

Touchstones of Our Faith

Liz Huddle

Chalice Reading by Rev. Gary Kowalski

With faith to face our challenges,

With love that casts out fear,

With hope to trust tomorrow,

We welcome this day for the gift it is --

A reason for rejoicing.

SERMON READING by Rev. Bruce Southworth

O Source of life and love,

Torn by desires to sit back

and to enjoy the beauty of the world --

to savor the blue skies and gentle days --

and by desires to recast the world and to fight its evils --

to save the world...

Torn by all those things that hurt and confuse

and make no sense amid beauty --

yet supported by all those things that heal and hold us --

smiles, kisses, mountain vistas

and gentle waves, warm words...

We live in mystery.

We live torn apart at times --

so much glory --

so much pain.

We live in faith --

faith in ourselves and each other --

faith that we can create bonds of the spirit

that proclaim we are not alone.

We have much health within us --

we can live through the heartache to new life.

So, for the grace of the world

and all the tumble, too,

this day we give thanks. Amen.

QUIETUDE

TOUCHSTONES OF OUR UU FAITH

What I'm going to present to you today comes from the Theme-Based Ministry Project of the Pacific Western Region of the UUA and First Universalist Church of

Denver. It is offered to Emerging Congregations. A few of the other “themes” that are being investigated are: HOPE, JUSTICE, HUMILITY, WISDOM, and BELOVED COMMUNITY. The Touchstones mentioned in today’s title are the sources of knowledge that are available to us to help us develop our own private thoughts and conclusions as concerns these themes. I have made copies of these sources that the Ministry Project is calling Touchstones. On the left side of the printing are our seven Principles and on the right side are the “Touchstones”.

But for today we shall simply look at FAITH as presented to us by two different writers. The first is The Rev. Michael W. Brown and the second is the Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland.

REV. BROWN GIVES US THE FOLLOWING:

Faith Is Not Belief by Rev. Michael W. Brown

Many of us have been asked at one time or another, “Just what is it that you Unitarian Universalists believe?” And I admit this is a difficult moment, even for ministers like myself. One of the problems with this query is that the question itself makes assumptions that may not be true. In a way it’s one of those questions like “When did you stop beating your children?” The hidden assumption here is that knowing what a person believes is the best way to understand and ultimately judge that person’s religious life, and I for one find this assumption highly questionable....

I want to propose, first of all, that faith and belief are not the same thing; and second, that faith is a dimension of life that is very accessible to Unitarian Universalists as well as to folks in other religious traditions or even no tradition at all. I’m not interested in arguing that belief is a bad thing, although personally I find its value limited at best. If I had to choose between faith and belief, it would certainly be an easy choice for me; in fact, I have already made that choice in my life, and the winner is faith by a wide margin. I think that we as Unitarian

Universalists have a strong, vibrant faith even though, as a religious movement, we have made a very conscious decision not to limit that faith within the confines of a specific set of beliefs.

This might be a good time to bring a couple of distinguished theologians off the bench to pinch hit, just so you'll know I'm not making all this up. Listen to these words from Wilfred Cantwell Smith, one of the foremost historians of religion of the twentieth century. Belief, he says, is "the holding of certain ideas." But faith is something different: "Faith is deeper, richer, more personal. It is engendered by a religious tradition in some cases and to some degree by its doctrines, but it is a quality of the person and not the 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."

So belief is primarily the adoption of certain ideas or concepts, whereas faith, in Smith's view, is about our immediate response to the joys and concerns of life, day by day. Now listen to the words of James Fowler, who has written one of the modern classics on the subject of faith, entitled *Stages of Faith*. He characterizes faith as our response to certain questions regarding our hopes and dreams, our commitments, and what we trust in life. Fowler writes, "Faith is not always religious in its content or context. To ask these questions seriously of oneself or others does not necessarily mean to elicit answers about religious commitment or belief. Faith is a person's or group's way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose."

So from the point of view of these two thinkers, at least, faith is very different from belief, although they certainly may coexist in the same person. But faith is not primarily about adopting a set of beliefs. Faith is about how we respond to the joys and challenges of our lives, day by day, moment by moment. It's about whom and what we love, about where we invest our time, energy, and allegiance.

It's about whom or what we trust and about how we respond in the face of difficulty and tragedy. In the words of another great twentieth-century theologian, Paul Tillich, it's about our "ultimate concern." Or as Emerson put it, "A person will worship something." The real question is, what occupies that place in our lives? ...

Faith is a kind of stance that we take in relation to the totality of life: crazy, beautiful, comic, tragic, painful, rewarding, puzzling, inspiring life. To be a person of faith is to affirm that within this amazing kaleidoscope of life experience there is meaning available, meaning discovered or created, personal or universal. Faith is taking the stance that somehow life is good, or at least good enough to be worth the struggle and the pain. Faith does not require that we be able to state precisely and unambiguously why that is. There is no law that says we have to be able to do that. Faith can be open ended; there's nothing wrong with that approach at all. Remember the admonishment of the Tao Te Ching: "The Tao that can be named is not the true Tao."

Carl Sandburg expresses this indefiniteness of faith so well in his words, "I'm an idealist. I don't know where I'm going, but I'm on my way." What a great statement of the sense of idealism that is not tied down to a particular set of beliefs. Faith is a continuously unfolding creative process, whereas belief is all too often the tragic mistake of trying to contain that creative process inside narrow boundaries and not let it change and grow. Of course, that limitation is death to creativity, and in the worst-case scenario leads to oppression.

I'm not saying that religious beliefs can't work well in a life of faith. Clearly they can. But the beliefs need to be of the type affirmed by the great religious educator, Sophia Lyon Fahs: "gateways opening wide vistas for exploration," not "like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction." Beliefs need to be flexible and open to question, or they can too easily become oppressive.

Faith is not about choosing something to believe in and then hanging on for dear life. Faith lets go. Faith is trusting in the creative process of life. It is moment by moment, unpredictable, creative, open ended, spontaneous, responsive, and

responsible, yet always directed toward more joy, more beauty, more love, more compassion, more justice. It doesn't need to be written down, and its secret cannot be memorized and recited on demand. The truth is not in the words, not in any formula, but in the experience, in the heart, in the moment-by-moment response to being alive.

The 2nd part of the sermon is by Rev Kirk Loadman-Copeland

While it is true that our faith can emerge without intention as we respond to life, an unexamined faith like an un-examined life does not serve us well. Unitarian Universalist scholar James Luther Adams writes, "An unexamined faith is not worth having, for it can only be true by accident. A faith worth hav-ing is a faith worth discussing and test-ing."

An examined faith takes into account all of the reasons in the world for pessimism, of which there are many, weighs them in light of what is possible, and finds reason for optimism. An examined faith never allows the enormity of a mountain to get in the way of trying to move it bit by bit for as long as it takes. An examined faith understands the leap of faith as one made "half-sure and whole-hearted." When we begin to ex-amine our faith, to make sense of it, we understand how vital it is to life itself.

Without faith, we have little reason to even get out of bed in the morning. With faith, our reasons for living and loving multiply exponentially. Faith cannot be prescribed or proscribed. It must be uniquely fashioned out of your experience of life. Unlike belief, faith is indi-vidual. No one else has your experience, your values, your dreams, or your faith. You can share and examine your faith with others in this religious community as a way of making sense of your faith. Through such examination, faith be-comes an even more compelling motiva-tion and compass in our lives, as it ig-nites our own fire of commitment. Since we are made of the stuff of stars, let our faith burn brightly, pushing away the darkness.

What Being a UU Means to Me

Jim Arbogast

Fifty years ago I was an outcast. My parents moved to Ogden Utah, and suddenly, I was THE non-athletic, non-academic, pacifistic, non-Mormon, new kid in my class. I became the default target for whatever the kids could think up. My defenses quickly thickened and I was not the model for good self-esteem.

It took a while for me to externalize and be able to laugh at the funny things in life. I also had a lot of time to ponder the positives and negatives of most things. Three moves and five years later I graduated, into the seventies with a pro-environment, pro-social justice, and a question authority mindset.

After Judy and I got married we were content to just live our lives and donate our free time to good causes. Then our son Michael started attending a youth group of a conservative community church. This prompted us to look for alternatives. About this time I came to the realization that *I can choose* my faith regardless of my family history, ethnicity, or location.

When we entered the Unitarian Universalist fellowship we saw many friends that we knew from political, environmental, and social causes we were involved in. My defenses lowered and I could not find the usual negatives that I came to expect with a religion. Now I feel only positives and my arms are open and welcoming and not up defensively. I believe in the seven principles and enjoy the free thought and community I find here.

I've been a UU for almost ten years.

What Being a UU Means to Me

Ellie Klauminzer

I grew up a U, not a UU. Unitarians and Universalists didn't join together until 1961, and by that time, I was in college and I didn't need a church.

Growing up Unitarian in my conservative Ohio community marked me, somewhat. Lakewood was a very Methodist/Presbyterian sort of community. One of our neighbor families was Catholic, but even they were a recognized part of the Christian fraternity.

I wasn't, but I never let on that I was such a heathen. I faked it a lot. My Christian education came in public school – in those days and in that city, church and state weren't much separated. I learned the Lord's Prayer in junior high when we sang it as part of a musical program. Our high school choir sang at the Holy Week observances of the local Methodist church.

In every other way, our family was ordinary middle class and I was not considered a social pariah, but nevertheless, growing up Unitarian gave me a taste of what it must be like to grow up on the outside, looking in.

Unitarian church school made a skeptic of me and reinforced my identification with those who really were considered outcasts, although in fairness, my mother was also a big influence in this. Church school taught me to resist conventional thinking and to question, which were very helpful habits of mind throughout my schooling. It taught me to act on my convictions, just as had Clara Barton and Susan B. Anthony. My church, West Shore Unitarian, was big on humanist thought, and that belief system largely remains with me. My religious education spoiled me for any other church, and it also taught me, intentionally or not, that one can lead a good life unattached to a church community.

Indeed, Gary and I remained largely unchurched for over 40 years, even though we were married at West Shore. Over the years, I tried out several UU churches, one in Palo Alto and another in Lexington, MA, but they didn't stick.

It wasn't until 2005, after we moved to a small central MA town, that my need to both enlarge and deepen my friendship circle led me to try out yet another UU church. A friend lured me to a service at First Parish of Stow, and at long last, I felt comfortable enough to stick around. I joined the choir, which got me to services every week. Choir practice in the sanctuary of that 160 year-old building, with its horsehair-stuffed pew cushions and ancient pipe organ, became my weekly meditation. There was something about singing the repetitious warm-up exercises in that sanctuary that reminded me of the chanting of monks. It induced, possibly, a similar sense of peace and serenity.

It was here that I first heard the argument that a church community was important. That even rugged individualists need the guidance and support of a loving community; that we are our best selves when we are inspired by the encouragement and example of those whom we respect and who care about us. I was a product of the individualist humanism of the 1950's. Something big in my church had changed while I wasn't paying attention. Perhaps that something was the merger with Universalists. Whatever it was, today's UU is a more complete, emotionally rich and emotionally sustaining church community than the one I remember. UUs have learned to feed the mind and uplift the soul. I think that Unitarian Universalism has become the religion for our times.

What Being a UU Means to Me

Sue Redkey

Being originally a "U" and now a "UU" has meant first and foremost having a religious foundation with two key features:

1. First, no matter where I am geographically, or where I might be in my evolving spiritual journey, I have a spiritual home - a place where I am accepted and valued, regardless who I am at the time . . . or who I have been . . . or who I plan to be.

2. Second, unlike friends who describe themselves as “lapsed” Catholics, or “non-practicing” Jews, or “recovering” Episcopalians, as long as I am living and modeling our principles, I am a “practicing” UU whether I show up every Sunday or not.

More specifically, being a UU has meant different things at different times in my life:

- **As a child:**

It meant learning about Christianity as just one of a number of religions – visiting various churches, synagogues and temples and exploring a variety of earth-creation stories.

It meant hearing my 5th grade Sunday school teacher remind us again and again that his job was to teach us not *what* to think, but *how* to think. That was huge for me and I obviously remembered his words.

- **As a teenager:**

It meant belonging to LRY (Liberal Religious Youth), where I learned a song that I’d like to share with you now, as a sort of penance, I guess, for having once allowed myself to think being a UU made me superior to those of other religions who bought into what I felt were silly beliefs and irrelevant practices. I hope this will help you see how far I’ve come.

I've got 6 gods, jolly, jolly 6 gods,
I've got 6 gods, to last me all my life.

I've 2 gods for work and 2 gods for play,
1 for night and 1 one for day-ay-ay.

No morals have I to grieve me,
No grubby little Bible to deceive me.

Polytheistic, believe me,

As we go rolling, rolling home, quite pure.

*Rolling home, quite pure, rolling home, quite pure,
By the light of divine inspiration.*

*Happy as the boss, when they nailed him to the cross,
As we go rolling, rolling home, quite pure.*

(Note: these are memories and are not meant to reflect a UU disrespect for traditional Christians.)

- **And finally, as an adult, being a UU has meant:**

Knowing that whenever I moved to a new town, I had an instant source of friends and meaningful connections.

And, from the time that my daughter came out as a lesbian, it has meant being so grateful that she did not have to grow up hearing any nonsense about God not approving of her - at least not at home or at church.

I am pleased to be part of a religious community that walks the talk of the values with which I identify. Amen