In May of 1962 the poet Alfred Corn wrote to Flannery O’Connor about a religious problem. It seems funny to call him “the poet Alfred Corn,” because then he was not the poet Alfred Corn, except metaphysically, but the college freshman Alfred Corn. People were often writing to Miss O’Connor in those days about religious problems or with religious requests, and sometimes she seems to be wondering, archly, which of the many madmen, fanatics, and murderers in her stories moved these people to write to her. But Mr. Corn’s letter was in no way a crank piece; he was moved to write to the great religious novelist by the common freshman experience—maybe the quintessential freshman experience—of religious doubt.

It is not hard to imagine the conversations in those Emory University dormitories which must have preceded Corn’s letter. One can almost see, for instance, the little grins of triumph on the faces of the poet’s hallmates as they prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that there could not possibly be a God because Science has shown that the world was obviously not created in seven days and if one doesn’t believe that God spoke the world into being (at 9 a.m. on April 9, 4004 B.C.) then one might as well not believe anything. Or perhaps the argument was that everything that has happened in this century—like everything that has happened in every other century—is so horrible that it proves not only that there is no God, but that if there were one he or she would be unworthy of believing in anyway, and that refusing to believe in God is somehow a sign of superior sensitivity to the agonies of human suffering. (To me those things prove only how much we still need God—if only to help us not to remain the monsters we seem to keep becoming whenever we are left on our own.) Underlying it all, I suspect, is a question about culture and intelligence—just how can anybody, the hallmates seem to be asking, who wears shoes and knows how to read and write believe in God? It’s
something that smart people just don’t do anymore, like wearing hair shirts or sitting on poles. One can also see the young poet, worsted in the oratorical displays of the dormitory, writing to the most famous Smart Christian in captivity to see if she might give him some good arguments with which to show his hall-mates a thing or two.

She didn’t give him those arguments, of course. What she did do was to show to him that his own experience—the experience of doubt, “is an experience that in the long run belongs to faith; or at least it can belong to faith if faith is still valuable to you, and it must be or you would not have written to me about this.” Now when O’Connor says this, she turns one kind of doubt into another kind of doubt. I think that half of education consists in learning to entertain richer and richer varieties of doubt. Walker Percy once described the college student as moving from an anarchic dogmatism, in which he or she believes with great certainty a great many totally contradictory things which have been dictated by authority, to a dogmatic anarchism, in which one is absolutely and positively certain that there is no certainty. One of the hallmarks of sophomores—and one of the reasons why they call them sophomores—is the totally uncritical and unskeptical acceptance of global skepticism. And although I’ve just been jeering at it, there’s no question that this kind of skepticism is not only necessary—in precisely the same way that Hume and Berkeley were necessary in philosophy—but also good in its own right.

The fight Alfred Corn was having with his hall-mates was a fight over knowledge. And although I don’t think knowledge is the only end of life any more than I think Hume and Berkeley are the culminations of philosophy—I save that honor for Kant—I do think that without the testing of skepticism and the questioning skepticism provides one is never quite grown up. The question the skeptic always wants to ask is, “How do you know that? How would you prove that?” And the assumption is that what you cannot know with certainty, and what you cannot describe with complete rigor, is finally only nonsense and flapdoodle (to use the polite term). Now in some ways this aggressive doubt, this probing and testing which casts out everything which cannot stand up firmly in the face of its pressure, is a very good thing. For one thing, skepticism frees one from being imposed upon by authority. If someone were to believe whatever I said because I said so and I’m the boss that person is vulnerable to any hocus-pocus I might want to come up with.

As Milton says in the Areopagitica: “Truth is compared in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition. A man may be a heretick in the truth; and if he believes things only because his Pastor says so, or the Assembly so
determines, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds becomes his heresie.”

We expect people’s views to arise from the examined sense of experience, and we cannot have that examined sense unless we go out and test things and see if they really are the way we keep being told they are. This is the great hope of the Enlightenment (of which Unitarian-Universalism is one of the fruits), the hope that one might ground convictions upon something other than authority, upon something other than the force of compulsions brought to bear upon our minds by parents, institutions, or traditions. It’s also the great hope of the young student.

The kind of trial this experience can be should be familiar to many of us in this room as well. People used to joke about us that Unitarian Universalism is a decompression chamber between orthodoxy and the golf course; they saw what we do here is a sort of last line of defense of a sentimental nostalgia for religion which one could be counted upon to outgrow. That’s wrong, of course, because the many of us who are “come-outers” from other faiths are for the most part not so much “come-outers” as “come back inner’s” who come to Unitarian-Universalism not directly from some other faith but after a years-long period of being unchurched. We are not people who are struggling with the first bouts of skepticism but people who have learned how skepticism tempers faith and runs together with faith. Maybe it is only that doubt that shows that faith is faith and not only knowledge, a set of facts we learned or prejudices we inherited. As O’Connor explained to Alfred Corn: “I don’t know how the kind of faith required of a Christian living in the 20th century can be at all if it is not grounded on this experience that you are having right now of unbelief. This may be the case always and not just in the 20th century. Peter said, “Lord, I believe, Help my unbelief.” It is the most natural and most human and most agonizing prayer in the gospels, and I think is the the foundation prayer of faith.”

This interplay of faith and doubt should be very familiar to us. Nobody can say precisely what we Unitarian-Universalists believe. But there is something, or we’d all be back home with the New York Times the way we used to be. Bill Schultz describes us not as people who have pared off the parts of religion that no longer suit us but as people who have refused to limit our apprehension of the holy by tying it to beliefs that cannot grow because they cannot change. He sees our faith not as a kind of plea-bargain deal with Atheism but as a kind of refusal of idolatry, a way of keeping faith with a divinity that always transcends us, no matter where we go. I think that’s right: we worship something unnamable that keeps us deeply puzzled and rebukes us just at those points when we think we’ve been really smart or really good. We can’t do justice to this thrilling mystery with any
of the language we grew up with, perhaps. But we also cannot be said to worship
the very safe and very pale Abstraction we are sometimes accused of worshipping
either. We worship something, but that something is no more the capital lettered
Source and Ground of All Being we sometimes get backed into talking about than
it is the vigorous, bearded, elderly man with a hot temper and a love of wicked
puns that we saw in the margins of our illustrated Bibles as children.

As Milton says in the *Areopagitica* “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered
virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary,
but slinks out of the race, where that immortall garland is to be run for, not without
dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity
much rather: that which purifies us is triall, and trial is by what is contrary. That
virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows
not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank
virtue, not a pure.”

To the mind concerned with knowledge and skepticism, the mind which plays
what the philosopher of education Peter Elbow calls the Doubting Game, belief
looks like a form of weakness, a form of dependence upon what Mommy and
Daddy told you but which just might not be true. The radical skeptic sees the
believer as one who keeps longing for the fleshpots of Egypt, while he sees himself
as toiling bravely through the desert in the direction of the Promised Land he
would claim not to believe in if challenged. But all this I think is to get what belief
is wrong. Does the person who want proof of the existence of God really want
arguments? And what kind of God would God have to be in order to be someone
whose existence one really could prove by argument? Does the person who wants
to know how a good God could have let all these horrible things happen really
want an *explanation* which shows that it’s all for the best anyway? God forbid.
What that person wants is some assurance that despite all appearances, despite all
the bad things that happen to us and the bad things we do to each other, that our
lives are still mysteriously valuable and that our experiences somehow make sense
even if they never quite make that sense to us. One cannot exactly describe the
kind of divinity that does this—except perhaps by resorting to sentences which
all begin with “Anyway,” or “In spite of everything” and end with “nevertheless.”
One does this by giving up the doubting game and adopting what Elbow calls the
believing game, in which one tries to envision how the world would look through
the eyes one does not already have. The God one imagines here is a *how*, not a
*what*. By contrast, the God the hall-mate is arguing about, and which the poet
can’t defend, is the God of the philosophers, a ridiculous contraption made of Ifs
and Therefores, not the living God of Abraham and of Mary and of Jesus and of
Mohammed and of Krishna.

Recall for a second those scenes in the Bible where God is asked to show that he’s for real. Sometimes the biblical authors seem to do this by way of magic tricks, miraculous cures for the good guys, miraculous trouble for the bad guys. Think for a second how God makes his case to Pharaoh by calling down the ten plagues on his head. Pharaoh never is in fact convinced, but he is certainly subdued. For the first few plagues, however, Pharaoh has no reason to be convinced, because he has his own magicians, and until God really outdoes himself with some really spectacular misfortunes they hold their own pretty well. Aaron and Moses make the land crawl with snakes. Pharaoh’s magicians make the land crawl with even more snakes. (Pharaoh says: Thanks guys. More snakes. Just what I needed.) Now Moses’ snakes eat up all of Pharaoh’s snakes, but the damage is done: clearly you don’t have to be God to make the land crawl with snakes. Maybe what’s wrong with Pharaoh is not that he doesn’t buy this sort of evidence but that like the hallmates he needs evidence in the first place.

Just what do you have to do to prove that you’re God? When Satan tests Jesus in the fourth chapter of Luke he proposes a few tricks. “Are you God or not? See if you can turn those rocks into bread.” But he does not merely ask Jesus to perform tricks: he asks Jesus to fulfill, on terms Satan sets, the very prophecies Jesus claims to have come to fulfill. Jesus is out in the desert, as symbolically charged a place as a people can imagine whose chief item of sacred history is a forty-year sojourn in that same desert, and what Satan is asking for is for Jesus to repeat, under conditions Satan has laid down, one of the chief miracles of that sojourn, the appearance of the manna from heaven. When Satan takes Jesus up to the top of a mountain and shows him all the lands he can have (if he cuts the right deal), Satan seems to be having Jesus repeat the experience Moses had on Mt. Pisgah, where he too got a glimpse of the promised land (which, however, he was never to enter). And in his last test, in which he sets Jesus upon the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and remarks that if he really is God he should be able to leap from that place without hurting himself, Satan merely seems to be asking Jesus to fulfill promises which had been made in the ninety-first Psalm.

Jesus’s responses seem rather evasive. To the last challenge he replies by quoting Deuteronomy 6: “You shall not put the Lord to the test.” He leaves it undecided whether the “you” he speaks of is himself, who would test God by leaping from the tower, or Satan, who would test God by asking him to leap. What he means, of course, is that we can’t sit in judgment of God, even when we’re only asking him to be as good as his word. Now at first this sounds quite odd, as if a mother were to answer the question, “Mommy, what is the Holy Ghost?” with
“How dare you ask me such a question!” But Jesus also seems to argue here that what you can test is what you can know, and you can’t know God, because anything one knows cannot be God but only a kind of idol: either the easy kind, made of wood and stone, or the other kind of idol, the God of the philosophers, made of proofs and words. And that is a deep answer to the question Alfred Corn was asking Flannery O’Connor.

We don’t know God the way we know facts: for one thing, knowing facts doesn’t put us morally on the spot, but knowing God does. It is as if we cannot subdue God to understanding without losing sight of divinity. One can know God only as one knows a person, not as one knows a fact. In Spanish, one would use the verb “Conocer” but one could not use the verb “saber.” One speaks of some kinds of belief as a kind of weakened knowledge, as something one can’t demonstrate but will hold out for against all comers. But clearly religious belief is not like that kind of belief: it’s not a weak fact about the world but a strong fact about how one has chosen to live in the world. One doesn’t believe because one has grounds for doing so but because that belief is the ground and basis of everything else. It is what makes knowledge possible, and it is what makes it something worthy of having. One believes what one does not because the world is the way it is; rather, one believes what one believes because one is one’s self the way one is, and the nature of one’s world is a consequence, not a cause, of one’s belief. This kind of belief is partly an act of will, in that it orders and morally characterizes one’s life, and partly not an act of will, in that it is the natural expression of a deeper kind of identity than we are normally aware of in ourselves.

I think this kind of belief is finally much closer to what is good about skepticism than to what is bad about dogmatism. In her letter to Corn, O’Connor notes that a lot of the nineteenth century Biblical scholarship which in the nineteenth century was thought to undermine religious faith and to promote atheism and whatnot is nowadays taught in divinity school and seems to be no particular threat to belief. Those who lost their faith because the of the Higher Criticism, it turns out, could better have hung on in blind trust. Now this seems to mean that that skepticism which refuses to be imposed upon and which discards all things which cannot be proven is hardly as liberating a thing as it seems, for it causes us to throw out various babies with all the dirty bathwater, and leads us, in supreme self-confidence, to sweeping renunciations which turn out to be blunders.

But those blunders are very salutary. I don’t think anyone can truly claim to be grown up who has not outgrown at least two sets of grand convictions and who has not grandly made of fool of himself or herself by passionate devotion to what has turned out to be a mistaken cause. One of the big lessons about learning is how
little one learns from learning and how often confident pronouncements turn out to be wrong. One must finally hold an idea at arm’s length, or else one will forever be swept away into foolishness by the first clever fellow with a better argument than one’s own. One has to give up the idea that the world is finally knowable, that one can get it all either from one’s own or other people’s cleverness. “What kept me a skeptic in college” O’Connor remarks, “was precisely my Christian faith. It always said: wait, don’t bite on this, get a wider picture, continue to read.” It is this that O’Connor calls Christian skepticism. “It will keep you free—not free,” she says, “to do anything you please, but free to be formed by something larger than your own intellect or the intellects of those around you.”

It is this kind of freedom that Paul calls Christian freedom. It is not just the freedom to be yourself. It is also the freedom to be more than yourself, the freedom which springs one from the double-binds and impasses we keep living our way into. Sometimes we can feel this experience of freedom directly—this is the experience of redemption which the terrifying Puritan divines sought to give to their hearers, using their visions of human wrong and sin in just the way the Zen masters use their koans, those puzzling questions which tease one out of thought into enlightenment. To give them their due, the old Puritans sought to provoke us into a leap of faith, into a new kind of being, into a new and transformed identity. Or perhaps we don’t experience this grace, this transformed identity, directly, as a crisis and then a transfiguration of feeling. (I keep remaining skeptical about grand experiences of conversion and self-overthrow. These experiences should be beyond feeling, but somehow I keep wondering whether they might be only feeling.) Perhaps it can also be something more temperate, more like wisdom and less like upheaval, the ordinary conduct of an ordinary life lit by a more than ordinary radiance. I think that also can rightly be called the experience of grace.