

# Doubt

Adapted from Heart to Heart by C. Robinson & A. Hawkins

There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.

-Alfred Tennyson

Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.

-Frederick Buechner

The depth of man's questioning is more important than his answers.

-Andre Malraux

## *Consider This:*

Have you ever been called a Doubting Thomas? Too often that accusation is thrown at those who have questions and doubts about orthodox theologies, as if it is a character flaw or a kind of willful blindness. So it's ironic that the original Doubting Thomas was one of Jesus' disciples, and that according to the story, Jesus treated him with great respect. The story says that Thomas, faced with evidence of Jesus' resurrection, became a believer. The integrity that caused him to resist believing on evidence of others' experience required him to believe when he had the experience himself. He was a skeptic by nature, apparently, but open to new experiences and willing to be changed by them. Not all of us are able to be as flexible as Thomas. When confronted by new evidence, we tend to want to stick to our old opinions and beliefs, at least while we gather corroborating evidence and take some time to adjust. But if we are on a journey of integrity, adjust we must. This is the heart of Jesus' invitation to Thomas to "live unbelieving no longer, but live believing."

Maybe you once believed that homosexuality is a problem of mental health-until you met a gay person as sound in mind and spirit as yourself. Or you believed that God answers all sincere prayers, but your grandmother died in spite of yours. Or you were taught that chiropractors are quacks, but your spouse's backaches were cured that way. As you amass new experiences and begin to doubt your old beliefs, you are "living unbelieving." It is easy to just push the doubts back and forget about it, but a better way is to give yourself time to adjust, discern, test a new belief, or embrace a new truth. This takes time and energy and is rarely comfortable. It takes great integrity to stay in this gray zone until you find your new (or old, but tested) beliefs again.

*The Benefit of Doubt.* The Buddha insisted that an attitude of doubt is necessary, because some things do not come with proof. It is written that he said the following to one of his disciples, a man named Kalamas:

“It is proper that you have doubt, that you have perplexity, for a doubt has arisen in a matter which is doubtful. Now, look you Kalamas, do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by the delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities; nor by the idea: "this is our teacher." But, O Kalamas, when you know for yourself that certain things are unwholesome and wrong and bad, then give them up. ... And when you know for yourself that certain things are wholesome and good, then accept them and follow them.”

Let's take it as a given, then, that our lives will and should contain the experience of doubting what others believe. Here are three variations on the universal theme of doubt.

*Doubt as a Theology.* Gnostic is a Greek word that means "knowledge of God." Agnostic comes from gnostic and means "no knowledge of God." A through-and-through agnostic claims that by the nature of things, we can't completely understand God, at least not for sure. Although some people use the word "agnostic" to mean that they themselves don't know much about God, technically agnosticism is a belief about the nature of the world we live in. One way of parsing out the scale of religiously conservative to religiously liberal is on a scale of agnosticism. Generally speaking, the more conservative and fundamentalist one is, the more specific one's beliefs and the more sure one is about them. Liberals tend to be more modest about their theological claims, more aware of the limits of their knowledge, and in consequence, more accepting of differing views. Agnosticism finds it easy to be tolerant and difficult to be concrete in matters of faith. Religious liberals are much more likely than religious conservatives to stand firm on the right and responsibility of individuals to think out religious matters for themselves and to base their beliefs on their own experience. For these people, a theology of agnosticism is required by their integrity-until and unless they have had the experiences that would lead them to faith.

*Doubt as a Dodge.* Most people find religious belief hard. That still, small voice is not only soft, it speaks seldom. Sorting out what we believe is work. Not everyone cares enough to do the work. Most are content to let others do the hard thinking. Folks like this might be members of orthodox churches; they don't really believe, but they don't care enough to kick up a fuss or try to find something else. Some agnostics are content to shrug and say "I don't know." But in reality, they don't care. At this time in their lives, their concerns are not theological, and they give little attention to sorting out matters of faith.

*Doubt as Development.* Those who study the way people grow in faith say that there is an appropriate stage when doubt reigns. As persons enter their teens, they become able to sort out what they believe from what beloved others have told them is true. They want proofs and insist on using their own minds. Too often, these youth discover that the adults around them

are not charmed by theological independence. As a result, the youth often part company with church as soon as they can. Later in their life, they begin to soften their skepticism and give more credence to their emotions and intuitions, sometimes returning to a less literal, more sophisticated version of their childhood faith—just in time to be discomfited by their own teenager's budding doubts.

Doubting Thomas, you see, was quite an admirable character - firm in his convictions and able to change when confronted by new experiences. He insisted on seeing for himself, but he was willing to go where he might be changed. He let himself be curious rather than threatened by the beliefs of others. He's one of the patron saints of liberal religion.

*Activities:* Before the gathering, reflect by doing one or both of these activities.

*Pencils and Pens.* Artists often begin a drawing with a pencil, using their eraser liberally. When they are happy with their drawing, they "ink it in," using a pen to make it permanent. You can do something similar with old and new beliefs and doubts. Begin by making a list of words that evoke old and current beliefs and doubts, both religious and other, from the Tooth Fairy to God to alternative medicine. Using a pencil, arrange them on a blank page in some artistic way, varying their size, weight, and placement to indicate their importance in your life. Keep those beliefs and doubts you have left behind in pencil, but "ink in" the beliefs you feel sure of with a colored marker.

*Journaling Suggestion.* Make a list of some of the things you used to believe that you now doubt (religious and nonreligious, from "Sinners go to hell" to "If he loves me, he'll go to bed at the same time I do every night"). What made the change for you?

Questions/Sharing Suggestions:

- Think about some of the things you believe and where those beliefs come from. How much weight do you give to your experience versus the experience of others?
- Is there anyone in your life now who encourages you to doubt or who listens without judgment when you express your doubts?
- What are some things (religious and nonreligious) that people around you believe but you doubt? How does your doubt affect your relationships with those who believe?
- How are faith, belief, certainty, and doubt related in your life? How do you feel about the idea that doubt is a good thing for faith?
- If you are questioning your theology at this time in your life, what are some of the questions you are focusing on?
- Did you do either or both of the activities? What did you learn from doing them?

Next meeting: September 12th.