

**“Faith Works:
The Perspective of Liberal Tradition”**

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SERMON

If religion is only the belief in a supernatural being and related worship, then our community and tradition may be an alternative to religion. If, however, there are other ways of understanding religion, then ours may be an alternative religion and not an alternative to religion.

I believe strongly that Unitarian Universalism is a religion, and that our community is a church and not a lecture and debate society. This sermon is in the tradition of an alternative or liberal interpretation of religion and worship. Religious liberals are devoted to an open and progressive faith gathered within a community of seekers. Although our way of faith is different from others, it is a way of faith and an invitation to explore.

Whatever faith is, at its best, it is said to help with survival. For many, faith provides a positive attitude, a hopeful outlook.

Yet, there can be too much faith or a kind of blind faith. For some people, things unseen reassure faith. This kind of faith is a belief that God will take care of all things, and whatever is going on will be okay, because it is God's will.

The Pauline text, Hebrews 11:1-3, says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." This surrender to things unseen and into the unknowable is a stumbling block for most Unitarian Universalists, who are reluctant to abandon reason, and are skeptical about things unknown. We doubt leaps of faith, leaps into absurdity, and requests to believe unquestioningly. We are reticent to accept this kind of simplistic faith.

Yet, some UUs who claim to reject faith are the very same people who believe that technology and human ingenuity will always save us...that there is nothing that science will not discover. I have heard some UUs say that there is no such thing as the mystery of existence, only things yet to be known. It is only a matter of time until all things will be known. This too may well be a too-simple faith.

Most of us want a subtler, more enduring and more sustaining faith than either of these. We want to use both our reason and our hearts. We want both truth and wisdom in finding our way through life. We want meaning that includes doubt. Religious liberals find that certainty alone is a dangerous path. Any image of Life must include ambiguity and uncertainty to be truly useful or an accurate reflection of Life. Why? Consider this unfortunate story.

A man boards a bus as it leaves the terminal. He wears an overcoat. Beneath the coat he is wearing a bomb. His pockets are filled with nails, ball bearings and rat poison. The bus is crowded. At each stop, heading for the center of town, more and more people get on board. He is happy. The bus is full now. With a press of the button he destroys himself and most of the people on the bus. Because he has filled his pockets, he has ensured further casualties on the street.

Later, his parents learn of his death. Although they are sad, they also feel tremendous pride at their son's accomplishment. He has prepared the way. They are certain that he has gone to heaven and has sent his victims to hell. It is a double victory. The event was cause for great celebration, and the neighbors honored the family with food and gifts. An

occasion such as this is happy for some, and a deep and horrible tragedy for others.

The dangers of a too-certain faith, a faith without compassion, are the reasons that religious liberals reject the rigidity of orthodoxy of any faith that is beyond reason. A faith that requires its followers not to question, but just believe, is potentially a very harmful faith. The abuses of this kind of faith are legend.

Some years ago a colleague and mentor, Rev. John Wolf, suggested that I watch a televangelist so that I could see what the "competition" was offering. "Just believe," says televangelist Robert Tilton, "and send money, so that you might be healed by the Lord and my ministry of healing. All that is required is that you believe and that you send me money. Put your affected body part up against the television and believe, send money to my ministry and be healed." Though I was shocked, it was working for the Reverend Tilton: money was rolling his way, and clearly he was reaching some of the general public.

If this is faith, I understand why many thoughtful people reject faith altogether. There is a faith that emerges after we reject a simplistic faith. Is it possible to have faith that is not a denial of both reason and the fullness of our humanity? Is it possible to have faith in something other than in a "Supernatural Interventionist God" or in the heavenly rewards of a hereafter? This kind of religion promises certainty and certain rewards and punishments.

What do we offer instead? Ambiguity and uncertainty. What about a faith in the here and now? This kind of faith is

one that trusts and embraces all of Life, irrespective of outcome.

Victor Frankl captures of this kind of faith in his remarkable book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Here was a man who witnessed the worst of humanity. In Hitler's concentration camps, Frankl went face to face with evil at its most extreme. He did not believe that God caused the concentration camps nor that God was supposed to save him or to have prevented this catastrophe. He found faith in meaning. No matter what happened, he could still choose. He could choose to be courteous. He could choose to be helpful or loving, even to the prison guards. He could choose to hasten his death or to live. The choice was his, which gave him a strong sense of meaning. His faith was that in the realization that meaning is possible. Meaning is not a given, but something we can create. His faith told him that ultimately life is meaningful, in spite of horror, death or evil.

Paul Tillich, arguably the most significant theologian of the 20th Century, wrote about faith existing in our ability to address ultimate concerns. He preferred to think in terms of courage rather than faith. Faith is the courage to be.

James Luther Adams, a Unitarian, said that faith is that about which we are willing to risk the waged meaning of our lives. Faith is not a knowing or a believing. It is a trust that meaning is possible and not a certainty. It says that something happens between our lives and our world that makes the world richer and our lives worth living.

Occasionally I mention my long time friend, Richard. We were sailors and surfers together on the West Coast for most of

my young adult years. He was a world-class sailor and waterman. One weekend he was racing from San Francisco up the coast to Sir Francis Drake Bay, and back. His boat was a serious contender. As they rounded the Golden Gate and headed up the coast, the sun was setting and the wind and waves were very high. The waves were running ten to fifteen feet and the wind was running thirty to forty knots. That is a lot of sea.

Everyone was required to wear a safety harness when on deck. As night fell, the conditions remained severe. Some of the boats dropped out of the race. It was about then that Tom, a crewmember, was moving across the deck to take the helm. He unhooked his lifeline in order to move around the other crewmembers. It was just then that the boat took a sudden fall off the front a wave.

Tom was in mid air and the boat sailed out from underneath him. He was overboard, in the dark, in high wind and in life-threatening conditions. They went into their survival drill mode. One man acted as spotter. Another grabbed a searchlight, while the boat was brought around, sails dropping, tacking for a good position from which to bring him back on board, but the seas were too rough and they couldn't get to him. That was when Tom started blowing his whistle and yelling at them. He teased them for being poor sailors incapable of rescuing him. He laughed as they came near again about how this was a great way to die, thanking them for making his death more likely by their bad seamanship. Between laughs, the crew managed on the third pass, to pull Tom in to safety.

I tell this story because I believe that Tom and the crew were saved by his faith. In the face of despair and possible - if not probable - death, he could laugh. I don't believe he was laughing because he thought that God would save him. I believe he was laughing at the absurdity of the situation. Because he knew and loved the crew, he could laugh at their idiotic mistakes and cheer them toward him. His laughter was his forgiveness, which allowed them to try harder. Had he not been laughing, the seriousness of the situation would have so overtaken them, that they would have failed to rescue him. His laughter told them that if they failed he knew they were doing their best, and regardless of outcome it was okay. This is true faith.

Although it is true, this is just a story. At the same time, it is a metaphor for all of our lives. We are all a bit out at sea. Much of the time, the wind and waves are very manageable, but sometimes all hell breaks loose and things go wrong. When that is the case, can we laugh? Can we join with Adams and Frankl and believe that there is still value and meaning to be found even in the face of suffering and despair?

Faith is a risk and a gamble. A liberal faith is a knowing and a trusting more than a believing. There are no guarantees in a liberal faith. Yet, faith is the confidence that allows us to live our lives in spite of setbacks. It is to wager everything we have on behalf of our integrity and sacredness of our lives, and the commitments we make. We stand ready for life. We choose. We risk. We love. We do the best we can and the rest is not up to us. Our willingness not to know is a profound faith.

Too many traditional and orthodox religious traditions promise certainty. Their God is a god too small to include paradox or ambiguity. The “both and” quality of life is lost amidst black/white, right/wrong, either/or thinking, when in fact, life is seldom all one way or the other. The truth of the matter is that life is not tidy and does not fit well into boxes.

To allow the oddness and awkwardness of life is to admit the life we have is really the nature of life itself. To admit that despair and meaninglessness can exist side by side with meaning and a fullness of life, this is to admit to the true nature of existence.

One of the most faithful moments of my life came a few years ago. I was working at a church in which my work had become ineffective. My vision of that church and the membership’s hopes for themselves began to be very different. I knew that it was time for me to make other plans, but I did not know where or what would come next. At that point in my career, I was not even sure I would stay in the ministry.

I left that job without a plan for what would come next. My faith was that it would work out no matter what happened. I was without a job for only a few weeks, before I was offered a chance to work as an interim minister for six months. By the time that was over I had offers for three different part-time jobs. I took all of them. One of them turned into a full time and very rewarding ministry.

I had no idea where I was going, just that I was going. I didn’t know that the process would involve so little suffering or such an easy affirmation of my ministry or my gifts. I was

willing to suffer, to pay whatever price. I just knew I needed to do the next right thing, whatever it was.

Faith is the willingness to choose and the confidence that this choosing will be good. Faith is the belief that ultimately Life works and the willingness to pay the price no matter what the outcome. If the choosing is right, then the outcome is almost irrelevant. True faith allows us to live on the edge between hope and despair, between love and death and holding both. This kind of faith allows us love life; the whole damned disaster of it. So, here is to life and to the God of Life. For many of us this kind of faith is good, and it is enough. The choices we make and the good we do is the proof of our faith. Every act of integrity and hope is another testimony to the fact and meaning of Life.

Rumi put it this way:

This being human is a guesthouse,
Every morning is a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness and a meaningfulness,
Some momentary awareness comes, and
It is an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!

May we have faith in Life, enough to plant for future generations. May we be bold enough to bring fruition the golden dreams of love and justice. May we again and again accept Life on Its own terms more than on ours.

READINGS: Two UU statements on liberal faith

"Faith," by Georgette Wonders

We all live by faith. The question is: in what?

For many people, to speak of faith is assumed to include a particular kind of belief in God, a god that can be petitioned and persuaded, whether by our intensity or persistence or the quality of our approach, to intervene according to our desires, a god who may test our faith by withholding what we want, and numerous variations on that theme. This faith is a thing you have or don't have, variously by grace or by choice. It can move mountains, we're told, cure disease, change fate. The Apostle Paul said in his letter to the Hebrews that "... faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

Assurance and certainty, two highly prized characteristics in this uncertain world. And yet faith doesn't necessarily have very much to do with either of them. As a matter of fact, our need for assurance and certainty too often leads us to various kinds of magical beliefs and practices, and too seldom to what is a fully developed faith.

You may be familiar with Viktor Frankl's book, *Man's Search For Meaning*. After surviving the Nazi death camps of World War II, Frankl managed to integrate his experiences and training as a psychotherapist to create a new school of therapy he called "logotherapy" He believed that that most neuroses (and perhaps some psychoses) were either directly due to a loss of a sense of meaning in life or to unconscious attempts to avoid

facing that void. He observed that human happiness or fulfillment is not the result of the pursuit of pleasure or power or whatever, but is possible only as by-product of a life lived within the context of meaning, of a context and purpose that transcends the individual self.

Please remember that Frankl witnessed and experienced the very things that destroyed the faith of many, including some who did not personally experience them! But for Frankl, religion became "the search for ultimate meaning" and he defined faith as trust in ultimate meaning.

Clearly Frankl's 'faith' would not mean that one is absolutely sure of just what this ultimate meaning is -- only that one trusts that there is one.

"Faith of Reason," by R. Karl Dieter

Perhaps, Faith in God and faith in the lawful structure of the Universe are two sides of the same coin; the God of Abraham and the god of Spinoza being one and the same. I delight in a universe without meaning and purpose for it provides a void that my mind aims to fill. My soul cries out with joy when I read Bertrand Russell's lines "Only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built." My freedom is maximized and the believer's justification for controlling me is minimized in God's eternal silence. Now in all fairness, my freedom could also be secured in a faith that commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and a world devoid of meaning can be filled with all kinds of cruelties and horrors. The view is largely a matter of personal preference and above all the freedom to choose. I have found no greater

joy and pleasure in this world than the thoughts and expressions of my own mind. I do not exaggerate when I say that I come to church to play, to revel in my being, to disturb the universe and give it meaning. Like the tiger dripping red in tooth and claw, my thoughts clutch the mangled hopes and dreams and tyrannies of unquestioned faith. My faith is that the universe is both orderly and perverse but not capricious and malicious. It is therefore knowable by Science and by human intuition or religious belief.