

“Changing Our Minds”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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Reading

This making of a whole self, Nancy Shaffer

Sermon

“My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas.”

If you were in elementary school in the 1980s and surrounding decades, you might recognize this mnemonic device for naming the, then-believed, nine planets of our solar system.

Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto.

The planet at the very edge of our solar system, Pluto, enjoyed the designation of the ninth planet, but it wasn't always so. Percival Lowell was a wealthy Bostonian who founded the Lowell Observatory Tower in Flagstaff, Arizona in 1894 and started an extensive search for a possible ninth planet which he called “Planet X.” Despite two faint images of Pluto being captured in 1915, Lowell would not live to experience the the official discovery of the planet. He died in 1916.

The search lay dormant for more than a decade until the arrival of a 23 year-old from Kansas, Clyde Tombaugh, who was handed the job in 1929. He worked for a year at meticulously comparing photographs taken two weeks apart at the observatory and comparing them with a machine called a blink comparator for any sign of an object that may have shifted. Tombaugh finally found the subtle indication of a distant moving object large enough to be a planet. Further photographs confirmed it, and news of the discovery was telegraphed to the Harvard College Observatory on March 13, 1930. The news made headlines across the world. The Lowell Observatory put out a global call for suggested names. An eleven year-old girl from Oxford,

England thought the name of the god of the underworld would be a fitting one, and so, the much anticipated ninth planet was given its name, Pluto.¹

Of course, humans didn't stop observing what is up there at the edges of the solar system with this discovery. Mike Brown is a professor of planetary astronomy at CalTech. After completing a PhD on the planet Jupiter and its moon Io, Brown wondered where he might direct his scientific inquiries next. What he discovered and how it eventually unfolded in the scientific community wasn't something he could have predicted.

For many years after Pluto was discovered, it seemed as if the dust had settled on planetary discoveries. But, as time passed continued observations by astronomers showed that Pluto was not alone. It has five satellites. And, in 1992, two scientists from the University of Hawaii, David Jewitt and Jane Luu, discovered the first of now more than 1000 known objects orbiting beyond Neptune near Pluto in what is called the Kuiper Belt, for the scientist Gerard Kuiper.

This discovery was intriguing to Mike Brown. As more and more objects were discovered in the Kuiper Belt, new attention was given to the possibility of yet another planet being discovered in our solar system as well as to the very definition of a planet itself.

“I knew what a planet was,” Mike Brown writes, “As a child, I knew planets from my poster on the wall. As a teen, I knew them from watching them move across the sky. And later I knew them from years of writing a Ph.D. dissertation. Nobody was going to change my mind about what a planet was. Right?”²

Brown began to focus his research on all of those objects out near Pluto. In a fashion similar to Clyde Tombaugh, but with more advanced technology and more people to help, he meticulously scoured images of the sky for something moving that was bright enough to possibly be another planet.

Mike Brown and his team's diligent research paid off. Along with two other scientists, Brown discovered an object they referred to as Xena, which they believed to be larger than Pluto.

¹ “Why Is Pluto No Longer a Planet?” <https://www.loc.gov/everyday-mysteries/astronomy/item/why-is-pluto-no-longer-a-planet/#:~:text=In%20August%202006%20the%20International,will%20be%20designated%20as%20planets.>

² From [How I Killed Pluto and Why It Had It Coming](#).

The discovery led to a wave of rethinking among astronomers culminating in a meeting of the International Astronomical Union in Prague in 2006.

They took up this very basic question: What is the definition of a planet anyway?

After much debate, the IAU voted to narrow the classification of a planet and designate Pluto, Xena, and one other object of similar size, as dwarf planets.

The number of planets in our solar system was changed to eight.

“My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Noodles.”

The shifting and evolving of our opinions, beliefs, and knowledge is an important part of human growth. We are not creatures in permanent stasis but creatures in flux, ever changing. And thank goodness for that.

Changes in our thinking are necessary to keep pace with the changing conditions around us at any given time. Being open to new ideas rather than stuck in the rigidity of clinging to what we think to be true now makes growth possible.

The changes can happen after years of careful research, or in more sudden flashes of insight.

What is something you have changed your mind about lately?

Changing our minds doesn't usually come easily especially when what we believe we know really matters to us.

The dwarf planet that was discovered in 2005 and set off the Pluto classification debate has now officially been named Eris, after the the ancient Greek goddess for discord and strife.

The discovery of Brown's team of a possible tenth planet had sent waves of debate into the scientific community, and after the IAU's decision to reclassify Pluto as a dwarf planet, many people felt the waves of shock.

Brown writes, “In the days that followed, I would hear from many people who were sad about Pluto. And I understood. Pluto was part of their mental landscape, the one they had constructed

to organize their thinking about the solar system and their own place within it. Pluto seemed like the edge of existence. Ripping Pluto out of that landscape caused what felt like an inconceivably empty hole.”³

Within the realm of science, the protocols for learning and changing what we know to be true are clear. There is a realm in which to have these debates, and new ways of thinking are encouraged.

Beyond the scientific community, how we come to rethink what we think we know becomes murkier. Changing what we think or what we think we know isn’t a dispassionate process.

Daniel Kahneman is a psychologist and behavioral economist who has studied how people think, and he warns against putting too much stock in rationality: “when people use the word “rational,” I think, what they mean by this is that there is a good reason for what you believe and what you do. If there is a good reason for it, you believe in what you do, then, you are rational. But if we accept that, in general, our more important beliefs are not rooted in arguments, that there is no good reason for why we have this religion or that religion, or this politics or that politics; it’s just something that happened to us — that changes the nature. We shouldn’t be looking for rationality so much, because by using the word, we seem to expect it to happen. And I think that’s just not the way the mind works.”⁴

I find this statement sobering and also a helpful rethinking of why we come to believe what we do. There is a much larger role for life experience and emotion in how we think than we might understand or even desire.

Reason and emotion are much more connected than we might believe, and the process of changing our minds is a holistic one.

Bob Inglis served as U.S. House representative for the state of South Carolina for 12 years between 1993 and 2011. He was an evangelical Christian, member of the Republican Party, and he says that climate change was nonsense to him in the early 2000s.

³ From [How I Killed Pluto and Why It Had It Coming](#).

⁴ <https://onbeing.org/programs/daniel-kahneman-why-we-contradict-ourselves-and-confound-each-other/>

But, in 2004, his son, who had just turned 18, said he'd vote for him only if he changed his stances on the environment. Inglis heard this from his son as a statement of love, "He was saying to me, 'I love you, and you can be better than you were before,'" Inglis reflects. With five young adult children, Inglis felt strong that it was important to listen to our young people.

So, Inglis joined the science committee. He took a trip to Antarctica and saw evidence of global warming in the ice core. He traveled to see the bleaching of coral reefs and met someone who was motivated to understand the impacts of climate change by their love of God evidenced in creation. Inglis had a conversion of heart and mind.

He began to speak more publicly about climate change and the need to address it. This made him less popular with his Republican constituents, and when he was up for reelection in 2011, he was challenged in the primary. After 12 years in Congress, he lost his seat. He went on to found an organization called RepublicEN that brings together political conservatives who want to advance solutions to climate change.

I wasn't familiar with Bob Inglis' story before beginning to prepare this sermon. I was surprised to learn about his conversion and the organization he founded, and not surprised, though disappointed, to learn his views on climate change caused him to lose his seat in Congress. I can sense that Bob Inglis' story is starting to change my own mind about whether and how we can address pressing issues that seem to keep us stubbornly divided.

Bob Inglis took a courageous stance in bucking the generally accepted position both in his political and religious community.

Often, fear of conflict and rejection can keep us from rethinking our positions. We are less likely to take on a new position or even admit we don't know something if we sense it may cause tension with people who matter to us or may cause us to even be excluded and shut out of community.

If we are fearful of conflict, we might avoid the kind of conflict of ideas that is actually a productive source of rethinking.

Adam Grant is an organizational psychologist who speaks and writes about the art of "rethinking."

He writes: “Relationship conflict is destructive in part because it stands in the way of rethinking. When a clash gets personal and emotional, we become self-righteous preachers of our own views, spiteful prosecutors of the other side, or single-minded politicians who dismiss opinions that don’t come from our side. Task conflict can be constructive when it brings diversity of thought, preventing us from getting trapped in overconfidence cycles. It can help us stay humble, surface doubts, and make us curious about what we might be missing. That can lead us to think again, moving us closer to the truth without damaging our relationships.”⁵

Especially when we are rethinking deeply held beliefs and positions, we need to be able move forward with some security in our relationships. We need to tend to both the heart and the mind in this process of change.

This kind of process is taking place right now in our own religious movement. If you turn to the first few pages of the gray hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*. You will find a page that begins, “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote...” The statement continues to articulate seven principles and the sources that shape Unitarian Universalism.

This statement is found in the sacred text of Article II of our denominational bylaws. The UUA says this about Article II:

“For some religious institutions, the equivalent of Article II would be regarded as a permanent statement of belief. Ours, however, is a Living Tradition. We commit ourselves to regularly revisiting our Principles and Purposes to ensure that we are relevant, that as we grow in understanding, our Principles and Purposes grow, too.”⁶

And so, for the past two years, the Article II Study Commission has been engaged in reviewing our shared principles and purposes. They have held listening sessions and presented at General Assembly. Over the next few months, you can expect to hear more about the proposed revisions to the UUA Principles and Purposes and how you can be part of this process of change and rethinking.

⁵ From *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don’t Know*.

⁶ Article II Study Commission, <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/about-article-2>.

One of the shared values named in the current draft amendment to Article II is the value of “evolution.”

It states: “Evolution. We adapt to the changing world. We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Evolution is fundamental to life and to our Unitarian Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.”⁷

We continue to evolve.

From rethinking Pluto to rethinking our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes, we, humans, continue to learn and grow and reshape what we know and what we believe.

We change our minds and our hearts, growing in knowledge and in love.
May this be good news again and again.

⁷ Article II Purposes and Covenant, https://www.uua.org/files/2022-10/article2_draft_language_102022.pdf.