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## Doubt: Hell in the Hallway

*When one door closes, another door opens.* Years ago, our wise May Cheever said it to me, and I shared it with friends: *When one door closes, another door opens.* They all nodded, taking it in, weighing its truth. All except for singer-songwriter Pete Donnelly, who, without missing a beat, deadpanned, “Yeah, but it’s hell in the hallway.”

This is a sermon about the spiritual practice of hanging out in the hallway ... a dark hallway, all doors locked, which we can only pray is really a passageway, a passing tight squeeze from which we will be birthed.

The hellish hallway: how did we end up here? Just moments ago, we were in a brightly lit room! Welcome to life. Life 101: Doors Close. Doors that we didn’t even know exist slam shut, shutting us out. Can you feel yourself contract? Where is your breath?

The first spiritual practice of hanging out in the hallway is to *keep breathing!* Breathe, and be brave! Breathe, and believe. Let’s summon our spiritual courage, and look and see what wisdom the desert of doubt has to offer.

The Buddha taught that there are five obstructions to enlightenment, five mind-states that prevent us from living happy, joyful, and free. These mind-states are called the five hindrances: craving,<sup>1</sup> aversion, sloth,<sup>2</sup> restlessness, and doubt. Most of us lead with one; name your poison: Is it craving, aversion, sloth, restlessness, or doubt? That fifth hindrance – doubt – is often called the mother of all hindrances. While all the hindrances may join us in the hallway, “the uncertainty that arises because life is unpredictable

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as lust or sensual desire

<sup>2</sup> Also known as torpor, or sloth and torpor

and often painful”<sup>3</sup> stops us cold in the dark, with no energy and no sense of agency.

Buddhist teacher Phillip Moffitt writes, “It is not wise to underestimate the power of doubt... Once doubt is established, [the mind contracts around it,] and it creates chaos in [our thinking]. Because there is a tendency to identify with it, [just like that, we] become a person of doubt. The ensuing uncertainty can ... lead to indecisiveness, powerlessness, or a feeling of being separated from [our selves].... [It may manifest as] nonspecific anxiety, as if there is something [we] have forgotten to do, or have done incorrectly.... [It may manifest as] exaggerated ... distress over a decision [we] have to make, or a vague sense that [we] have failed, or that life isn’t as [we] thought it would be.”<sup>4</sup>

Doubt is a mighty match for mere mortals. Its foil is faith. But we’ll get to that. Actually, a huge number of people get to that way too fast. They turn away from the lessons doubt has to proffer, and, instead, turn to a faith that seduces them with surety. Suddenly, they have all the answers. And surety sounds really great; what a relief to know everything, to be sure of everything! Surety sounds great until another miracle takes us by surprise, and we are transported to that spacious place of awe and wonder, overcome, yet again, by the beauty – the sheer majesty – of the Mystery. So much of life’s depth and richness has to be sacrificed to squeeze into the box of surety. Unitarian Universalism chooses mystery over surety.

Doubt is a spiritual crisis; that’s the hell in the hallway. But doubt comes to us as both a hindrance and a teacher. How can we turn doubt on itself, “treat [it] as a messenger, a call for change,” meet it as a potential ally, and use it as a vehicle to awakening?

Philip Moffitt advises, “It is crucial that [we] not believe stories [our minds] tell [us]. Use doubt to doubt your own doubt... Mark Twain ... said, ‘My life has been filled with terrible misfortunes – most of which have never happened.’”<sup>5</sup>

I commend to you *don’t-know mind*. It’s really something to know that we don’t know! The cultivation of don’t-know mind requires that we sit with

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<sup>3</sup> Moffitt, *Lost in Doubt?* in “in “Yoga Journal,” 12/02, pp. 70-71

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 68

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, pp. 70-71, 74

not knowing, and affirm that this is exactly where we need to be, being that it's exactly where we are. Again, the temptations are endless; it's so easy to obscure our doubt with surety, or optimism, or denial. But until we look at our doubt clearly, if not unflinchingly, until we really acquaint ourselves with our most obscure uncertainties, reservations, hesitations, and mistrusts, we will be prisoners of doubt.

I learned the best of what I know about the spiritual practice of working with the hindrance of doubt from people who were facing their deaths. In 1989, poet Marie Howe lost her brother, John, to AIDS. I commend to you her book, *What the Living Do*.<sup>6</sup> The title poem, a lament for her brother, ends, "I am living. I remember you."

This summer, Marie Howe published a beautiful prose piece on the loss of her friend, Jason. It is, in part, a primer for working with doubt; uncertainty as a spiritual practice. She writes:

"I'm looking for the gate,' Jason used to say when he was in pain. 'I can't find the gate, but I'm looking.' What was this gate my friend ... was looking for? Maybe he wanted to find the door in the room of suffering, so that he might walk through it into another story....

"'I want to be present,' he used to say. 'That's all we can be,' he would say, 'present - and kind.'

"This might be the most difficult task for us...: not to look away from what is actually happening. To put down the iPod and the e-mail and the phone. To look long enough so that we can look through it - like a window.

"Jason looked up one day ... and said, 'This is unendurable.' Then he said, 'I like that black sweater.'

"How do we learn this kind of attention?... [Jason's friend Lucie] picked up Jason from the hospital and drove all night to get to Provincetown; he wanted to go there for maybe the last time. Walking slowly through the fog on the beach in the very early morning, [Lucie] said, 'We will always remember this day.' And Jason, who was pretty well practiced by then, said, 'I am remembering it now.'"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 1998

<sup>7</sup> From an excerpt reprinted in *O, The Oprah Magazine* ( Volume 9, #8), August, 2008, p. 173

The spiritual practice of working with doubt calls us to look – not to look away, but to look – and to be present. Present and kind, as Jason said – not only to others, but to ourselves. This is hard! But doubt is just doubt; it’s important not to give it more than its worth. And learning to bear our doubt will make it infinitely easier to bear yet more difficult, all-but-unbearable challenges. Yes, this is hard ... but possible.

So now, to faith: “the antidote to doubt.” Not cheap faith, but hard-won faith: not bumming someone else’s beliefs, but fearlessly committing to what we experience as true; not what we’ve been told, but what we’ve lived. Faith is making the decision to affirm, *When one door closes, another door opens*, and attending to the possibilities of that small light shining through the keyhole. Faith is putting our beliefs into practice, and putting them to the test: Will they uplift us by day, and hold us through the night? Here is a beautiful passage from Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg’s book *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*:

“Many link faith to narrow-minded belief systems, lack of intelligent examination, or pain at having one’s questions silenced. Faith might evoke images of an external authority. Historically, the idea of faith has been used to slice cleanly between those who belong to a select group and those who do not. To fuel their own embittered agendas, fanatics harness what they call faith to hatred.

“I want to invite a new use of the word faith,” Sharon Salzberg continues, “one that is not associated with a dogmatic religious interpretation or divisiveness. I want to encourage delight in the word, to help reclaim faith as fresh, vibrant, intelligent, and liberating. This is a faith that emphasizes a foundation of love and respect for ourselves. It is a faith that uncovers our connection to others, rather than denigrating anyone as separate and apart....

“The Buddha said, ‘Faith is the beginning of all good things.’ No matter what we encounter in life, it is faith that enables us to try again, to trust again, to love again. Even in times of immense suffering, it is faith that enables us to relate to the present moment in such a way that we can go on, we can move forward, instead of becoming lost in resignation or despair. Faith links our present-day experience, whether wonderful or terrible, to the underlying pulse of life itself.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sharon Salzberg, *Faith*, pp. xiii-xiv

My spiritual companions, when one door closes another door opens ...  
but it's hell in the hallway. What does our faith call us to do?

Breathe, and be brave! Breathe, and believe.

Just say no to the temptation of surety, and yes to mystery,  
to the possibility of awakening.

Cultivate don't-know mind.

Practice presence, and kindness.

Practice paying attention - looking, not looking away.

And have faith and keep the faith and give it away -  
a faith that liberates,

sounding like a heartbeat, steady and sure,  
a foundation, like rock shelf,  
underneath our whole lives.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> recalling Adrienne Rich, final lines of "Transcendental Etude" (*The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977*, p. 77): "and now the stone foundation, rockshelf further//forming underneath everything that grows."