

## **“The Trouble with Faith”**

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The trouble with faith is that we never really know if we are right. The whole idea of faith is rooted in not knowing, but in trusting without certainty, without concrete evidence or proof. Faith is a belief that does not rest upon logical material confirmation. “Faith is believing when it is beyond the power of reason to believe,” wrote Voltaire. “The way to see by faith is to shut the eye of reason,” writes an anonymous source. Augustine wrote, “Faith is to believe what you do not yet see; the reward for this faith is to see what you believe.” Miguel de Unamuno writes, “Faith is, before all and above all, wishing God may exist.”

And that is precisely the problem of faith for many religious liberals. The idea of faith, the concept of faith, often presumes a belief in or a wish for or a loyalty to a god of some sort, a power that cannot be touched or examined, something beyond our physical world imagined by others and declared as real. The trouble with faith is that it requires faith. To have faith we must risk trusting something we cannot quantify, cannot measure, cannot declare with certainty the existence of.

But Susan Salzberg, an American Buddhist practitioner, writes in her book entitled *Faith*, “In Pali, the language of the original Buddhist texts, the word usually translated as faith, confidence, or trust is *saddha*. *Saddha* literally means ‘to place the heart upon.’” “To have faith,” Salzberg continues, “is to offer one’s heart or give over one’s heart.” It means that we offer our innermost selves to the idea of something. This does not presume a deity or even supernatural powers. Faith, therefore, can be our trusting of something within or beyond us.

We can have faith without having God, we can have faith in the ability of humanity to be compassionate; faith in the power of the spirit to strive for life and hope; faith in the power of touch and of a caring presence to provide healing and comfort; faith in the divine connection we have with one another; faith that justice is always possible; faith even in God or the Holy or the Divine Spirit that is Life.

“A [person],” said Ralph Waldo Emerson, “bears beliefs as a tree bears apples.” We will believe something, he contends, whether we wish to acknowledge openly or publicly our faith or beliefs. Whatever is foremost in our minds and actions will point to what it is we believe about the world and what it is we have faith in. Faith is not a possession, but an expression of something within us; through our actions what we believe and have faith in can be observed. “[We] bear beliefs,” wrote James Luther Adams, “about [ourselves], about [others], about [our] work and [our] play, about [our] past, about [our] future, about human destiny. What [we] love, what [we] serve, what [we] sacrifice for, what [we] tolerate, what [we] fight against – these signify [our] faith.”

“In Pali, faith is a verb, an action, as it is also in Latin and Hebrew.” Salzberg continues. “Faith is not a singular state that we either have or don’t have, but is something that we do.” She contends that faith is an “unfolding process of the heart.” Martin Luther King Jr. put it this way; “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.”

Abraham took the first step and actually climbed all the way to the top of the mountain nearly sacrificing his child because of his faith. Here is the trouble with faith.

“Faith is believing in something when common sense tells you not to,” declares one of the characters in the film *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*. You must admit Abraham,

assuming his common sense was active, would have questioned God's demand to sacrifice Isaac. In a time when male heirs were vital to the continuity of ownership of property, why would God call for the death of the one who could ensure the future of Abraham's line, never mind that it was his son? What kind of God would call for such a sacrifice? And how does one have faith and trust in such a God? Can we be sure that God will stay our hand just in time if we were called to make a great sacrifice of life or limb or love? Of course not. For some, that is the whole point of faith – that we trust ultimately the will of that which we call God.

There are countless stories, both Biblical and contemporary, that tell of people, who in the depths of despair, give their lives over to God and are lifted out of the abyss. Many of us have heard or read testimonies of people who near death or during intense meditation have an experience in which they are overcome with a sudden sense of oneness with all of creation. Maybe you have been met with the certainty of those who lost a loved one or have suffered tragedy after tragedy and say they know that God has a plan greater and more comforting than we can ever know.

Many of us, thinking ourselves people of reason and intellect may look down on those who hold such faith as Abraham. We may dismiss those as crazy or ignorant or naïve who blindly follow what they understand God's will to be without question. We, as Unitarian Universalists, cannot have faith, whether in God or humanity, without question, without doubt. That is not to say there are not those within our tradition that believe strongly in God's active and guiding hand in their lives, or that there are not those who believe that karma determines the course their lives will take, or those who believe all things happen for a reason. But for many of us these beliefs were arrived at through some

process of questioning, of examination, of scrutiny. The ability to question may even have been the reason you find yourself in a Unitarian Universalist church.

“Believe those who are seeking the truth; doubt those who find it,” wrote Andre Gide. We are a religious tradition that honors and reveres doubt. In fact, our origins come from a place of doubt and questioning. Our Unitarian ancestors questioned the divinity of Jesus and the claim of a Divine Trinity. Our Universalist forbearers doubted the character of God as vengeful and punishing, as well as the existence of hell. “There lives more faith in honest doubt,” wrote Alfred Lord Tennyson, “than in half the creeds.” Wilson Mizner writes, “I respect faith, but doubt is what gets you an education.” Doubt and question is what propels us to further discovery. It is not being satisfied by past or current solutions that pulls us to seek more answers. Salzberg asserts that for faith to become deep it must be verified, investigated, tested and questioned. “It is your own assent to yourself,” wrote Blaise Pascal, “and the constant voice of your own reason, and not of others, that should make you believe.”

A famous sutra tells of a group of villagers who came to visit the Buddha. They said to him, “Many teachers come through here. Each has his or her own doctrine. Each claims that his particular philosophy and practice is the truth, but they all contradict each other. We’re totally confused. What do we do? What do we believe?”

The Buddha replied, “You have a right to be confused. Do not take anything on trust merely because it has been passed down through tradition, or because your teachers say it, or because your elders have taught you, or because it is written in some famous scripture. When you have seen it and experienced it for yourself to be right and true, then you can accept it.”

James Luther Adams suggests that the question of faith is not, “Shall I be a person of faith?” but rather, “Which faith should be mine?” And it is this freedom to choose our faith that makes Unitarian Universalism unique. Our foundations are built upon the idea that, gifted by a god or simply a result of our evolutionary progress, we have free will. So the trouble with faith finally is that we have the ability and responsibility to determine for ourselves, based on our experiences and knowledge, the truth of the universe and God and humanity.

“I do not feel obliged,” wrote Galileo, “to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect, has intended us to forgo their use.” Norman Cousins wrote, “My reason nourishes my faith and my faith my reason.” It is through investigation that we come to understand that which is mysterious and unknown. We may never fully comprehend that which is beyond us or in us for that matter, but our willingness and ability to seek, to inquire and determine for ourselves the truths we shall hold faith in, is our responsibility and our privilege. “We have no choice but to be free in the choice of our faith,” wrote James Luther Adams. And he concludes, “An unexamined faith is not worth having, for it can be true only by accident. A faith worth having is faith worth discussing and testing. No authority, including the authority of individual conviction, is rightly exempt from discussion and criticism. The faith of the free, if it is to escape the tyranny of the arbitrary, must be available to all, testable by all, valid for all.” Salzberg calls this an “abiding faith.” One that we have put to test, examined, held up against our experiences and knowledge and declared right and true for us. Not simply rejected out of anger or fear or skepticism, but one chosen in freedom. This faith, an

abiding faith, is the one ultimately we live through our actions and our words and our creation of religious communities.

“Liberalism in religion,” wrote Rev. Dana Greeley, “seeks to know the truth from whencesoever truth may come; and it accepts the dictates of reason and the findings of science, even though it also follows faith wherever faith transcends those dictates and findings.

The natural cosmos with its spiritual and moral truth is a vast unimaginable miracle that science is actually beginning to measure. Religion is our response to the one unimaginable cosmic miracle, and our relationship to each other in its presence.”