

Living Faithfully

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One of the benedictions we use to end Sunday services here at UUSS goes like this: “May faith in the Spirit of Life, hope for the community of earth, and love of the sacred in one another, be ours now and in all the days to come.” We wish ourselves and each other continued faith — “faith in the spirit of life.” What does that mean, really? And what does it have to do with hope for the community of earth, and love of the sacred in one another?

A few years ago I read an interview with Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest who works with gang members in Los Angeles. When he was asked about the “success rate” of his ministry and its job training project, Homeboy Industries, Father Greg responded: “We are not called to be successful, we are called to be faithful.” I was struck hard by that statement. What was he talking about? Doesn’t he care about success? He must want to achieve his ministry’s goals of rehabilitation and restorative justice. As a priest, he’s gotta believe that God cares about the outcomes for the individual men he works with. So what did he mean by saying that he was called not to be successful, but to be faithful?

I think he meant that the **value** of his work with gang members can’t be measured by recidivism and addiction relapse rates. Instead, working with these men — treating them with dignity and respect, daring to love them, holding hope for them to have a

different life — is valuable for its own sake, regardless of recidivism and relapse rates. Father Greg does this work not first and foremost to achieve a goal, but because it is the way to live out his faith — a faith that God loves each tattooed face and twisted heart, lives among the poor and dispossessed, and can create justice out of the wreckage of human failure. In Father Greg’s context of Christianity, being faithful means walking the talk of the gospel. Not just **believing** in a loving God, but **living** in a way that manifests God’s love in the world.

We too are called to be faithful.

I am well aware that many UUs are practically allergic to the word “faith.” Some of us were taught as children that “faith” means unquestioning acceptance of a belief system, of a particular idea of God that makes no sense to us. Some of us have been taught that “faith” is the opposite of “doubt,” that it means certainty about ultimate truths. But when I use the word “faith” I don’t mean believing in something intellectually, and I don’t mean feeling certain about anything emotionally.

Let’s try thinking of faith not as a noun but as a verb — or an adverb. It’s about **how** we **do** our lives. To live faithfully is to live out our commitments, as we do when we are faithful to a partner — hanging in there in good times and bad, even on days when we just plain aren’t feeling the love. To be faithful, in other words, is to live consistently with our highest and deepest values. Which is choice about our actions, not an intellectual position or an emotional state.

For me, the highest and deepest values are the Interdependence of life on Earth and of all Being; the ultimate power of Love; and the progress of the human community toward greater Justice. Whatever you believe about the Spirit of Life, whether or not you are comfortable using the word God, whether you consider yourself a theist or an atheist or something else altogether, these principles are integral to Unitarian Universalism: Interdependence, Love and Justice.

So what does it mean to live faithfully to these principles? If faith isn't an intellectual position or an emotional state, then "keeping faith" with UU principles (that's "principles" with a small "p") doesn't require unwavering belief in anything — including our Seven Principles (with a capital "P"). We are a creed-less faith. We covenant to "affirm and promote" our principles, not to accept them without question. I'll tell you, I have my days when I doubt the inherent worth and dignity of some people. I have days, weeks, months, when I am cynical about the democratic process, and all but hopeless about the prospects for world community.

As for my personal world view, I am not someone who believes that "things happen for a reason" or that Love conquers all. I do believe that Love and Justice are more powerful, ultimately, than the forces arrayed against them — but that doesn't mean that they triumph in any given place and time, let alone in some final cosmic showdown. So even though Love and Justice are among my highest values, I have plenty of doubt about how well they're doing at triumphing over evil. And yet. . .

And yet I choose to live faithfully, to live deliberately in a way that affirms and promotes my values regardless of my doubts and regardless of my very human emotional ups and downs.

So for example, living faithfully means limiting my personal carbon footprint, whether or not there's still time to prevent climate apocalypse. It means not getting into a debate with myself about whether or not my vote matters, but voting as if it does matter. (Because if I don't, it won't.) It means not retreating into isolation when I feel lonely and disconnected, but maintaining my place in the community by showing up here on Sunday morning, singing in the choir, attending the upcoming workshop on racial justice. It means sharing my income with those who have less than I do, showing up to feed the hungry and provide shelter to the homeless. Bottom line: it means caring for the Planet and its creatures, and doing my small part to create the conditions for peace and justice. And it means making time every day for silence, for deep attention to my own heart and spirit, whether or not I feel anything moving there.

Just like the lover who has pledged faithfulness, I **don't** feel it — or believe it — all the time. There are days — weeks — months when it is entirely unclear to me that love is winning, or that humanity is making any progress at all. For UUs, that is what counts as a crisis of faith. But it's not a crisis, not really, it's a natural part of the rhythm of human experience and the spiritual life. So I try not to let my doubts, or my lack of felt spiritual connection, drive my daily choices about how to live. I don't want to deny my

doubts or pretend to feelings I'm not having, but I can carry on just the same. Sure I fall off the path sometimes, sometimes several times a day, but I can choose to get back on. That's the core of faith, I think: choosing to get back on the path of my values and take the next step, whether or not I can see where the path is going.

Martin Luther King said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." That's exactly right. And as Dan Millman puts it, "Faith means living with uncertainty - feeling your way through life, letting your heart guide you like a lantern in the dark." I like that a lot. Faith is the act of holding my heart out like a lantern, while I take that next step up the staircase into the unknown.

I recently visited one of my kids who's attending college out of state, and I spent part of an afternoon while she was in class hanging out at the campus Center For Religious And Spiritual Life. After meditating in the chapel awhile, I went downstairs to the library and browsed the bookshelves. A title caught my eye: Faith is Like Skydiving. Whoah. Lanterns on dark staircases is one thing, but *skydiving*? Now I must admit that I did not even open the book, so I have no idea what the author's thesis was, but what it made me think of is the notion some people have that if your faith in God is strong enough, if you trust that God will catch you, then you will be rescued before hitting the ground just like a parachute opening after some terrifying minutes of free-fall. God as parachute, and faith as the ripcord. On the basis of this book title alone, I was off and running in my own head, arguing against a theological straw man entirely of my own creation: Are you kidding me?! Parachutes fail! People crash! You can't keep horrible

things from happening by demanding faith in a divine superhero who makes everything OK! What a stupid metaphor for faith!

Then I remembered something else. A few years ago I read in the newspaper about a young American aid worker who was kidnapped by terrorists abroad. She was a Christian. In one of the messages she got out to her parents, she told them not to worry about her because “God was cradling her in free-fall.” Cradling her in free-fall. [Pause] She didn’t say that her faith, or her God, was going to rescue her from the free-fall. And it didn’t. She was killed. But she felt the presence of her God, loving her and holding her, even as she was falling into the abyss. That moved me, to my core.

At the time I was in a free-fall of my own. My life wasn’t in danger, but I felt like I was in a waking nightmare headed toward some horrific climax, and had no idea how things were going to turn out. Free-fall. And the phrase came to me: “cradled tenderly in free-fall.” I may not share the Christian aid worker’s God, but that phrase of hers became my parachute. I used it as a mantra. And as I worked with the phrase in prayer and meditation, I felt myself opening to love even in my terror, like the anemone opening in the dark, in the passage Jim read. Even though no divine superpower was going to rescue me, I discovered that I could experience being held in love, and connected to the interdependent web, in each unfolding moment of the fall. And that helped me, when my feet were finally back on the ground, to hold up my lantern so that I could see just far enough ahead to take the next step. And then the next.

We are living now in a time when it can seem as if our whole country is in free-fall. The radical uncertainty facing us as individuals, as a nation, as part of the community of earth, can be terrifying. There are religions that try to offer certainty in response to all that. This isn't one of them! But the opportunity we have, to live faithfully as Unitarian Universalists, offers something that is more precious to me than certainty.

We UUs love the phrase, often attributed to Dr. King, about the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice. That's something I want so desperately to believe is true, and sometimes I do . . . and sometimes I doubt. Dr King was actually paraphrasing the words of 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, who had a beautifully nuanced view. Parker said: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is long, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight, [but] I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice."

Theodore Parker was talking about the nature of faith! We can't actually see the whole arc to confirm with certainty that it bends toward justice, but we can experience enough to be willing to trust the proposition — enough to decide to act on it. We consult our experience and our conscience, and choose to take the first step even though we can't see the whole staircase.

Doubt is the voice that says: But you can't **see** where the arc goes from here; you can't **know** that your efforts will make a damn bit of difference.

And Faith — not a blind faith, but a faith informed by reason and experience, because we are Unitarian Universalists!— responds: Fair point — but even so, **even so**, I have experienced the power of community. I have seen how the passion for justice arises anew in each generation. I have felt Love enter the darkest caves of my heart and the broken places of my spirit, and I have witnessed this in the lives of others. These experiences are enough for me to keep putting one foot in front of the other on the path of love, justice, and interdependence.

As Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams said about the arc of justice, it does not bend on its own. It bends because each of us in our own way lays hands on that arc and bends it in the direction of justice. For me, that's the whole point of faithful living. By acting in accordance with the values of love, justice and mercy I may help create them in this life. Even if they **are** incapable of perfect realization, as doubt whispers, they can emerge and flourish only to the extent we work for them. And walking the path of faith, according to those values, together with you, is **without doubt** the best way for me to live a life of depth and meaning. And that, my friends, is what's more precious than certainty.

So may it be.