

## Elements of Faith for Religious Liberals

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For many UU's "faith" is one of those words that connotes a connection to a religious tradition that was abandoned and is approached now with dread or revulsion. It congers up a demand to believe a specific doctrine or dogma. That was where I was when I left the faith of my childhood and eventually joined this congregation many years ago. I want to introduce a completely different approach to the concept of faith; one that I hope will be helpful to your spiritual and ethical life without requiring a specific belief or dogma.

The New Testament book of Hebrews defines faith as follows: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." I take this to mean that for Christians, faith involves belief in things that cannot be proven. The notion that faith cannot be proven is something I agree with.

Last week Rev. Kali talked about faith as a driving force for social justice as opposed to a solitary self-reflection. She also stated that faith does not need to involve a dogmatic belief. "Faith is not something we do alone, it's not all about us, it's about the world we wish to see, the world we hope is possible." So for Kali faith is about a vision for a better, less divided and more merciful world.

My wife thinks of faith as a kind of emotional gyroscope that helps her deal with the ups and downs of life. It helps her to face a new day after a difficult time. I think we all need this gyroscope.

Elizabeth Dixon expresses the idea that faith can be a guide. She talks about faith as "a trust in life," and more than ordinary trust.

When we consider faith as one of the spiritual emotions it takes on an entirely different meaning than when it is used to designate a particular type of religious belief. If we asked someone to describe their faith, for example, we would expect to hear an answer such as

Presbyterian or Catholic or Unitarian or Agnostic. But if we ask someone if they *have* faith, the answer is likely to be much more nuanced and complex. Having faith in a general sense suggests a trust in life, a source of comfort or ease. We might say that we have faith, even if we do not believe in a personal God who is watching over us and hears our prayers, or a heaven that awaits us after we die. Faith is too broad a concept to confine to religion, and yet to call it “spiritual” implies more than just trust in the most basic sense. We might trust that we will wake up in the morning and that the day will proceed without any unexpected horrors, and this is truly a blessing for those of us who are fortunate enough to possess this basic trust. But the word “faith” in the context of a discussion of spirituality suggests something more, something we have faith in that is beyond the ordinary and the mundane.

Ronn Smith gave a talk to us a few years ago in which he defined faith this way:

I regard faith as a sacred trust in the infinite, the unknowable, or the ultimate reality. It arouses our highest thoughts and draws meaning from our deepest struggles. Trusting in God is one manifestation. But we find equally valid expressions of faith in Buddhism and humanism, which have no deity. Those who describe themselves as “people of faith” wrongly imply that the rest of us are sleepwalking through life without hope or purpose.... The conventional notion of faith lacks imagination. If I told you, “I believe in world peace,” you would understand this to be an idealization, not an assertion of historical reality. I’m afraid history offers little evidence to support my belief. But I’m not claiming that world peace actually happened or that it necessarily will happen – only that I believe it to be possible and worthy of my commitment.

Notice Ronn used the word “unknowable.” Since faith by definition relates to something that cannot be known for certain it is inevitably connected with doubt, just as the quote from the Book of Hebrews and the quote from Dixon I read. Ronn and Dixon also talk about trust in the infinite or the “beyond the ordinary,” but it does not require a specific belief. Rev. Kirk

Loadman-Copeland quotes religious historian Wilfred Smith regarding the idea that faith is different than belief. Belief is something we think while faith is something we live:

For Wilfred Smith, belief was “the holding of certain ideas.” He wrote, “Faith is deeper, richer, more personal. It is engendered by a religious tradition in some cases and to some degree by its doctrines, but it is a quality of the person and not the system. It is an orientation of the personality to oneself, to one’s neighbor, to the universe; a total response, a way of seeing whatever one sees and of handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at more than a mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of a transcendent dimension.... Faith, then, is a quality of human living.” Belief is content; faith is a process that influences the way we live, and makes it possible for us to live with meaning. Faith is a verb, not a noun.

So Wilfred Smith says faith is a way in which we connect to our own selves, to others, and to the universe. Also, faith is unique to each of us and it is something beyond belief. Buddhist Sharon Salzberg takes this further. Faith is the trust in ourselves that makes it possible to face the unknown future. She writes:

In my understanding, whether faith is connected to a deity or not, its essence lies in trusting ourselves to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely.... This is a faith that emphasizes a foundation of love and respect for ourselves. It is a faith that uncovers our connection to others....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....Faith is the willingness to take the next step....With faith we move into the unknown openly meeting whatever the next moment brings....[we] recognize that everything is moving onward to something else, inside us and outside. Seeing this truth is the foundation of faith.... With faith we can draw near to the truth of the present moment, which is dissolving into the unknown even as we meet it. We open up to what is happening right now in all its mutability and evanescence.... Faith entails the understanding that we don’t know how things will unfold. Faith allows us to claim the

possibility that our selves might change in ways that allow us to recognize and trust the helping hands stretched towards us.

In a similar way, the psychologist Erich Fromm described faith as a kind of courage to act, especially if going against the majority. He also states that ideally faith is guided by reason.

To have faith requires courage, the ability to take a risk, the readiness even to accept pain and disappointment. Whoever insists on safety and security as primary conditions of life cannot have faith; whoever shuts himself off in a system of defense, where distance and possession are his means of security, makes himself a prisoner. To be loved, and to love, need courage, the courage to judge certain values as of ultimate concern – and to take the jump and to stake everything on these values.... To have faith means to dare, to think the unthinkable, yet to act within the limits of the realistically possible; ...Faith is rooted in one's own experience, in the confidence in one's power of thought, observation, and judgment. While irrational faith is the acceptance of something as true only BECAUSE an authority or the majority say so, rational faith is rooted in an independent conviction based upon one's own productive observing and thinking, IN SPITE OF the majority's opinion.

Here is how the influential liberal theologian of the twentieth century, Paul Tillich, defined faith: "Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned." Also, "An act of faith is an act of a finite being who is grasped by and turned to the infinite." Notice again here that faith is defined not as a belief but rather as an experience and a "state of being," in other words as a verb. Notice as well that Tillich draws us to the transcendent dimension of faith by referring to "the infinite." This is similar to the others I quoted. We can be ultimately concerned with anything, farming, sports, politics, but if we are ultimately concerned with the "infinite" that is where meaning and spirituality stem from, that is faith. Also for Tillich faith involves what we care about the most and invest ourselves in the most. Tillich's term "ultimate concern" reminds me of the Biblical commandment to "love the lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and all your might." If you replace the word "God" with whatever you decide it the most

important ideal of value you are still living in faith. It is the process as much as the content that matters.

UU minister Galen Guengerich proposed similar ideas about faith. Faith defined not as belief in a supreme being, but rather the awareness of the infinite. Although Guengerich uses the word God he means something quite different from what we usually think of. By “God” Guengerich means “the experience of connection.” Guengerich says this is what UU believe: “As Unitarians, we believe all names for God point toward the same mystery. As Universalists, we believe all creation shares the same destiny.” There is Guengerich said, “One divine spirit within and around us, and one destiny before us.”

Here is how Guengerich defines “faith:”

[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.

In addition to noting that faith is an act of our whole selves Guengerich adds something to the definition that none of the others did, namely that through faith “we are responsible for the well being of others.”

Guengerich goes on to suggest steps for the daily practice of faith. These include reading, reflection, intention, and contemplation:

Begin with the **reading**: Read the text carefully several times, preferably aloud. The second step is **reflection**: Ask yourself which word or phrase catches your attention. Why that word or that phrase? You may wish to jot the word or phrase in a journal. Reflect for a short time on the word or phrase and think about what it evokes in you. Make a note or two. The third step is **intention**: Ask yourself what purpose your reading and reflection suggests for this day. Set a specific intention that you can reasonably fulfill. Maybe you identify one small change that you can make today. Jot it down. The final step is **contemplation**, in which you expand your awareness from intention to **gratitude**. Remind yourself that the world is full of

untapped wisdom and your life is full of unrealized potential. Note a couple of things for which you're especially grateful.

I will be talking later this month more about the link between faith, gratitude and the need to "pay forward" because of the blessings life has given us.

In summary here are what I take to be the most important elements of faith from the quotes I have read to you today. First, faith cannot be proven and is therefore accompanied by doubt. Second, faith is much more than a belief or a hope, but rather it is an orientation of our whole personality. Third, faith involves a deep commitment to what we are "ultimately concerned" about or what we regard as most important in life. Fourth, faith involves the courage to act even when we go against the majority or face the unknown future. Fifth, faith involves our deep connection to the infinite and the transcendent dimension and recognizes our deep connection to others, all life, and the universe. Sixth, faith involves our conviction and hope for a brighter world, and responsibility in furthering that. Seventh, faith includes awareness of our dependence on the world and others for everything that sustains our lives. Out of faith come gratitude, and the desire and responsibility to do our share to sustain a better future for everyone. So faith is the foundation of a spiritual life no matter what you believe or do not believe. Faith is the deep connection we experience, and a better world we hope for, and work to help advance.