



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Unexpected Adventures in Philosophy

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

29 January 2023

frederickuu.org

I wonder how many of you have taken a philosophy course? Did you enjoy taking it?

More importantly for our purposes, how many of you took a philosophy course in middle school or high school? How about even earlier: in elementary school? Or kindergarten?

I'm increasingly convinced that as a society we wait far too late to give people opportunities to formally engage with the really big questions of "life, the universe, and everything," to wrestle with the many different ways that various people and groups have responded to big questions over time.

The earliest opportunity most people have to take a philosophy class is in college. But not everyone has a chance to go to college — or even wants to. But, the big questions that are at the heart of the philosophic tradition tend to naturally occur to most humans at an early age. And when that early curiosity isn't nurtured, wonderful opportunities to learn how to think more deeply, more subtly, and with more nuance are too often missed.

How many of you have known a child who at some early point went through a question asking phase, often relentlessly asking *why*? How many of you *were* that kid? I definitely was.

It's time for bed? *Why?*

Because getting rest is important. *Why?*

Because you are tired and cranky the next day whenever you stay up past your bedtime. *Why?*

Because your body needs sleep to be refreshed. *Why?*

I could keep going, but this back-and-forth typically ends with four words — say it with me: “*Because I said so.*”

Sometimes kids weaponize asking *why* to try and get their way — out of boredom, in a power-grab attempt to test what may seem like unfair controls, or even just to get attention. But that relentless *why, why, why, why, why* also emerges out of their authentic curiosity to understand this mysterious and strange reality in which we all find ourselves. Kids — and adults too — want to know not just how the world works, but *why*. We humans often aren’t satisfied with mere data, facts, and information. We want *meaning*. We want to *understand*. We want to know *why*.

Too often kids stop asking *why* because they realize their questions aren’t welcome. I’m not saying that we adults have to feel like should know all the answers to the questions kids ask. Indeed, kids’ questions give us an opportunity to assure them of the reality that, like them, we don’t know everything either; that no one knows all the answers!

The philosophical tradition — much like our UU traditions that we offer here at UUCF— turn out to be less often one, single, definitive answer, and much more often simply a safe space for exploring questions together.

In 1902, in a letter to his 19-year-old protégé, the Austrian poet Rilke put it this way:

I want to beg you, as much as I can...to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to **try to love the questions themselves** like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the

point is, to live everything. **Live the questions now.** Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

If you want to read the context, all ten of Rilke's missives to his protégé are published in a powerful modern classic titled *Letters to a Young Poet*.

My sermon today was also inspired by another delightful, accessible, and quite practical book titled *Nasty, Brutish, and Short: Adventures in Philosophy with My Kids* by Scott Hershovitz, a professor of law and philosophy at the University of Michigan, and the father of two children.

In the cartoon posted beneath the book's cover title, one kid asks, "Is the title about us?" The other kid responds, "I think so."

My fellow philosophy nerds will recognize that title as an allusion to *Leviathan*, an influential book in the history of political philosophy written by the 17th-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. This most famous line from that book speculates that life for humans prior to the founding of societies was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Hobbes was, shall we say, a *pessimist* —and many people (including myself) mostly disagree with his conception of things.

That being said, life with kids can sometimes feel like Hobbes' "state of nature." Hershovitz says that, "Our kids [can be] nasty, brutish, and short. [But] they are also cute and kind...and two of the finest philosophers I know. They're among the funniest. And the most fun too" (18-19). He wrote this book to support them in staying that way.

Hershovitz's hope for his children is that they won't get discouraged from the natural human inclination toward curiosity that can be the starting point for adventures in philosophy. As with Rilke's letter to his protege, Hershovitz wants his kids (and the rest of us too) to keep on *living into* the big questions about life, the universe, and everything.

Let me give you a few examples from my own life — and as I do so — I encourage you to remember how you have or haven't been encouraged to *live the questions* in your own life, as well as how you might feel led to help encourage others'.

This first story exposes what is likely no big surprise to anyone: I've been a big nerd for a long time. Not that there's anything wrong with that! Once when I was middle school age, my parents were delayed in picking me up after youth group at my family's Southern Baptist Church. So I decided to spend that time exploring the church library. Nerd alert!

While perusing the shelves, one book stood out to me. The title was something like *The Catholic Bible with Apocrypha*. I remember thinking, "Wait. Isn't the Bible *The Bible*? What is a *Catholic Bible*? And what's the apocrypha?" I opened the book to its Table of Contents, and saw unfamiliar books, called Tobit, Judith, Bel and the Dragon, Psalm 151. Whoa! No one ever told me that there was more than one Bible! As many of you know, this particular rabbit hole goes a lot deeper once you get into the many other non-canonical books from the first few centuries of the Christian tradition. But this one brief experience was more than enough to start the questions flying in my adolescent brain.

When I asked my youth group leader about this discovery, he looked startled and said, "Some groups include additional books of the Bible." — and quickly walked away.

Around that time, I also remember a Sunday School lesson when we were reading a passage from the biblical book of 1 Samuel that says, "an evil spirit from the LORD came on Saul." And then King Saul attacks David with a spear. It's 1 Samuel 19 if you want to look it up.

I raised my hand and asked, "What does it mean that an *evil* spirit from God entered Saul? Is *God* a source of evil?" My Sunday School teacher got that same deer-in-the-headlights look on his face that my youth group leader had

expressed when I asked him about the extra books in the Bible; he said, “That’s *not* one of the questions listed here in the curriculum. We’re going back to that.”

I was a fairly obedient kid, so I didn’t press either of them further. But these are two among many experiences in which I was discouraged from *living the questions*.

In contrast, here’s a very different story that made me want to embark on an adventure in philosophy. In the summer between my junior and senior year in high school, I was a junior counselor for seven weeks at a summer camp, and the first staff Bible study topic was “Theodicy.” I remember thinking, “the-od-i-what?!”

Compare the more familiar word theology, which comes from the words *theos* (“God”) and *logos* (“word”); so, words about God. Theodicy is like that: *theos* (“God”) plus *dice* (“justice”). The basic framework of theodicy turns on three premises:

1. If God is all-knowing, then God *knows* about evil.
2. If God is all-loving, then God should want to *do* something about evil.
3. If God is all-powerful, then God *could* do something about evil.

The gist of theodicy is that the existence of evil sometimes challenges us to consider that maybe either God *doesn’t* exist and the universe just evolved this way, to include what we humans experience as “good” and “evil”; or perhaps that God *does* exist, but is the source of evil — and since God is the source of everything, maybe God is more *evil* than is sometimes admitted. There’s a lot more to say about the various theodicies that have been developed over time to respond to the problem of evil, but that’s a whole other sermon for another day.

One accessible introduction to theodicy is Bart Ehrman's *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question--Why We Suffer*. A more advanced theodicy is *Evil Revisited: Responses and Reconsiderations* by David Ray Griffin. Also see my sermon “[Evil: Bad Apples or Bad Barrels?](#)”

Returning to our story: in that surprising Bible study on theodicy, I mostly listened. But inside, my head was spinning. “Wait! There’s a whole field of study called theodicy that wrestles with understanding how both God and evil exist? I been going to church multiple times a week for my whole life, so how come no one told me about this before?!”

Afterward, I told the camp director, Dan, who had led the Bible study, “That was by far the most interesting and mind-blowing Bible study I have ever attended.” As a seventeen-year-old Southern Baptist, I had been to a *lot* of Bible studies.

He said that he was glad I enjoyed it, and invited me upstairs to his office. He showed me his bookshelf, saying, “If you are interested in learning more, you can borrow any book you’d like one at a time. When you’re done, just return it and get another one whenever you like.

That summer in my free time — and staying up sometimes late into the night — I read Tony Campolo’s *20 Hot Potatoes Christians Are Afraid to Touch*, featuring questions like:

- What about women preachers?
- Can a Christian own a BMW?
- When it is OK to tell the doctor to pull the plug?
- Can Christians kill [in war]?

I wouldn’t particularly recommend Campolo now, but in 1995, as a fairly sheltered Southern Baptist from South Carolina, that book hit me like a bolt of lightning.

I also read the theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas’s *After Christendom: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas*. I read the contemporary classic, *Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and I read environmental activist Wendell Berry’s book *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community*. That is by far the best title Berry ever came up with. The introduction includes this classic passage: “If you have *bought* [this

book], dear reader, I thank you. If you have *borrowed* it, I honor your frugality. If you have *stolen* it [because it had the word ‘sex’ in the title], may it add to your confusion.”

Is it problematic that all of these books were written by white men? Yes. But reading them at that time in my life laid the groundwork connecting me to books written by much more diverse and multicultural authors.

Here’s another important part of my story. Where had Dan, the camp director who let me borrow books from his bookshelf, acquired those books? He was a graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, which was a great school in many ways prior to the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. That’s the same seminary that my childhood minister and youth minister had attended. It turns out that they knew all the same stuff as Dan, but — I am going to be really honest here — they were (in my judgement) too afraid for their jobs to be honest in their preaching and teaching about what they had learned in seminary.

Don’t get me wrong: I have many good things to say about the staff of my childhood church too; but there was real harm done to many by their collective failure to be honest about the big questions of life, the universe, and everything — and their silence contributed to a church-wide culture of secrecy and shame.

For those who follow the news, that culture contributed to recent revelations about the decades of coverups around sexual abuse in Southern Baptist congregations ([Vox](#)). Some of the stories I know well, stories of harm experienced by people I deeply love from my childhood and young adulthood; but those stories are not fully mine to tell. You can Google articles covering that scandal in depth.

Let’s take a breath. This is heavy stuff. But I don’t want us to miss how enlivening and exciting exploring the big questions can be when we do it right.

There’s a famous scene from the film *The Matrix* in which the protagonist, Neo, is offered the choice between taking a red pill and a blue pill. Morpheus,

the leader of the rebellion, says, “You take the blue pill... the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill... you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

I don’t know about you, but through whatever confluence of temperament, genetics, and conditioning, I tend toward always choosing the red pill. *Give me the red pill!* Let’s go to Wonderland. Let’s see how deep this rabbit hole goes!

All my early curiosity arose from that deep childhood impulse toward asking why, why, why, why, why. I *really* want to know. I don’t just want to know *how*. I don’t just want to know the facts and the mechanics. I want to know *why*.

And that search for meaning — the longing to know *why* — is what philosophy at its best is often all about. Philosophy is from the root words *philia* (“love”) and *sophia* (“wisdom”). It is a whole field of study dedicated not just to information or knowledge, but to *wisdom* — to thinking about what *really matters* and *why*.

I entered college with the intention of going pre-med and ultimately becoming a doctor, which would have been one great way to spend my life. But in my freshman year, I took a year-long Humanities sequence of courses, and the frequent lectures around religion and philosophy woke something up in me — a passionate curiosity about life, the universe, and everything — that had been too often lulled to sleep within the Southern Baptist context of my childhood.

I ended up doing something that I don’t necessarily recommend to others, but which worked out for me: I declared a double major in religion and philosophy at the end of my freshman year — before I even took a single class from either department.

I don’t anticipate that my choice will be most people’s path. To return to Hershovitz’s book — *Adventures in Philosophy with My Kids* — he says that, even now as a philosophy professor, he doesn’t aspire to his children following

in his footsteps to become professional philosophers. Because philosophy is simply about “the art of thinking,” it is an art we arguably should want every human being to master. In Hershovitz’s words, the aim of philosophy is “to raise a person who thinks clearly and carefully. It’s to raise a person who cares what others think — and thinks with them” (312).

That description of philosophy resonates with so much of what we’re about in this big tent of Unitarian Universalism. We come together, not to find “The One Answer for All People, Times, and Places” — as if such a thing were even possible. Instead, we come together in all our diversity to discover what others think, so each of us might think more clearly and carefully — so together we might live into the big questions of life more wisely, generously, and compassionately.

If you were hoping for some practical tools to do just that better, Hershovitz recommends five prompts that will get you a very long way in living the questions — with yourself, with the young people in your life, or really, with anyone:

- What do *you* think?
- *Why* do you think so?
- Can you think of reasons you might be *wrong*?
- What do you mean by...?
- What is....? (313)

Hershovitz lists some wonderful resources for going deeper at the end of his book, especially for exploring philosophy with children, but also for all ages.

Let me give you one specific example. If you’ve spent much time around kids (or even if you’ve just *been* a kid, I suspect you’ve heard someone complain, “Hey! — that’s not fair!”

Here’s how you can potentially transform that exhausting complaint into an adventure in philosophy. Try some prompts like:

- I hear you feel, “That’s not fair.” What do *you* think fairness is?

- Whose job is it to make things fair?
- Do *you* ever benefit from unfairness?

Always remember that, “You don’t have to have answers in mind to ask questions. Just see where the conversation goes” (314). Welcome to philosophy! It’s all about *living the questions*.

If you worry that you have lost the spirit of philosophizing — and if you’re not a parent of young children at the moment — our Director of Religious Education, Melissa, would be glad to sign you up to help teach Religious Education classes here at R.E. I’m not kidding. Kids really are alive to the awe and wonder about the world that we sometimes lose on our journey to adulthood (316).

That’s one reason I’m grateful to be part of Unitarian Universalism, which is often called the *living* tradition. There’s a reason the symbol of our movement is a flaming chalice. We are always open to learning and growing. There is the risk of getting burned, but there is also tremendous warmth, fascination, and the lure of gathering around the fire in community.

I wish you all unexpected adventures in philosophy.