

KNOCK ON WOOD
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I don't know how many of you have noticed that I always knock on wood whenever someone talks about how well things are going in the present or tempts fate by speaking cavalierly the future. And I suspect few of you would guess at how truly superstitious I am. How could there be a superstitious minister in a tradition which has stood so proudly, from its very beginnings, in the use of reason and rationality in religious life? It must just be a quirk, not a completely irrational belief.

Now I am fully aware that scientific proof of any phenomenon demands far more than anecdotal evidence, let alone a single incident, but here is my story anyway.

When I was 20, I lived for a year in Boston working as a waitress. Wanting to get to know all aspects of the restaurant business, I took a couple of shifts doing vegetable prep. Standing in the basement chopping celery and carrots to stock the salad bar. Now I've never been especially good with knives, so maybe I was tempting fate by taking on this task at all. On my first shift, I cut my index finger – more than a nick, but nothing terribly serious. On my second shift, I was determined to be cut-free.

When Dean, the manager, walked by I told him, "Dean, I'm not going to cut myself today." I rather freaked him out. "Don't say that," he responded with a visible shudder. I looked at the large wooden chopping block in front of me. I felt so confident that I refused to knock on it. "Well, I'm not going to cut myself," I said simply.

All went well for about another half hour. Dean walked by again and said, "You know, as my old Austrian riding instructor used to tell me, 'You must fall off the horse seventeen times and get back on before you can call yourself a horseman.'"

"Dean, I'm not going to cut myself seventeen times to learn this job." Once again, I eyed the wooden chopping block and declined to knock upon it.

Dean laughed and went into a closet for something. On his way back by he said, "Well, yes with an electric vegetable slicer, it only takes once."

Dean went back upstairs and not two minutes later, I had stuck this finger into the electrical vegetable slicer. I didn't lose the tip, but it took four painful stitches.

I have knocked on wood with fervor ever since. I have the scar and to this day and a slight numbness to remind me.

While there is much folklore explaining this particular superstition, the one I like best is about wood nymphs. Trees play a powerful role in much human folklore, and this bit of lore has it nymphs live in the trees. They are not malicious spirits exactly, more like tricksters. When someone tempts fate, these nymphs take us down a notch by ensuring our bad luck. Yet they don't have particularly good hearing. So, when someone says something potentially dangerous, she has only to knock on the tree so the nymphs can't hear.

My own modern corollary, since we knock on wood after we have already spoken, is that the nymphs also don't have long memories. So, when I knock on wood, I discombobulate the critters and they forget whatever I said.

So there you have it, no matter which way you slice it, my rationality has been scarred, and I am superstitious. Even as I really do know better, I feel actively uncomfortable when I don't knock on wood. Statements like, it could be worse send me scrambling for the nearest wooden object.

This, from a minister who stands so proudly in the lineage of William Ellery Channing. Since this is a Sunday when we have welcomed new members, it seems appropriate to give a little historical background to our faith. Channing is not widely remembered today, but he was one of the great lights of his time. Alexis de Tocqueville met with him on his tour of our new country in 1831 and described him as "the most celebrated preacher and most remarkable author of the present time in America."

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, calling someone a Unitarian was an insult. People who were insulted this way were those who rejected the Calvinist view of humanity as depraved sinners in the hands of an angry God. Who rejected the Trinity and therefore saw Jesus as fully human. Who considered the use of reason as necessary to a full spiritual life.

By 1819, the growing distance between the orthodox and the liberal had come to the point of a schism. On May 5 of that year, Channing threw down the gauntlet. He embraced the epithet Unitarian and defended it with vigor and eloquence in a sermon called *Unitarian Christianity*. Also known as the Baltimore Sermon, it was preached on the occasion of the ordination of Jared Sparks in the First Independent Church in that city. When reprinted, it became a runaway best seller – all 13,000 words of it. That is nearly six times longer than any of my sermons. Channing spoke that day for more than an hour and a half.

The sermon is a masterpiece, and I fall in love with Channing all over again whenever I read it. In it, he elucidates the Unitarian view of the Bible, human nature and the nature of revelation and Jesus. He speaks so clearly to the very religious issues we face in our time. It shows that our Unitarian message has *always* been intellectually lively and so necessary in a world of religious intolerance and idolatry.

Here is just a little of what Channing said in defense of Unitarianism, and in particular on the use of reason in a religious life.

"The principles adopted by the class of Christians in whose name I speak, need to be explained, because they are often misunderstood. We are particularly accused of making an unwarrantable use of reason in the interpretation of Scripture. We are said to exalt reason above revelation, to prefer our own wisdom to God's. Loose and undefined charges of this kind are circulated so freely, that we think it due to ourselves, and to the cause of truth, to express our views with some particularity."

He goes on to say things like:

"We profess not to know a book, which demands a more frequent exercise of reason than the Bible."

"We indeed grant, that the use of reason in religion is accompanied with danger. But we ask any honest man to look back on the history of the church, and say, whether the renunciation of it be not still more dangerous."

He speaks, in words that feel eerily prescient today of the dangers of anything less than a reasoned approach to the Bible.

"The ambitious contrive to find doctrines in the Bible, which favor their love of dominion. The timid and dejected discover there a gloomy system, and the mystical and fanatical, a visionary theology. The vicious can find examples or assertions on which to build the hope of a late repentance, or of [salvation] on easy terms."

"Say what we may, God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it. We may let it sleep, but we do so at our peril. Revelation is addressed to us as rational beings. We may wish, in our sloth, that God had given us a system, demanding no labor of comparing, limiting, and inferring. But such a system would be at variance with the whole character of our present existence; and it is the part of wisdom to take revelation as it is given to us, and to interpret it by the help of the faculties [of reason], which it everywhere supposes, and on which founded."

I read this sermon and I want to stand up and cheer. If God gave us minds to think with, then we must bring our

thoughtfulness, our ability to compare, limit, infer and discern to our religious lives. How many of you came to this church because you don't have to check your brain at the door? What a relief the Baltimore Sermon must have been to all those religious liberals who had felt on the defensive for so long. And it speaks just as clearly to us, in this day, who often feel the same way. Since when do the orthodox and conservative get to define what it means to be religious in our land?

So, where do I come off being superstitious? Superstition is defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as "an irrational belief that an object, action or circumstance not logically related to a course of events influences its outcome." Or "a belief, practice or rite irrationally maintained by ignorance of the laws of nature or by faith in magic or chance." And finally, "idolatry."

Once when I blamed myself for something because I hadn't knocked on wood, a friend commented, You just aren't that powerful. As if I could change the future by knocking on the doorframe.

Yet I suspect superstition arises more from a deep sense of powerlessness. Awful things happen, and we have so little control. Events can feel chaotic and frightening.

Originally, the word superstition meant something like "standing still in apprehension or awe." Fear and/or awe seem reasonable responses to mystery and wild unpredictability. Yet for Cicero, superstition carried a less reasonable connotation. The Latin *supersito* means to stand in terror of the deity, and *superstes* means surviving. Cicero wrote, "Those who for whole days prayed and offered sacrifice that their children might survive them, were called superstitious."

By our lights, this certainly sounds like "a belief, practice or rite irrationally maintained by ignorance of the laws of nature or by faith in magic or chance." It is definitely motivated by a fear of the unknown, particularly the fear of death. Hence, such a practice helps us survive by granting kind of power over the forces of the universe that seem to have so little care for individual life.

Our faith, however, is based on the Enlightenment value of freedom of inquiry in religion as in all things. We often call our faith free of superstition.

Yet Cicero made this significant distinction: He said, "Superstition is the baseless fear of the gods, religion [is] the pious worship [of the gods]."

The Catholic Encyclopedia does not base the error of superstition on irrationality. Rather, the error is idolatry. Not putting God at the center, but thinking that we can put our own will and desire at the center of our lives. Knocking on wood shows a failure to trust God and God's purposes.

Channing did not think reason negated spiritual revelation in religion. Rather he considered reason a key tool figuring out what revelation might mean in our lives. Superstition does not stand up to reasoned inquiry. Yet there are still mysteries before us. Not everything can be reduced to provable scientific fact. Channing's text in the Baltimore Sermon was from the Letter to the Thessalonians. "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good."

Use reason well and carefully in your religious life. Think about how the Holy manifests and reveals itself. Hold fast to that which your reason helps you know is good.

Superstition and religion do arise from the same human dilemma. We are self-aware. We know we are alive and yet we will die. We wish to control our lives and circumstances in the face of this knowledge, and yet we cannot.

Knocking on wood may be completely irrational but I'm going to keep doing it. Not because I believe it makes a difference, but because it reminds me to continue to use reason in my religious life. As Channing says, *God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it.* We are all human, and often frightened and sometimes irrational and superstitious.

Neither reason nor revelation should rule our religious quest. The gift of our faith is our constant inquiry into the interplay of both. Let not your reason help you ignore the truths of Holy revelation in your life, yet neither let ungrounded beliefs take over what your good mind tells you to be reasonable.

Go ahead, knock on wood, walk around not under ladders, avoid black cats if you will. But live your religious life fully conscious and aware. Use all your gifts. William Ellery Channing would ask no less.