

# UU Faith

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Syracuse

March 12, 2017

Rev. Jane Thickstun

“Stand by this faith,” says Olympia Brown. She was speaking of the Universalist faith, which she was ordained into in 1863.

“Stand by this faith,” we can still say today, speaking of a Unitarian Universalist faith that in many ways has changed, yet in many ways has remained the same since Rev. Brown’s time.

One thing that hasn’t changed in all this time is that people still refer to Unitarian Universalism as a faith. The first chapter in *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide* is called “Our Faith.” Another book that serves as an introduction to Unitarian Universalism is called *Our Chosen Faith*. This title focuses on the fact that so many of us - they say 90% - come to Unitarian Universalism from other religions, or no religion. A very small proportion are born into it; most of us choose it.

James Luther Adams, the primary Unitarian theologian of the 20th century, wrote a book called *An Examined Faith*, playing on the famous line from Socrates - that an unexamined life is not worth living. As Unitarian Universalists, our faith must pass the test of reason, or it is not worth having.

Some people talk about Unitarian Universalism as a “saving faith,” and share stories about how it saved them by its inclusive embrace, its wide acceptance of people and beliefs, its affirmation of the worth and dignity of everybody.

And some talk about it as a “covenantal faith,” referring to the fact that what binds us together as Unitarian Universalists is not a creed or a common belief system, but rather a covenant, a sacred promise, to walk together in our search for what gives our lives meaning and purpose (whether that covenant is explicit or not).

Unitarian Universalism is also sometimes called a religion, a denomination, or a movement. But most often it is called a faith, perhaps because that captures best the significant core of what this creedless, loosely organized collection of congregations and individuals is all about.

So we Unitarian Universalists have a faith, a faith we can be proud of, a faith that opens doors of the spirit, a faith that takes justice seriously, that finds expression in speaking out for the poor and the oppressed. We have chosen this faith, we have examined it, and if it hasn’t yet, it may still save us.

We have a faith, but do we have faith? What does it mean to have faith?

Some might feel that this use of the word “faith” is just too religious for them. There’s a lot of baggage and negative associations with the way the word is often used.

In some religious traditions, people are expected to believe things that go against reason, or at least things there is no evidence for. These things that can’t be known by rational

processes, yet are proclaimed to be true, are called articles of faith. Things like a virgin giving birth, or a man rising from the dead. These things can't be known the normal way, so they have to be taken on faith. Having faith, in this sense, means to believe things on some other authority than our own minds.

Unitarian Universalists can't accept this kind of faith. For us, there is no authority in religion higher than the individual conscience, and every idea, religious or otherwise, must make sense to our minds. We insist on using our minds in our religious search – sometimes too much, when we forget to bring our hearts and guts along too. But we can't believe something is true just because it says so in a book, or somebody tells us it is. We can't believe something is true when it defies reason.

There's another way to have faith, though, that makes sense to people who use their minds, and their hearts as well. There's a way to have faith that doesn't require us to leave our brains at the door.

Unitarian Universalists have faith when they can look at all the tragedy in the world, all the suffering and loss in their own lives, and still say "yes!" to life. As UU minister Dick Gilbert says, "The faith we share is a fundamental confidence in life, a basic trust in human existence, an affirmation in the worthwhileness of the human enterprise." It is more an attitude than a belief. At bottom, it is a deep trust in our own goodness and the goodness of the world.

As David Rankin says in the reading, "Trust is saying 'yes' to creation." This deep trust, also called faith, indeed enables us to do all those things he mentions: to act in freedom, to take risks, to appreciate others, to be honest and constructive and authentic, to touch the springs of consciousness, and to see the inherent potential of life.

When we have faith, we cannot keep from singing.

When we have faith, we feel able to realize our best potential.

When we have faith, everything feels right with the world and ourselves.

When we have faith, we know we can overcome any obstacles.

When we have faith, we don't worry that our small contribution alone won't fix what we see wrong in the world; it is enough that we are doing our part.

The first kind of faith I talked about believes something is true, even against the evidence. This kind of faith does that too, but instead of believing something about the world that seems impossible, this faith asks us to believe in ourselves, even when that seems impossible.

Sometimes I feel like I can't do anything right, I'm not living up to my expectations, and I get really down on myself. I can look at the evidence – what I did, what I said – and the logical conclusion I come to is that I'm not as good a person as I want to be. That's when I need faith – faith that assures me I am good, even against the evidence. I have to believe it. I have to believe I have inherent worth and dignity even when I'm feeling quite unworthy

and undignified. I have to believe it because at some level I know it to be true, but more importantly in that moment, I have to believe it because that's the only way out. It's the only way to feel good about myself again, the only way to feel happiness again, the only way to realize my potential as a capable and loving human being.

When we are down, we are not doing ourselves or the world any good. Of course it's natural and inevitable that we'll be down now and then, and that's OK – the point is not to stay there any longer than we have to.

The world is in a terrible state right now, what with refugees and terrorism and the growth of poverty as the richest get even richer. Then there's global warming and the rape of the earth so that we can use up all its precious resources before our great-grandchildren arrive. And now a new federal administration and Congress seem to be making things even worse. It's terrible, just terrible.

How do you keep from despairing?

Then there's the personal tragedies we all experience. Have you lost a loved one? Are you out of work, or frustrated at work? Are you or a loved one experiencing serious health or financial issues? Are you experiencing trouble in a relationship? Do you sometimes feel like you aren't doing what you wished you might do with your life?

How do you keep from despairing?

Sometimes when my faith is waning, I find inspiration in a poem by Mary Oliver. I knew it – it's in our hymnbook – but then when I did a Vision Quest one summer, I found it hanging on the wall of the outhouse. I've since hung it on my own bathroom wall.

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes, over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

(Mary Oliver, #490 in *Singing the Living Tradition*)

Whoever you are, the world offers itself to you . . . calls to you . . . over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

There are many ways to find faith, ways to restore our faith in ourselves and in life itself.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are open to finding it anywhere. This is where our personal belief system comes in, which can be different for everybody. Some find renewal of their faith in their conception of God. Some might read the bible. Some might find it in reflection on the cosmos or the rhythms of the earth. Some might read the Tao Ching. Some might read Marcus Aurelius or Ralph Waldo Emerson. Some might find it in meditation. Some might find it in prayer. Some might do any or all of the above. I'm sure you can think of more.

Beyond these sources, however, we have a common source. Our Unitarian Universalist faith offers us the faith that we seek. Our Unitarian roots feed the belief in the goodness of humanity, and our Universalist roots feed the belief in the goodness of God, or the universe. There is no hell in our faith, and our heaven is here on earth, if we can only realize it, if we can only believe in it. We all have inherent worth and dignity, and we are all connected to each other and to the whole. We derive our worth through our being part of this greater whole.

Sometimes I think of it as having faith in myself, trusting myself and my judgement, believing in my inherent worth and dignity. Sometimes I need to believe there is something outside of myself, something I can lean on, even if it is something as large and impersonal as the entire universe. One image I like is the idea of floating in the ocean of God – letting go of my worries and my need to control outcomes, and just relaxing and letting myself be held up by forces stronger than I am.

Over time I've come to realize that faith in myself and faith in something outside myself aren't two different things. They are two different ways of looking at the same thing. When you have one, you have the other. When you love yourself, the whole world is lovable, and when you love the world, you can believe in yourself too.

Finding something to love in the world can help us back to loving the rest of it, back to loving ourselves again. Author Barbara Kingsolver says:

“In my own worst seasons I've come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon. Until I learned to be in love with my life again. Like a stroke victim retraining new parts of the brain to grasp lost skills, I have taught myself joy, over and over again.”

Over and over again. Faith needs to be constantly renewed. There are so many things that threaten it. It is really quite a fragile thing. That's why we need to come to church. That's why we need to read things that inspire us. That's why we need to hear the geese flying overhead and watch a sunset now and then.

Wherever you find your faith, may you find it over and over again. May you experience the deep spiritual joy that comes from cultivating a deep faith, a faith that says “yes!” to life.