

"The Wellsprings of Our Faith"  
Rev. Nancy O. Arnold

March 4, 2018  
UU Congregation of Danbury

There is a story about faith told by author and storyteller Edward Hays:

The visitor from outer space was delightful and charming, and, like every tourist, he wanted to see everything on that first day on Earth. The alien marveled at the beauty of our planet, its mountains and rivers, its vast rolling prairies and lush green vegetation. The official delegation who escorted the extraterrestrial visitor took pride in his obvious fascination with Earth. As they toured the heartland of America, evening was approaching, and they became absorbed in one of the Midwest's typically magnificent sunsets.

All of a sudden the visitor from another planet began to weep and sob, all to the dismay of the official guides. 'What's wrong? Have we said something to offend you?' they inquired.

Through his sobs the visitor replied, 'Oh, look, your beautiful sun is dying. How can you not grieve?'

The guides looked at one another in amusement, and one of them spoke reassuringly, 'Don't be sad, sir, the sun isn't dying. This happens every day. We don't mourn, because we know that the sun will appear again tomorrow morning.'

The alien only shook his head. 'How can that be? Look, it has almost disappeared, and all the light is fading! What faith you Earth people have to believe that it will ever appear again.' (Edward Hays, *A Pilgrim's Almanac*, pp 152-153)

The story ends there, but we can add our own responses to the alien's statement. We could explain the laws of physics and science that assure us of the sun's reappearance each day. We could explain that God created the universe to continue as long as people lived on earth. I'm sure there are other explanations. But probably we would not say, "Yes, I guess we earth people do have a lot of faith."

Why is it so hard for us to acknowledge our faith? Does the word faith have any place in a religion of skeptics?

Faith is an enigma. Essentially, faith means to believe in something or someone. Faith means to trust in the worth of something. To have faith is to have loyalty for a person, an idea, or a thing. Keeping faith with ourselves and others. Keeping faith with God. Keeping faith with science. Keeping faith means trusting that what we believe is true – is true – at least for us.

Faith is difficult for us Unitarian Universalists. The word itself has too many associations with believing in something we can't prove. When we

hear the word "faith," we may think of religions that have a creed in which their believers place their "blind faith." But in truth, faith simply means trusting in what we believe to be true.

Jesuit mystic Anthony deMello tells the story of a Christian scholar and a scientist:

(It seems that) a Christian scholar (a man) who held the Bible to be literally true was once accosted by a scientist who said, 'According to the Bible the earth was created some five thousand years ago. But we have discovered bones that point to life on earth a million years ago.'

The scholar responded confidently: 'When God created earth five-thousand years ago, he deliberately put those bones in to test our faith and see if we would believe his Word rather than scientific evidence.' (Anthony de Mello, *Song of the Bird*, p. 42)

When I use the word "faith" I mean it as a way of life. Living with faith means more than living with a set of beliefs that we accept "on faith." I agree with Wilfred Cantwell Smith when he describes "faith" as a "quality of human living." He says that "faith"

At its best...has taken the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service: a quiet confidence and joy which enable one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one's own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen... (cited by James Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, p. 11)

Faith is a way of life. It is a way of relating to ourselves and to others that is authentic to who we are as individuals. Faith is a quality of life exacted by the person, not prescribed by a set of beliefs. It encompasses how we relate to others and to ourselves. It allows us to feel at home in the universe and to find meaning in life no matter what may come our way. Faith is what allows us to live as people with integrity, as the people we are called to be – wholly ourselves.

A number of years ago I participated in a panel discussion at a large non-denominational Christian church. The topic focused on mission work in other countries. Each panelist was asked to address the issue of doing mission work from our own religious perspective. I spoke of my concern that too often missionaries go to other countries with their message of faith without respecting the culture and people already there. To assume that our message takes precedence over another peoples' beliefs is arrogant and disrespectful. (It didn't occur to me at the time that by critiquing their

missionary work I was being arrogant and disrespectful of their religious practices.)

During the questions from the audience, it became clear that I spoke a different faith language from most of the people present. I carefully explained that our religious tradition did not hold the Bible as its authority. This was to a group of young people who sat clutching their Bibles as we spoke. They were able to cite chapter and verse to dispute most of what I had to say.

I grappled with how to explain our faith to these young people, without being disrespectful of theirs. Placing our trust in the reason and goodness of human beings was in direct opposition to everything they believed. For them, God is a father who punishes his children for disobeying his word. (They take the Bible as the word of God, quite literally, just as the scholar did.) I explained that I believed that the Bible was written by people to make sense of the world they saw around them and to put forth some guidelines for how they might live in that world.

After the program ended, I was surrounded by young people asking me questions, and challenging me. One very articulate and thoughtful young man told me of his religious journey. He had been a Methodist but he found that there was not enough substance in what he was being taught. I told him that I understood what he meant because I had grown up as a Catholic and I felt the same way. Our paths took us to faith traditions that gave us the answers we were seeking. Very different answers. He wanted some security and some rules by which to live. I wanted answers for my questions, or at least a religion that respected the questions as valid.

We parted with him saying to me, "I feel sorry for you. You have nothing to hold onto." I told him: "Don't feel sorry for me. I have a lot to hold onto. It's just different than what you have." And then he hugged me.

I was very touched by this exchange. We didn't need to prove each other wrong. We simply tried to understand each other. He probably didn't know it, but with his hug, he reinforced my faith.

Faith, for me, means believing that there is something in life that sustains us. It may be a person, it may be God, it may be a tree, or it may be just trusting that tomorrow the sun will appear. In this case, it was the young man himself. It is through people that I often experience what some call "God." The young man's presence affirmed my faith in the goodness of people.

Faith as a way of life means to trust in the worth of that life. I trust that I am here for a reason. I trust that you are here for a reason. And, I trust in the worth and goodness of all our lives.

Faith addresses questions such as: Why am I here? What is my purpose for being? Is there a reason for my existence? These are questions

that bring many of us to congregations such as this. We seek answers to these very personal questions about our place in the larger human family. And, we want to question freely in the company of others on a similar search.

This is at least part of what constitutes this congregation. We are people seeking to know who we are; people who trust that our lives have meaning. We come to congregations such as this because we want to experience what it means to be accepted as we are. And, we want to belong to a community that will remind us of our own goodness when we forget.

Many years ago, there was a quote that appeared on a Unitarian Universalist calendar: "We are seekers rather than believers..." At the time I was proud to be among the seekers and kept that page of the calendar hanging on my office wall for years. Now – I disagree with that statement. I have come to believe that we all believe in something, or at least we want to. Otherwise we wouldn't be here.

If you doubt my words, take a look at the people around you. Are you going to tell them that you don't value their presence here? Would you want them to tell you that they doubt your value to this congregation? Even if you, yourself, doubt that you have value. Maybe you come here to be reminded of your own worth.

Your presence here is an expression of faith. By your presence you are saying that you believe that these people are worthy of your trust. Simply by being here, you affirm your trust in the value of this beloved community in your life.

For us to function in the world without the belief that we have a reason for being is to live without faith in our own existence. If there is no purpose, then we might as well not be here. (When I say "here," I mean the universal "here," not necessarily the geographical "here" of Danbury.) I'm talking about life itself.

Humans have always attempted to make sense of their lives. The Bible is one expression of that exploration. Science is another human attempt to make sense out of life as we know it. Poets and philosophers have written volumes about the meaning of life. Ministers have preached for centuries – probably more – grappling with questions of ultimacy. The search for meaning in life is a universal quest. It is that search that brings many of you to this Congregation.

I have had a few mystical experiences in my life. The first one occurred several months after the death of my grandmother who I loved dearly. It took place when I was with other Unitarian Universalists. It was an experience that left me somewhat unsettled.

A small group of Unitarian Universalist ministers were guided through a meditation that included encountering Jesus on Easter morning. We all had very different reactions to the meditation. My reflections were startling

to me and to the others. I remembered from my childhood that Jesus said he would return, and that he would be with us always. When I met him on Easter morning, I felt as if I was relieved of a tremendous burden -- doubt. You see, Jesus had fulfilled his promise to return. In my grief and loneliness following the death of my grandmother, I was reassured that I would never have to be lonely again, because Jesus would be with me always, just as he promised. It made me feel that I had a purpose for being in the universe, as if I still had work to do, and I wouldn't have to do it alone. My encounter with Jesus gave me the hope to fulfill my own promise.

This experience was borne out of my imagination. But it also came out of my own need to make sense of my existence in the wake of the loss of someone I loved. I needed to find a reason to trust my place in a changing universe. It was no less powerful an experience because it existed in my imagination. It touched the very heart and soul of my being.

What it revealed to me was my deep hunger to believe that there was still a place in the universe for me where I belonged, and where I was loved. In this meditation, my encounter with Jesus represented the Unitarian Universalist congregation to which I had come home. The congregation is a place of belonging to a faith community that is accepting and challenging and loving – all at the same time. Just as my grandmother was.

One cannot have faith without trust. Trust does not come easily for some of us. We like to be in control. We believe in self-reliance. "God helps those who help themselves" and all that.

The evolution of my own faith journey has meant a gradual shift in how I see my place in the greater scheme of things. I acknowledged that I'm not really in control of my own destiny as I had assumed. The illusion of control is our human attempt to make our lives feel manageable.

We can take charge of our lives. We can take actions to change what is troublesome. But the outcome? It's not really up to us.

I believe in the process of changing what I can, and accepting what I cannot change. But, ultimately, the results are out of my control. One can only act in faith, and trust that what we are doing has some purpose.

American writer and theologian, Frederick Beuchner, writes that faith is

better understood as a verb than as a noun,  
as a process (rather) than as a possession... Faith is not  
being sure where you're going, but going anyway.  
A journey without maps. (He quotes Paul Tillich who said,)  
'doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.'  
(printed in the newsletter of the First Unitarian Church  
of Worcester, Mass.; date unknown)

My colleague Barbara Merritt suggests that "faith is something that even the most skeptical among us are called to develop.

Faith is a trustful belief that some things are worth doing; some feelings are worth having; some visions are worth pursuing. It's not a question of proving or justifying, or guaranteeing results. It is a question of moving forward, towards what we believe is good; in any and all circumstances. (ibid)

Faith. Trust. Religious community. These are all brought together in this place made sacred by our design. You come here seeking more for your lives. You trust that you will get what you need as part of this faith community. You may not share the same beliefs. But what you share is a trust in your willingness to be here for each other as part of this religious community.

Trust goes deep, and faith is expansive. Your presence here is encouragement for your shared struggle to make sense of life as you know it. More than that, your faith is a response to people and the world as you know it. It is a way of being in the world, and trusting your own place in it.

This Congregation is the wellspring of that faith. May it ever be so.