

Faith is Not a Four-Letter Word

Given 8/1/2010 by Robin Mitchell

Opening Reading / Call to Worship

The questions we ask one another are so critically important. If you and I ask each other what we believe, we will get into talking about very heavy stuff [and] often we will end up arguing.

However, when we ask one another what we truly love, what we truly value, what we care about more than anything else in life, something amazing happens. We don't argue. We listen. We connect. We discover that we love and want the same things. We care about one another.

Peter Morales (UUA President)

Meditation Reading

Every year
the lilies
are so perfect
I can hardly believe

their lapped light crowding
the black,
mid-summer ponds.
Nobody could count all of them –

the muskrats swimming
among the pads and the grasses
can reach out
their muscular arms and touch

only so many, they are that
ripe and wild.
But what in this world
is perfect?

I bend closer and see
how this one is clearly lopsided –
and that one wears an orange blight –
and this one is a glossy cheek

half nibbled away –
and that one is a slumped purse
full of its own
unstoppable decay.

Still, what I want in my life
is to be willing
to be dazzled –
to cast aside the weight of facts

and maybe even
to float a little
above this difficult world.
I want to believe I am looking

into the white fire of a great mystery.
I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing –
that the light is everything –
that it is more than the sum
of each flawed blossom rising and fading. And I do.

Mary Oliver – The Ponds

Presentation

The idea of faith, particularly religious faith, has gotten somewhat of a bad odor among liberals lately, and for good reason. After eight years of an administration that believed in "faith-based" solutions to reality-based problems, often with catastrophe-based results, after seeing school boards deciding that their faith in the Book of Genesis trumps scientists' mere knowledge about the age of the universe and the origin of life, and after seeing airliners flown into skyscrapers by people who had faith in the 72 virgins they were about to receive in paradise, it's not hard to see why reasonable, rational people might find themselves thinking that faith really is a four-letter word.

And so we find people like Sam Harris writing books like *The End of Faith* and we can't help wondering if that might be a good thing after all.

But when I go to my various churches and temples and Fellowships I see something different – I see people who seem to have faith that it's possible to transcend their worst impulses, to live lives infused with love and grace. And when we look at people like Martin Luther King or the Mahatma Gandhi, we see people who had a deep faith in the nobility of their enemies, a faith that seems to have changed both their enemies and the world. It's not so clear to me that this kind of faith should end, and so I thought it would be good for us to look at faith this morning, both how it acts in traditional religions and what it might mean to us as religious liberals.

Now if we're going to talk about faith, we need to ask ourselves exactly what it is. According to Sam Harris, religious faith is "unjustified belief in matters of ultimate concern." He goes on to say that "faith is what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse." Meow! But he has a point; that kind of faith certainly does exist – in fact, it's probably most of what passes for religious faith in the world, the kind that we're right to be suspicious of, the kind I was talking about a minute ago at the start of my sermon.

But this isn't a very deep reading – since religious beliefs are mostly unverifiable by their nature, essentially what he's saying is that faith is really believing your beliefs. Faith and belief are pretty much the same thing, and if they're religious then they're bad things.

The Zen Buddhist writer Alan Watts had a more illuminating take on faith and belief. According to him, if you believe something then you accept the universe to the extent that it matches your belief and you reject it otherwise. If you believe that the universe was created 6,000 years ago then you accept whatever in it seems to be 6,000 years old and you're basically hostile and defensive about everything else.

But faith, to him, was something very different. To have faith is to accept the universe as it is, without vetting it to make sure it fits your conceptions. It's an unconditional opening to what is, a willingness to see rather than a demand to dictate.

Belief, according to him, is basically a closing, a circling the wagons around the things you require to be true. And faith is an opening to whatever really is true. When belief sees something it doesn't like in the world, its basic question is "how do I discredit this?" When faith encounters something difficult, its question is "how do I open my heart to this?"

So we have these two very different notions of faith, the Sam Harris definition that basically conflates it with belief and the Alan Watts vision that says they're diametrically opposite. But when I go to all my different churches and look at all the people actually living their religions I see something more in-between – I see something that looks a lot like Alan Watts' faith, an opening to possibility, growing out of the kind of religious beliefs that he disdains.

Here's a specific example of faith arising from beliefs: I went with our Coming of Age kids on their field trip to the Greek Orthodox church in Cardiff earlier this year. It's a gorgeous church – if you ever get the chance to visit it, you definitely should – and one of the most beautiful things are the wonderful mosaics inside and out. On the front of the church, in painstaking mosaic, are the two Bible verses they have chosen to represent them to the world – the Ten Commandments and the verse from the Gospel of Matthew where someone tries to test Jesus by asking him which of those commandments is the most important. They have Jesus' reply set in stone: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and all the Prophets."

Now I'm sure the people in that church believe that Bible verse – after all, they're Greek *Orthodox* Christians, and the word "orthodox" literally means "right belief". So I'm sure that almost all of them believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God and savior of mankind, actually said those words. And as UUs, most of us don't share that belief and probably don't really know how to value it.

But beyond that belief, for those who are willing to take the next step, is faith – faith that it is possible to do those things, and that it matters deeply. Faith that in spite of all that is small and mean in us it is possible for us to love what is best and highest with all our heart, our soul, and our mind. Faith that in spite of all that is tribal and greedy in us it is possible to love others as deeply as we love ourselves. And faith that a life spent pursuing those goals would be both transformed and transformative, that both we and the world would be ennobled.

And that faith – that faith is something anyone can celebrate whether they're Christian or UU or anything else. That kind of faith is seeing a possibility, something vaster than we'd imagined, and saying "I want to live this into being, in myself and in the world." Two weeks ago we heard a sermon called "God is a Verb," and perhaps I should have called this one "Faith is a Verb." Beliefs are something we hold, but this kind of faith is something we live.

In this example, faith started from a specific belief, but in time this kind of faith comes to transcend the belief that gave it birth. Once we are given the impetus to start living as if our highest ideals were true then we gain confidence as we see the effects in our own life and character, and we are no longer just doing it because Jesus or Krishna or Buddha told us to.

It's like a child before her first recital having her parents tell her that of course she has a beautiful voice and that everyone is going to love her. That may be what allows her to go on stage the first time, but as she gains experience and comes to trust her voice and her talent then she no longer needs her parents' reassurances. Even if she later finds out that they're actually tone-deaf and had no clue, that no longer matters once she's come into her own voice.

And my own experience is that Christians who are far into this kind of mature faith still have their original beliefs, but they don't cling to them so much. They'll tell you they believe in God, but then they'll smile and say that she's still at work in the world. They'll tell you they believe in heaven, but they'll laugh and say they know atheists who will get there before they do.

This may explain a paradox that seems to trouble a lot of the New Atheists like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins – how do all the different religions get along with each other? Looking through their books, they seem to be a little disappointed that we're not all at each others' throats; they don't seem to think we're doing this religious thing right. And if you look at our various beliefs, they've got a point – the different religions do make very different claims about what is true – or at least about what is factual – and there's not much that, say, a Christian and a Buddhist can agree on at that level. Jesus either was the only son of God or he wasn't; we either are reincarnated or we aren't.

But as our opening words said, when that Christian and that Buddhist ask each other what they love, what they care about more than anything else, or where their faith leads them, something very different can happen. Spiritually mature Christians have faith that it's possible to love God with every fiber of their being and that doing so would fulfill their lives; spiritually mature Buddhists have faith that deep within us all lies the beating heart of enlightenment in all its perfect splendor, and that uncovering it is the best possible use of a life. Christians have faith that all people are children of God and that it's possible to love them as you love yourself; Buddhists have faith that the separation between people is an illusion and that compassion is our natural state. These faiths lead to lives that will look very similar, and our Christian and our Buddhist may come to discover that they are spiritual brother and sister, as will people of faith from any of the other great religions.

This actually happens – Thomas Merton was a Catholic monk who spent the later years of his life traveling in Asia studying and practicing with Buddhists. Now I've read a few of his books and there's no question that he was a Christian, and a Catholic Christian at that. That was part of who he was. But he saw the Buddhists he met as kindred spirits, and said he felt more kinship with them than he did with lots of people in his own church. I think he was responding to their shared faith and seeing that it was more of a bond than the beliefs he shared with the more hidebound people in his church who perhaps couldn't open their hearts so much to genuine faith.

I think this is why we have interfaith events and not inter-belief events. I'm not sure I'd want to work at an inter-belief homeless shelter – I'd be afraid of fistfights breaking out in the halls, of jihad in the dining room. But I've volunteered at the *Interfaith* Shelter Network lots of times – both here and with the Methodists – and never seen anything but loving service.

Not only is it faith, rather than belief, that allows people of different religions to come together like that to make a difference in the world, but it is faith rather than belief that compels them to do so. Faith is not an acceptance of the world as it is, but a reaching out to the world that could be.

Martin Luther King was a Christian minister who I'm sure believed the Genesis story about all people being created in God's image. But he had faith – not really supported by what he could see; what Sam Harris might call "unjustified belief" – he had faith that Southern whites were vessels of God's love and should be treated as such. He believed the Exodus story about God leading the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt, but he had faith that the arc of history bends towards justice. It was those faiths, I think, and not the beliefs, that got him out on the streets of Selma and Montgomery and created a world in which those things were true, or at least a little truer than they had been. His faith was certainly a verb!

So this focus on faith can help us understand and respect the belief-based religions in the world, but it can also help us understand our own liberal religion. Newcomers often ask us "How can you be a religion if you don't believe in anything?" or "Does being a UU mean you can just believe anything you want?" And those are good questions, questions that sometimes perplex us old-timers as well.

But if you see us as a community of faith, drawn together by faith in our seven principles, then we do make sense as a religious community. You can see each of our principles as a statement of faith – we have faith in the inherent worth and dignity of every person; we have faith that justice, equity and compassion can be the basis for our relations; we have faith that everyone is capable of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and so on. These are not expressed as beliefs, but as things that we covenant together to affirm and promote – to take the radical step of living into being, in our lives and in the world.

So how can we be a religion if we don't believe in anything? We are a religion because our faith is as noble and as transformative as any other religion's. Our seven principles aren't just mushy platitudes; they're demanding and almost defiant refutations of much that seems wrong in the world, and living them fully would radically transform us and the world.

Can we just believe anything we want? Well, yes, as long as those beliefs lead to faith in our principles. You can certainly be a theist, or a deist, or a humanist; millions of people have found those beliefs leading them to our principles. Can you be a Christian? Absolutely. Can you be a fundamentalist Christian? Maybe not so much, not because we have some formal exclusion but because it will be very hard for you to get from your beliefs to our faith. But if you want, give it a try; it's the faith that matters, not the beliefs.

And ultimately, I think it's the faith that makes me love all of my religious communities so much and to be able to move among them so freely. I choke on the words of the Apostles' Creed at my Methodist church these days, and I stumble a little over some of the Buddhist chants about endless cycles of rebirth, but I'm sometimes moved almost to tears when I look around at the people who, like me, have come to take the risk of being forever changed by faith. People who, like me, have come to look into the fire of a great mystery, to be reminded that the imperfections are nothing, that the light is everything.

That spirit seems the same to me whether I see it in a church, a shrine room, or an amphitheater, and it makes me love and honor the people who share it, and to want to spend time in their presence.

Especially the ones in amphitheaters. The ones who come here, each with their own beliefs but with faith in our principles and in their ability to unite us. The ones who make this the richest, most varied, most interesting of all my faith communities. Thank you all for making our beloved community, and please, please – keep the faith!