, let’s talk about something we can do in the here and now. Yes, it’s important to consider what we can do with the gifts that the Fellowship offers us, to think about our role as stewards of this congregation, but not — I want to stress — for the purpose of judging one another on how well we think they’re doing. If you’ve been here any length of time, you know that we strive to make this a safe place for being who we are, warts and all, where we certainly encourage one another to be our best selves, but also recognizing that we each have our own needs and limitations and strengths and challenges. So everything we do is with good intentions and an openness to possibility and a willingness to try but also the right to pass if that’s what we need to do.

And that’s important, because I have here a basket containing a number of envelopes, each with a five dollar bill inside. Yes, it was no mere hypothetical that I spoke of giving you five dollars of the Fellowship’s money. And this is, as I said before, for the purpose of figuring out, for yourself, that if the answer is five dollars, then what is the question?

Now I do want to challenge you, if you are willing to accept this challenge, to turn your five dollars into more than five dollars and then bring it back, sometime in the Fall, in the same envelope. More generally, I want you to see what you can do with your five dollars to amplify the UUFP’s Mission to grow in wonder, connect in love, engage in service and inspire generosity. I am particularly interested in knowing what you did and

how, so please do include a note to that effect when we start collecting the envelopes. I know that some people who have heard of other churches doing this already have some ideas about how they might turn their five dollars into more than five dollars, but it's not necessary to know what you're going to do right now. What matters are good intentions and an openness to possibility and a willingness to try, and remember that you also have the right to pass.

Let's work on finding the questions to the answers that have been given to us, and let's help one another find the questions to our own Ultimate Answers. For we choose to journey together, living the answers we find to the questions we ask, searching for meaning in both love and service so that we may realize together the Beloved Community.

May it be so.