

Elements of a Liberal Religious Faith

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Why faith? For many of us “faith” is one of those words that is associated with a religious tradition that was rejected and is viewed now with dread or revulsion, or at least disinterest. The word seems to imply a demand to believe a specific doctrine or dogma. I left the faith of my childhood because of the dogma that made no rational sense to me, and I suspect many of you had a similar experience. I eventually joined this community many years ago but I wasn’t sure what I was seeking. When the word “faith” was used in a presentation or in reading I would cringe and have doubts that I was in the right spiritual community. Eventually I realized that I was seeking “faith,” but in a different form from the one I grew up with. The transformation from a fundamentalist faith of my past, to an appreciation of a liberal UU version took a number of years. I had to let go of what I thought the concept of faith meant in order to begin the journey of a new understanding. So the discussion about faith is personal for me. I am thinking many of you can relate to the challenge the word “faith” evokes.

Another reason for choosing the theme of faith is that I noticed when the topic came up earlier this year there seemed to be some confusion about it. I thought it would help to explore it together in more depth and to provide clarity, and hopefully inspiration as well.

This month I and our other presenters will share a completely different approach to the concept of faith than the traditional or evangelical versions that you are familiar with. I hope the exploration of faith will be meaningful to your spiritual and ethical life. Rest assured, a specific belief or dogma will not be advocated here. If you are carrying baggage around the word “faith,” you can set it aside to consider a non-dogmatic and more personal perspective. This month, I hope we can talk together about what it means for a religious liberal to have a personal faith.

I want to begin with a quote from the Book of Hebrews: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” [repeat] I take this to mean according to the New Testament, faith involves orienting to things that cannot be seen, meaning not provable, but are still hoped for. The notion that faith refers to something

that cannot be proven is something I agree with. Many religious fundamentalists proclaim their faith as universal fact, and seem to ignore or distort the quotation from the Book of Hebrews I read to you. With the notion that faith is something that can't be proven as a starting point I want to share with you several non-dogmatic views. As you listen, I invite you to explore which may resonate with you.

A few years ago Rev. Kali talked to us about faith as a driving force for social justice rather than simply solitary self-reflection. Recently she shared with us that faith need not involve a dogmatic belief. To quote Rev. Kali's definition, "Faith is the practice of one's spirituality. Spirituality [in turn] is how we connect to self, others, and whatever you call sacred." So for Kali, faith is about embracing a personally recognized sacredness beyond the self that allows us to connect. Rev. Kali will be talking with us about liberal faith next Sunday.

Later this month Sue will read a thoughtful talk Ronn Smith gave here a few years ago. In it Ronn 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.

Motivational speaker Elizabeth Dixon expresses the idea that faith can be a personally arrived at spiritual guide to life rather than a particular religion. She writes:

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, [as] 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.... the word "faith" in the context of a discussion of spirituality suggests something we have faith in that is beyond the ordinary and the mundane.

So again, we can have faith without aligning with a particular religion or belief. Also Recall, Ronn used the word “unknowable.” Since faith by definition relates to something that cannot be proven it is inevitably connected with doubt, just as the quote from the Book of Hebrews implies. Rev. Kali, Ronn, and Elizebeth Dixon also talk about trust in the infinite, the sacred, or that which is “beyond the ordinary.” But, again, it does not require a specific belief or dogma.

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland quotes religious scholar Wilfred Smith regarding the idea that faith is different from belief. Belief is something we think while faith is something we feel and live:

For Wilfred Smith, belief was “the holding of certain ideas.” But “Faith is deeper, richer, more personal.... it is a quality of the person and not [a] 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. [repeat]

So Wilfred Smith says faith is our unique way that we connect to our own selves, to others, and to the universe. It is a whole way of life. Again it is beyond belief and unique for each person. and we might say a core part of of person. Buddhist Sharon Salzberg takes this a step further. Salzberg refers to faith as 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 open up to what is happening right now in all its

[uncertainty].... 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.

For Salzberg, as we see, faith is a feeling that allows us to embrace the present and move into the uncertain future. There is the feeling that there is something we connect with that cares for us and sees us through challenges.

For the renowned liberal theologian Paul Tillich faith was the most important aspect of a person. He said, "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." [repeat] 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 earlier. We can be ultimately concerned with anything, but if we are ultimately concerned with the "infinite" that is where meaning, spirituality, and sacredness, stem from; that is faith. Also for Tillich, faith involves what we care about the most and invest ourselves in the most. The common ground that liberal faith communities such as UU share with more traditional religions is that faith involves a major life commitment.

Going a step further, the psychologist Erich Fromm described faith as a kind of courage to act, especially if going against the majority. He also states that mature faith is guided by reason, our own decision-making, and bravery.

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.

This definition by Fromm reminds me of what Rev. Kali and others said about faith deriving from our own understanding and being the inspiration for social action.

UU minister Galen Guengerich proposed similar ideas about faith. He defined faith 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 to the infinite." Guengerich says: "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 as Guengerich said, "One divine spirit within and around us, and one destiny before us."

Here is a broader definition Guengerich gives for "faith:"

[Faith is] a commitment to live with the [idea] 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 that through faith "we are responsible for the well-being of others." Again as others have stated, faith is defined here as a verb and an intension towards social justice work.

You may be wondering as I have, how these ideas about faith from a non-dogmatic, liberal perspective fit with the recently adopted UU Values Statement with Love at the center? To refresh your memory, the new UU Values are: Interdependence, Pluralism, Justice, Transformation, Generosity, and Equity, with Love at the center and informing all the other values. As you may remember the UU Value Statement includes a "covenant" or a solemn pledge to act on these values. We are invited to come to our own appreciation of the meaning of these values but we covenant to work together to live these values in order to help our fellow citizens and the planet. As was stated, faith is a verb, so living out our faith requires action. Our faith as UU's is expressed not by a

shared belief or doctrine, but by a commitment to work for the benefit of others with whom we share life on earth, and guided by Love. Much as Guengerich stated, “one divine spirit within and around us, and one destiny before us.” And remember Fromm stated to have faith is to live our values.

In summary, here are what I take to be the most important elements of a liberal faith from the quotes I have read to you today: First, faith cannot be proven and is therefore accompanied by doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty. Second, faith is much more than a belief; rather it is an orientation of our whole personality. Faith is a verb; it embodies action. Third, faith involves a deep commitment to what we are “ultimately concerned” with, or what we regard as most important in life and most sacred. Fourth, faith involves the courage to act even when we go against the majority or when we face the unknown future. Fifth, faith involves our deep connection to the infinite, sacred dimension and a deep connection to others, and all life. Sixth, faith involves our conviction in, and hope for, a brighter world, and responsibility in furthering that. To these I will add one more feature from my understanding: Seventh, faith includes awareness of our dependence on others and the world for everything that sustains our lives.

Out of faith comes gratitude, the deep appreciation for all we are given, and the desire and responsibility to do our share, and to invest in, and help to sustain, a better future for everyone. So faith is the foundation of a spiritual and ethical life no matter what you believe or do not believe about a deity. Faith is the deep connection we seek to experience, a better world we hope for, and work to achieve. Faith is what allows us to move into the unknown future with confidence. Our Seven UU Values provide a framework in which we can build and enhance our personal, unique path to greater faith, as well as a basis of our shared work.

