

On Being Stupid

By

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We've all heard there's no such thing as a stupid question. This is meant to reassure us that there's no reason to feel embarrassed about not knowing the answers. But I would counter that all legitimate questions are stupid, and if we're not willing to risk some embarrassment, it's not possible to learn new things. That's what the etymology of the word "embarrass" means, "to bar" or "block" something. Being embarrassed bars us from achieving new things, from moving forward, and asking embarrassing questions prevents us from discovering new ideas. It blocks us from obtaining insight and understanding.

This is why I prefer its more popular phonetic definition: being embarrassed means being *bare assed*. This may not be true etymologically speaking, but it's pretty much how it feels to be embarrassed. I can relate. Peggy often reminds me not to bend over in public because of my plumber's smile. My derrière has oft been in de' air, which I think embarrasses her more than it does me. Finding ourselves so exposed, without our pants, or shoes, or some other article of clothing, is a common dream of those feeling anxious about having to perform a public task, like giving a speech, or going to class, or a work meeting, and so forth. Performance anxiety, stage fright, social anxiety, shyness can all result from our desire to not be embarrassed.

Since embarrassment is a social phenomenon, meaning it usually happens in public, one thing we instinctively tend to avoid is asking a lot of questions that everyone else, we imagine, already know the answers to. Instead, we just keep quiet and go along with whatever the crowd seems to already know so we don't have our *end up* and end up looking stupid.

But even if the word embarrassed doesn't literally mean being "bare assed," the word *stupid* comes close to it. It shares the same root as the word "stoop." Stooping is the opposite of standing. Stooping means bending and lowering ourselves. Standing, as in *upstanding*, means being straight and upright. That's how we prefer being considered in public, as upstanding citizens who don't ask stupid questions. Throughout human history, asking some questions, especially by questioning the authorities, could get a person severely punished. This has been especially true when it comes to questioning religious beliefs or religious authorities. Not long ago, questioning the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, or his resurrection meant a death sentence.

Yet, there's an extraordinary line in the Christian scriptures, in *I Peter*, referring to the dealings between God and humanity as "things in which angels long to look."¹ The Greek word translated here as "long to look," *παρακυπτο*, is more literally translated "to stoop around" or "to bend over." If you can imagine curious angels bending over humanity like inquisitive children dumbstruck by the workings of an anthill, then you have an image of what *παρακυπτο* means, "things angels stoop over,"—stupid cupids. They are fascinated by us because we are mysterious to them. They don't fully understand humanity, so they bend down for a deeper look. Have you ever seen a depiction of a majestic angel bent over? An angel with a plumbers crack—now that's a picture for some of the artists among us to consider.

This relatively rare word, *παρακυπτο*, "to stoop over," is used only three other times in the Christian Scriptures, once in the *Letter of James*,² once in the *Gospel of Luke*,³ and once in the *Gospel of John*.⁴ In *James* it's used in reference to those who "look into" God's law, or "stoop over" it to understand it's mysteries, and the other two refer to those followers who first "looked into" Jesus' empty tomb. *Luke 24:12* says, for example, "Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings only; and he went away to his home, marveling at what had happened." *John 20:4 & 5* says similarly, "The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; ⁵ and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying *there*; but he did not go in." So Jesus' disciples, according to the original tradition, weren't dogmatic about their Holy scriptures (God's law), or about the meaning of resurrection, they were stupefied by it. They bent over in awkward positions, humbling themselves, to try to comprehend something of these mysteries.

I wonder what religion might have looked like in Western culture if it were more often looked at from this stooping position, *παρακυπτο*, from a position of seeking, curiosity, and wonder, rather than of knowing and teaching others the is only one upright position to take on such matters. This is what Unitarian Universalism is supposed to be about, though I think some of us have lost our way. These days many are behaving more like fundamentalists, so certain and protective of their opinions, they immediately demonize and dehumanize anyone who differs.

Back in 2005, after being in the news for some sort of activism that I can't recall, I received an anonymous letter stating:

It is great to live in a country where you have the freedom to demonstrate how little you understand the world. You can freely demonstrate your stupidity and not be subject to

¹ I Peter 1:12.

² James 1:25.

³ Luke 24:12.

⁴ John 20:5.

Government interference. Since you have demonstrated your stupidity and lack of understanding, I feel you should be rewarded with your own sign. So, in the words of a well-known comedian, “Here’s your sign.”

In large bold letters smack in the middle of a second page were the words, “I Am Stupid.” I’ve proudly kept the sign to this day, although I still don’t know who gifted me with this prized possession. I’m guessing it was my revered college philosophy professor, finally expressing pride in and rewarding me for my philosophical growth. For, I agree, it really is wonderful to live in a society where we can demonstrate how little we understand of the world, *παρακλυτο*. As a reward for demonstrating my “stupidity and lack of understanding,” he sent me my very own “I Am Stupid” sign. I’m sure that must be it. For it is a prize any philosopher would cherish.

Whoever sent it, the point is that we don’t need to hear there are no stupid questions. That’s false. All genuine questions are stupid and require risk. So we need, instead, to be encouraged to be okay, even delighted, to ask stupid questions. It’s okay to bend low, to put ourselves in awkward positions, to let our plumber’s crack smile, if it means an opportunity to encounter life’s mysteries, and to truly learn new things. That’s the heart of the authentic religious experience. As the heretical theologian Matthew Fox says, “religious experience... begins with awe and wonder.”⁵

When considering this, I’m often reminded of William James’s celebrated book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. At the very start of his classic 500-plus page manuscript, we find an almost unassuming statement, “I speak not now of your ordinary religious believer who follows the conventional observances of his country, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, or Mohammedan. His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit.”⁶ Now here’s the remarkable part, he refers to all of these as, “second-hand religious life,” adding, “it would profit us little to study [them].”⁷ Think about it! A 500-page book about the varieties of religious experience that begins by announcing it would be meaningless to talk about the major religions of the world, which James never says another word about.

Authentic religion isn’t about dogma or certainty. Dogma and certainty is the death of religion. It’s the death of genuine religious experience. Genuine religious experience means being brave enough to let our ideas of reality disintegrate around us so we can have a genuine mind-altering, consciousness-expanding experience.

⁵ Fox, Mathew, *Wrestling with the Prophets*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1995, p. 37.

⁶ James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, forward by Jacques Barzun, A Mentor Book, New American Library, New York, NY, 1958, p. 24.

⁷ Ibid.

Some of you may recall me speaking in the past of a meeting I had with a delegation of Muslims from Afghanistan back in 2010. I was still living in Louisville then, and we happened to be near Clifton Unitarian Church, where I was minister, when it came time for the delegation's noontime prayers. I offered the use of our sanctuary. Although grateful, they were visibly nervous about accepting my invitation and huddled together to discuss the matter. Eventually the translator asked, "They want to know what goes on in your church?" I wasn't quite sure what they meant, so I started describing our usual order of service, at which point the translator interrupted, "They want to know if there are any crosses or if you pray in it," which, apparently, would have made it unsuitable. "Oh no," I chuckled, "You won't find any crosses of praying going on in our church."

I then explained a little about Unitarian Universalism, of how we're open to being inspired by all religions, including Islam, but are not bound by any, which was satisfactory to them. After completing their prayers, which they did in private, they told me that according to their tradition any place Muslims offer their ritual prayers becomes an official mosque. So, to my knowledge, Clifton Unitarian Church is the only UU church in the country that has also been named a mosque.

It turns out the word *mosque* simply means, "place of prostration." So, by merely performing their noontime prayers there, it became a mosque, a place of prostration. That's the idea I'm getting at, that religion is about becoming stupefied before mystery. It's about bending down in curiosity, and getting bent out of shape by dogma, and about walking humbly with our God, humble about our beliefs, not certain of them.

I should also delineate the difference between *stupid*, and a couple of other words we tend to use synonymously: *dumb* and *ignorant*. The first of these, *dumb*, is different, but no less virtuous than being stupid. Being stupid is the precursor of becoming dumb. That is, when we have an authentic religious experience while bending low before awe and wonder, we become dumbstruck. We fall silent because there's nothing we can say to adequately describe any of it. *Dumb* is an Old English word that means, "silent," or "unable to speak." It is not a reference to feeble-mindedness, as it is often used. Rather, its root, *dheu*, as in "dust," actually means *cloud* or *mist*, which is the root of the word, *mysticism*. So a dumb state of mind is literally a "mystical" state of mind. It is the state of not knowing, and, thus, not knowing what to say and being wise enough not to say nothing.

"Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue,"⁸ an old Hebrew proverb says, and the *Tao te Ching* says, "the Master teaches without saying anything."⁹ Zen Buddhism says, "Those who know do not speak." Gandhi said, "In the attitude of silence the soul finds the path in a clearer light." Henry David Thoreau said, "Silence is the universal refuge, the sequel to all dull discourses and all foolish acts." The aged American

⁸ Proverbs 17:28.

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poet, W.S Merwin once said, “Now all my teachers are dead except silence.” Theologian, Walter Bauer said, “The Arctic expresses the sum of all wisdom: Silence.” And, the great American author Emily Dickenson wrote, “Saying nothing... sometimes says the most.”

The genuine religious experience is in mystery and silence, not in knowing and noise. There must be a “cloud of unknowing between you and your God,”¹⁰ says the unknown author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. “The Way objectified is nebulous and blurred,”¹¹ says the *Tao te Ching*, and that when we reach for it, like mist “it can’t be grasped.” So calling someone “dumb” ought not be considered an insult, but a compliment to one’s intelligence, even if our society too often discourages us from exploring mysteries and asking questions. As Einstein, one of the most intelligent people ever to have lived, said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. [One] to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.”¹²

The one modality we should try to avoid, however, is the opposite of both dumb and stupid. *Ignorance* is what happens when we refuse the invitation to humble ourselves before life’s mysteries, and when we are all too ready to open our mouths and speak of certainties we only think we know. Ignorance is best depicted by the three monkeys who cover their eyes, ears, and mouths to avoid anything that counters their dogmatic beliefs. More often, however, they are bullying apes who try to cover the eyes, ears, and mouths of others.

I’m afraid this is the modality our society is in today, *ignorance*, refusing to look beyond our own unfounded certainties: demonizing, dehumanizing, and punishing anyone who disagrees, while working to shut the eyes, ears, mouths, and minds of others, especially of our children, whom we’ve convinced should be terrified of hearing things they might find disagreeable. Teachers are now expected to somehow anticipate what might set their students off and extend trigger warnings before saying anything risky. Increasingly, guest speakers on college campuses are asked to sign guarantees they won’t say anything offensive, and renowned experts are being disinvited or entirely displatformed for their past thought crimes. We’ve now taught two generations that original ideas are harmful and original thinkers are dangerous and must be silenced and punished. Orwellian dystopia has become reality: thoughts have become crimes, punishable by cancelation on social media, as a kind of scarlet letter that prevents offenders from keeping their jobs, finding new jobs, speaking in public, or being welcomed anywhere again. Our society, on both the left and the right, has become ignorant.

Victor Weisskopf, of the Manhattan Project, once said of his mentor, the great quantum physicist Wolfgang Pauli, “You could ask him anything. There was no worry that he would

¹⁰ Johnston, William, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing & The Book of Privy Counseling*, Image Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1973, 1996, p. 45.

¹¹ #21

¹² Einstein, Albert in *Living Philosophies* Simon and Schuster, New York 1931.

think a particular question was stupid, since he thought *all* questions stupid.”¹³ I agree, all legitimate questions are stupid. Today, in our Age of Endarkenment, asking them not only takes humility: it takes courage. Anyone who does so, must be stupid.

¹³ In *The American Journal of Physics* (1977).