

France is Bacon

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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In the internet chat forum *Reddit*, where users often pose questions to each other, someone posted the question “*What word or phrase did you totally misunderstand as a child?*”

A Reddit user, going by the username “Lard_Baron” shared a childhood story from their time as a 12-year-old, admitting that when their father shared the quote “*Knowledge is power, Francis Bacon*”, they heard it as “Knowledge is power, France is bacon.”



Eiffel Tower from Montmartre

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Whenever the kid shared the quote, including what they thought was the cryptic phrase “France is bacon”, they were astounded that no one found that phrase weird. Upon asking a teacher to explain the apparently-cryptic phrase’s deeper meaning, the teacher gave an in-depth explanation about “knowledge is power”, but didn’t elaborate upon the attribution to Francis Bacon – or, as the kid heard it – “France is bacon.”

Not having the self-confidence to articulate their confusion any further, the kid was resigned to accept the phrase as part of the things they might simply never understand... until years later, when they saw it written down and finally understood the source of the confusion.

A bit of a sidebar here... strictly speaking, the quote “Knowledge is power” doesn’t fully belong to the philosopher Francis Bacon. In his work *Sacred Meditations*, the Latin phrase he uses [*Nam et ipsa scientia potentia est*] translates more closely to “knowledge *itself* is power”. It was one of his students, the notable Thomas Hobbes, who later used the version of the phrase that we are now more familiar with.

That particular detail aside, the way the quote was cited, and then long-misunderstood by the 12-year old's inability to articulate his curiosity, offers a deeper lesson on the limits of communication, and the work involved in reaching clearer understanding.

Many of us have had situations when we've misheard a phrase or a song lyric – there's even a word for these: *mondegreens*. You can probably think of a time when you've had a similar misunderstanding. As meaning-making beings, our experiences and preconceptions often fill in the blanks with something that helps us make sense of what we might have misheard, though this might lead to misunderstandings down the road.

In reading the story of *France is Bacon*, I was impacted by the kid's recognition that they might never fully understand the mysterious meaning of that phrase, accepting that sometimes we can leave room for uncertainty... until they eventually found a medium that helped them find greater clarity – the printed word.

This allowed for a fuller *visualization* of the difference between Francis Bacon, the philosopher, and “France is bacon” the cryptic phrase that the kid's own experience led them to conjure up from what they *thought* they heard in spoken speech. Sometimes, different methods and different media really make a difference in learning.

Next month, we'll be looking at a number of deep themes. And although February is a short month, it often features, and celebrates, several deep themes in our lives, including questions of justice, as part of Black History Month; celebrations of love, during the Valentine's Day holiday; exploration of family connections – and the meaning of family itself – with the relatively new statutory holiday that is Family Day. It's also the month in which fellow Unitarian Universalist communities consider our shared faith nation-wide, with some guidance from the Canadian Unitarian Council.

All of these have deep and complex uses of language, with words like justice, love, family, faith, and community – all carrying broad meanings, that can be ambiguous, as well as emotionally charged for some of us. These meanings are often informed by our own experiences and preconceptions. And we might not always feel that we have the best use of language to engage in these conversations. Language itself can be complex and nuanced, with many opportunities for expression.

A quick word of caution, my friends – when we have questions about deep and complicated matters (racial justice, religion, love, family), and we happen to lack what feels like adequate language, there is a tension between venturing into our learning edges, and remaining respectful. Some level of stumbling is inevitable – this is part of the learning process.

It is also important to remember that, in the process of stumbling, people might get hurt, even if unintentionally. It is because of this, that a fair level of contemplation continues to be important in exploring the depths of knowledge, to minimize the potential for unintentional harm.

My friends, as I have said before, one of the safest ways to pursue curiosity is to *first* listen intently, and welcome offerings of knowledge whenever they are being freely given. Then, contemplate the meanings we gather thoughtfully, and get a better sense of what meanings and wisdom we still struggle with. And when an appropriate opportunity arises, we may continue our queries, in a spirit of humility and respect.

Sometimes, the people we query are not in place where they can answer our questions, and this calls for respect as well. And very often, our own work of responsible research, through varied media and reliable sources, can bring up answers we might not find otherwise.

In our hymnal there's a hymn called *Praise the Source of Faith and Learning*, which we haven't used much lately at the church of Olinda.

This is partly because the language it uses, and how it uses it, can bring up different meanings – and emotions – among each of us. For instance, the hymn calls for a renewed “call to prayer” and not everyone in our church has a practice of prayer... or we might not always call it that. But the broader appeal that this hymn makes, in my interpretation, is toward accepting the need toward enhanced contemplation, and constant re-evaluation of our understanding, with a caution to avoid stagnating in our own assumptions and preconceptions.

One of the hymn’s verses states: “we acknowledge that our science and our art | and the breadth of human knowledge | only partial truth impart”, which – at first glance – might appear to knock, or undervalue, science. One way that I’ve read this hymn is quite the contrary: recognizing that the most inspired science requires a degree of intuition, and an openness to questioning, as well as cultivating a sense of comfort with our discomfort, accepting that there is always room for the unknown to linger, beckoning us toward further pursuit.

In this spirit, my friends, may we continue our responsible search for truth, with a sense of healthy curiosity, a measure of humility, and a respectful regard and awareness of the varied experiences and perspectives that we may come across, as we encounter all with whom we share the planet.

So may it be,
In Solidarity,
Amen

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Suggested hymn:

Hymn #158 Praise the Source of Faith and Learning

Words: Thomas H. Troeger, 1945- , © 1987 Thomas H. Troeger

~)-| Music: William Albright, 1944-1998, © 1992 Henmar Press, Inc. (C. F. Peters Corp.)

Tune commissioned by the First Unitarian Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan, for their 125th Anniversary

Tune: PROCESSION Meter: 8.7.8.7.D.

You can experience this hymn with multiple perspective by trying it with a couple different tunes:

HYMN TO JOY #29 or

HYFRYDOL #207