

“Why We Believe What We Believe”
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I was visiting my parents a few months ago, and my dad made a statement about a current news issue that I hadn't heard before. Something having to do with immigrants and immunizations. I Googled the topic on my phone. I found that the information he had and the information I had were not in agreement. So, I said, “Actually, Dad, it says here...” and I went on to provide him with the new information.

That was at breakfast on the first day of my visit. By evening, we had gone back and forth like that at least half a dozen times. Now, my dad is a very easy-going guy, but I could tell he was starting to get a little annoyed with me. So, I realized a couple of things: He wasn't latching on to the new information I was giving him, in fact, he clearly didn't appreciate it. Also, from his perspective, I was just criticizing him.

Given that my relationship with my dad is much more important than who's right or who's wrong, I stopped challenging him every time I suspected his information about current events wasn't completely accurate.

That night, we watched a Netflix movie called “Bernie,” about a funeral home director who was beloved by everyone in town. He was the friendliest, kindest and most considerate person you could imagine. He does the funeral for a woman's husband, and then begins calling on her, at first to see how she is faring. Eventually, they become romantically involved, and he moves in with her.

Well, she becomes a tyrant, and takes advantage of his kind nature and devotion to her. One day, something snaps in him and he takes a rifle from the garage and shoots her. He's utterly horrified at what he's done and tries to cover up the crime. But once the body is discovered, he quickly confesses.

The movie unfolds a little bit like a documentary, so you see these video clips from ordinary folks in the community, and the people are saying things like, “Bernie? I don't believe he could do such a thing.” And, “Well, even if he did do

it, he's such a nice person, he shouldn't have to go to jail for it." At the very end of the film, there's one woman who just doesn't accept the truth: "I don't care what anybody says. He didn't do it."

All the facts are there, right in front of her, and she still believes what she believes.

As a minister and someone who is genuinely interested in people, I've been perplexed by the number of people who support a candidate who seems to lack so many of the qualities that would make an ideal president. I'm also a person who, like probably all of us here, is committed to seeking the truth, whether it's something in our personal lives or it's concerning issues in the world around us. So I've been really challenged to try to understand the thinking of people for whom the facts don't seem to matter.

I've been thinking a lot about these folks. And when I find myself focusing too much attention on the perceived shortcomings of others, I know I need to turn my attention back to myself. Now there's the REAL challenge! It's much harder. Because when we focus on other people whom we see as somehow less than we are, we don't have to think too much about our own less-than-perfect selves, our own strivings to become kinder and more compassionate.

Oh, that.

Let's come back to that a little bit later, because it's much more interesting to talk about other people. Seriously, though. I want to say something about labels. The way we label people. I think labels can work two ways. When we label someone in a negative way, it can make us stop seeing a person as a fellow human being. Think of some of the choice words you might use to address the person in the car ahead of you who just cut you off. A negative label makes it easy to dismiss another person: "I've got them figured out. Nothing more to know about them." We tend to do this a lot in our daily encounters with others.

These kinds of labels are evaluative. We're making a judgment. They stop us; they close us off.

We have an enormous spiritual challenge right now. How can we keep ourselves from falling into the dismissive sort of divisiveness that has become so pervasive in our country? Saying, “Oh, those conservatives are so...” Fill in the blank. I found myself doing just that –dismissing the “other,” with whom I don’t seem to have much common ground.

And I thought back to a time when a pair of labels actually helped me to be much more empathetic toward others. I was working for a small company with my brother and sister-in-law which helped people who had too much credit card debt. With the help of an attorney, we helped them exercise their consumer rights. We taught them what to expect when a debt collector called. Many debt collectors, unfortunately, use illegal threats to try to coerce borrowers into making a payment.

Some of our clients felt much better after we explained in detail what their rights were, what the collectors could and could not actually do and how we would respond on their behalf when their rights were violated. Other clients, though, came into the counseling session extremely frightened, and their fear didn’t seem to diminish even after I explained everything to them. I’d repeat and explain in more detail the points I had made, but it didn’t seem to matter.

I saw this happen again and again, and it puzzled me. Then I had an insight. A wise person once told me that there are some people who seem to engage with life primarily through their intellect. They’re usually ruled by their intellect over their emotions. They have their I over their E. Other people, though, are ruled by their emotions over their intellect. They have their E over their I. And we all do this to some extent.

It became clear to me that some of my clients had their E over their I. I now had a way of labeling my clients that was descriptive, not evaluative. They were people for whom fear was so overwhelming, it got in the way of their being able to hear the logic and rationality of the facts. This descriptive label enabled me to be more patient and compassionate toward them. I got much further with reassurances than I did with giving them more facts and figures.

So –as we neared the first debate, I was thinking about all these things. Many of the people who support Donald Trump have a lot of fear about “the way things

are going in this country.” What if I tried to describe them in terms of their emotions vs. their intellect? I believe that many of Trump’s supporters are being led by their E over their I. This explains a lot. For folks in this state of mind, facts don’t matter. They are fearful and they want someone to reassure them.

As the debate begins, I decide that I’m going to try to listen to it as if I’m a person who lives my life with my E over my I. Suddenly, it’s all making sense! As a frightened conservative, I’m hearing promises that are very comforting. And “my” candidate seems powerful, like someone who gets what he wants. The other candidate, with all her facts and figures, is not reaching me. I’m focused on listening for more reassuring words, those promises that my life is going to feel much better than it does right now.

The fact that the world is an uncertain, complex place makes some people profoundly uncomfortable. (Max Ehrenfreund in the Washington Post) One characteristic among conservatives worldwide is that they are particularly averse to uncertainty. There’s an attraction, especially among conservative voters, to simple explanations and solutions. This is not about intelligence.

I’ve been doing a lot of reading about how humans develop and maintain attitudes and beliefs. Cognitive dissonance theory, which suggests that we have an inner drive to hold all our beliefs and attitudes in harmony. Then there’s a related tendency, confirmation bias, which is where we favor and interpret information in a way that confirms what we already believe. We all have these tendencies, whether we are liberal or conservative. That’s why new information that challenges our beliefs is hard to accept.

Last weekend I was in central Pennsylvania, hiking, and in the surrounding small towns I saw a number of Trump signs. I tried very hard not to be reactive. I tried to apply my new understandings to the people who I imagined lived in those rural houses I passed by. I am trying to keep my heart open, to be descriptive and not evaluative. I am trying to expand my compassion beyond my comfortable limits. And I refuse to allow myself to be manipulated by the fearmongers.

It would not be difficult for me to imagine that I’m superior to conservative people who are fearful and suspicious of anyone not like them –generally, anyone not straight, white and middle class. But I know that’s a trap, one that’s too easy

to fall into. There's a great song I heard a long time ago, and I only remember the first line. But that's enough. It goes, "We hate the people who hate like you..." It's a good one to keep in mind.

We may not like what a person says or does. We may even have strong feelings against a person. But underneath, we are more alike than we are different. We all know fear. We all feel pain, joy and sorrow.

Compassion is a commitment to treat others the way we would like to be treated. A commitment to be applied universally, not selectively. The goal of compassion toward all others is our greatest spiritual challenge.

Compassion even toward those to whom we feel aversion is a difficult spiritual practice. But we must try. We will often fall short. Let us here in our UUFP community be inspiration and support for each other, as together we do our part to bring more love and caring to the world. It really is true that Love Trumps Fear.