

“Faith for the Future, Faith for this Very Moment” Kathryn Ellis, March 20, 2011

When I began to write for this morning, I realized that what I was thinking about was really at least two sermons: first what faith is and is not and my own experience with faith. Secondly, about the history and future of faith and Unitarian Universalism’s place. Today, I am focusing on the concept and experience of personal faith. “In his utopian novel *Island*, a sketch of the future of science and religion published in 1963, Aldus Huxley ascribes the following prayer to his fictional islanders: ‘Give us this day our daily faith, but deliver us from beliefs.’”ⁱ

Faith has come to mean beliefs. Some of the definitions from The Random House Unabridged Dictionary include: a belief that is not based on proof, belief in God or in the doctrines or teachings of religion or a system of religious belief. Faith is a word that’s gotten a bad rap; for a long time, I found the concept confusing at best or meaningless. It seemed to be a code word for believing the unbelievable. For some, “faith” is a weapon, a tool for control. This kind of faith sets boundaries and defines who is in, who is in charge and who is out.

People in our congregations tell stories about “having faith pounded into you” or about asking questions to which the reply was only “have faith.” “Have faith” seemed to be another way to say “because the priest or the bible said so!” For many, asking questions was labeled a “lack of faith,” and a lack of faith implied that there was something wrong with the questioner. This is the definition of faith that is associated with the word “blind.” I remember driving by a country church. Their sign read, “This is the church where we don’t think. God wrote it and we believe it.”

But belief is not the original meaning concept of faith. Spanish writer Miguel Unamuno wrote a story “in which a young man returns from the city to his (home) village because his mother is dying. In the presence of the local priest, the mother clutches her son’s hand and asks him to pray for her. The son does not answer, but as they leave the room, he tells the priest that he cannot pray for her because he does not believe in

God. 'That's nonsense,' the priest replies. 'You don't have to believe in God to pray.'ⁱⁱ Harvey Cox said of this story that the priest "recognized the distinction between faith and belief. He knew that prayer, like faith, is more primordial than belief."ⁱⁱⁱ

Static faith proposes an unchanging belief system, one size fits all. Our daughter worked for a small company which designed and sewed clothing. For awhile, they had just one size with a label that read "your size." That size did not fit everyone and certainly did not fit everyone in the same way. We know that the world is immensely variable and constantly changing. Life is always moving and changing. Writer and philosopher Alan Watts said "Belief clings, faith lets go."^{iv} Faith includes awareness and acceptance of life, of change. Faith includes the understanding that we cannot predict life, we don't know how it will all turn out.

The UU theologian, James Luther Adams, stated that everyone has faith, meaning that everyone has assumptions and beliefs on which we base our behavior in the world. Adams proposed that "an unexamined faith is not worth having." "The question concerning faith is not, Shall I be a person of faith? The proper question is, rather, which faith is mine? Or, better, which faith should be mine? for whether a person craves prestige, wealth, security, or amusement, whether a person lives for country, for science, for god or for plunder, that person is demonstrating a faith, is showing that she or he puts confidence in something."^v

For me now, faith is an important, core feeling, part of my way of being in the world. Faith is experiential and embodied. It is not certainty; it is not knowing the outcome. I had to learn what faith is for me. "Faith begins with awe in the face of mystery."^{vi} "The Buddha said, 'Faith is the beginning of all good things.'" Buddhist teacher, Sharon Salzberg, entitled her book Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience. The essence of faith "lies in trusting ourselves to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely." No matter what we encounter in life, it is faith that enables us to try again, to trust again, to love again."^{vii} She says that in Pali, the language of Buddhist texts, the word usually translated as faith means 'to place the heart upon.' In

Pali, faith is a verb as it is also in Hebrew and Latin. Faith is not a singular state that we either have or don't have, it is something that we do.^{viii}

In *The Future of Faith*, Harvey Cox quoted Albert Einstein, "To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly; this is religiousness."^{ix} Cox wrote:

Einstein's perspective also helps sort out the complex interaction between awe, faith, and spirituality. Awe is a basic and nearly universal human emotion. Not to feel it was, for Einstein, to be less than human. Faith, on the other hand, is a particular human response to what awakens awe.^x

Cox also considered Jewish philosopher and Talmud scholar, Emmanuel Levinas reflections on humans' encounters with each other and the "wisdom of love."

Levinas's reflection on the interpersonal and Einstein's awareness of mystery led them both to a similar conclusion: the objective knowledge science rightly insists on is not the only kind of knowledge human beings need. (This awareness, Levinas said) pushes me beyond myself toward a sense of responsibility, one that repeats itself and deepens with each encounter.^{xi}

In *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*, Wendell Berry wrote about unexplainable knowledge. Berry wrote that this knowledge from "out of the depths" can be communicated but it "cannot be proved, demonstrated, or explained; it cannot be taught or learned." It is the knowledge of human experience: emotional and intuitive; it is "our hearts own song."

For me, deepening faith is knowledge from my own experience; it is embodied, emotional and intuitive. Faith is about trust and confidence, love and connection. It is offering our hearts. Salzberg wrote, "To offer our hearts in faith means recognizing that our hearts are worth something, that we ourselves in our deepest and truest nature are of value."^{xii} It is listening to that still small voice. It is listening to our lives. It is about discernment. What is our life about? What is our call as an authentic, faithful self?

When we feel and live this kind of faith, we are transformed. Faith encourages us to be engaged in the present moment and to be aware of possibilities. We open our hearts and minds to the mysteries of life without insisting on answers. Faith connects our story with a larger story. We see that we are a thread in the interdependent web of all existence. This examined faith can help us to know what is right action for us to take in service to our community and to the world.

Harvey Cox wrote about the past and the future of faith and described Christian faith in the first couple of centuries. Remember, fundamentalist Christianity is a twentieth century phenomenon. Cox called the first two or three hundred years of Christianity “the age of faith.”

Creeds did not exist then . . . Hierarchies had not yet appeared . . . Faith (was a) way of life or a guiding compass . . . a dynamic lifestyle sustained by fellowship, reflecting hope . . . people called the movement that had begun through Jesus and his disciples “the Way.” Jesus himself was addressed as the one who taught “the way of God I truth” (Matthew 22:16). Those who followed him were described as walking the “way of peace (Luke 1:79) and “the way of truth” (2 Peter 2:2).^{xiii}

My life experience has led me to a faith that gives me strength. I certainly cannot believe that “everything will turn out right or that everything happens for a reason.” Catastrophes happen at personal, national and global levels: earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes and nuclear accidents. Yet, somehow, whatever will be, will be all right. I have faced pain, physical and emotional, and I will face pain again. I am alive. I will feel fear. I will be angry, frustrated, annoying to others and to myself at times. I will feel joy, love, comfort and pleasure. I am alive. I will do my best to increase love, loving-kindness in the world. Sometimes, I will help another and sometimes, I will fail. I am alive. I am alive and I am a very, very small part of a very large universe. And I have come to know that I am held in love.

And you are held in love. You are alive. May you come to know your own deepest truths. May the light shine on your path. May you be peaceful. May you know that you are loved. May you love. Sing your hearts own song.

Amen. Blessed be. Ashe.

ⁱ Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009, p. 213.

ⁱⁱ Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009, p.3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009, p.3.

^{iv} Salzberg, Sharon. *Faith: On Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2002, p. 67.

^v Adams, James Luther. ed. Kim Beach, p. 27.

^{vi} Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009, p.37.

^{vii} Salzberg, Sharon. *Faith: On Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2002, p. xiv.

^{viii} Salzberg, Sharon. *Faith: On Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2002, p.

^{ix} Quoted by Harvey Cox in *The Future of Faith*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009, p.21.

^x Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009, p. 23.

^{xi} Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009, p.33.

^{xii} Salzberg, Sharon. *Faith: On Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2002.

^{xiii} Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009.