

Faith and Reason: Must they be in Conflict?
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What I plan to offer this morning is a review of the current conflict between those who regard faith as a false guide and those who regard reason as a false guide. I will suggest that the capacity for faith is part of our human make up and has survival value. I will try to show why I believe that faith and reason need to be in balance in order to have a meaningful spiritual life. Also I will present an expanded definition of faith that doesn't require belief in a supreme being but doesn't exclude it either. I will suggest that faith encourages compassion and social action. Finally I will talk about my own journey with faith and reason and how I have attempting to balance the two resources in my spiritual and ethical journey.

Faith and reason have tended to be seen as opposing forces in recent times. Currently, some humanist atheists declare the concept of faith to be archaic, useless to rational thinking, or even destructive. They argue that if something cannot be proven then there is no meaning to be derived from it. In his book *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris goes even further in his attack on the concept of faith. He argues that the Christian, Moslem and Jewish traditions are and have been responsible for enormous bloodshed and unspeakable torture for non-adherents. In Harris' worldview "to have faith" means to believe in a supreme being, and the term cannot be applied in a more generic or nuanced way, he contends. There are only two mutually exclusive positions, either you are led by faith or reason. There can be no balance. To be fair, unlike Harris, many atheists would accept a more nuanced and expanded view of faith of the kind I will talk about later.

On the opposite pole, those in the fundamentalist community, see logic, reason, and science as potentially the enemy of a meaningful, religious life, and perhaps leading to eternal damnation. They place their faith on the Bible, or another sacred text, as the inerrant word of God that must never be questioned regardless of any scientific evidence or reasoned argument that challenges their faith. For these fundamentalists too, there can be no balance. Think of the debate about teaching evolution in public schools as an example.

Emerson had this to say regarding the blind faith in the authority of the church or the Bible: "The faith that stands on authority is not faith. The reliance on authority measures the decline of religion, (and) the withdrawal of the soul." In place of authority Emerson placed central importance on personal experience of the transcendent as the foundation of his faith. Emerson chose the middle ground of combining a personal faith based on his experience of the transcendent and the use of reason rather than authority. According to Emerson, reason is "the highest faculty of the soul--what we mean by the soul itself; it never *reasons*, never proves, it simply perceives; it is vision."

Sadly, the tension between faith and reason is even apparent in our own UU congregations. The Fourth Principle states we “covenant and affirm to and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” This principle more than any other, asks us to apply reason, logic and science to arrive at the truth. Rev. Sarah Oelberg tells us the principle honors the humanist tradition in UU and has been part of our long history of standing up for freedom of religious thought and reason even in the face of persecution and death. Michael Servetus was burned at the stake and David Franc was imprisoned until his death because of their proclamation of this principle. Ironically, Principle IV is now under attack within our own movement. Some UU leaders would have us forsake reason in order to be more spiritually inclusive.

I would like to propose, as Emerson did, that there is a place for both faith and reason in developing a personal theology as our Fourth Principle asks us to do. I will go even further to say that both are essential to a robust personal theology. It seems foolish to me to rest on a faith that is clearly disproven by reason and science. However my experience and belief is science and reason alone do not offer the sense of purpose and meaning that I am inclined to think human beings need. Without faith of some kind I would be prone to cynicism and despair especially when I think of all the desperate problems of the world. I believe faith carries people through crises and challenges. Consider how faith allowed the family members of those killed at Charleston Emanuel AME Church to cope with the aftermath of the massacre. Khalil Gibran said, “Faith is an oasis in the heart which will never be reached by the caravan of thinking.” I think we need the oasis of the heart.

On the other hand, beyond being merely foolish, there is a danger in relying entirely on unreasoned faith in making sense of life and our place in it. Consider the extreme example of a patient suffering from a psychotic disorder. He hears a voice in his head and is convinced God is speaking to him. God tells him that in order to save the world he must kill all the prostitutes he can find. Trying to reason with this man is to no avail. He has faith that he is God’s agent on earth.

If one is alarmed at the errors inherent in lopsided, unreasoned faith, one might be tempted to adopt the opposite position as Sam Harris recommends in his book. Seeing the dangers inherent in blind faith devoid of reason, one might decide that faith is a false guide. The known reality that can be proven is the only foundation upon which a solid connection to a shared reality is achieved, some atheists have argued. Is there a middle ground? Can faith and reason work together?

Imagine life for humans 10,000 to 50,000 years ago. Our ancestors would have had very little scientific understanding of the world they lived in, but they had brains every bit as capable as our own. They would have had many questions. Where did the herds they depended upon come from? What caused the rain? Why did creatures die? When we look at the cave art and figurines of these

ancient peoples we see evidence not only of their creativity but also of their spiritual searching. I saw a photo in National Geographic of an ivory carved figure, a man with a lion's head. Why did someone take the time to carve it? What meaning did it have? More amazing yet, consider the site in Turkey, *Gobekli Tepe*, estimated to be 11,000 years old, more than twice the age of Stonehenge. It was erected as a temple during the hunter/gatherer age. At this impressive ancient site are standing stones, or pillars, arranged in circles some as tall as 16 feet. They were carefully carved with stone tools. The diameter of the central structures is about 1,000 feet. There is no evidence anyone actually lived there. Instead it appears it was a gathering place. Why did a civilization that had not yet domesticated animals or developed agriculture spend the enormous time and manpower on a massive structure that served no apparent practical purpose? It seems most likely these ancient creations must have been an expression of faith of some kind. Humans have always used art, architecture, myth and ritual ceremony to help us deal with the big questions that reason and science did not, and are unlikely to answer. Art and myth are important sources of meaning and of faith, anthropologists tell us. Faith seems to be the resource humans apparently have always used to deal with the unknown, to overcome the anxiety of what could not be understood and controlled. The need and capacity for faith seem to be an essential part of existence. Much as the role of reason as contributed to our survival as a species, faith seems to me to have been playing a complementary role in human evolution. The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions says, "faith is necessary for human life and knowledge outside of religion, since it is the basic acceptance that the universe is reliable...."

Lets consider what a broader, more inclusive definition of faith that doesn't require belief in a deity might be, one more compatible with reason, and not imposed by an authority. The American Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg wrote a book entitled, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. Her intention was to describe how one can have a life of faith without subscribing to any religious dogma and without necessarily believing in a personal God. Faith has been used, and is still being used to divide the true believer from the infidel. Alternatively, Salzberg's use of the word faith "emphasizes the a foundation of love and respect for ourselves (and it)...uncovers our connection to others." She goes on to say, "...it is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience.... (This kind of) faith enables us to move forward instead of getting lost in despair." It might be fair to say that Salzberg's idea of faith is spiritual rather than religious.

Ronn defined faith as a "commitment to values that people hold as sacred, ideals which may or may not be personified by a God. It is the act of entrusting oneself to the infinite." I take his reference to "commitment to values" to mean that we act upon them, so for Ronn, faith is as much an action or a way of life as it is a belief or a feeling. In his book, *The Dynamics of Faith*, the late liberal protestant scholar Paul Tillich defined faith as the act of being "ultimately concerned with ultimate reality." For Tillich faith is separate from scientific or philosophical reality

and faith cannot be proved or disproved. It is something a person chooses and has or does not have. Doubt always accompanies faith because one can never completely know or grasp “ultimate reality.” Further he says faith is an act of courage; an act of our whole being. Tillich quotes from the Old Testament, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and all your strength.” If you eliminate the God reference, then faith is devotion to what you care about and invest yourself in, to the utmost.

Some of you may remember Rev. Galen Guengerich’s definition of faith that I spoke of last March. He said, faith is, “a commitment to live with the belief that life is a wondrous mystery, that love is divine, that we are responsible for the well being of others around us. Faith is a commitment to live fervently and devoutly, with eyes wide opened, mind fully engaged, with heart open to mystery, and soul attuned to the transcendent.”

To attempt to summarize these seemingly diverse, alternative definitions of faith I would say that it is an experience of positive qualities in oneself, a commitment to live a positive life, in harmony with others and the universal whole. It is a conscious and deliberate choice to dwell in what is most precious. It is a belief in the possibilities of a better world and a motivator to contribute to that end. Rather than a causal endeavor, real faith requires a commitment of our whole selves and lives to help create a better world.

How does that kind of faith exist with reason? Faith and reason represent two complementary pathways by which we human beings develop a spiritual life. Reason is regarded as a methodology or tool for determining truth. Here is a definition from Wikipedia: “Reason is the capacity for consciously making sense of things, applying logic, establishing and verifying facts, and changing or justifying practices, institutions, and beliefs based on new or existing information.” In contrast, faith refers to belief as it is not based on provable assumptions. Quoting from the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, “...faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” So it appears at first glance these two approaches to truth are very different ways of knowing. Enlightened faith may be based in a revelatory experience and commitment to deeply held values, while reason involves an active study and analysis of the known and knowable world. Reason and science can strip away aspects of faith that don’t stand up to realistic appraisal. The faith that is left is compatible with reason. This is essentially what astrophysicist Neil De Grasse Tyson said in a recent TV interview with Bill Moyers.

Faith in traditional religions is based on reports of divine revelations written in sacred texts, told in narrative or parable form and backed by authority. This makes the claims of religion difficult to challenge by means of reason. It may be an error to even consider such a challenge, in some instances. Karen Armstrong tells us the ancient Greeks identified two distinct approaches to truth, *logos* and *mythos*. We might regard *logos* as a “left brain” function and *mythos* as “right

brain.” You may recall that in right-handed people the right hemisphere of the brain processes in a holistic manner. It is the more artistic side and the side associated with feeling connected and with empathy. The left hemisphere is analytic; it is responsible for math and problem solving. It attends to detail. There is a purpose to the fact we have two hemispheres; two ways of knowing the world and responding to it.

Logos is close to what we mean here by reason. *Mythos*, as the word suggests, refers to knowledge derived from myth, allegory and the like. The Bible is an example of a text full of parables, and fantastic stories. Faith and *mythos* are right hemisphere functions. Because of this it would seem that sacred texts like the Bible ought to be immune from rational proof. However as we have talked about in this setting, adherents seem to want to “prove” assertions in sacred tests. Armstrong maintains to subject the stories of the Bible or the myths of other cultures to rational analysis is to commit an error. To understand a myth you must not take it literally but rather, metaphorically. Let’s take the creation story from the Old Testament as an example. Are we really supposed to believe that a creator proceeded over the course of 6 days to create the heavens and earth, separate the oceans from the land masses, inhabit the earth with vegetation, animals and finally humans? Then after all that work God rested? Rather I think this story is intended to help us marvel at the vastness, orderliness, beauty, and abundance of this world we have been given and instill a feeling of gratitude. Whoever wrote that story had no idea how the creation of the world came about. The author intended that the reader would feel a sense of awe, gratitude and faith. There is really nothing to prove or disprove in the story.

Psychologist and philosopher William James argued that reason alone is too limiting a basis for living. People have passionate concerns about which there is doubt and still find it necessary to act. James was a scientist and as such he placed a premium on empirically derived knowledge. In his essay, "The Sentiment of Rationality" James stated that faith is "belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible; and the test of belief is willingness to act," when there is a shortage of facts. On one side James sees the tough-minded rationalist and on the other the “tender-minded” idealist. The pragmatist is the mediator between these extremes, someone, like James himself, with “scientific loyalty to facts,” but also “the old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity, whether of the religious or romantic type.” So James is affirming that reason alone is insufficient and needs to be balanced by faith. James also informs it is faith that inspires us to act for the common good.

More recently, the Dali Lama expressed the need to temper faith with reason. He said, "If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change. In my view, science and Buddhism share a search for the truth and for understanding reality. By learning from science about aspects of reality where its understanding may be more advanced, I believe that Buddhism enriches its own worldview."

Before I conclude I'd like to share my own experience with this issue. As a child and teen I was steeped in the Orthodox Jewish faith. I ate only kosher foods, I prayed every day using my phylacteries and prayer shawl. I did not spend money, use electricity or ride in a car on the Sabbath (Saturday). My faith told me this was the path to salvation as the Bible, Talmud and the rabbis taught. That faith tradition bound me to a very close-knit community. When I turned 16 I realized that many of the things I was taught just didn't hold up to reason and scientific scrutiny. For many years after, I was guided by reason but I had given up my Jewish faith and along with it, my community of birth. I didn't think that was possible for me to have faith any longer and I felt a spiritual lack. I did find a sense of connection and meaning in helping others and in nature.

Becoming a UU has helped me to expand this sense of meaning and connection into a new and fuller faith. I have found encouragement on our Fourth Principle. My acquired faith is very personal to me but I will share a part of it. I feel my life and all life as a tangible extension of evolution. I am very grateful for my consciousness, and the many wondrous experiences I have had. The connection I feel to life, to others who came before me, and to my fellow human beings instills an obligation and opportunity to work for a better world. I do not believe in life after death for me as a unique person, but my faith is that all of us are connected in this great experiment of life so my life is a small part of an infinite process. My faith is that there is much that is good in the world and my job is to help extend it. I believe along with Emerson, William James and the Dalai Lama, that a healthy and meaningful spiritual life requires me to employ both faith and reason to the application of our Fourth Principle. I have used reason and its sister tools of logic and scientific knowledge to strip away from my belief system ideas that aren't real. I try to live the values embodied in our other six Principles; respect for people and the interdependent web of life, justice, peace, democracy, and love. I have faith that we citizens of the world can and must work cooperatively toward improvement of our many big problems. I seek to be open to the sense of awe and wonder and connect with others and the natural world. I strive to continuously revise my faith with the help of reason and to keep a healthy dose of doubt and humility. And I am very grateful to this community for helping me to develop and live my faith.