



A SYSTEM OF

INQUIRY

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It's good to find and feel some comfort, I know, friends. A lot of us are in need of it today with the devastation of two hurricanes, the anniversary of the attack on Israel, and the unthinkable response against Gaza now widening into a campaign of aggression across the Middle East, the upcoming elections that have many on the edge, not to mention all the things we just have to do in a day. I can see it, as I'm listing the things, you're all moving around. Yeah, I feel it. So it's a good time to find some comfort. It's a good way to be here together.

This week I was reading The New York Times, not something I suggest doing if you're trying to move away from some of the other things we're talking about, but there I was reading The Times, and there's a 20-year anniversary article about the column Modern Love in there this week. Daniel Jones, the author, retells some of his favorite stories from that column in the article.

One of the stories is about a dad and their child. At the end of each day, the child goes into the dad's lap and they tell each other the worst parts of their day and then the best parts of their day. And one day they were doing this and the child climbed into dad's lap and was talking all about the bad things. And there were so many that dad forgot to ask, "Well, what's the best thing that happened today? So he finally remembered and asked this child, "What's the best thing that happened today?" And the child nestled their chin into his shoulder and said, "This is, Daddy. This is."

And this story brought me back thinking about times I've had comfort or found comfort in my own life, and whenever I think about that, for some reason, I remember car trips and I remember sitting in the back of my dad's Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme... Supreme... Going to see my cousins in Virginia. The night was still over the Chesapeake Bay. It was like we were sailing over the water there on that long, low Bay Bridge, if anyone's ever taken that bridge. Only the headlights and the moon to guide us. It

was so still, all of us knowing where we were headed together, knowing soon that my aunt would sing me and my cousins to sleep in the same room with her beautiful voice. I felt so safe. My sister beside me, my folks up front on our way to see our kin.

Even now, it's a comfort to remember these times, and we all need comfort now. I know. Exactly. Many of us are trying to find it. We find our way with charts and compasses, so this sermon series is aptly titled "Chart and Compass". You can read more about it in this book. They're all around campus. I strongly urge you to take one home and look at all we're going to be doing together this year. When I think about a chart and compass, I think it's hard to get anywhere very good without knowing how to get there. It takes a chart and a compass. I'm all for wandering, don't get me wrong, but when I need to get somewhere, I need a map.

Now, because we're a multigenerational church, I should explain what I just said is that a chart is a map. And because we're a really multigenerational church, I should explain a map is a piece of paper that you'd open to find where you need to go. All right? That's right. Preach. Now, they work pretty well, and they actually are still important when we're in remote parts of the world or where there's a power outage or when AI finally takes over and we need to hide from our robot overlords. "All hail Zurg." I'm just saying.

And what is a compass? A compass allows explorers and travelers of all kinds to use the chart. They've got to find their way where they need to go, because a compass uses the Earth's magnetic field to tell us where true north is. With a good map and a compass in fine working order and some training and orienteering like I got at Schimelpfenig Middle School in eighth grade, any traveler is in good shape for their journey.

So let's talk about that map we've got. Let's talk about this. Where did our first maps come from, do we think? There's lots of answers, a lot of examples of maps, but a lot of them were created by the religious authorities of the time to be sure they knew where everyone lived, where the property was, and so we could collect taxes. Those were the good old days. We used to just come by and get the pledge. Hey, this is a good idea, Daniel. We canvass real short next year. Okay. Everyone's like, "Amen, they can do that."

But the modern world of world maps and charts, they actually trace their root to someone pretty specific. And that person is Ptolemy, who worked in Egypt. Though I was corrected on many occasions after the last service, I should say, considered himself coming out of the Greek diaspora, working in Egypt, named Claudius, got all these comments, so you're welcome. Now, he's famous for a lot. His rendering of what he thought was the entire world in that map he wrote and composed in the second century, and it remains today one of the most influential maps in history. It was used for centuries after for charting courses, roughly unchanged. And it was used by a lot of people until you know what happened, with every trip and every discovery, those on the voyages improved the maps on their way to new lands.

And somewhere between using those maps to subjugate the people found in those lands or to take the riches they could from those lands. Because if you can't say it on Columbus Day weekend, when can you say it, friends? Right. They use those maps to make more accurate maps so they could do more of those activities. And by doing so, fewer and fewer people, fewer and fewer were lost at sea, which is great. And the world became more and more connected, subjecting people to all that exploration and exploitation spelled for them. The maps people had were subjected also to rational inquiry, until they were more and more true.

And the same thing was happening in the world of religion, in the world of faith and belief. In 1899, right when this church was founded, think about what was happening then. William James was in Cambridge at Harvard, sharing the halls with lots of Unitarian thinkers and believers at the time, and he was busily writing "Varieties of Religious Experience" at that time to deliver in 1901 and 1902 as lectures. And over in Europe in 1899, Freud was working on "Interpretation of Dreams", published in 1900. This is the milieu. This is the kind of thinking and the forward movement that was happening.

And this church was charting its way through that, through its own course, with rational thought, rational inquiry into this new century alongside the visionaries of faith and belief and rational inquiry. Limbaugh quotes Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, "I am sure that my rational nature is from God, then, that any book is an expression of his will. Her will." Will. This church and the religion it strives to practice, chooses to celebrate the rational in the nature of humans as assurance of the divine presence in our lives, not the other way around, not a divine command we find in a book or a prayer and then doing all we can to make that come to pass. We're doing the order of operations, right? All right.

Now, not everything that feels rational is rational. Okay? Professor Fiery Cushman who runs the Moral Psychology Research Laboratory at Harvard, who's carrying on the work of William. James writes about something that sounds a lot like rationality, but it's not. He writes about rationalization, and he does not mince words when he does. I quote, "Rationalization occurs when a person has performed an action and then concocts the belief and desires that would have made it rational." Well, I never. Well, I never have felt so convicted in my life. Who would dream of such a thing?

Now, not to call him out, but our friend Ptolemy here might be a little more famous for a bit of rationalization than for any map he made. Anyone who studies astronomy knows where I'm going. Ptolemy, much to the satisfaction of the Catholic Church at the time, put forth a theory that the earth was the center of the solar system, which meant he had to account mathematically for the deeply complex actions all the other planets were taking in relation to the earth. I'm making a sign of epicycles right now. This is what Ptolemy had a theory about. He mapped the movements of the planets and came up with an entire theory of how they would move in little circles to relation to the earth, all just to hold up this theory that the earth is the center of the solar system.

Today, this, actually, is held up in science classes across the world as one of the great guardians against assumptions and the resulting rationalizations that they breed. And what Limbaugh's sermon did at this church is apply this truth to religion. Before psychology was ever a discipline and a move

toward rational inquiry and faith ever started, many people were already navigating their lives based on the teachings of a church. Many leaders who held the lives of others in their care tried to fit their whole world, their whole emotional space into what Holy Scriptures or ones they called holy had told them, and many people just couldn't get comfortable with it.

And rightfully so. The rational approach of Unitarian thought was like an oasis for people who cherished their faith in something greater than themselves. Yes, but questioned why they had to check their rational thought at the door. Back when we had coat checks. It was so classy.

This faith, though, isn't easy. I mean, seriously, you're putting up with halfway through the sermon already and you're still with me. So it's good. As a Unitarian Universalist today, I'm always in a kind of state of crisis, self-imposed crisis of faith. I don't know if anyone feels like that, because I look for the hope in the hearts and actions of other people. That doesn't always go so well when I'm reading The New York Times and trying to have that feeling to be guided by rational and thoughtful inquiry. And this poses a tremendous strain when I see more rationalization perhaps at work in the world than rational thought.

But the problem isn't only with others. The risk of rational inquiry and making it part of a faith is experiencing that horrible thing, that black goo inside that we're taught by the world is something shameful or impossible to overcome, that something that if you go online or social media something, if you go online, you could risk all your friends or maybe some of your family if it's discovered you might be this too. And you know what it is: being a Cowboys fan. No, just kidding. No, no. It's being wrong. Which is really the same thing, but no... Oh, I know, I know.

No, it's the state of being wrong and even harder than being wrong ourselves is telling someone else you think they are wrong. Oh man, wouldn't we rather just run away and never say anything again? But confronting what is wrong, armed with rational and thoughtful and loving inquiry is a gift from God, and it will set you free. Uh-huh. Okay.

We're going to get into some stuff now. So I'm holding you. The world... I know. Marked this recently, the one year anniversary of the attack by Hamas on Israel and then also the military response by Israel against Palestine and Gaza. And I don't know if there is a more prescient, specific, horrific example of the difference between rational and rationalization than we are witnessing now and going through that region and around the world. The treatment of an entire group of people by restricting their movement, forcing their re-movement, placing them behind border walls with legal dehumanization, is only possible through rationalization. Because every rational part of me knows that every human is created equal and deserves dignity and freedom.

And attacks against Jewish people are climbing at a rate that is shocking to the conscience. The generalization of an entire group of people, assuming that their religion and politics are one and the same alone, perpetuates a dangerous myth and stereotype, diminishes the very real threats against them with a chilling casualness, simply for who they are, throughout the world, including our neighbors right here in Dallas and the synagogue that birthed this church. It's a form of hatred and

dehumanization, too. This dehumanization is playing out as violence and war-making and especially, especially, as “unavoidable collateral damage in seeking a purported military target”. It’s one of the most tragic and callous forms of rationalization I have heard in my life.

Another is how much of what we do see today, at its root, here, this day before Indigenous People’s Day, when we are talking about maps and what they brought, we have to name that rational inquiry, when unchecked, the making of maps and their use and the project of empire across the seas, subjected people, and indigenous people in particular, to horrors we are still only fully learning about today. And then doing these things in the name of a loving God. If there is a blasphemy in Unitarian Universalism, that’s it. Right?

And the poet warns us in the reading. You hear it that when we give shape to the world, when it’s not flat anymore, we’re all closer. We are all more intimate and intertwined. We are closer kin than we’ve ever been before every day, and we know death more personally and feel it more personally than generations in the past. The poet says death, too, is like a map, once flat and far stretching past clustered mountains and blue lakes. It rises now, a dark sun in the western sky. Certain. Unexpected.

And I inquire. Rational inquiry. Is this who humans will always be? Is warring division inseparable from being alive? Does peace live only in our imagining? I heard a man in Gaza on the radio who lost his entire family this week say, “Dreams are gone from this place now.” And I heard in his words that famous inquiry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It’s the first thing the psalmist asks in Psalm 22, the Psalm that is purportedly written by David and played on a harp. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It’s in the lectionary today, in the common lectionary. It’s going to be heard and sung by more than a billion people today.

And the words are the same ones that Jesus cried out from the cross when an occupying military force killed him in front of his family. So the story goes, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” And feeling forsaken is painful. I think that is some of what I am feeling these days. Its root in Hebrew, “azapatani” means to leave or to loosen your grip for a time. And sometimes that’s what I think I’m feeling in times like this. When my faith in humans and their potential for love and for good seems like it’s leaving. It seems like it’s loosening, my grip on what I thought I knew. Maybe that is what sends me grasping for refuge, for answers, for music, for you, for people, for a hope in something I can’t yet see for a heaven or for a peace that surpasses understanding, whatever you call it. This searching and searching and asking and asking and maybe that, right? Maybe that is how faith, maybe that is how God, maybe that’s how something new has to happen in the world. Maybe that is the revolution we are still trying to make in this place. Rational inquiry, filled and actuated by love for others.

Faith is how we hold questions, not how we dole out answers. Faith is how we hold one another, not how we dole out punishment, faith. If it is true, faith, I believe is how we hold out love to those who are wrecked, not how we correct, not how we write, not how we are more holy than anybody else. It is how we hold out love for all, forsaking no one. It’s right. I don’t know what that is. It’s right to have. That’s it. You heard it. It’s coming. It’s right to want good, healthy comfort with one another. To be with those who are together on our journey and be guided along the way by love. It is right for us still, even so, to

question all we need to question in the living of these days. That is what is a faith of questions and answers, of holding those holy questions of what is left to teach us in our lives.

The world is full enough right now. I know it is overwhelming with complexity and pain for many of us. I know. We're just walking around doing stuff and all of this is happening. But asking and asking again, listening and listening more, loving and loving no matter what, staying in conversation even when it is uncomfortable, can hold us to our true north right against the chart that we are making of our lives and guide us home over the bridges, over the distance and over the water so dark that we do not know the way home, where we are held and heard, home, where we can speak to one another about the worst that is happening and be understood, and remember to share the best of what is happening today and be held and loved. Home is where we speak about this. Home is where we lay down the sword and the shield, where we lay down what we are protecting ourselves from, where we lay down our burdens and receive love. I know that that is what I need right now, what many of us need this second in this place together. May we build it and continue to live it in that way. May it ever be so. Let's make it so. Blessed be, and amen.