

Faith and Doubt:
The Practice of Knowing without Knowing
A sermon for Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Unitarians and Universalists have been around since small communities started coming together to put the teachings of a man called Jesus into practice. Yes, our roots are in Christianity. Early Christians gathered in spiritually-centered circles to take care of each other and celebrate the beauty of life on this earth. People held to many different beliefs about Jesus and about God. Christian religious leaders argued with each other ... What did Jesus mean? How were they to live and be in the world? The tent was big and growing in response to the variety of different local cultures and human experiences. There was conversation and debate.

Then as now religion was one of the tools used by rulers to exercise power. Christianity grew in the soil of the Roman Empire where life was an experience of poverty and oppression for most people. Tolerance of Christianity alternated with murderous persecutions, depending on the particular beliefs of the emperor at the time or the political advantages that could be reaped from stirring up sectarian conflict. Sound familiar?

In 325 the Roman Emperor Constantine ended the debate and discussion within the Christian religion when he convened the Council of Nicea. He wanted to calm the social instability that comes from religious disputes. Under the Emperor's heavy guiding hand the Christian bishops voted to adopt a creed for all Christians to follow. The doctrine of the trinity – three persons in one god – was set forth as the truth and those few bishops who held out for a different view – that God is one and indivisible and Jesus was not the same as God – were sent into exile – their writings burned.

In 325 choice as a respected legitimate religious practice was abolished in the world ruled by Rome. Adherence to dogma set its seal on the Christian religion.

Nonetheless, Unitarians and Universalists survived. Then and now we were heretics, which means people who *choose* their faith. The early and later Unitarians' insisted on the unity of God. This insistence evolved throughout the centuries into the radical affirmation of individual *choice* in religious beliefs.

This holding to choice isn't about whim or knee-jerk resistance to authority; it's about making faith real! Unless we *choose* – unless we engage in doubt, debate and exploration and deeper development, our faith is ephemeral. We claim the necessity of a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” because that is what faith requires.

The Universalists took issue with the idea... derived from even more ancient religions... that the Christian God was capable of condemning people to eternal pain and suffering in a fiery pit.

Early and later Christian Universalists said ... no. God is about Love – Inclusive Love, not eternal punishment. This Universalist faith has evolved into what we call our first principle – the inherent worth and dignity of every person... It is also visibly expressed in our persistent work for social justice – because as Unit Univ I would venture to say we believe everyone deserves joy in life, even as we know there is plenty of pain.

In most religions faith equals acceptance of the teachings of that religion. The teachings define what to believe. The beliefs are not subject to proof. We are very different. We Unit Universalists look to choice and shared values to define and live out our faith.

So let's talk about this word faith ... what is it – if it isn't a set dogma or list of beliefs that cannot be proved? UU minister Tom Owen-Towle says, "...faith is *deeper* than belief or doctrine. Faith is the *energizing spirit* that gives birth to our convictions... faith is that confidence which allows, indeed implores, us to keep on moving forward even when we see partially, know incompletely and act imperfectly." (Tom Owen-Towle, *Theology Ablaze*, page 94)

The Latin word "credo" is often translated as "I believe," Owen-Towle says more accurately it means, "I give my loyalty, my heart, my *faithfulness* to ..." Credo... faithfulness is about what grips my being, what underlies and inspires the firm commitments we make in our lives. (Owen-Towle, page 95)

Unit Univ invites, encourages and urges us to take faith seriously – throughout our lives – to claim and live our values, seeking ever more depth about what that means.

Sharon Salzburg, Buddhist teacher connected with the bringing of insight meditation to the West, describes faith as "an inner quality that *unfolds* as we learn to *trust* our own deepest experience." "No matter what we encounter in life, it is faith that enables us to try again, to trust again, to love again. ... Faith links our present day experience, whether wonderful or terrible, to the underlying *pulse of life itself*." (Sharon Salzberg, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience* italics added. pages xiv-xv) Thank you, Sharon

I think of these two perspectives on faith as representing different aspects of faith. Owen-Towle's "energizing spirit" being a blaze that fuels discernment and action. And Salzburg's trust in our own deepest knowing holds us up when we lose heart and beckons us back to the "pulse of life itself" when all seems dry and broken.

In Pali, the language of the Buddha, the word for faith or confidence or trust is *saddha*. *Saddha* means to place the heart upon. Faith is offering, trusting, *risking* one's heart. In Hebrew one meaning of the word denoting faith is willingness to take the next step.

Faith is a Verb. It's about beliefs, but it's about the beliefs we develop from our experiences that propel us into living our values. Faith is what we do.

You may remember the Indiana Jones action adventure movies of the 1980's? In the third movie (1989) Harrison Ford as the archeologist and professor Indiana Jones is racing against the evil-incarnate Nazis to find the Holy Grail. He's following a series of increasingly cryptic clues. He comes to a precipice. A chasm drops away below him... with no apparent bottom. The gap from where he stands to the other rim of the chasm cannot be negotiated even with the most fantastic running leap. He considers his options – being a man of action, he doesn't contemplate very long, but he does pause ... he accepts the only way to understand the clue is to step out into thin air. This is not a rational decision ... but he trusts his analysis of the clue and he trusts his past experience of following the previous clues... He steps out... into the air... a stone moves into place under his foot, making a bridge across the chasm.

Take a moment to consider these questions for yourself: When you have come to the chasms in your life how has Unitarian Universalism helped? When you've had to make tough choices how has Unitarian Universalist faith played a role in guiding your choosing? When you've come to places of great discouragement or *deep* grief how have your experiences in Unit Univ given comfort?

About 10 years ago I wondered whether this religion could help me through a *very* hard time in my life. To give you a bit of the picture -- I had devoted myself to increasing diversity in my workplace. In response I received nasty, angry pushback, primarily from other white people. I was used to success. I was used to being liked. This push-back threw me into shock and deep confusion.

At the very same time I was also learning about being a white woman in a multi-cultural world. I was learning that behaviors I intended as supportive and helpful also carried the oppressive weight of the white woman... wanting to help and mixed right into that desire being patronizing -- not listening well, thinking I had the answers – “just let me fix it for you” attitude. As if I could! The combination of being ostracized from a place of comfortable power and seeing how I was part of the problem I thought I could fix hurled me into a chasm of shame and self-blame.

Did my UU faith hold me? Help me? Before I answer I have to tell you what my UU faith was back then. It had three convictions: maybe you have some of the same or maybe yours are very different.

One: I am called to be good where good means striving to make the world a better place – because we Unit Univ are about life in this world and it's on us to *bend* the arc toward justice.

Two: Individual hard work is the way to be good -- because there is no mystery or grace in striving for justice – it's about getting' to it and stayin' with it.

Three: Being in a congregation where I am seen in all my complications – lets me know that I am not alone.

That was my UU faith 10 years ago and I have to tell you it was firm and real... and it was not enough. It had loving community and social justice passion and personal responsibility

in it. I received wonderful pastoral care for my distress. I found compassionate encouragement and powerful learning programs for deepening my understanding of privilege and racism. But my pain was bigger. I needed something bigger, deeper, more powerful than individual human striving and learning how to be anti-racist and anti-oppressive. As vitally important as those things are ... and they are! I needed something to help me get past feeling so awful about myself. More therapy wasn't the answer – this was a crisis of the spirit – a crisis of faith.

I turned back to Buddhism. To sitting meditation and teachers who steered me to cultivating loving kindness or friendliness toward myself and others. It's also known as metta – which you offer in song every Sunday. Through being with the teachers and doing metta I connected with an ocean of compassion for my spiritual suffering. It was not a rational experience. I can only assure you I found a connection with the “pulse of life itself” through having this particular regular spiritual practice. That connection fades when I skip my daily spiritual practice but even when I let the tie get weak I do know it is there – and I know how to cultivate it. I have faith in it and it helps keep me joined to my deepest values and commitments.

My UU faith 10 years ago relied too much on individual effort and achievement. It was thin on deeply, regularly connecting with the “pulse of life itself.” It needed to get bigger. Without a mature spiritual practice I was out of touch with that which is larger than me, myself, alone. Whether we call it nature or mystery or universe, goddess or god or Life or the Interdependent Web, I suggest we are all part of something larger. And it's vitally important for each one of us to find and nourish what that connection is for us.

When I am grounded in a regular spiritual practice, I have more strength and steadiness for the rigors of being a Unitarian Universalist. We have a beautiful, powerful and challenging religion.

We're invited to find our own spiritual grounding, and practice it regularly *and* to build *communities* of faith *and* to be engaged in the world as agents of love and justice.

Being heretics who insist on choosing – we are not taking an easy road. We're signing up for the road with potholes and unexpected turns and hills and steep curves without guardrails. Where there will be chasms without obvious bridges.

We're signing up to become acquainted with each other's heartaches *and* heartfelt yearnings. To listen past what we think we know about each other. We're signing up to keep the door open and welcome in the currently unknown others who also seek a free faith, rooted in equity, compassion and justice. We're signing up to speak and to hear the new things we need to say to each other. To stay in relationship when it becomes difficult and messy and the thing we want most is to leave. That's precisely when our free faith – the kind of faith that says “I choose this” calls us into the process of *together* discovering once again the “energizing spirit” that fuels our discernment and “the pulse of life itself” that can hold us when we despair.

As we continue to nurture and grow our faith as a community together, we care for each other AND for the communities near and far all around us. Hungry families living on this island of Alameda and throughout Alameda County, our neighbors in Ferguson, Missouri, children fleeing violence and daring to cross the border into the United States, prisoners. So many opportunities for acting on faith.

But let's not become overwhelmed or discouraged by the breadth and depth of needs to be met or causes to be tended. Let us find our connections with that which is greater than our individual selves and cultivate compassionate relationships with each other. Let us keep growing stronger and clearer as Unit Univ. so that when there is no apparent way across the chasms of injustice and intolerance, impatience and sheer weariness – whether personal or collective You, me, we will step out anyway, on faith, and find the bridges we need.

And when doubt and discouragement appear and they will, let us seek remedies, reminders, reassurances like this one from Mary Oliver:

And especially it is wonderful
that the summers are long
and the ponds so dark and so many,
and therefore it isn't a miracle

but the common thing,
this decision,
this trailing of the long legs in the water,
this opening up of the heavy body

into a new life: see how the sudden
gray-blue sheets of her wings
strive toward the wind; see how the clasp of nothing
takes her in.

That is Faith.
Commonplace.
A decision to rise and rise again.
Lifting with non-rational confidence.
A knowing, a trusting... in a nothing that does embrace.

Blessed be.

Resources: *The A to Z of Unitarian Universalism*, Mark W. Harris, The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 2009
Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience, Sharon Salzberg, Riverhead Books, 2002
Theology Ablaze, Tom Owen-Towle, Flaming Chalice Press, 2011
“Heron Rises from the Dark, Summer Pond,” *What Do We Know: Poems and Prose Poems*, Mary Oliver, Da Capo, 2002

