

## **Faith: the Fabric of Meaning**

by Ronn Smith, 9/20/2009

Mark Twain once described faith as “believing what you know ain't so.” On another occasion he cautioned, “Don't part with your illusions. When they are gone you may still exist, but you have ceased to live.” His remarks touched on the paradox of faith, although I will contend that faith is neither belief nor illusion. So what is it, and where does it fit in the vocabulary of liberal religion? If meaning is the primary motivation of human life, as Victor Frankl theorized, how does faith contribute to meaning?

Reminiscent of Socrates, theologian James Luther Adams said, “An unexamined faith is not worth having.” Of course, not everyone would agree that faith should be examined. Doesn't faith mean that we accept a proposition without question? Philosopher Thomas Hobbes likened it to a pill for the sick. If they swallow it whole it may help, but if they chew it first they may not be able to keep it down. Call me a compulsive chewer, but I believe a meaningful faith will withstand self-criticism and subject itself to competing points of view. Adams was famous for building his case by citing a host of experts, to the point that a colleague joked, “Adams believes in salvation by bibliography.” Adams' retort: “There's no such thing as the immaculate conception of an idea.”

I hope to dispel the popular impression of faith as an unquestioning religious belief. Real faith is not synonymous with religion, and it provokes questions as readily as it resolves them. Unlike belief, faith does not require evidence. Notwithstanding the attempts of devout believers to set themselves apart as “people of faith,” we all have faith. It may be the sense that beauty, love and truth are worthy ends in themselves, despite their underlying mystery. It may be the conviction that our best effort is intrinsically worthwhile, without any expectation of rewards. It may be the “passionate intuition” of Wordsworth, or an all-consuming dream that shapes our reality. Emerson said, “That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character.”

People could not continue living without faith of some kind. Frankl wrote of his brutal experience in a Nazi concentration camp, “The inner hold a prisoner has on his spiritual self relies on having a faith in the future, and once a prisoner loses that faith, he is doomed.” I believe Dr. Frankl's observation applies equally to those of us in milder circumstances. We still experience loss, separation, anxiety and fear – an existential pain that demands a faith response.

Unitarian Universalists have been accused of having an indecisive faith; many are uncomfortable even talking about it. Traditionally we have focused our faith on the goodness of people. We accept without proof the universal right to be treated with dignity and the inherent capacity to treat others with dignity. Pearl Buck said, “I feel no need for any other faith than my faith in the kindness of human beings. I am so absorbed in the wonder of earth and the life upon it that I cannot think of heaven and angels.” Although some UU's do believe in God, our collective faith is expressed as a purpose or spirit rather than as a creed.

It is a mistake to equate faith to belief in a literal God. Buddhism has no deity; yet, few would deny Buddhism its place among the world's prominent faiths. Liberal Christians believe in God, but usually reject orthodox portrayals. German theologian and Lutheran Paul Tillich said literalism denies the infinite character of God and therefore becomes idolatrous. Many people perceive God through poetry, not theology. The pagan Greeks understood the mythical nature of their gods. Such gods served to personify certain qualities of human nature – good and bad – and the myths invigorated those qualities with a compelling narrative.

Tillich said there is hardly a word in the religious language more subject to distortions, misunderstandings, or questionable definitions than the word faith. He defined it as the state of being “ultimately concerned,” or surrendering oneself to an ultimate concern. Buddhist Sharon Salzberg called faith “an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our deepest experience...It is the embodiment of life's mystery, the present expression of possibility, the conduit connecting us to a bigger reality.” Religious historian William Cantwell Smith defined faith as “the state of quiet confidence and joy which enables one to feel at home in the universe.”

Drawing from these concepts, I offer a simple definition: faith is the act of entrusting oneself to the infinite. By this definition faith is a practice that bestows trust (more promising than “surrender”). Trust suggests risk, which demands courage. The word infinite implies ultimate importance (as Tillich advocated), but also denotes a vast unknown, an eternal realm – something beyond the self, which is finite. The point of contact between the finite and the infinite is “the depth of the human soul” (Tillich). Since meaning comes from seeing the relationship between the parts and the whole, faith creates meaning.

Part of authentic faith is the assurance that humans cannot comprehend the infinite. This faith makes no claims to absolute truth, historical fact or future events. It has no trouble accommodating mystery or discovery, because the only claim it makes is on one's heart, mind and soul. Tillich wrote, “Doubt and faith are poles of the same reality.” He warned that when religion suppresses doubt, the “dialectic of faith collapses” and religion becomes stagnant. Certainty removes the need for faith. To paraphrase Reinhold Niebuhr, nothing makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we are saved by faith.

Who can say which part of faith is real and which part, fantasy? Consider the Greek paradox of Solon weeping for his dead son. A friend asked, “Why do you weep, since it cannot help?” Said Solon: “That is why I weep – because it cannot help.” We cry because our troubles are beyond the aid of tears. We hope because our ultimate destiny is beyond hope. Assured immortality or guarantees against suffering would eliminate the possibility of hope, and with it, any chance for meaning. Unlike blind faith, doubt creates a sense of urgency. Philip Wik wrote, “When we doubt, we kindle the tiny flame of hope and a vision for something better.”

Not only are we destined to die, but the causes for which we live are seldom fulfilled in our lifetime. True faith demands risk and sacrifice for some larger enterprise, as in Mary Oliver's poem.

For what is life but reaching for an answer?  
And what is death but a refusal to grow?  
Magellan had a dream he had to follow.  
The sea was big, his ships were awkward, slow.

And when the fever would not set him free,  
To his thin crew, "Sail on, sail on!" he cried.  
And so they did, carried the frail dream homeward.  
And thus Magellan lives, although he died.

Spiritual growth comes, not from smooth sailing, but from rough waters and even shipwreck. Victor Frankl survived the horrors of a prison camp by rescuing hope from a sea of despair. He argued that if suffering and dying have no meaning, then neither does survival.

Since faith implies doubt, are there no absolutes? For humans, I believe mystery is absolute, and therefore so is the imperative of faith. But the response to that imperative is particular to each person, place and time. Tillich observed that while faith is a certain state, choosing the object of one's faith is an uncertain act. For this reason faith brings not only comfort, but insecurity. Unfortunately, the defense against this insecurity can be to either devote one's self to shallow, secular pursuits, or to deify the symbols of faith. I believe the deepest faith accepts insecurity as an inseparable companion. It inspires unyielding commitment to an ideal that will never be completely attained. It is analogous to navigating by the stars – one never gets to the stars but they give direction to the journey. The mistake of many religions is to exalt the symbol instead of the ideal; to obsess over reaching the star rather than to follow it.

It may be helpful to think of faith as a three-phase process: Awareness, Attitude, and Action. They are circular and mutually reinforcing. Awareness evokes the spiritual dimension; Attitude, the mental dimension; Action, the physical dimension. By this characterization, faith involves the whole person. Since reflex and conscious will are both part of the whole person, faith is neither involuntary nor intentional, but both.

The Awareness phase can alert us to beauty, love, wonder, and the sacred. It requires mindfulness and openness to new experience. Theologians and mystics may have this in mind when they speak of being grasped by some higher reality.

The Attitude phase seeks understanding and reconciliation. It is the reference frame by which we interpret and assign value to our experience. At its best, it incorporates reason, trust, gratitude, compassion, and the basis for our deepest values, reverence. Attitude is an outgrowth of free choice. Frankl wrote that everything can be taken from a person except the last human freedom – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances. "When we are no longer able to change a situation...we are challenged to change ourselves."

The Action phase is the outward manifestation of faith. It animates the values formed by our Attitude and renews our Awareness. In the saying, "leap of faith," we cannot separate the state of mind from the action. Without faith there is no leap, and without the leap, faith rings hollow. We read in the Book of James: "For as the body is dead apart from the spirit, so also faith is dead apart from works." Idle declarations have little to do with faith. The Buddha said, "However many holy words you read, however many you speak, what good will they do you unless you act on them?"

It is customary to distinguish among the various forms of faith by whether or not they promote belief in a supernatural being. But I have observed a more telling distinction: What attitude do they foster toward the natural world? Do they hold life to be tragic or triumphant? Do they hold human nature to be corrupt or noble? One can find ample evidence to support either position, as Frankl concluded: "After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips."

However ambiguous the evidence may be, the consequences of our chosen faith are profoundly different. The pessimistic faith is conservative, looking to the past for answers, derogating life on earth and waiting for redemption in another world. This kind of faith has produced doctrines like original sin, mortal life as probation, and a transcendent God (existing apart from the natural world). The optimistic faith is more generous toward this world and the potential for humans to improve it. This faith is forward-looking and creative. It allows for an immanent God (inside

nature). A member of this school, Martin Buber wrote, "A person cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human." In rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity and emphasizing the humanity of Jesus, the Unitarian faith did not demote Christ so much as it promoted humankind. Channing said of human nature, "In its vast potential lie all the attributes of the godlike we may ever know...there is a spark of the divine in every human breast."

Most successful religious movements originated from a creative and optimistic faith, even though many of them have lapsed into pessimism. The concept of a Buddha nature, reflecting a positive image of human potentiality, has inspired millions. Jesus challenged his followers to an unprecedented standard of love and mercy that revealed his faith in the nobility of human nature. The protestant reformation lifted Christianity from the Dark Ages with the notion that each individual could experience the divine without the intervention of church hierarchy. Mormon founder Joseph Smith based the most successful religious startup in American history on the perfectibility of human nature. He not only abolished the doctrine of original sin, but foresaw the day when humans would become gods.

Perhaps the creative and conservative world views both serve a purpose, to innovate and advance while at the same time preserving traditions that have worked. Evolution relies on the balance between conservative and creative forces – replication and mutation. Remarkably, genetic transcription in most species has maintained an error rate just high enough to allow for progressive adaptation, but low enough to avoid discontinuity and extinction. So we UU's needn't mourn our minority status. We're a mistake; the world can only handle so many of us!

Creative faith has an inordinate impact on society and culture. Jim Wallis noted that most of the important social movements have been fueled by progressive religion. UU's rightfully share that heritage. But will we answer the bell for the next round? Optimism can lead to an easy conscience and even naiveté. At the end of World War II Protestant liberals were accused of subtly changing the notion that humans are sinful and need redemption into the idea that they are inherently good and capable of continual perfection. This left them ill-equipped to explain the moral calamities of that era. Niebuhr rejected their feeble attempt to blame institutional failure, arguing that human nature created and tolerated those institutions in the first place.

If orthodoxy is resigned to sin as the source of the world's ills, liberalism too easily dismisses evil and too reluctantly surrenders its freedoms to fight for justice. At their extremes, both are powerless to change their surroundings. Adams bemoaned the lack of accountability within the liberal movement, what he called the "anarchy of private judgment." He complained, "There's no way of flunking as a Unitarian." The current challenge for liberal religion is to generate organized commitment out of this persistent tension between individual conscience and cohesive community – between personal freedom and public responsibility.

We cannot answer that challenge in isolation. It takes voluntary associations forging a collective understanding and vision. It matters how we define faith. The world must discard the use of the word faith and all its symbols to separate the saved from the damned. Our definition of faith should focus on connection, not separation. Faith is not the sole purview of people who believe in God. Rather, it is essential to the human condition – the act of entrusting oneself to the infinite. Faith is a free but inevitable choice that must be made each day, just as we choose to eat and drink. It involves the whole person as Awareness, Attitude and Action. Completing this circle will create meaning in our lives. The deepest faith will embrace doubt, not erase it. And the possibilities that spring from doubt will energize us to transform ourselves and the world around us.