

DUCK QUACKS DON'T ECHO: OBSERVATIONS ABOUT FAITH

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There's an e-mail out there in the world—you may have seen it—that showed up on my computer a while back, one of those forwarded forwarded forwarded messages of unknown origin. This was a list of fascinating “facts”—and the word “facts” is in quotes—that captivated my imagination. One, which I've mostly forgotten, had to do with ears...something about the fact that ears grow, maybe? Whatever it was, I thought, “I didn't know that,” but it didn't strike me as outrageous. Another was about cows: they'll go upstairs but not downstairs. “That makes sense,” I thought, but then I did wonder where anybody would take a cow to try that out. But I know that going upstairs is a different visual experience from going downstairs, so I could imagine when I read that fact that it could very well be true. Then I came to this one: a duck's quack doesn't echo, and nobody knows why. “Wrong,” I said to myself. An instant reaction, no speculation or reason involved, just...that's not true. There is no good reason for me to believe that the quack of a duck doesn't echo just like other sounds echo.

The more I thought about it, the more I longed for a way to test that premise. There's a wonderful park in Richmond called Maymount, and I spent many afternoons there with my children when they were young. There's an Italian garden there which has a long colonnade, at the end of which is a beautiful architectural feature that my children called the Echo House. It's a dome supported by columns, and when you stand under the edge of the dome you say your name, or hello, or whatever else a child might think of to say, and you hear a distinct echo. The wonder of the Echo House, though, is that the closer you moved to the center of the dome, the more intense the echo gets, until, when you're directly under the center, the echo is quite theatrical. Now, as you may know, there's also a children's farm at Maymount, which consists of a barn and all types of farm animals, including, of course, ducks. How, I wondered, could I persuade a duck to follow me, without coercion, from the barn to the Italian garden, to the edge of the Echo House. Once we got that far, I could pick the duck up, which would make it quack, and then jump under the center of the dome. I would need an audience, witnesses, because I'm sure that if I could get a duck under the center of the Echo House dome, and keep it quacking, the quack would echo.

Why, I wonder, do some fascinating internet facts seem curious and entertaining, while others strike me as instantly and obviously false? And what does any of it have to do with faith? And what IS faith, anyway?

As we've discussed before, Unitarian Universalists tend to be not entirely at ease with religious language, and the word faith may not be part of the working vocabulary of many of us. You may have noticed that I use the word often in a generic sense, when I mean religion or spirituality or whatever name you want to give to that which draws us together on Sunday mornings. We don't gather here for strictly social reasons, or for civic or political reasons. We may be atheists, or agnostics, or humanists, or UU Christians, we may embrace Earth-based spirituality, or we may name ourselves any

number of other things. But we come together because we are Unitarian Universalists, or friends of Unitarian Universalism...because we are, in my language, people of faith. We believe our principles and purposes. We believe they can make the world better, and we believe they can enrich our own lives. We have faith in that.

There's another way to use the word faith, and I maintain that it's different. Our earliest Christian roots may have instilled in many of us that the Word is the source of truth. Christianity teaches that the way to know God is through the word of God, the sacred text, and Christianity is not the only religion that has as its basis a sacred text. I wonder how much that premise, so deeply rooted in our culture, affects us, without our knowing it, when we read. Think of the number of times someone has told you something is true or real based on that person's having read it in the newspaper. Anybody can write anything they want on the internet and send it out far and wide, without being held to any standard of accuracy or veracity. And people believe it, because they've read it. Or they don't believe it. What makes the difference, with the Bible or the internet?

For me, it's my own experience. I believe what my experience tells me is true, and I do not believe what my experience tells me is not true. I know that fingernails grow, hair grows. Why not ears, at least a little bit? I know that going down the steps looks different from going up the steps, so I can imagine that a cow would feel comfortable doing one but not the other. Every sound I have ever heard in a context that would cause an echo did echo, so I have no reason to believe that a duck's quack, out of all the sounds in the world, would not also echo.

I don't remember ever deciding to think that way; it was just part of the nature of the person that I was and am. When I was a child, I learned early on that in my Sunday school, and in my home, questions about religion were not encouraged. How, I wondered, all through my childhood, could somebody who was dead come back to life? I couldn't figure that out. But when I asked, I was told that you didn't question it, you just believed it. The Bible said so. You had to have faith. Somehow, I remained unconvinced, but I couldn't say so, because it would sound like I didn't have faith. But there was nothing in my experience upon which I could base a belief that somebody who had died could really come back to life. So, it didn't matter where I read it. I couldn't believe it.

Ironically, now that I'm an adult, in my own Unitarian Universalist congregation I have been identified once in a while as deeply faithful. Why? Because I believe what my experience tells me is true, and I believe it even when I'm not having that experience at the moment. I believe that I am surrounded by steadfast love, even when something is getting in the way of my feeling that love. But I believe because my experience stands as a witness. I believe that the Universe knows what it's doing, because over and over again I have experienced that the Universe knows what it's doing, even though I don't know and wish I did. Do I get discouraged? Absolutely! Afraid? Yes! But, you can be discouraged and afraid—probably will be—along with conviction that the Universe knows what it's doing, even though the Universe might not be explaining itself to you and me.

This is where my Unitarian Universalist understanding of faith differs from my childhood understanding. Growing up in the Methodist church, I was taught that faith meant you were to believe something, even in the absence of evidence that it was true, and often in spite of evidence that it was not true. But faith meant believe anyway. And faith implied freedom from anxiety and distress. Now, as a UU, I see the word faith as meaning you believe because of evidence that supports what you believe in, even if your experience at this moment is difficult or even agonizing. As people of faith in the UU sense, we don't try to put aside the distress or deny it. Rather, we move through it as gently as possible, maintaining the conviction...having faith...that we're going to come out on the other side, and knowing we're surrounded by the bright light of love of the Universe, experienced through our community...family, friends, our community of faith. Knowing the bright light shines, even when something is casting a deep shadow over us.

For a person trained in seminary, who loves the work of the church, this podium becomes a sacred place, a pulpit, on Sunday mornings. I can make you a sincere promise, that I will never say anything to you from this sacred place, unless my heart and spirit are confident that it is true. There are statements in the words of the Christian sacred text that I'm unable to embrace, but there is much in the text that I have complete faith in. The Spirit of Life that is in and surrounds us all is for us and never against us. The Spirit of Life knows your name, knew you and loved you before you were born. You knit me together in my mother's womb, says the psalmist in Psalm 139. In the Gospel of John, chapter 14, verse 18, the Spirit of Life speaks through the man Jesus and makes us this promise: I will not leave you desolate. I am coming to you. This promise is real. It is true. I know that because my experience has affirmed it for me. The Spirit of Life will not leave us desolate.