

## Got Faith?

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Rev. Teena Grant

This week I woke up thinking about this sermon and I said to myself “Why did I sign up for this. What can I say that’s worth people’s time about faith. I don’t know all of the answers to this. What was I thinking when I said yes to this?” I’ve got to admit that I often wake up thinking, “Why did I say I was going to do this?” This is pretty much my standard angst for anytime I have to speak in public. And then I thought, “Teena you’re giving a sermon about faith. Show some faith, already, and go sit down at your computer and surely the words will come.”

So I sat down at the computer and decided to have faith in the still small voice inside of me that said there is something so important about this that I feel so deeply about and maybe I won’t be able to communicate it perfectly and maybe no one can - it’s something I know inside. And I thought about the faith that is inside of everyone who is would come here today. All of us come each Sunday with the faith that something is going to transpire here that is going to be meaningful, important, comforting. We see it as a place to keep remembering who we are and what we’re capable of. **That is faith.**

I’ve been struggling with the question of faith all of my life – so much so that I became a minister and actually made a full time career out of it. It’s changed and morphed over the years. Challenges, milestones, childbirth, work, and life itself have shaped and influenced it along the way.

You know, this exploration of faith that I began as a child took a new twist one day when I was having a conversation with a friend right after 9/11. I was in New York right before 9/11 and actually returned on 9/10. I was talking with my friend and told him that I wonder what it would have felt like if I was on a flight that was going down and there was nothing any of us could do to stop it. There was no one I could call and we only had minutes before it went down. What would I do? The first thing out of my mouth was that I’d hold the hand of the person next to me and try to comfort them. And my friend said, “What if they didn’t want you to?” OK I was stumped there. I thought about and realized that I was probably trying to avoid my own fear and panic by saying that. What would I do with my aloneness at that point? What would comfort me? What would I belong to if there was no one there to belong to? What could I rest my mind in at that point? What could I **ultimately** put faith in?

Some of you may know I was raised Catholic and I think there are several of us here who were. I was given a faith growing up. It was a dogmatic faith. We were taught to depend on God and that God had a reason for everything. In many ways we did not have to develop our own faith. And then, of course, I began to question all of that. I thought that there was no such a thing as faith. The world is as it is. What happened- happened. It was a waste of time to worry about the whole mysterious part of it. In fact, I used to get angry when people used the word mystery. Why waste time on the unknown. We don’t need faith. Just do it. You can really only depend on yourself anyway. And now I’m learning that faith in what we know and faith in ourselves alone can sometimes be dangerous and that faith in the unknown can be liberating.

Later I became a Unitarian Universalist. I learned about liberal faith – with its strong leaning towards social justice and its faith in our ability to work for the common good. It taught me about the responsible search for my own truth and provided me with the opportunity to find what I could put my ultimate faith in. It is that very freedom to question that puts Unitarian Universalists in the position of having being able to have a very real and strong faith.

There was a very prolific UU theologian, minister, and professor named James Luther Adams who died in 1994 at the age of 93. He thought that many UUs thought that if they left the faith that they were brought up in with its dogmatism and wishful thinking, there was no longer a faith to be had. I must admit that I thought that way for many years. To many of us it meant that they no longer had to adhere to beliefs that made no logical sense. But Adams felt that faith should still be central to their life. Faith didn't have to die when traditional beliefs died. He felt that everyone has a faith – it's just a matter of what you put your faith in. Whatever we put confidence in is our faith. And whatever we ultimately put confidence in is what some refer to as God or as the theologian Paul Tillich (who influenced Adams) called it “Our ultimate concern” or the “ground of our being.” And whatever we put our faith in will manifest in our words and actions. He believed that a liberal faith should realize that “our ultimate dependence for being and freedom is upon a creative power and upon processes not of our own making.” (Adams, 31) In other words our ultimate faith should not be in ourselves but in the source from which we spring from and are a part of. Life itself. Some may call that God or “our Ultimate concern.” He describes **God as the “inescapable, commanding reality that sustains and transforms all meaningful existence.”** (Adams, 32) None of us can deny belonging to it. None of us can deny that it commands our lives. None of us deny that it is life itself that pushes us towards more creativity, goodness, and love. Everything we do is framed by this reality.

So there is something out there that moves us.

Let's look at it from another perspective – a Buddhist perspective. Sharon Salzberg, a Buddhist teacher and writer wrote a book called, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. She argues that a faith that is fresh, vibrant and liberating can be found in our very nature and the nature of the world. Buddhists call it Buddha nature. This is a faith that urges us to keep going in spite of what happens. It's a willingness to take the next step. It tells us that life is constant movement and change and transition. Relationships come and go, jobs come and go, our abilities come and go. Nothing stays the same. And in the end it all goes. But underneath it all is a core, a movement, that is life itself. It is in this natural movement that we can put our faith in.

This movement towards creativity, towards love, that we ourselves experience is a powerful force and longing in each of us. We can't always reach our ideals. Our love is never perfectly given or perfectly received; but the very longing itself for love, reflects life itself's longing for it. It's a constant movement; and you and I are a part of that movement. A small part of the greater symphony. That's what we can rest in. That's something we can put our faith in that's real. And it's based in our own experience. We can have a deep, profound faith in life itself just as it is. In our most authentic, deepest true nature we can have faith. When we live from this kind of authentic faith our actions and words will come from this place. When we value our true nature we will value the nature of every living person and thing. When we have faith our nature, our actions and words ring with reality, true understanding and compassion.

Sharon Salzberg tells us that this kind of faith takes an open heart open hands. We have to open our clenched fists. Many spiritual traditions teach about surrender, letting go. I recently read a book by a Unitarian Universalist named Phillip Simmons titled, *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of An Imperfect Life*. This is a man who lived with Lou Gehrig's disease – one of the greatest challenges to anyone's faith in life. He says that the main purpose of his book is to “accept the fact that we will one day lose everything. When we learn to fall, we learn that only by letting go of our grip on all that we ordinarily find most precious – our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves – can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom. In the act of letting go of our lives, we return more freely to them.” (Simmons, 15) Not an easy thing to do and sometimes it takes serious illness or facing our own mortality to do it well.

I have had the privilege of working with many people who were dying and have learned so much about faith from people of all traditions. I have met many people who have exhibited these qualities of openness and surrender to this mystery in which we live. I'll never forget one man I met while working as a hospice chaplain. I'll call him Bob. Everyday he would get dressed in his sweats in his emaciated body and he would put a leopard skin scarf around his neck to add a little style. Everyone loved being around him. We practically fought for time with him. He'd sit up all day on his patio enjoying every piece of nature that he could and he was so comfortable and happy. One day I couldn't resist asking what his secret was. What made him so happy? He said, “I've let go of it all. I've let go of my worries, my grudges, my fears, everything. I'm just enjoying being present now and I just have this feeling that everything will be OK. It's amazing –it's hard for me to believe that I still have cancer. I just feel so healed.” He handed me a story to read, saying, “this explains what's going on with me.”

The story is about a man who was holding onto a rope tightly for his dear life. He thought that if he let go, he would fall to his death. Everyone told him that's what he needed to do. So he did. It was hard to get a lot done in that position. But he kept holding on until a wise woman came along and told him that it was OK to let go. She encouraged him to let go of one finger at a time and guaranteed that he would feel more comfortable and at peace if he would just do that. He resisted with all he had but she coaxed him along while acknowledging his fears and concerns. He finally let go of all of his fears and all of his fingers, and low and behold, he discovered that he was standing on the ground the whole time.

And I think that is the way with us most of the time. Sometimes I worry when I do something like the whole world depended on it and if I messed up the whole world would fall apart. But there is something larger that we are all grounded in. We are all still standing on the ground of our own being all the time anyway. And we can make a choice. Will can choose to trust the very ground of being that we are made of or not. Will we choose life or not. I think to have faith is to choose life. How often do we think of our connection to that ground?

Once when I was talking about faith with my sister she said that identifying with nature gives her faith. When she sees the seasons change, she feels comforted. She knows that there will always be the cycle. She can count on it and that cycle supports life itself. We humans have our own seasons and changes that we can count on. As plants always pushes itself towards regeneration and so does our deepest self. Salzberg says, “Faith is the animation of the heart that says, I

choose life, I align myself with the potential inherent in life, I give myself over to that potential.” (Salzberg, 16)

What do you do when things are going terribly, when we lose loved ones or when our kids are having problems, illness or when there is so much pain and injustice in the world. There are time in our lives when we are so devastated that sometime we feel there is nothing to hang on to. Right after 9-11 I remember how despondent I felt. I felt rage at God and the Universe. I scrambled for some hope as everyone did. There was a poem by Adrienne Rich from our UU hymnal that popped into my mind and I kept repeating it and kept it by my desk. It brought me so much comfort then. This is it:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save.  
So much has been destroyed.  
But I have to cast my lot with those  
Who generation after generation  
Perversely, and with no special power  
Reconstitute the world.

And sometimes our poems and prayers don't work and we feel despondent – that there is nothing to stand on. We've forgotten who we are. We feel alone and separate from the rest of life. That's when the power of the community comes in. Others can hold the faith for us until we can find ours again. Sometimes I've said that to patients at the hospital - "I'll hold faith for you until you find yours." And sometimes others have done that for me. We are all part of that wholeness and if we acknowledge that we can learn to trust that with open hands and heart. Then, our own life will find its way in the movement of life itself. As Sharon Salzberg says in her book, sometimes all we have to do is keep going and life will carry us the rest of the way.

I put my faith in that. In that movement towards love, justice, that creative impulse that constantly seeks to repair, to change, to heal, to make better. That movement that keeps returning in history and our personal lives no matter what happens.

Can such a faith have a personal component? I think it can. One of my beloved mentors, the Reverend Carole Edwards, once said to me "Life chose you. Life chose you to be here." I'll never forget the feeling of belonging and all rightness that I felt with those words. Life did choose each of us. Something beyond our control put us here.

Sharon Salzberg ends her book with a verse from a 14th century poet from Kashmir named Lal Ded. Her nickname was Lalla.

At the end of the crazy moon night  
The love of God rose.  
I said, "It's me Lalla"

Salzberg speaks of Lalla's "calm expectation of being remembered...offers her self completely, no reticence due to feeling a lack of self-worth, no questioning of her absolute right to be there

face-to-face with the vastness of her ultimate truth.” (Salzberg, 174 -175) How wonderful it would be if we all could stand before the universe with that attitude.

The poet Rilke wrote, “So you must not be frightened...if a sadness rises up before you larger than any you have ever seen; if a restiveness like light and cloud shadows passes over your hands and over all you do. You must think...that life has not forgotten you.” (Salzberg, 120)

James Luther Adams speaks of “a love that will not let us go.” (Adams, 78)

Life is constant movement and possibility

Life chose you.

You are held by a love that will not let go.

Life will never forget you.

You can have faith in that.

### **Works Cited**

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