

A Faithful Commitment to Values: An Ideology Is Not Faith

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching; Reflection by Dawn Huebner (printed after sermon)

Sunday, April 28, 2024, Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #1010 We Give Thanks, #205 Amazing Grace (arr. John Turner), #1017 Building a New Way

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Today I'm going to talk about faith. I figure it's a good idea to do that every 10 years or so. Actually, every single Sunday that we hold a service, we strive to communicate our Unitarian Universalist faith. We strive to embody it and call it forth from one another. To be sure, if on a random weekday we were suddenly asked: "What is Unitarian Universalist faith?," many of us would open our mouths but no sound would come out. Then after a few seconds, "Uh, um, well..." Eventually, however, there could be a good conversation. One aspect of the UU tradition is that we value conversation. We promote curiosity about one another's perspectives and curiosity about our own assumptions.

Yet even hearing the word "faith" in a UU congregation can generate some discomfort. Because that word is used by some groups that give it a very narrow meaning, some UUs don't feel it applies to us. We encourage holding beliefs lightly. But the word *faith* seems to mean an unshakeable certainty, right? We try to be open to reviewing and rethinking our beliefs, try to let them evolve. *Faith*, on the other hand, seems to mean a set of specific, unchanging, beliefs, like a creedal statement.

That is indeed a narrow interpretation of the word. Contrary to that, in his book *Religious Humanism as a Way of Life*, the UU minister William R. Murry explains three types of faith, which are based on three Latin words dating back to the Medieval Christian Church.¹ They are *assensus*, *fides*, and *fidelitas*. First is *assensus*, as in giving your *assent* to specific statements, and accepting certain concepts—like the doctrine of the Trinity or salvation through Jesus Christ. You either accept it on faith, or you don't.

The next word is *fides*, which means faith as trust—the word confidence, for example, has *fides* as its root. Faith is an orientation toward life which is honest about life's hardships *and* about life's goodness and potential. It is an openness to life instead of despair. You can have an open, trusting orientation to life no matter your specific beliefs or your lack of them.

Sharon Salzberg is an American Buddhist teacher. In 2002 she published a whole book entitled *Faith*. Salzberg says: "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 rely."²

Faith as trust, in order to be authentic, must have a degree of humility. First, humility involves respecting those who have different perspectives. Second, humility recognizes that some experiences will test our faith, will cause us to struggle with it. Authentic faith is not triumphant, but humble.

As I said earlier, the first kind of faith is assent to or acceptance of specific beliefs. But it's unfair to say that you either have it or you don't. I have known sincere Christians who wrestle with some parts of their church's creed. At some stage of life, they're not sure of *this* doctrine of faith, and later on they doubt another part of it. People like this are in good company. Among several other saints of the Church whose faith was tested, Mother Theresa of Calcutta is known for miserable stretches of doubt that God was even there.

Robert Solomon is a philosophy professor and the author of the book *Spirituality for the Skeptic*. “What makes simple faith simple is the fact that nothing has challenged it,” he says. Doubt is a natural part of the journey of trust and faith. To be sure, nobody wants to go through disappointment or betrayal. We don’t look forward to it. If we are caring for children and youth, or supporting young adults, we want to shield them from setbacks, disappointment, rejection, and loss. However, avoiding disappointments does not build faith in one’s ability to work through them. Solomon says, “What makes blind faith blind” is an unwillingness to acknowledge hard experiences and process them. Having the support and encouragement to do this is crucial to growing a faith which is both realistic and resilient.

Faith as trust is an orientation toward human relationships as well as life in general. We want to trust one another, and we hope to be worthy of others’ trust. Yet there will be times when others let us down and when we let them down. This can happen in families, friendships, and institutions. How we get through it will test our faith. Depending on the degree of hurt or confusion we feel, it can be scary to look at the situation, speak honestly, listen openly, and pursue a renewal of trust. Doing this takes courage. It calls for faith in yourself. Whoever we are, we must summon the trust that we have the ability to work through frustration and fear.

Sharon Salzberg, the teacher of Buddhism, advises that finding a spiritual community, a refuge, “is a significant step on the journey of faith. A trustworthy refuge [she writes] enables us to go against the misleading promises of an unexamined world, to move beyond [our] conditioned attitudes, ... [and to refrain from superficial answers or heartless ones] to our deepest questions.”³

It is crucial to our individual wellbeing to have loved ones, friends, and communities that we are able to trust. Sometimes when our trust is betrayed, however, it may be wise to separate ourselves from those who have caused the harm. It may be necessary. Then we can set about the process of the healing that we need in order to grow trusting relationships with others. At the level of the larger community or the nation, it is crucial to the wellbeing of everyone to be able to trust our fellow citizens and our leaders.

In this country, since before the 2020 presidential election, we have suffered from attempts to break our faith in one another. Because he was hurt and aggrieved by his loss of re-election, the former president has promoted the idea that a national election was rigged and fraudulent. Of course, this is not a reasonable claim. Election officials in cities and counties around the country conduct independent procedures following local laws. There is no control from Washington. Local election officials come from both parties. Their thoroughness and integrity are a point of pride for them. Yet as the former U.S. president and his allies have repeated falsehoods over and over, they have broken the trust and faith of many voters in their local leaders. As a result of those vicious lies, election officials have been intimidated by people in their own communities. Many have been harassed; their families have been threatened. Worn down by this, many retired early or resigned their positions.

This is disheartening and scary. I want to assert *my* faith in the integrity of local officials and volunteers who keep our elections fair. And in spite of the lies, the disinformation, and the violent words that seek to break our democracy, I want to assert my faith that it will survive. To find encouragement, I need only remember the faith embodied by the African American Civil Rights movement. If anyone would have cause to lose faith in democracy, it would be those for whom the promise of democracy was denied.

In many southern states, Black Americans lived under white-ruled tyranny for most of the 20th century. So-called Jim Crow laws required enforcement of racial segregation in schools, public transit, businesses, parks, and other public places. Election laws denied the right of Black citizens to vote, which also made it impossible to get elected and improve things. Blacks trying to vote/ would be confronted with poll taxes, so-called literacy tests, and outright rejection. Voting registration volunteers were attacked, threatened, and murdered.

After generations of this repression, it would have been understandable to lose faith, to give up. Yet African Americans kept faith in the possibility of democracy in this country. This faith was most famously demonstrated by the leaders of the Civil Rights movement and the words of Dr. Martin Luther King. And this faith was embodied by every ordinary person who was willing to staff telephone banks, write letters, donate money, make food, and show up. It took faith to be willing to be trained in nonviolent action, to attend rallies and marches, to participate in strikes and boycotts. Trusting in solidarity, members of the movement kept faith in one another.

To be sure, many leaders and volunteers were sustained by specific expressions of religious faith. They trusted in a just God, and they found inspiration in the scriptures. And from this, they showed faith in themselves. In spite of setbacks, including violent ones, members of the movement remained faithful to a just cause. And by faith and work, they achieved the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Acting in faith means acting faithfully, not with a guarantee, but with assurance that your faith is valid.

For me this is a compelling example of the meaning of the third of those three Latin words for faith. The word is *fidelitas*, which means faithfulness. From it we get the word fidelity. This means keeping true to your commitments, being true and reliable. We can be faithful to a friendship or a family, to an organization to which we belong, to the nation where we live. And especially we can be faithful to the values which we cherish as true, important and inspiring.

Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer is a professor of botany. She writes about the connections between environmental science and the spiritual gifts of her Native American heritage. In spite of all the tragic history she knows, and in spite of all the bad news with which she wrestles, she keeps an open faith. In Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she puts it this way: "I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift." This is her orientation to life. This is how *she* demonstrates faithfulness.

Recently a few members of UUSS and I watched an online dialogue between Dr. Sofia Betancourt, president our denomination, the UUA, and Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson, the president of the United Church of Christ. These two liberal denominations have the same roots in Congregational churches of the 17th and 18th centuries. Both of these ministers are women of color, the first ones elected to lead their faith organizations. They spoke about the role of liberal religious organizations in these troubled times for democracy, for environmental disasters, for poor people and those on the margins. The safety and the rights of women and LGBT people are in peril.

For the radical right wing, weaponized religious language attacks human dignity. It energizes opposition to human rights. In response to this crisis, both presiding ministers agreed that our two denominations can counter those attacks with our own messages of a *different* faith.

We need to energize opposition to injustice. Not only our denominations need to do this, but each of us—you and me. We can say, “You’re not talking about *my* God. My faith envisions a God of love and acceptance.” (That’s Universalism.) In the face of ignorant or hateful words, we can say: “My faith calls me to disagree with you. Because it says that every child of God belongs in the human family. Everyone deserves to be respected and safe and free because everyone has dignity.” (That’s Unitarianism.) While people both within and between these two denominations have different ways of articulating our beliefs, what holds us together is our values.

Since 1984 the Unitarian Universalist Principles have articulated the values to which our UU congregations are faithful. The first one is *the inherent worth and dignity of every person*. The dignity and worth of every person is not a fact you can prove; it is a statement of faith. It’s a value to which we try to be faithful. The Seventh Principle is the interdependence of all existence, symbolized by a web which holds the whole human family and all the beings on this earth. To be sure, science teaches us more and more that everything *is* connected and mutually dependent with everything else. But we go further. We affirm this principle as a nudge for gratitude, an inspiration to awe, and a reason for stewardship and care. This is part of our faith, isn’t it?

If we don’t claim the word faith for ourselves, then it will continue to be used only by movements that exclude people from the idea of God’s love and acceptance. Faith will continue to be used to exclude people from full participation in the human family, to deny their dignity and their freedom.

Faithfulness to our values means claiming them here in this place and proclaiming those values out beyond these walls.

Faith as assent or acceptance of specific beliefs must be affirmed in freedom. Whether it’s a religious belief or a secular ideology, if it’s coerced, it’s not faith. If it’s pronounced with righteousness or intolerance, it’s not faith. To be authentic, faith must be open to doubts.

Faith as trust is not something that you merely recite or argue about, it is your approach to life, to the world, and to others. Of course, our faith will be tested. But it is by wrestling with discouragement that we can build authentic faith.

Sharon Salzberg writes: “No matter what we encounter in life, it is faith that enables us to try again, to trust again, to love again. Even in times of immense suffering, it is faith that enables us to relate to the present moment in such a way that we can go on...instead of becoming lost in resignation or despair.”⁴

[According to Robert Solomon, having faith is not what we do in order to receive benefits. If holding faith is only a means to getting a reward, then it’s not authentic. Yet there is a paradox here, he says. For when we trust, we *can* get something back. We can find more comfort in the world when we live with trust. We notice more to be grateful for. He says that living with faith as trust can open up “all sorts of possibilities that ... the lack of trust keeps closed.”⁵ *Living with faith*, in other words, is living to keep your heart open.]

As I said earlier, every Sunday that we hold a service, we strive to communicate our Unitarian Universalist faith, and celebrate it. We seek the strength to embody our values here and beyond these walls. We strive to be people you can trust and rely on. We build our trust in one another as a community. When it’s tough to keep faith, we trust one another to keep faith with

us. When it's hard to hold onto our faith, we trust one another to hold it up for us, until we can claim it again and return the favor.

So may it always be. So may we continue to inspire faithfulness in one another. So may it be, blessed be, and amen.

Personal Reflection by Dawn Huebner, Worship Associate

Worship Associates are typically given a choice about whether or not to offer a Reflection. When I saw that today's service was about Faith, I thought sure, I'll give it a go. But when it came to actually writing it, I struggled.

What does faith mean, anyway? Is it the same as belief? Does it have to be about God?

There's the broad meaning we give the word, like, "I have faith that my son will eventually find a job." Or "I have faith that Lisa and I will get gold in every country in Geo Guesser, an online game we are addicted to." If you don't know what Geo Guesser is, feel free to ask one of us after the service. But I don't think Roger is going to be preaching about that kind of faith today, the kind that essentially means "I'm confident that this thing or that thing is going to happen."

Instead, I think we're going to hear about *religious faith*, the kind that, in most religions, centers around God. Who God is, and what he or she or they want from us.

The problem with that kind of faith, and what made this Reflection difficult to write, is the slippery slope from faith to Fundamentalism. The line that gets crossed when faith stops being about 'this is the creed, or origin story, or God I believe in, the set of values that helps me live a meaningful life,' and instead becomes, 'this is what is *true*, and if you don't share my faith, you are not only wrong, but also bad and, at its most extreme, you need to be eliminated.'

It's like the term 'faith' – the whole concept of it – has gotten co-opted by extreme, black-and-white thinkers intent on maintaining power. That kind of faith is not for me.

And I kept hitching on the part of faith that has to do with believing something without evidence. It reminds me of what Stephen Colbert calls 'Truthiness,' when you decide something is true because it *seems* true, and oh, by the way, it aligns with your self-serving goals. That's a problem. Especially now, with the widespread blurring of lines between facts and patently false, or at least evidence-free, narratives.

I was going around and around about this until my wonderful spouse, Lisa, asked, "Is there anything you believe without evidence?"

Their question cut through the noise in my head because the answer is . . . Yes. I do hold 'evidence-free' beliefs. Or at least one.

I believe there is a unifying spirit running through us, and between us. A spirit we can't touch, or see, or prove, but that connects us all. I believe we are held within that spirit, and we contribute to it, and when we die, we become part of it, and continue on, unseen, within it.

Do I know that I'm right? No, I do not. Can I **prove** that such a spirit exists? Definitely not. But I don't need to. I don't need to convince anyone to think the way I do. I don't need to be "right" in a way that makes others, who might believe something different, "wrong." I can live within my belief. Hold faith in it. Take comfort from it. It's helpful to me without being hurtful to anyone else. And that, for me, is enough.

¹ William R. Murry, *Becoming More Fully Human: Religious Humanism as a Way of Life* (New Haven, 2011: New Haven Press), 122.

² Sharon Salzberg, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience* (New York, 2002: Riverhead Books), xiii.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁵ Solomon, 54.