



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Trust Your Gut

Rev. Lissa Anne Gundlach, Senior Minister
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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

At the suggestion of one of our members, I was delighted to recently make a new clergy friend in the Rabbi Susan Silverman. Susan is an American born rabbi raised in a progressive secular Jewish family along with her precocious sisters, including the comic Sarah Silverman. Susan lives in Jerusalem with her husband Yosef Abramowitz and family. Susan gave birth to her three daughters and adopted her sons at birth from an orphanage in Ethiopia. She and her husband are passionate about their journey with adoption as one of the most important decisions of their lives. Adoption has become Susan's passion as she travels the world promoting it as an option for all families, especially within religious communities. Neighborhood was privileged to host Susan and her family to kick off her US tour for her new book *Casting Lots: Creating Family in a Beautiful, Broken World*.

In our first conversation over skype, as Susan sat at her kitchen table with her husband Yosef moving in and out of the frame, I asked her how they first made the decision to pursue adoption. She replied, "I always knew I wanted to adopt, and when Yosef and I talked about creating a family I knew adoption would be a part of our journey. We have always made decisions using our intuition."

I was struck by Susan's candor, not only in the choices that she had made to create her family, but how she and her husband made the decisions they did. These choices can be so difficult for many who struggle to make their dreams of having children a reality.

How do you know what you know, and how do you use what you know to make the big decisions that will shape your future? Do you analyze the pros and cons carefully? Do you weigh the facts, read the reviews and seek out evidence? Do you talk to others to get their advice? Do you operate on "hunches," or those powerful flashes of knowing that move across your consciousness so quickly you could almost miss them if you're not paying attention? Do you "go with your gut" or "have gut feelings?" Do you pray, and step out on faith?

Most of us probably use a combination of ways of knowing, applied uniquely in each situation to make the best decisions we can in the moment. The trick is to know which way of knowing to trust at which time—when to trust your friend's advice and when to trust your gut.

Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* explored the many ways and reasons why we make decisions without too much, or any thought at all. As it turns out, our rational mind isn't always involved. Psychologist Timothy Wilson puts it this way in his book *Strangers to Ourselves*, cited by Gladwell in *Blink*:

The mind operates most efficiently by relegating a good deal of high-level, sophisticated thinking to the unconscious, just as a modern jetliner is able to fly on automatic pilot with little or no input from the human 'conscious pilot.' We move back and forth between our conscious and unconscious modes of thinking, depending on the situation.

Liberal religious people are often more comfortable living in our “conscious pilot” mode. We may be uncomfortable with the idea that anything other than reason would govern our choices. Our decisions are carefully weighed with the best information from the most reputable sources. And yet, how many of us, when pressed, would admit that our intuition has played a huge role in how our lives have unfolded, often changing the course of our lives in unexpected ways beyond reason or common sense?

In my own life, I have always struggled to find the balance of relying upon my intuition and reason to make the biggest decisions in my life. Some of my most life-changing decisions have been influenced by a sense of deep knowing that was beyond reason, sometimes even beyond “common sense.”

Take my call to Neighborhood, for example. On my first visit to Los Angeles just over two years ago, I was staying with my two close friends in Eagle Rock. While their mission to convince me to move to California was already clear, little did they know that they would play such a role in my call to this congregation. My friends drove me by the church, where I was instantly drawn to the church’s beauty and the visible signs of the amazing ministry you were doing. Even though it seemed kind of crazy, some part of me knew right then that I would be your minister. I didn’t know when or how that would happen, but wildly it did. A few months ago, I accepted an invitation to a party where I barely knew anyone, knowing that I was meant to go, only to meet the person I instantly knew would be my partner. Lucky for me, he felt the same way! I’m convinced that I am not always conscious of the ways I make decisions or how I know what I know.

Intuition is a kind of knowing that transcends conscious reasoning or unconscious thinking. One of our members gave me an amazing shirt this week that sums it up: *Intuition: I don’t know why I know. I just know that I know!*

Intuition is a bridge between the cognitive mind and the unconscious and a mediator between the wisdom of the body and the brain, interpreted by what we often call “gut” feelings.

You don’t need to travel far to know how intuition is enjoying a heyday in our culture, particularly here in the Los Angeles area. Head over to Echo Park on any day of the week and find the popular metaphysical shop House of Intuition bustling with seekers of every age eager to learn about the intuitive practices of tarot or astrology or to speak to psychics and clairvoyants. Talk to our members, and you’ll find intuitive practices alive and well in our congregation.

Like any good Unitarian Universalist, if you are like me you are wired dually as both skeptic and seeker. I want to trust my intuition, and to explore this more esoteric side of spirituality that continues to beckon me. But I want to know the science behind it. Over the past few years, science has proven that we don’t have to discount the validity of our intuition and its role in

our behavior—how we make important decisions in our relationships, in our jobs and in our lives.

Over the past ten years, the field of cognitive science, the study of mind, has developed a comprehensive and widely understood understanding of brain functioning. The key to understanding intuition's influence on the brain seems to be getting the body involved.

A 2011 study in the journal of Psychological Science used a simple card game as an illustration. Researchers created a game that manipulated participants not to rely on common strategy or widely-understood rules, but instead asked participants to use their "intuition," their "hunches" to play. The players were hooked up to a heart monitor and a finger sensor to measure their sweat secretion. According to the researchers, as the players consciously worked to understand the unfamiliar rules of the game, they self-identified that they were making decisions "on their gut feeling" or "using their intuition." Measuring their heart rates, the researchers found that their decisions were made as a result of their body's subtle changes. Those who "listened to their hearts"—literally those who listened to their increased heart rate--were more successful at the game. The player's sense of their body's reaction came first, the decision followed second.

"We often talk about intuition coming from the body—following our gut instincts and trusting our hearts," said the UK clinical psychologist Barnaby Dunn, first author of the study. "What isn't certain is whether we should follow, or be suspicious of what our bodies are telling us." Intuition, in the case of the study, was purely a result of the brain and body communicating successfully to win the game.

So how can we be sure we can "trust our gut?"

The "gut" is formally called the enteric nervous system, the term for the collection of more than 100 million neurons, two thin layers lining our gastrointestinal tract. Our gut is our body's engine that absorbs and digests, turning our food into energy we can use throughout our body. The enteric nervous system functions in an autonomous fashion from our central nervous system, containing more nerve cells than our entire spinal cord.

Not only this, our enteric nervous system is home to the "feeling" chemicals our body produces which are directly linked to our body's emotional life—containing 90% of our body's serotonin, and over half of our body's dopamine, those happy brain chemicals linked to feelings of wellbeing, sending messages of satiation and wellbeing to our brains. Our "guts" can tell us we feel full physically. They can also tell us when something is terribly wrong or just feels right. You know when you've had a feeling "in the pit of your stomach"—of nervousness or fear. Anxiety and depression have long been linked to gastrointestinal issues.

This proliferation of research has led gastroenterologists to call the gut a second brain, our "little brain" which in total is equivalent to the size of a cat's brain. Jay Pasricha, Director at John Hopkins' Center for Neurogastroenterology, is an international leader in the research. In

an interview for Hopkins magazine, he said:

The enteric nervous system doesn't seem capable of thought as we know it, but it communicates back and forth with our big brain—with profound results. Our two brains 'talk' to each other, so therapies that help one may help the other. In a way, gastroenterologists (doctors who specialize in digestive conditions) are like counselors looking for ways to soothe the second brain.

Our gut brain is intrinsically connected to our cognitive and emotional life. Antonio Damasio is a Professor of Neuroscience at the University of Southern California Department of Neuroscience and director of the Brain and Creativity Institute. Damasio has spent his career defining the connection between the brain and emotion, the physical process that produces our experience of "gut feelings," which we often identify as "intuition." In an interview with Scientific American called "Feeling Our Emotions," Damasio said:

In everyday language we often use the terms interchangeably. This shows how closely connected emotions are with feelings. But for neuroscience, emotions are more or less the complex reactions the body has to certain stimuli. When we are afraid of something, our hearts begin to race, our mouths become dry, our skin turns pale and our muscles contract. This emotional reaction occurs automatically and unconsciously. Feelings occur after we become aware in our brain of such physical changes; only then do we experience the feeling of fear. I continue to be fascinated by the fact that feelings are not just the shady side of reason but that they help us to reach decisions as well.

We are not simply human from the neck up, we must be engaged with the entirety of our bodies. Without engaging our gut, we are missing an enormous amount of valuable information about ourselves. We need to attune ourselves to practices and principles which put ourselves in touch with our bodies and allow us to reap the benefits of the wisdom is beyond the knowing of our rational minds to make the decisions, great and small, which shape our lives.

These practices could be as simple as taking time for mindful eating, which involves not only what you eat but how you eat it. Making decisions about when, how much and what to eat are among the most simple and yet most unconscious we can make. How many of us struggle with stress eating, with overeating or skipping meals? We find ourselves starving or too stressed to eat, then make poor food choices laden with sugar, fat and salt that make us feel even worse.

When we are stressed we lose touch with our gut brain-- we are less likely to be able to listen to the signals our body gives us about when we are hungry and when we are full. Mindful eating, based on Buddhist and Ayurvedic principles involves choosing fresh ingredients for your meals for their freshness and healing properties. Before you eat your meal, put your cell phone and electronic devices away, turn off your television or radio and sit in silence for a moment with your plate in front of you. Notice the color, aroma and beauty of the food you have

prepared. Reflect on the gratitude you have for the earth and the people who planted and harvested the food, the animals that sacrificed their lives, and for the nutrients that nourish and sustain your body. Try practicing mindful eating once a day and see how you are better able to be in touch with your body's intuitive signals, not just about physical hunger but emotional hunger or physical exhaustion. You may find you are not hungry for that cheeseburger, but feeling lonely, tired or sad instead.

A practice like mindful eating helps us "trust our gut," leaning into our intuition rather than ignoring the body's signals and wisdom. The realm of our "gut" is the realm of emotion and the unconscious. A place to deepen our connection to our intuition is through our dreams, full of images, signs and symbols. To truly trust your gut, you must be open to receiving information from these sources. When you wake up in the morning, write down everything you remember about your dreams and see what they have to tell you about your decision. Are there animals, people or places that keep coming up? What might they have to teach you? Or perhaps you are having trouble sleeping, plagued by a racing mind or a feeling of dis-ease about a problem you are mulling over. Write this down too.

These practices for "getting in touch with our gut" can have a big impact on our physical and emotional presence, making us better partners, better parents and friends and better leaders too. Richard Strozzi and Staci Haines have created the field of generative somatics to bring body-based practices into the realm of leadership. The strong leader is able to integrate the wisdom of the body into every decision.

As for me, as we approach the close of my first year with you here at Neighborhood as your senior minister I am learning to trust my intuition and the wisdom of my body and to bring these gifts to bear in my leadership. I know in my gut this is the place for me to settle and create my family with my incredible partner. I know in my gut that you and I are meant to live out our ministry in community together. I know we can do great things together and are creating a new vision for this church. In this partnership of ministry, we can trust.

Amen, and blessed be