

Meaningful Questions: What Can History Teach Us?

Reflections by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

December 8, 2024

When we were holding our evening services during the week of the election, people were drawn to the historical vignettes that Reverend Jane Tuohy shared with us. We gathered here in the sanctuary and wanted to be in each other's company. We needed to sing together, listen to one another, and unburden our hearts and minds.

We also needed to lean into the wisdom and perspective of history. We needed to know that we are not alone and that others have gone through difficult times, such as we are, and that they not only survived, but they thrived in those challenging times. At each of the services, Reverend Jane highlighted Unitarians and Universalists who lived through difficult times including ending slavery, fighting wars, and responding to challenges in our country's governance.

Thank you, Reverend Jane, for integrating those historical perspectives into the services.

And so, as we near the start of our 300th anniversary year, which coincides with extraordinary times, we are looking for wisdom. How do we hold onto hope, feel joy, engage in celebrations of what is good, and do the work that needs to be done? How do we live with love at our center and not lose ourselves in negativity, skepticism, or despair? How do we keep our head, hearts, and hands above the fray of discord and yet engaged in the work of love and justice?

Last week I spoke about the importance of spaciousness in these times. This week we turn to the power of history and meaningful questions.

We know that some of the history we have been taught was not accurate. Much of what is recorded is the history of wealthy, white people, predominantly men. This history has been whitewashed of responsibility; stripped clear of acknowledging the harms white people caused to Indigenous people, Black people, other immigrants, and women; and the list goes on. We must be diligent and thorough in our research to ensure that we are learning a more complete and true history. There is so much wisdom in

history that has been washed over, denied, and misconstrued and that we must reclaim.

Even with its flaws, we benefit greatly from the lessons of those who came before us. We learn from their mistakes and their successes. Without learning from history we are at great risk of repeating hurtful and unhelpful actions. We can also learn from our own histories.

Learning from history is more an intellectual exercise. To make historical reflections helpful, we can use questions that ask us to apply these learnings to the present day. This use of questions as a guide is an ancient practice used of course by Socrates, and similarly as Koans in Buddhism and short stanzas in the Tao Te Ching.

Doug Latham and I have created a booklet of 18 quotes and associated questions for you to use at home. These questions make great discussion starters for friends, families, or church members. You can also use the quotes and questions as journal prompts and for self-reflection.

We thought we would try this question and application exercise with volunteers and me here in the sanctuary and online. We'll try a couple now and then send you home with the full set of 18 quotes and questions. You will see them in the chat box now as a PDF on YouTube and ushers will hand them out as you leave the church.

Doug will ask me the question. I'll answer and then we'll hear from one or two of you. (Let's keep the answers brief.)

Doug: I have a question before I ask about a new quote: Rev. Rebecca, you heard me talk about Lydia Maria Child. Can you share the name of a UU whose legacy you turn to at times like this? (See Reverend Rebecca's answer to this question at the end of this reflection.)

Doug: The first quote is from Wilma Mankiller, who was the first female Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, and the first woman elected as chief of a major Native tribe. "The secret of our success is that we never, never give up." (Doug turns to Rev. Rebecca)

Meaningful Questions: What Can History Teach Us?

December 8, 2024 *page 2*

Rev. Rebecca, *What is something you have worked on for a long time and never given up? Would you continue even if you knew you may never reach your desired goal?*

Rev. Rebecca answers the questions then takes one or two answers from the congregation.

Doug: Okay. I'll ask you our second question. (Turns to the congregation) Reverend Rebecca doesn't know which question I'm going to ask her.

Rev. Rebecca answers the question and then asks for one or two volunteers to give their answers. She thanks the volunteers.

Rev. Rebecca:

Please rise and join in singing our closing hymn,
#16 'Tis a Gift to Be Simple.

Rev. Rebecca's answers to Doug Latham's first question about a UU whose legacy she turns to in challenging times:

Louisa May Alcott, 1832- 1888

Writer:

Also wrote Gothic pulp fiction under a pseudonym.

Reluctant to write *Little Women*; wrote the book in three months and two installments. She actually wrote it to help her father. He wouldn't get a philosophy book published unless she wrote the book.

Incredibly dedicated to her family:

Supported her three sisters Abigail (Amy), Elizabeth (Beth). and Anna (Meg). Raised her niece after one of her sisters died.

Died at age 56, likely due to health complications from serving as a nurse in the Civil War. She died two days after her father's death.

Unitarian and Transcendentalist:

Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and her father, Bronson Alcott, who was also an educational reformer.

Abolitionist, feminist, and women's suffragist:

The Alcotts likely harbored enslaved people at Orchard House, their family home in Concord, which served as part of the Underground Railroad.

First woman to vote in Concord, MA in 1880 on the School Committee selection.

Three words:

Determined

Loyal

Tricky

A Faithful Response

November 10, 2024 *page 3*
