

Faith

Part 2 of a Sermon Series on Scary “F” Words

Rev. Roger Jones, preaching, with Carl Gardner, Worship Associate
Sunday, November 8, 2015
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: Gonna Lay Down My Sword and Shield #162,
Faith Is a Forest #194, and Wake Now, My Senses #298.
Special Music: choir: “I Believe,” by Lucy Holstedt;
Offertory: Ballade Op. 2 by Frederic Chopin

Shared Offering with [Sacramento Loaves and Fishes](#)

Personal Reflection on Faith by Carl

August 27, 1999. My son has just been born. He’s out of the room, being cleaned up and checked over, and I am just beginning to release from the tension of the delivery, remind *myself* to breathe, and take stock of the new reality in which I am a father.

A few minutes go by, and the doctor returns and to tell us “the baby isn’t breathing very well, he doesn’t have enough oxygen in his blood. We need to take him to UCSF because they can take better care of him there. No, I’m sorry, you can’t ride in the ambulance. You should meet him at the hospital.” We get a brief moment to see him, touch him for the first time. He’s moving, crying. An infant. And then he’s gone.

The next time I see him, my boy is unconscious. Still. He lies on a table under a bright lamp, nearly naked, an intravenous needle in his arm. A ventilation tube is taped to his face. The machine pumps rapidly, and a small part of his chest jumps in the same, unnaturally quick rhythm. He doesn’t seem real; it’s like he’s like a doll.

I feel as helpless and vulnerable as I ever have. It seems like my whole heart is in this child, and some of the paths away from this moment lead to possibilities that threaten to overwhelm me with fear and sorrow. If there was anything I could do help my son, to turn away that threatening future, I would do it.

But I can’t.

So I do the only thing that I can. Which is just to be there. My perspective shrinks to small moments, experienced one at a time. I sit with my child; I touch him; I speak to him. I talk to the doctors and nurses in the intensive care unit to understand as much as I can.

I talk to relatives, friends. I feel fear, and I accept it for what it is. But I recognize that the dreadful outcomes that frighten me are not here, they are not in *this* moment. This moment is now, and that is all that it is.

The next moment is not in my control, is not my responsibility. I am free to exist only in the now, doing my small things, one moment at a time.

Is this faith? Letting go of control of the future? Faith in the moment?

Not all of my moments are fearful. Some are a bench in the warm sunshine, a happy dog wagging its tail, Saturday morning.

And I am free to enjoy each one of them fully, and to leave the next moment to its own devices. In one moment this past August 27, my son turned 16.

Sermon Part 1 by Roger

The unknown Christian author of the Letter of Hebrews writes, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” But Mark Twain, the author of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, says: “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”

It was in between these two apparent extremes that a few dozen UUSS members and friends gathered, studied, and reflected with one another and with me over a few Monday nights. This course was entitled Ideas and Experiences of Faith. We read essays on faith by Sharon Salzberg, an American teacher of Buddhism; Marcus Borg, a liberal Christian scholar; Paul Tillich, a major Protestant theologian from the last century, and Neal Jones, a Unitarian Universalist minister.

Over the four weeks of our class, the members prepared their own statements on the nature of faith. At the end, we listened as everyone read their words. The depth of heart and thoughtfulness were striking. So was the variety.

Several of them stated that they don’t accept things on face value, but only after considering evidence. For them, faith means believing things we can’t prove. But they still could articulate what they could count on to make it through life.

For example, some people identified a trust or faith in kindness or in the Golden Rule. Others noted the Serenity Prayer. One member wrote: “My main tenet of faith is a sense of acceptance of the way life is, a feeling of trust in life, whatever it holds.”

I have asked two members of the recent class to read to you their own statements on the nature of faith. First Don and then Alexandra.

(2 members read their statements, then music.)

Sermon Part 2 by Roger

We don’t want to be pressured, exhorted or *lectured at* about faith—that’s for sure. But I wonder if some of us worry if we’ll have enough of it at time when we might really need it.

American society thinks too narrowly about faith, and we are polarized about it. What I mean is: our culture is dominated on one side by traditional Christian assumptions about faith and on the other side by secular dismissals of it. There’s the Apostle’s Creed of the historical Church. How many of you memorized it at one time? There’s John 3:16, that famous verse from the New Testament on which modern evangelicalism is based. Either you believe it or you don’t. *That’s* faith, or not-faith. How unfortunate.

The question of agreeing to a set of beliefs, or not, seems pretty easy when compared to a more open and personal question: what gets you through? How do you navigate the complexities of *this life*?

How do you deal with your self-doubt, your worries for those you love, for the human family, for the planet?

Once Sunday afternoon each a month, Irwin Rosenblum and I are co-leading the Coming of Age program, with 10 adolescents paired with 10 mentors. By May, all 10 youth will have drafted their Credo statements, and will deliver them to you in a service. We are hoping that our youth don't just make a list of statements: "I believe in this/I don't believe in that." We are longing to hear what life looks like for them, what it feels like.

These are questions about faith also.

What are you thankful for, and concerned about? What in life intrigues you and inspires you? In a youth's Credo statement, we hope to hear not a checklist of yes/no/or maybe questions. We hope to encourage every person's reflection on this existence, which we share, all of us with our own particular experience.

The term Credo is a Latin word, meaning *I believe*. From it have come words like credible and credit. Or creed, which is an official statement of beliefs.

Going further back than Latin, you can trace it to Indo-Germanic origins, and then back to a word in Sanskrit, an ancient language of India. And that word in Sanskrit means: what you set your heart upon. Not what you *nod* in agreement with, but what you set your heart on.

What are the values that ground you, and sustain you in times of confusion, struggle, conflict or exhaustion? When you feel defeated, or you despair for the world, what visions or stories keep you going?

When you *do* keep going, and when you call on the wisdom of your experience, when live out of your values--when you do that, it's called faithfulness. Living faithfully by your values, your visions, your hopes.

Unitarian Universalist minister Neal Jones writes: "Faith involves our will and imagination more than our minds. It's imagining a future that's different from the past and then living as if that future is possible.... Faith is not believing the unbelievable; it's trying the untried."¹ He uses the metaphor of a trapeze artist.

If you're a trapeze acrobat, you spend hours in practice on the swinging bar in the air. You visualize the leap you'll make. After practice and mental preparation, comes the moment of truth. Swing through the air, and let go of your trapeze. Aim for the arms of your trapeze partner, or aim for the bar on the empty trapeze a distance away. Prepare, let go, reach out, embrace. The faith of a trapeze artist.

You might say that's not faith—it's the result of hours of preparation and practice, and the confidence that you are ready to make the leap. This is true if we keep to faith's narrow definition of things that cannot be proven, only accepted or not.

But if it has to do with trust, then faith can come also from experience, from learning and practice. It can emerge from thinking about what has helped you make it through at some earlier time. Faith can grow with experience. It grows with encouragement from others. We can gain faith or confidence with encouragement and preparation. You *bring all*

of this with you as you look at the trapeze bar several yards away. But then you have to *decide* to make the leap.

This is a good way to think about faith, trust and confidence—as an acrobat. But I must admit I don’t have sufficient faith even to climb an extension ladder. (Fear of heights, and of falling from them.)

I appreciate that acrobats don’t get up in the morning and say, “Today I’m going to do something I’ve never prepared for.” They grow toward that ability; they grow in confidence before they make the leap.

I’m happy to say that most of life’s challenges take place at a lower altitude. Even so, we can’t choose many of our challenges. Sometimes we fall without even aiming to take a big leap. Things happen to us. A winter storm comes as a blessing, but you walk out the door to see the oak tree has dropped a branch on your car. The finance industry collapses, leading to layoffs just after you started making friends at your new job. You lose the home you worked so hard to buy. There’s an unwelcome diagnosis of illness.

Things happen to us, to those we care about, to the world, things that we don’t even want to imagine. How can anyone have faith – when these things could happen? Faith in what?

But faith includes our will and our imagination. It’s imagining a different future, keeping a vision, and setting our heart on that vision. Faith is not necessarily believing the unbelievable; it’s trying the untried. Faith is going forward into life with courage.

In my life, I have gained more faith by knowing people who bear agonizing losses but choose to greet others with joy and kindness.

I have gained faith from friends who tell me they have seen enough strength in me and they knew I could get through the hard times I was experiencing.

I have gained faith by making a gratitude list, and asking, “Am I not blessed?”

One of the reasons I feel called to work in a congregation, one of the strongest reasons, is that it helps me come to know people who restore my faith by the way they live, and by the values on which they set their heart.

Recently a UUSS member gave me this definition: faith is choosing to act as if what you care deeply about is really true.

Consider the climate crisis, he said. The scientific consensus is that the ongoing climate chaos is real, it is human caused, and it’s doing terrible harm. We know this. What we don’t know is whether it’s too late. Even Bill McKibben said this in a radio interview on Friday. The noted climate activist celebrated the President’s decision against a petroleum pipeline from the Alberta tar sands in Canada down through this country. McKibben said we can’t know if it’s enough, or if it is soon enough. Yet he took heart in this recent success on behalf of the environment. He said it would boost the environmentalist work of people in places large and small. It would spur unity and cooperation among activists and civic leaders around the world. And as the world gets more worrisome, we need more unity and cooperation.

Can we do enough to stop climate chaos? We can't be sure. But many of us choose to live as if we *can* make a difference. By our deeds, our commitments, and our longing, we are living faithfully toward that vision. We set our heart on it.

Imagine that we are trapeze acrobats practicing the moves needed to make the leap - Imagine it. In your mind, or maybe right here, in this place - Extend your arms, your hands and fingers – reaching to catch onto what is possible – whatever your hopes might be, for your life, for others, for us all.

Let our personal practice and our shared encouragement give us faith to try the untried, faith to move toward the future with an open heart.

Do you doubt? Bring your doubts. Do you struggle? Bring your struggles. Bring all your vulnerability. In this community, *together* we have more strength than any one person has alone. We have more hope than a single life can give. In this place where we seek, hope, listen, observe, reason, and/ *try the untried*, we find faith.

Faith is choosing to act as if what you care deeply about is really true. May we find it here, and share it. May we find encouragement, for this kind of living.

Let us reveal our doubt and our faith, and share in our struggles *and* our hopes. May we know strength and hope and faith within, and when we need these gifts may we find them, very close by.

Amen.

¹ Neal Jones, “The Faith of a Trapeze Artist,” in *Quest*, Vol. LXIX, No. 6, June 2014.
www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/the-faith-of-a-trapeze-artist/