When you are facing a juncture in your life, a period of transition, or an important decision, I wonder...

Do you search for an answer by weighing out all your choices in a reasoned, rational way? Or do you try to feel your way through it, seeking a gut sense of rightness?

Do you imagine that the universe or a divine presence has guidance to offer you about your path, and that you are being called toward one direction or another because of your particular spiritual work or destiny in a larger universal unfolding? Or do you feel that we are all quite on our own in an indifferent universe, and that all things in this life unfold by some combination of human action and random chance?

In the many traditions of discernment and spiritually grounded decision-making, there are perhaps two very broad categories:

One perspective is that we make meaning as we walk along. There is no “larger plan,” no “God’s will for our life,” no “where I’m supposed to be or what I’m supposed to be doing in the universal scheme of things.” There is only choice: the choices we make, their consequences for our lives and relationships, what they say about us, and to what extent they enable us to live to the fullest of our capacity. This might be called an existentialist view, but it can be understood in spiritual language as well. Our calling is to make meaning of our lives through the choices that only we can make.

A different language of discernment comes from a tradition of theistic belief in which the seeker lives and moves within a divine field or ground of being. The universe is expressing and unfolding a divine intention, what some call the divine will and others call the divine longing, and we are a part of its action, its expression and its fulfillment. In this view each person’s life has a purpose within that larger unfolding, and it is possible for the individual to experience the divine as communicative, responsive and leading. This is a mystical understanding of the universe and our place in it.

I am personally sympathetic to both these views and have experienced my path in both ways. I have enough personal experience of strange synchronicities and urgent intuitions to sense that reality is intelligent, responsive and very mysterious. At the same time, I think we build our lives by what we choose, moment to moment, day by day, and I believe that we are profoundly responsible for all that we create by our choices.

There have been passages in my own life when I longed for, prayed for, begged for guidance from God or from my own deeper wisdom, and was met by deafening silence and a deep sense of being alone with very difficult choices, a small boat with short oars in a big sea.

There have been other times when I have felt as if the wind caught my sails and moved me with great energy in a direction that felt right in every way, an undeniable leading or intuition that I was called to do a particular thing. Auspicious conditions seemed to conspire to assist me, and what followed that choice and flowed from it over time confirmed the rightness of the decision.

Happiness exists on earth, and it is won through prudent exercise of reason, knowledge of the harmony of the universe, and constant practice of generosity.

—José Martí
Perhaps there is also an in-between ground in which we seek through intuition and feeling and the guiding wisdom of a larger community to which we belong, a path that is both personally life affirming and good for the whole. I do not think we need to frame this as divine guidance, but it does call upon some larger sense of self, or larger sense of belonging than merely following one’s personal desires or reasoning.

It is possible to imagine that guidance comes as a kind of directive about a specific choice. What should I do? This particular thing or that particular thing? It is as if one were at a crossroads, facing four possible options, needing to choose: What is the right thing to do? What is the right step to take?

Many of us have GPS devices in our cars or on our phones now—global positioning systems that interface satellites with maps to locate where we are and how to get from one place to another. In a clear, pleasant, mechanical voice it talks to you, saying things like: “Left turn approaching, 200 feet.” Or if you take a wrong turn it says, “Recalculating route,” and sets you back on track. And when you get to your destination, it says, very satisfyingly, “You have arrived.”

What could be clearer? Perhaps spiritual guidance could work something akin to this. One would get directions about a particular choice or where one should go. There are right turns and wrong turns, a particular destination, and a particular route (plus recalculations, as needed).

While it’s true that one can get a very strong intuition to do something in particular—or not to do it—I’ve come to believe that the compass is a more apt metaphor for the way intuition and inner guidance work. The compass needle doesn’t point southwest to indicate that you should turn southwest, and then switch to due south when that’s the better way to go.

The compass simply shows you the direction of the Earth’s North Pole. The point of the needle is drawn toward the north because it feels a magnetic attraction to north. That’s all the compass does for you. North is the only thing it reveals. What you do in relation to that knowledge is up to you. You can move directly toward it, you can turn in the opposite direction and walk south; you can keep north in the corner of your eye as you move in an easterly direction. You can hike upstream along a winding creek bed that meanders first this way and then that, but always moves generally in a northerly direction.

If we were to understand “north” as a spiritual metaphor, what does it signify? And if the compass needle is also a spiritual metaphor, what is it in us that is drawn to the north?

Bring to mind a time when you felt spiritually grounded, when you felt that your actions flowed from a sense of being at home in yourself, being at one with your best self and your truest values. Can you play out in your imagination a scene in which you are spiritually centered? What happens to your breathing as you remember or imagine this? How do you feel in your body? What is the quality of your interaction with others? What’s the feeling in the room? What emerges from your choices or your interactions?

This might begin to give you a sense of your “true north.” The question may not be, “Should I choose A, or B, or C?” but rather, “What happens when I move and speak and consider the situation from a place of my deepest spiritual centeredness?” Another good question is: “What kinds of choices enable me to stay more spiritually centered, more attuned to my true north?”

A GPS enables us to not have to think. We are simply told what to do. We do not need to be aware of where we are, or how to get where we want to go. A compass places greater responsibility for awareness and choice in our hands. We may think of discernment as all about making the important decisions in life—changing jobs, having a child, getting married or ending a relationship, etc. But the path of discernment is more about developing an awareness of our inner sense of truth, an inner feeling of rightness or wholeness, a capacity to sense our deeper yeses and our deeper nos. This is the compass needle within us.

As we develop an awareness of what greater or lesser well-being feels like, as we learn to distinguish when we are moving toward or away from that well-being, we develop a foundation for truer choices. We find north by attuning to a sense of sacredness or wholeness—within both ourselves and others. When we lose that attunement, or feel cut off from it, when we can’t sense in which direction our wholeness lies, the choices we make may not be informed by what is best for ourselves or others.

We find north by attuning to a sense of sacredness or wholeness—within both ourselves and others.

We have to ask not only the question, “Who am I?” but also, “Whose am I?” A friend once shared with me this truth: “Discernment is personal, but not private.” We are not entirely free agents, making our decisions in a vacuum. We belong to a community of others, and a community of life. At best, our capacity to attune to the sacred dimension and to an experience of spiritual groundedness places us in touch not only with our inner true north, but also in touch with a shared north toward which the larger community of life is longing and evolving.

Following that compass, the path may be winding, but we can trust that the direction is true.
Reconciling Science and Religion

BY SAMUEL A. TRUMBORE, MINISTER, FIRST UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY OF ALBANY, NEW YORK

Resolving the rift between science and religion is deeply personal for me. I was raised by a father who is a high priest of science—a retired professor of physical chemistry for the University of Delaware. I loved science as a child and looked up to my father as an exemplar of the scientific method for discovering truth. Repeatable experimentation was the enlightened path to knowledge for me. Those fossilized, sooth-saying charlatans in the irrational religious world were self-deluded crackpots. Christians, in particular, were caught in an archaic system of thought that became obsolete hundreds of years ago.

I continue today with the same appreciation and passion for the expansion of understanding through systematic and repeatable methods that are the crown of the scientific method. But along the way I had an unasked for, unexpected, and life-changing experience playing a game of chess.

There is no luck or chance in chess; it is a game of logic and rational pure intelligence. In a game against a stronger player, I had a revelatory experience of playing almost effortlessly, as if I were guided to see the right next move. Spiritually intuitive chess, if you will. I experienced a state of consciousness that felt completely new to me, one that expanded my perception of reality and began a religious journey that has led to this moment today.

I call this journey religious because previously whenever I read the Bible or other religious texts I found nothing inspirational in them. They were dead historical texts that chronicled a semi-barbaric past that scientific thinking had overcome and was in the process of putting behind us. I had no interest in gurus and swamis who deluded themselves with magical thinking, lost in their imaginations. I believed that science outlined exactly what was real and the rest could be discarded.

After my religious chess experience, however, when I picked up these texts anew I began to find meaning in them. Gradually, I began to see that hidden in the archaic language and ideas was a message that had some kind of synergy, resonance, familiarity, emotional connection, and attraction that had eluded me before. The rational, systematic, and experiential approach of Buddhist insight meditation further opened up an even greater experiential understanding of what these religious teachers were talking about.

I’ve since had a number of objectively ordinary but subjectively transformative moments at meditation retreats. Using my scientific mind frame, I’m constantly trying to figure out what is happening and steadily on-guard for superstitious and magical thinking. The language that best fits these episodes comes from mythopoetic and religious literature. And some don’t translate well into language at all.

I’ve written some pretty enthusiastic letters to my father after these retreats trying to share what I was experiencing that pointed me in a spiritual direction. My father would respond as empathetically as he could by talking about the chemistry of the brain and endorphins. For him, the world can be completely understood through the laws of the movement of objects. He has nothing more, nothing less.

Most religious traditions demand that you begin with a faith in God or Spirit. But I suggest this is not necessary—one only need begin with interest and curiosity. Through the method of direct personal experience, guided by the confirmation of a community of practitioners, one can find out what the words God and Spirit are pointing at but cannot adequately convey. Spirit is an interior, subjective truth that cannot be objectified but can be encountered.

Where religion and science can meet once again and find common ground is the center of the scientific method—direct, repeatable experience. Just as the laws of the movement of objects can be directly witnessed and repeated by anyone sufficiently trained in the scientific method, so too are methods taught by spiritual leaders that also lead to direct, repeatable experiences that can be verified by a community of practitioners. Enlightenment can be approached with the same precision as a scientific experiment.

Science and religion can be mutually reinforcing because they both study the same thing—what is real. The science of the mind and heart can be joined together.

Philosopher Ken Wilber believes that this integration is possible because at the core of everything is Spirit. Science begins with a revelation of God and Spirit which creates the universe. Science begins with observable matter and builds up from there. My father is right that the methods of science have proved far more reliable for understanding the external world than that of religion, much to the consternation of Popes and bishops. But no scientist can deny the interior experience of reality for long. Consciousness is, of course, necessary in order for the scientist to observe and record the surface of things. But our interior reality is much greater than the physiological processes that support it. Sense data do not contain the message. Two people looking at the same painting and listening to the same music can have vastly different experiences even though the sensory input is exactly the same.
Science and the Sacred

BY LYNN THOMAS STRAUSS, MINISTER, ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

The most profound truths about what it means to be human belong to both science and religion. The deepest questions, the most challenging mysteries, are shared by philosophers, theologians, physicists, and astronomers alike.

Curiosity, the search for truth, and the joy of discovery are crossover experiences. All three motivate our personal lives, our work lives, our thinking and reading lives, because we humans seek to understand that which we cannot see. We hold faith in things unseen; we write our faith in mathematical equation or chemical formula; we speak our faith in prayer and meditation.

Unseen things include love, gravity, black holes, evil, hope, and joy, to name a few. We can see the evidence of these things. We see expressions of love, acts of evil, effects of gravity, and the dancing and singing of joy. But we believe in their existence even when we can’t see them.

Professor of astrophysics and Hubble Fellow Adam Frank in his book, The Constant Fire: Beyond the Science vs. Religion Debate, writes:

*Science and spiritual endeavor are both gateways. They are not the same. They are not equivalent. But both arise from the same ancient location in our history and our being.*

The ancient location that Frank points to is the position of the human being as observer and storyteller. Both science and religion rely on observation of the world and all its wonders. Both science and religion rely on story, myth, and narrative to make sense of what has been observed.

Historian of religion Mircea Eliade explored the universality of myth, ritual, and the sacred across cultures. He created the category of hierophany for manifestations of the sacred. Sacred refers to things set apart and worthy of reverence. Eliade suggests three universally human questions that aid us in our search for the sacred:

1. Who are we?
2. Where do we come from?
3. Where are we intended to go?

Religion and science both explore these questions. Through observation and narrative, both disciplines search for truth and meaning.

We 21st century UUs continue to seek after Eliade’s great questions of the meaning of life and death. *Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we intended to go?* The answers are still open; revelation is not sealed. Like the astrophysicists, like Einstein, we still search for origins and the meaning of it all.

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Science and the sacred will together lead us on a path of love of life.

Adam Frank speaks of the impulse to understand—this essential human urge to search for truth. He calls it “The Constant Fire.” It is, he says, the aspiration to know what is essential, what is real, what is true.

This was the Constant Fire of men and women working at the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory for 40 years. This is the Constant Fire that brings us back again and again to our faith. It is the desire to know. The passion to know what is real, what is true.

Ancient myth and classic literature are evidence of this Constant Fire in the human breast. We yearn to understand—ourselves and our world, the universe and the multi-verse. We wake each morning hoping for a sighting of the sacred, a hierophany. We wake ready to take on the world with our questions, with our quest for meaning.

Each morning I wake hoping to watch the sunrise. Each morning I wake searching for an experience of the sacred. Each morning I wake with deep questions on my heart.

We are observers, writing and telling the story of the universe, the story of humanity. What a gift, what a joy to dwell in the house of the sacred! To reach the furthest points in the galaxy and beyond. To hear the chirp of black holes colliding and detect gravitational waves from a billion light-years away.

To acknowledge nature as a source of the sacred in our lives requires each of us to live a new ethic, one of care and compassion for the earth, the universe, and all human and animal kind. An ethic of reverence for life. Science and the sacred will together lead us on a path of love of life. And what we love we will protect. What we love we will honor. What we love we will pass on to our children’s children.

Rainer Maria Rilke writes, in *Letters to a Young Poet*:

> Here, where I am surrounded by an enormous landscape, which the winds move across as they come from the seas, here I feel that there is no one anywhere who can answer for you those questions and feelings which, in their depths, have a life of their own; for even the most articulate people are unable to help, since what words point to is so very delicate, almost unsayable. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, some day far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

May we find joy in living our way into the answers.
This year I became an Uncle, and in a few days time I will become a “grandparent.” My niece’s name is Ella, and we’ve met by video but not in person, so I know what she looks like and what she sounds like, but not yet what she smells like. I mailed her parents a little adaptor back in September so that they could plug their 8-inch tablet computer into their television set and show me to Ella life-size. However, when they tried it, she carried on looking at the much smaller computer screen. She saw through the trick straight away! You see, she knows that Uncle Phil is really a 4-inch talking head, not some blown-up new-fangled TV projection.

I wonder what Ella will think when she meets the real me? Perhaps we should spend some time playing with the tablet together, so that she can see me and my 4-inch talking head at the same time. Then, when we each go home, she’ll know that when she next sees my talking head, she’ll really be seeing me.

Imagine what the world must be like to a nine-month old person. If you get a chance you should get down on the floor with Ella, wondering at the world through her eyes. It’s the moments of novelty, realization and unpredictability that remind us what a wonderful world we live in. Surprise! Informed, delighted, we are children again.

It turns out that wood is like plastic—mostly carbon, hydrogen and oxygen, in different arrangements but leading to solid materials that are similarly lightweight and strong; but they are made by two very different organisms that have figured out how to harness energy and recycle atoms in very different ways.

The insights that toddlers have are profound, but they are about things that are so familiar to us that we don’t even notice them anymore.

as much as possible I plan to be down on the floor with Ella, wondering at the world through her eyes. It’s the moments of novelty, realization and unpredictability that remind us what a wonderful world we live in. Surprise! Informed, delighted, we are children again.

How do we know what we know? Well, as Unitarian Universalists we are committed to an ongoing “search for truth and meaning.” And the Church of the Larger Fellowship offers support and company to everyone on that search, all the time.

Please support our community of search, so that we can continue to offer support and challenge and resources to all who want to join us on the journey. Please make a contribution of $100, or whatever amount is right for you, by visiting www.clfuu.org or by calling 1-800-231-3027.
From Your Minister

By Meg Riley
Senior Minister, Church of the Larger Fellowship

When I was 19 I fell in love with Plato’s Socratic Dialogues. These exciting explorations of truth and beauty, meaning and love, brought me into a deep curiosity. Having first encountered them on my own, I proposed doing an independent study about them at my college. I was assigned a crusty old philosophy professor as my teacher.

At our first session I shared exuberantly what made me particularly interested in the Dialogues: “Socrates often references a mystical source, or a myth, to explain what he’s trying to say. That’s what really interests me. At what point does he turn toward mythology, or the word of the Delphic Oracle, or other non-rational wisdom?” The professor, who was likely to smoke two or three cigarettes at once, sneered at me while he held his flaming lighter underneath. 

Her professor, with or without multiple cigarettes in his mouth, responded about like mine had. He encouraged her to go study art. But Kimerer, not as easily intimidated as I was, stuck with science, and eventually learned a scientific explanation for the goldenrod and asters’ affinity: together they hold a wide color expanse which attracts more pollinators.

Kimerer went on to write several books which connect her scientific mind and her indigenous understandings, and they are profoundly beautiful and wise. Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants is the most spiritually nourishing book I have read in a long time. It is also great science.

If I could have learned from teachers who held realities together as Kimmerer does, I might have studied plants myself. Rote memorization of the names of the parts held no interest for me. Indeed, study of literature wasn’t that fun for me either. Never once did we pause over Shakespeare or Austin, Melville or Woolf to say, “Wow—isn’t this beautiful?” Instead we picked apart. We parsed. We analyzed.

This kind of analytical, deconstructive thinking is how certain brains work. Scientists learn about plants; indigenous people learn from them. Kimerer says. The trouble is that too much education emphasizes learning about the world—the natural world, the human body, the ways we interact—at the expense of learning from the world.

When I was in seminary, besides getting academic grades, we students evaluated each other on the qualities which at that time, United Church of Christ members had said they valued most in their ministers. (I went to a UCC seminary, though I was UU.) Those qualities were empathy, compassion, and clear communications. I’ve always thought it would be great if every student in every subject was evaluated by peers for these qualities, along with whatever academic subject they were learning.

Empathy, compassion, and clear communications spring from a different kind of knowing than does parsing complex theological doctrine. Both are important. I want surgeons or airplane pilots to know the details of organs and engines, not just to be kind to me. But that type of knowledge can also be used as a measuring stick to judge some people inferior, and with that judgment comes trivialization at best and extermination at worst.

It’s certainly what white settlers did in the face of the different kinds of wisdom of indigenous people when they arrived on the land: judged them to know nothing of value. I weep to think who we might be if, instead, the white settlers had showed respect for different ways of knowing and chosen to learn from it. I am sure that our planet would be in much better shape, and our ways of interacting with one another would be profoundly different.

The poet Audre Lorde writes about these different ways of knowing and concludes, “The white fathers told us: I think therefore I am. The black goddess within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free.”

The world is a richer place when we respect the many different ways that people exhibit brilliance, and come to know what they know. May we create a world together where all ways of knowing are honored and respected.
REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Well, what do you know! No, really: what do you know—and how do you know it? And how do you know that you know it? Our fourth UU Principle says that we are committed to a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." But how do we go about searching for truth, and how do we know when we have found it?

Well, one obvious way to know things is through our senses. We know the things we can see and touch and smell and taste and hear. We can trust the evidence that comes to us from direct observation. At least, sort of. For instance, it turns out that we literally don't all see things the same way. Maybe a while back you saw the picture of a striped dress that was going around social media. Some people saw the dress as gold and white. Some people saw the dress as blue and black. The exact same picture. You can do a computer search on "striped dress test" to read articles about the science of why that is the case.

But I can tell you this—although I read an article that explains that the dress is really blue and black, there is no way that I can look at that picture and see anything other than white and gold. If I can't believe that what I see with my own eyes is definitely true, what can I believe?

Well, science. The fifth Source of our living tradition talks about "the guidance of reason and the results of science." We are folks who know that science matters, that evidence matters, that very bad things can happen when you try to pretend that the science around things like climate change or vaccinations can be ignored or denied. We know that there are laws of how the universe works that enable us to predict what will happen (every single time you drop a pencil it will go down, not up) and to create technology that really works.

People may say that humans and dinosaurs were on the earth at the same time because that matches the stories of the Bible, but that simply isn't true. We know this because the scientific investigations of thousands of people across time have proven things about the age of our planet and the development of life on earth that demonstrate beyond the shadow of a doubt that dinosaurs were long gone by the time that people arrived. Believing otherwise because of your faith in the Bible is just not going to make it so.

Except, of course, that science is a process, not a conclusion. Everything that we know through science is always the best understanding that we have at the time, not necessarily the final answer. The picture can change as we get more information. For instance, scientists now think that birds are probably the direct descendants of the dinosaurs, and that at least some of the dinosaurs had feathers. So in one sense you could now say that humans and dinosaurs not only lived at the same time, we're still living together. It's just that dinosaurs these days look more like vultures and sparrows, not stegosaurus and velociraptors.

So if you can't absolutely know something through observation or science, maybe we should go with the saying, "Trust your gut." People have an amazing ability to have a sense about things that goes beyond what our minds have logically puzzled out. You might know instantly that a person you meet will become a good friend—or is someone that you can't trust. But it turns out that even those gut-level first impressions are not that reliable.

Scientists did an experiment in which they set up situations in which people met each other, but in half of those first encounters they had the person who was meeting the subject hand them a cup of coffee. It turns out that if you hold something warm as you meet someone you are much more likely to have "warm" feelings toward that new person. Not really a great basis for deciding who you can trust!

So what do we know, and how do we know it? Do we really know anything? Maybe not. Or maybe it is better to think of truth as a process rather than an absolute fact. We are on a search for truth and meaning. Learning and growing is an ongoing part of what we do as seeking human beings. Through science, through relationships, through stories, through mystical experiences that we can't explain, we gather up the pieces that we build into structures of understanding.

It might be a structure that expands or shifts or changes over time. Sometimes we might even need to pull down a wall or two, as well as to put in a new window or door. But throughout our lives as Unitarian Universalists we are committed to building ever sturdier and more beautiful houses of understanding to live in and explore from.
Did You Know
That while there is only one issue of Quest Monthly over the summer you can find searchable archives for Quest at questformeaning.org/quest-monthly/

Knowing that you don’t know is health.
Presuming that you know is disease.
Only by recognizing that you are ill can you seek a cure.

The Master is their own physician.
They see their illness and treat it.
Having healed themselves of knowing they are truly whole.

Tao Te Ching, 71