It was the biggest fight of our quarter-century relationship.

And it was over a note.

Not a note as in a short letter on a piece of stationery. A note – as in music. Specifically this note (on guitar). Or this one (on piano).

They're both C. We were fighting over which C was which on the treble clef.

It all started with a song Amy was singing. She pointed to the sheet music and said the note – C – was too high for her. I looked at the same sheet music and wondered what her problem was. I could sing that C, so she sure could. She looked at me like I was an idiot. Or insane. Or an insane idiot. So I picked up a guitar and played the note.

"That's not the note," she said. She turned on our keyboard and played the same note an octave higher.

And that actually turned into a fight. A real, honest-to-goodness fight – complete with yelling, swearing, cutting remarks. Amy stormed out of the room. I pulled out a book of guitar music – complete with tabs – and showed her that my C was the right C ACCORDING TO WILCO! Did she think she knew more about music than Wilco?! Seriously?

Of course, Amy doesn't play guitar or read guitar tab, so the book didn't mean anything to her. But I thought my evidence was quite compelling.

I should point out here that neither of us is really qualified to argue music theory. She's a librarian, I'm a lawyer. Amy took piano lessons as a kid, and has kept playing occasionally since then. I learned a little guitar as a kid, and started taking regular lessons 5 years ago.

Nor was there any reason for either of us to be so invested in the right answer. We didn't invent music. I mean, sure, Amy's middle initial is C – but the note isn't named for her or anything.

And, of course there is an objectively correct answer. But it took a long time for me to think to ask Google. And suggesting that solution actually turned the fight up a notch – I'm pretty sure that was when Amy stormed out of the room. When she came back, she told me I could look it up so I would finally know I was wrong. So in a fit of maturity, I kept arguing with her instead of looking it up.

Overall, it wasn't one of our finer moments.

It turns out that for reasons that have to do with the way the guitar is tuned and played, I was mostly wrong.

But that's not the point and we don't need to dwell on it.

The point is that in my fight with my wife over something as inconsequential as musical notation, we find reflections of nearly all the points I'm going to make this morning. Those points being:

- We spend much of our time being certain about things we don't really know
- We might be wrong about any of those things
- We'd all get along better if we accepted the possibility that we might be wrong; and
- We really suck at accepting the idea that we might be wrong.

Just for clarity, by "we" I mean "people." As in all of us in this room, everybody we know, and all those people we don't know. We're all guilty of the sin of certainty, and it's making us unhappier, harder to deal with, and dumber.

Which brings me to my last point: It might be a good idea if we all got over ourselves.

That's more easily said than done. For more than half a century, studies have repeatedly and consistently come to a problematic conclusion: Once we get an idea in our head, we will go to great lengths to protect it. With no conscious thought – or even awareness – we will seek out sources and people that confirm our idea, and we will avoid anything contradictory. The alternative is to confront the dissonance of being wrong.

And we really hate that.

The idea we're talking about here is "cognitive dissonance" – the notion that when faced with new information that conflicts with something we already believe, our brains look for a way to resolve the conflict, usually in a way that lets us keep believing the thing we already believed.

And we almost never know we're doing it. As Harvard Professor Daniel Gilbert wrote in his NYT piece *I'm OK, You're Biased*, "much of what happens in the brain is not evident to the brain itself. People realize that humans deceive themselves, of course, but they don't seem to realize that they, too, are human."

And the trick we most commonly play on ourselves is confirmation bias – we automatically notice, or seek out, pieces of information that reinforce ideas we already have, and we avoid or dismiss sources that challenge our existing beliefs. An Ohio State study found that people spend 36 percent more time reading an article that aligns with their opinions. In a 2006 Stanford study, conservatives were more likely to read (and believe) news stories if the Fox News logo was next to the headline; liberals had similar reactions to headlines they thought were from NPR – but in that study, and in several other studies going back as far as 1964, conservatives were more likely than liberals or moderates to seek out sources that confirmed their views.

And the roomful of Unitarian Universalists nods sagely. That explains so much. Look at climate change – scientific studies are nearly unanimous in their conclusion that human activity is warming the planet, but many conservatives remain convinced that

there is no problem, or if there is a problem, there is nothing we can or should do about it. And as long as they stick with Fox, they don't have to listen to anything that challenges those beliefs. Or birthers – no matter how much evidence there is that President Obama was born in Hawaii, those nuts found and focused on some scrap of misinformation is actually a Kenyan-born Islamic radical sent here to infiltrate the White House.

Crazy, right? I'm totally with you.

Now stop looking at the people you disagree with and look in the mirror. The Stanford study didn't say liberals don't seek out reaffirming information, just that we tend to do it somewhat less than conservatives. But we have our own blind spots.

Liberals love science. We mock conservatives for ignoring the science of climate change, and fundamentalists for their blindness to the science of evolution. But many liberals are convinced that genetically modified crops are doing sinister things to our bodies – even though science says we're wrong. The American Association for the Advancement of Science – a prestigious, non-partisan organization of scientists which unabashedly confirms that both climate change and evolution are scientific fact – tells us that "the science is quite clear: crop improvement by the modern molecular techniques of biotechnology is safe." It is backed up in this conclusion by The World Health Organization, the American Medical Association, the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and the British Royal Society. But many liberals still condemn GMOs with as much scorn as many conservatives save for climate science.

Or how about guns. In 2003, Minnesota changed its gun laws to make it easier to get a conceal/carry permit. Liberals – including me – went a bit nuts, certain that allowing more guns out in public would lead to an increase in gun violence in our streets, stores, restaurants. We were wrong. The number of violent gun deaths remained pretty consistent. In 2000, there were 77 firearm homicides. In 2002, 55. In 2009, there were 46, and in 2010, 64.

But here's how pernicious this whole confirmation bias thing is – when I did the research on those gun statistics, research I was doing to back up the point that we liberals are just as prone to factually inaccurate certainty as anyone else, even as I was finding information that supported that particular thesis, part of my mind – the part that has long been a supporter of gun control – was trying to find a way to poke a hole in the data. Even when I was right I didn't like it.

Or how about my fight with Amy? Remember I told you I finally looked up the right answer? And a few minutes ago, when I shared that answer, did I just come out and say I was wrong? No. I said I was "mostly" wrong – implying that I was at least partly right. That wasn't just some rhetorical trick; when I wrote my notes for this talk, my handwritten outline really says "mostly" wrong. But I wasn't "mostly" wrong. I was wrong. And it's still really uncomfortable for me to say that. There's a voice at the back of my mind – no, not even the back, a voice in the solid foreground of my mind – that is trying to explain how I was kind of right, if I just look at the question in a different way based on how music is written for the guitar, which after all is the instrument I play, so ….

I can't escape confirmation bias even when I'm talking about confirmation bias.

So why does this matter? Why talk about it in church, of all places?

Well, if we don't recognize our own biases, and our powerful tendency to build them up and shelter them from challenge, we will slide ever-so-comfortably into a sense of certainty – certainty that our worldview is right, and they're worldview is wrong. And not just factually right, but morally right. Superior.

There is a principle in the field moral psychology: "Morality binds and blinds."

Shared moral guideposts bind a group together, provide a sense of connection and belonging to our group – family, party, church, whatever. But those shared guideposts can also blind us to the worth of members of other groups, to the merits of their ideas,

to the possibility that sometimes, maybe just sometimes, they might be right and we might be wrong.

This happens even when the actual differences between us aren't all that great. In a 2013 study, Stanford professor Shanto Iyengar finds that even though the nation today is measurably more partisan than it has been in 40 years, and that members of partisan groups disdain members of other groups more than ever, most Americans don't really disagree all that dramatically on the actual issues. In academic speak:

> All told, despite the absence of sharp ideological or partisan divergence in their policy preferences, Americans increasingly dislike people and groups on the other side of the political divide. Heightened affective polarization has widened the reach of partisan cues; party affiliation increasingly constrains social and personal ties.

Translation: Most of us aren't actually that far apart in our political beliefs. But we really dislike people from the other party anyway. And so we don't talk – or listen – to them.

In theory, that shouldn't be hard to fix. We could talk to each other. As Pema Chodron recognizes in her essay Choosing Peace, we all have the intelligence and wisdom that can be tools of peacemaking and happiness. "But this intelligence is obscured by emotional reactivity when our experience becomes more about us than about them, more about self than about other." There is a Tibetan term for this: *shenpa*, the "hook in our mind that snags us and prevents us from being open and receptive."

And what does this have to do with Unitarian Universalists? A faith tradition rooted in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and in seeing the inherent worth and dignity of all persons?

In answer, allow me to tell a joke: Why are UUs such terrible singers? Because we're too busy reading ahead to make sure we agree with the next verse.

For a church committed to the idea of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, we pretty easily get snagged on the idea that we should agree with what is said or done in this place. For years we have debated – sometimes quietly, sometimes not so quietly – whether to call what we do here each Sunday morning "worship." We agonize over whether we should use overtly religious language – do we invoke God, some amorphous "Spirit of Life" or a cold and uncaring universe? Should we mention prayer? Heaven? Are we even a religion? Years ago, when an early interim minister passed out small paper cups with sliced grapes in them as part of worship service, members complained to her that it was too much like communion and didn't have any place here. We don't believe in that spiritual crap.

Let's put aside for a moment the fact that some UUs – including UUs at this church – do believe in, find truth and meaning in, that spiritual crap. Let's pretend we're a monolithic collection of skeptical nonbelievers. Does that mean we shouldn't be confronted every now and then by the possibility that there is something to those spiritual beliefs? Does it mean we shouldn't hear about faith ideas shared by the vast majority of the people in the world? Should we come to service on Sunday morning safe in the expectation that our disbelief will be coddled? That our view of not just the world, but of ultimate meaning, will rest unchallenged? That we'll never be faced with ideas that might make us change our minds?

God, I hope not. Skepticism is all well and good – I'm a big fan personally – but we doubters and nonbelievers have to be prepared to turn our well-honed skeptical eyes on our own doubt. If we don't, doubt turns into its own perverse sort of certainty.

See, we can't keep pretending there aren't people sitting with us who do believe in a God of some nature, in a life beyond this one, in a spiritual realm connected to this reality. And we nonbelievers are guilty of the worst kind of arrogance if we simply dismiss the possibility that they might be right – and we might be wrong.

The same goes for those of us who do believe in God or some other sort of higher power. Take the meaning drawn from belief and turn it to good works, to love for

others. But respect that those others might believe something different. They probably do. And, hey, they might be right.

And I'm not just talking about believers vs. nonbelievers. My path out of the Catholic Church started with a recognition that there were many people who seemed to share a belief in God, but couldn't agree on what God was like or what he wanted from us. Were all of them right? Or none of them?

I have no idea. None of us does.

Every now and then church should remind us of that ignorance. It shouldn't reinforce our certainty; it should deprive us of certainty.

Cultivating that uncertainty, embracing that cognitive dissonance, is one way we Unitarian Universalists live our faith. You don't search for truth and meaning when you are wrapped in a cocoon of certainty. You can't really respect the inherent worth and dignity of people who don't share your worldview when you're quietly certain that whatever they believe is wrong. Oh, you can respect their right to cling to those silly, wrongheaded beliefs in an old man in the sky looking down on us. But that isn't respect. It's patronizing.

And my friends, many of us have been guilty of that sin. I know I have. Every time we say something like "of course that's what the *fundamentalists* believe," in a tone that makes it pretty clear that by "fundamentalist" we mean ignorant, misled fool who uses her religion as a crutch – and I've heard that use many times in this building – we are committing the sin of certainty. The certainty that we're right, that they're wrong, and only we are smart enough to know it.

Now you might say that they commit the same sin, writing us off as godless atheists with no moral compass. Maybe you're right. Maybe not. But I'm not talking to them. I'm talking to us. It would be nice if members of those other faiths saw our faith for the complex, life-affirming religion we see. Of course, they'd probably like us to give

them the same respect. And if you want to change minds, you should be prepared to start with your own.