



EXPLORATION

Reason

Readings

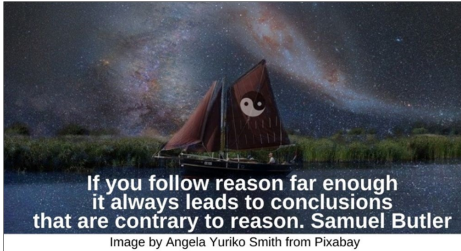


Image by Angela Yuriko Smith from Pixabay

1. *A Passion for Reason*

by Doug Muder

...The book that changed my life really shouldn't have been on my family's shelves at all.

... [It was] *The World's Greatest Thinkers*...

...If this book contained an all-time top-ten list of thinkers, I had to see it.

It didn't. But that's how I met Socrates.

He was reasonable and thoughtful. He followed an idea wherever it led, and if he had faith in anything at all, it was that knowing the Truth (whatever it turned out to be) would be better than not knowing it.

...My secret admiration for Socrates was my first Humanist religious experience.

...It's fine to describe the mistakes you found in your previous beliefs, but to describe the origin of your passion for reason is unseemly.

... [Years later,] I decided to check out a nearby congregation's Sunday service.

...The only thing I really remember about that Sunday was that the reading was from Bertrand Russell. I don't even remember what it said. But Russell would have been anathema in the church where I grew up, so it was astonishing to hear his words read from a pulpit.

It was, I suspect, the astonishment that affected me, not the content.

...I've been a Unitarian Universalist ever since.

...My old friend Socrates used to make this analogy: Reason is like a charioteer, passion like a horse. As important as it is for the charioteer to provide direction, without the horse he's not going anywhere.

...Whether we generate any horsepower or not depends in large part on how we tell our stories. Sensible stories may explain how we got here, but the visionary ones capture what moved us—and what might move someone else.

Source: <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/passion-reason>

2. *Reason, No-God, and God*

by DeReau K. Farrar

...A dominant voice in contemporary Unitarian Universalism ...believes the existence of any God is irrational. For many, even ...mentioning God in Unitarian Universalist worship is downright offensive. We are ... "smarter" than that.

The function of reason as a means by which Unitarian Universalists process possibilities is an extremely important characteristic of the faith, and has been so since at least the nineteenth century ...in America. It is this function of reason that now calls us to see that of course people of color, women, immigrants, queer people, genderqueer people, poor people, and refugees deserve the same rights and opportunities as educated, middle-class, cisgender, straight, white men.

...The use of reason is critical to Unitarian Universalism.

However, ...are we not also called to be both perfectly inclusive and respectful of others' searches for and expressions of truth and meaning?

...Atheism is a White Thing. That is not to say that there are no atheists of color. ...But, for the most part, atheism lives fairly solidly within "white space."

...People of color have, by and large, clung to their beliefs in God, in whatever form, not because they are insufficiently educated, but because it is God who has given them the strength to endure, resist, and—in some small ways—overcome systems of racism and white supremacy, in the myriad ways it has persisted, for centuries.

...Many theists need Unitarian Universalism just as much as any religious atheist might. And, I would argue that Unitarian Universalism needs theists just as much—especially at a time such as now, when so much is at stake, and we are being brought to face our own shortcomings around racial inclusion and justice.

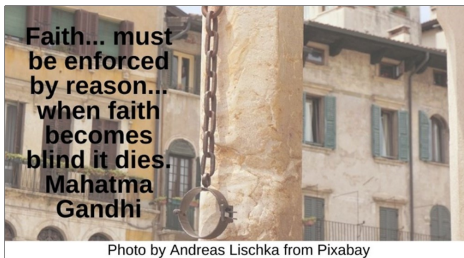
Source: <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/moving-beyond-whites-only-uu-theology>

3. *Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds* by Elizabeth Kolbert

...Cognitive scientists Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber ...point out that reason is an evolved trait, like bipedalism or three-color vision. It emerged on the savannas of Africa, and has to be understood in that context.

Stripped of a lot of what might be called cognitive-science-ese, Mercier and Sperber's argument runs, more or less, as follows: Humans' biggest advantage over other species is our ability to cooperate. Cooperation is difficult to establish and almost as difficult to sustain. For any individual, freeloading is always the best course of action. Reason developed not to enable us to solve abstract, logical problems or even to help us draw conclusions from unfamiliar data; rather, it developed to resolve the problems posed by living in collaborative groups.

"Reason is an adaptation to the hypersocial niche humans have evolved for themselves," Mercier and Sperber write. Habits of mind that seem weird or goofy or just plain dumb from an "intellectualist" point of view prove



shrewd when seen from a social “interactionist” perspective.

Consider what’s become known as “confirmation bias,” the tendency people have to embrace information that supports their beliefs and reject information that contradicts them.

...If reason is designed to generate sound judgments, then it’s hard to conceive of a more serious design flaw than confirmation bias.

...Humans, they point out, aren’t randomly credulous. Presented with someone else’s argument, we’re quite adept at spotting the weaknesses. Almost invariably, the positions we’re blind about are our own.

Source: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds>

4. *The Big Lie: Reason’s Fall to Demonic Possession*

by Rev. George Kimmich Beach
[For James Luther Adams,] Demoniac possession is itself a spiritual phenomenon. A demon is an alien and possessive power—something that displaces reason and will, something that puts individuals and perhaps whole institutions in the service of something consider greater, often a political system or cause. It spreads through the manipulative use of a “big lie,” often a slander of a person or a group and often linked to a conspiracy theory. It develops engines of propaganda. It is an ancient as well as a modern phenomenon, variously rooted in the drive of rulers to subject peoples to their rule or of discontented, dispossessed groups to subvert institutional leaders. Patriotism (the religion of nation) and religious orthodoxy (nondeviation from traditional ideas and norms) are often invoked to aid the cause or to cover its true motives.

Source: George Kimmich Beach, *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams*

5. *Celebrating Reason*

by Rev. Paul Rasor

Modernity celebrated human reason. In the psychology of the early modern period, reason was seen as a distinct faculty of the human mind. This faculty made it possible for humans to formulate ideas clearly, as well as to examine and solve problems. Because of the shift from external to internal authority, humans felt free to investigate the entire world without worrying whether their findings were in line with church doctrine or other established authority. ... Human reason became the final judge of all things, not only in science but also in the process of deciding philosophical and religious truth.

Modern rationality is individualistic and will-based. As rational beings, we are endowed with a disposition to acquire knowledge. But we seek more than knowledge. Reason also allows us to fulfill intentions, formulate goals, and take actions calculated to meet them.

...The modern emphasis on the reasoning person helped shape a new understanding of the world. When modern subjects looked at the world, they saw order. They saw phenomena that obey natural laws, laws that could be discovered and understood by means of this same faculty of reason. All this confidence in reason was justified by the advances made in the natural sciences during this period, especially in physics and mathematics. This process eventually led to deeper scrutiny of social and political institutions and contributed to the conditions that helped bring about such major social upheavals as the French and American revolutions.

Source: *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century* by Paul Rasor

6. *A Dream of Rationality*

by Rev. David Pyle

We have a dream in America of rationality. ...Connected with our vision of democracy lies the belief that we are rational creatures, and that if we could just “hear” one another, we would find “common ground,” because we are all human beings after all, capable of similar rational thought.

And yet ...the human being is not primarily a creature of reason. We are

creatures of great emotion and passion.... At its best, reason can act to temper our emotional core. At its worst, our faculty for reason has an innate ability to rationalize our basest instinctual behavior.

...[America] was founded in large part by Deists who imbued the primacy of human reason into the fabric of our national identity. In Deism, reason is seen as the key to unlocking the mysteries of each other and the universe. It is the key to human community, the key to understanding nature..., the key to understanding God through an empirical theology, and the key to a democratic form of governance.

...A fundamental aspect of our national identity is inherently flawed. The belief in basic human rationality is the wall we keep running into in seeking to understand each other. It makes us believe that the rationalizations are our true motivations, rather than the human emotions that underlie them.

...Our rationalizations have prevented us from understanding not only our own emotional selves, but made us afraid of the emotions within us. And this is a recipe for someone who is either emotionally smart or cunning to manipulate us by the powerful inner forces we have devalued and forgotten how to even see.

Source: <http://celestiallands.org/wayside/?p=2703>

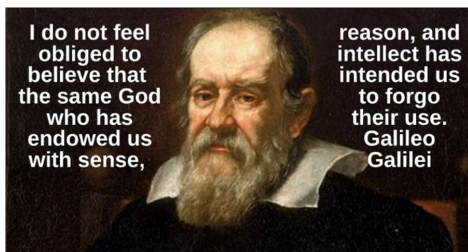
7. *Second Grade Atheist*

by Will Shetterly

In north-central Florida in the early 1960s, I heard Bible stories from Monday through Friday in public school and on Sunday at church.

...I became an atheist in second grade for two reasons. The first was a clash of faith and reason: If the Bible is true, how can it leave out something as wonderful as dinosaurs? That’s how I learned that there are two kinds of teaching stories. Some tell what’s true, some tell what people want you to believe.

My second reason for atheism was a clash of morality. One day, I told my parents what I was taught in school: Samson tied burning brands to the tails of foxes and set them loose in the fields of the Philistines. Dad asked what the



Galileo Galilei, portrait by Justus Sustermans, Public Domain

foxes had done to deserve that. And I saw that a god who rewards the burning of innocent foxes is a bad god. That's how I learned the most important distinction between stories. Some tell what's right, some don't.

My parents were trying to build a business in Levy County, but for them, conscience trumped commerce. They served blacks and whites in their restaurant, supported integration, opposed religion in public schools, and protested the Vietnam War. Perhaps it was inevitable that we would find Unitarian Universalism or Unitarian Universalism would find us. At the UU congregation an hour away in Gainesville, Dad had the rare experience of talking with people who agreed with him. For me, it was going from a place where playground bullies called me a "nigger-loving atheist" to a place where I was just another kid, as similar and as different as anyone else. Going to the UU church was like visiting a parallel world.

Source: <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/spiritual-science-fiction>

Wisdom Story

How Do We Know?

a traditional story,
retold by Doug Lipman

Some students of the Rabbi Baal Shem Tov came to him one day with a question. "Every year we travel here to learn from you. Nothing could make us stop doing that. But we have learned of a man in our own town who claims to be a tzaddik, a learned and righteous one. If he is genuine, we would love to profit from his wisdom. But how will we know if he is a fake?"

The Baal Shem Tov looked at his earnest students. "You must test him by asking him a question." He paused. "You have had difficulty with stray thoughts during prayer?"

"Yes!" The students answered eagerly. "We try to think only of our holy intentions as we pray, but other thoughts come into our minds. We have tried many methods not to be troubled by them."

"Good," said the Baal Shem Tov.

"Ask him the way to stop such thoughts from entering your minds." The Baal Shem Tov smiled. "If he has an answer, he is a fake."

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/signs/session4/how-do-we-know>

Snippets

"We can break the fourth principle down and examine ...each word. And each has importance—freedom: the radical notion that nothing ties us to any particular belief, but we can discover our own; responsible: the duty to use reason, good sense, science, compassion and intellectual discipline to find religious answers; search: the ongoing quest for that which defines for us, individually and collectively, the way to live and to be; truth: that which we are required to believe because it speaks to us with the force of fact and reality; and meaning: that which gives us the sense of purpose ...in life. ...The entire principle ...is at the core of our Unitarian Universalist religion." *Rev. Sarah Oelberg*

"We should not expect individuals to produce good, open-minded, truth-seeking reasoning, particularly when self-interest or reputational concerns are in play. But if you put individuals together in the right way, such that some individuals can use their reasoning powers to disconfirm the claims of others, and all individuals feel some common bond or shared fate that allows them to interact civilly, you can create a group that ends up producing good reasoning as an emergent property of the social system. This is why it's so important to have intellectual and ideological diversity within any group or institution whose goal is to find truth (such as an intelligence agency or a community of scientists) or to produce good public policy (such as a legislature or advisory board)." *Jonathan Haidt*

"All reasoning has a purpose; All reasoning is an attempt to figure something out, to settle some question, to solve some problem; All reasoning is based on assumptions; All reasoning is done from some point of view; All reasoning is based on data, information, and evidence; All reasoning is expressed through, and shaped by, concepts and ideas; All reasoning contains inferences or interpretations by which we draw conclusions and give meaning to data; and All reasoning leads somewhere or has implications and consequences." *Richard Paul and Linda Elder*

"In the Commission on Appraisal's 2005 report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, it was noted that, 'We agree that reason is a necessary part of religious inquiry and that the abilities of the human mind to think and choose must be brought to bear on religious questions in a disciplined and rigorous way. We disagree as to whether reason is a sufficient route to understanding by itself or whether other processes that go beyond the boundaries of reason are necessary.' In this context, note that Barbara Thayer-Bacon suggests that intuition, imagination, and emotion have important roles to play in critical thinking in addition to reason. Her term for critical thinking is 'constructive thinking,' a more holistic term."

"To think incisively and to think for one's self is very difficult. We are prone to let our mental life become invaded by legions of half-truths, prejudices, and propaganda. At this point, I often wonder whether or not education is fulfilling its purpose. A great majority of the so-called educated people do not think logically and scientifically. Even the press, the classroom, the platform, and the pulpit in many instances do not give us objective and unbiased truths. To save man from the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction. The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically." *Martin Luther King, Jr.*



“We are all in favor of emotional intelligence. Intelligence can take emotion as a privileged counseling partner. However, it does not allow the emotion to take possession of us, besiege our mind, and subjugate our thinking. The emotion must regulate our thoughts, not manipulate nor substitute them. Our perception is only a biased picture of reality, and emotions are individual or provisional. Therefore, critical thinking and emotional thinking must go hand in hand.” *Erik Pevernagie*

“In a world where critical thinking skills are almost wholly absent, repetition effectively leapfrogs the cognitive portion of the brain. It helps something get processed as truth. We used to call it unsubstantiated buy-in. Belief without evidence. It only works in a society where thinking for one’s self is discouraged. That’s how we lost our country.” *Laura Bynum*

“Critical thinking is often very uncomfortable, at least in my opinion. You have to reevaluate yourself, which means that, heaven forbid, you might be wrong sometimes. Most people don’t like neutral. They want you to have an opinion. And I’ve always been of the mind that opinions are only useful if you’re willing to change them very rapidly. I feel like the stronger your opinion, the weaker you should hold it.” *Jory Fleming*

“Critical reasoning, decision making, and problem solving—which, for brevity’s sake, I will refer to as critical thinking—have three key features: effectiveness, novelty, and self-direction. Critical thinking is effective in that it avoids common pitfalls, such as seeing only one side of an issue, discounting new evidence that disconfirms your ideas, reasoning from passion rather than logic, failing to support statements with

evidence, and so on. Critical thinking is novel in that you don’t simply remember a solution or a situation that is similar enough to guide you. ...Critical thinking is self-directed in that the thinker must be calling the shots....” *Daniel T. Willingham*

“One of the saddest lessons of history is this: If we’ve been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We’re no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It’s simply too painful to acknowledge, even to ourselves, that we’ve been taken. Once you give a charlatan power over you, you almost never get it back.” *Carl Sagan*

Questions

1. In reading #1, Doug Muder describes his encounter with Socrates, which awakened in him a passion for reason. It was that passion that led him to a Unitarian Universalist congregation where reason was extolled and truth and meaning were pursued. What value do you place on reason? On the search for truth and meaning? How have those allowed you to make a home within Unitarian Universalism? Muder writes, “Reason is like a charioteer, passion like a horse. As important as it is for the charioteer to provide direction, without the horse he’s not going anywhere.” Do you have a passion for reason? How is it expressed?
2. In reading #2, Dereau Farrar offers an analysis of how reason in Unitarian Universalism has led many to embrace atheism. He goes on to say that, “Atheism is a White Thing.” Many people of color are theists who find belief in God important and meaningful. He writes, “Many theists need Unitarian Universalism just as much as any religious atheist might.” How can we balance reason with a commitment “to be both perfectly inclusive and respectful of others’ searches for and expressions of truth and meaning?” How can

- we make tent of our faith bigger?
3. In reading #3, Elizabeth Kolbert writes that, according to Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, reason developed to help humans cooperate and “to resolve the problems posed by living in collaborative groups.” Does their assertion make sense? Why or why not? From your perspective, how is reason doing on behalf of our species? When done well, it serves us well, but the path of reason is filled with mines like logical fallacies. Kolbert focuses on the design flaw of confirmation bias where we see the flaws in other’s arguments but not our own. How does confirmation bias undermine reason? How can we address it?
4. In reading #4, George Kimmich Beach, who has explored the thought of Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams in a number of books, focuses on the demonic. This is not some other worldly force, but something all too human. Adam’s experience of the demonic and the power of the “big lie” was rooted in Nazi Germany, where he saw close at hand in Germany in the mid-30s. How does a “big lie” corrupt reason? How does it depend on confirmation bias? Can a “big lie” be successfully opposed. If yes, what is required? If no., what gets in the way?
5. In reading #5, Paul Rasor writes that reason was a primary feature of the modern period which began in the late 17th century and was advanced by the Enlightenment. A feature of this was the shift from external authority to internal authority. As Rasor writes, “...Human reason became the final judge of all things, not only in science but also in the process of deciding philosophical and religious truth.” How has reason aided you? Given current events, are we entering an Age of Unreason? Why or why not?
6. In reading #6, David Pyle writes that “the human being is not primarily a creature of reason,” but of emotion and passion? Do you agree? Why or why not? He writes that someone can “manipulate us



by the powerful inner forces we have devalued and forgotten how to even see.” Is this true? Why or why not? Does reason crumble through such manipulation of emotion and passion? Is this a tool of authoritarians? If yes, in what ways?

7. In reading #7, Will Shetterly explains why he was an atheist in second grade. More to the point, he explains how his family found Unitarian Universalism and how it made him feel: He could be himself. What brought you to Unitarian Universalism? Did it also seem, in a way, of visiting a parallel world? Why or why not? What do you value about Unitarian Universalism? Why?

The following questions are related to the Snippets.

8. For Sarah Oelberg, the fourth principle, “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning” is the core of Unitarian Universalism. Do you agree? Why or why not? While a free search seems obvious, what are the parameters of a responsible search? How is reason employed in the search for truth? For meaning?
9. Jonathan Haidt writes that our individual ability “to produce good, open-minded, truth-seeking reasoning, particularly when self-interest or reputational concerns are in play” is questionable. Does this surprise you? This is also in line with Elizabeth Kolbert’s comments about confirmation bias. Haidt says that it is important to do reasoning in a group, but not just any group. The group has to have intellectual and ideological diversity. If you were assembling such a group, who would you want in it? Why?
10. Richard Paul and Linda Elder did definitive work on the nature of

reasoning. Based on their writing, the nature of reasoning, done well, is actually quite complex. As you consider the process of reasoning, what is important to you? Why?

11. The Commission on Appraisal’s 2005 report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, concluded that reason is significant, but that it may not be sufficient. While they did not offer what more may be necessary, Barbara Thayer-Bacon suggests that intuition, imagination, and emotion have important roles in critical thinking in addition to reason. How may each of these three enhance reasoning? She proposes replacing the term critical thinking with “constructive thinking?” How might this approach and this term be more appropriate?
12. Martin Luther King Jr’s quote comes from his 1947 piece, *The Purpose of Education*, published in the campus newspaper, *The Maroon Tiger*, at Morehouse College. He wrote, “We are prone to let our mental life become invaded by legions of half-truths, prejudices, and propaganda.” How does this undermine the use of reason? He continued, “A great majority of the so-called educated people do not think logically and scientifically.” Do you agree with his concerns? Why or why not? How can this happen? Consider the climate deniers? What, if anything can be done about people who do this?
13. Erik Pevernagie writes about the role of emotional intelligence in terms of intelligence suggesting that, “The emotion must regulate our thoughts, not manipulate nor substitute them.” How can emotional intelligence enhance our reasoning? How can reasoning help with our emotional regulation?
14. Laura Bynum laments the absence of critical thinking in the world and thinking for oneself. What are the consequences of these? Have we lost our country because of this as she suggests? Do you agree that enough repetition confers truth on an idea or a lie? Why or why not? What can be done about this, especially with the reinforcement possible through social media?
15. Jory Fleming writes, “I feel like the stronger your opinion, the weaker you should hold it.” Do you agree? Why or why not? She also suggests that we struggle with accepting that we are wrong. Is that the case? Why? What can be done about it?
16. Daniel Willingham writes that critical thinking helps avoid “seeing only one side of an issue, discounting new evidence that disconfirms your ideas, reasoning from passion rather than logic, [and] failing to support statements with evidence.” Why are these important? Considering these, do most people use critical thinking or not? What are the consequences?
17. Carl Sagan wrote, “Once you give a charlatan power over you, you almost never get it back.” Do you agree? Why or why not? What are the charlatans promoting that are seducing people into giving up their power? Sagan also suggests that when we have been fooled long enough, we lose interest in finding the truth. Are there areas in which people have been losing interest in relative to the truth? Which ones? Why?