

September 10, 2006

**“Faith for Skeptics”**  
Rev. Dr. Arvid Straube

This is the first in an occasional series of sermons on faith. Today I want to talk about faith for skeptics. You can have faith if you are a skeptic. The problem is that it is easy to get confused about faith if you think about faith in the way that most people do. It is easy to get confused about faith if you think that faith means belief. Faith in a doctrine, faith in an idea, faith that Jesus was God and died for our sins, faith in a particular set of propositions; belief is not faith. We think, nowadays, that faith means belief, but if you look at the true meaning of that word, an older meaning of that word, you'll see that faith isn't about something you believe at all. It's about what you trust. Think about words derived from the same as the word “faith”: fidelity, trusting, true, being true in the sense of being trustworthy. So faith is that which we deem to be trustworthy and it's a lot more than believing an idea. As the Buddhist scholar Sharon Salzberg puts it, “Faith is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience.” In the language of Pali, the language of the earliest Buddhist texts, the word for faith is *saddha*. It means literally to place one's heart upon. Our faith is what we put our heart upon. As the late Harvard scholar of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith put it, “Faith is an orientation of the personality to oneself, to one's neighbor, to the universe, a total response, a capacity to live more than a mundane level, to see, to feel, to act in terms of a transcendent dimension. It's much more than what you think.”

We in the west are just so confused with the idea of faith as belief, particularly, most people in the west think that faith is belief in a deity, a personal god. It might surprise you to learn that there is a tradition where faith is an important part of the teachings for spiritual growth but does not have the idea of a deity, a personal god, and that's Buddhism. The Buddha taught about faith. He said that there are three phases of faith and that you go through them one after another. I found it very illuminating to take this teaching about faith and apply it to our experience about faith. The first stage of faith according to the Buddha is called “bright faith.” This is where someone wakes up to the possibility of their life. People may be going along living conventionally, thinking conventionally, acting conventionally, living somebody else's dream, somebody else's life, not understanding the preciousness of the human soul. All of the sudden an experience, usually, happens, usually it's an experience, perhaps someone has had a mystical experience of oneness with all, perhaps someone has read a book that's changed their life, perhaps someone has started a spiritual practice and finds that it's addressing the deepest hungers of their soul, perhaps someone has had a born again experience, for whatever reason there is a freshness and a brightness there and a way is found to a destination we didn't even know we yearned for. In order for bright faith to be fed, it needs a spiritual community. When people have an experience of bright faith, of waking up to their possibility, then they need the support of a spiritual community. It's articulated there, the teachings are taught there.

Faith is indispensable, but it's not the final phase. The problem with it is it can be rigid, why? Because it's too dependent on external validation. The deepest forms of faith

need to go beyond external validation. Sometimes bright faith can become blind faith because people shut out inconsistencies that are part of any belief system or any religious community because they don't want to rock the boat. They don't want to question which has been so promising for them. We need to learn if we are to grow spiritually that doubt is not the opposite of faith, that doubt as our reading this morning suggests, can be a servant of faith. Rigidly held beliefs can be very dangerous. When bright faith is held on to past its time with its reliance on external forces and a cutting off of individual experience and reason, it can be very dangerous. We need to acknowledge what will be happening tomorrow: the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, perpetrated by people who had a blind faith and we need to remind ourselves because we need to remember that most of the suffering in this world is perpetrated by people who are absolutely sure they are right.

So, doubt is not the enemy of faith and as that faith begins to be tested according to one's own reason and one's own experience, it becomes stronger not weaker. This is what in Buddhism is called "verified faith." It's not just in Buddhism. Paul talks about in the first letter to the Thessalonians, he said, "Prove all things. Hold fast to that which is good." Those of you who may be new to our faith of Unitarian Universalism, it's important for you to know that that is okay here because a lot of people who have been disillusioned by blind faith in perhaps another tradition, find themselves here and you need to know that here it's okay to test, here it's okay to question. One of the most important doctrines of Unitarian Universalism is the Free Pulpit and the Free Pew. The Free Pulpit means that a Unitarian Universalist minister is enjoined to preach the truth in love, the truth as he or she sees it, but we recognize that, as our reading says, there are flaws in every belief. My job is to carefully think, and pray, and present what I think is worthy and true. That's the Free Pulpit. There is no limit to that. But we also have the Free Pew, which means that we are expecting you to prove what is said from this pulpit, to put it against your own reason and your own experience. The truth is very large and one person cannot have it all. I suspect that one tradition cannot have it all.

Allen Watts said, "Belief clings. Faith lets go." So as bright faith moves from dependence on external community to an internal understanding based on testing and experiences of what is true and what we can let go of. In the beginning of trusting our own experience and reason, we come to the last of the phases that Buddhism talks about, abiding faith. Abiding faith according to Salzburg is, "Faith evolves from the first intoxicating blush of bright faith to a faith that is verified through our doubting, questioning, and sincere effort to see the truth for ourselves. Bright faith steeps us in a sense of possibility. Verified faith confirms our ability to make that possibility real. Then, as we come to deeply know the underlying truths of who we are and what our lives are about, abiding faith or unwavering faith, as it is traditionally called, arises. Abiding faith does not depend on borrowed concepts, rather it is a magnetic force that is a bone-deep, lived understanding, one that draws us to realize our ideals walk our talk and act in accord with what we know to be true."

So, how do we move then from bright faith to verified faith to abiding faith? Well, here there is a great deal of unanimity among the great wisdom traditions of humanity. One

is to be serious about spiritual practice, to take some time for reflection, for meditation, for prayer, to take some moments of our lives away from the business and external clamor of the world to seek the council of one's own heart and the universe itself. Another, and this of course is what's underneath all meditation, is to pay attention, to pay attention to one's thoughts and feelings, one's actions, to pay attention to the present moment, the abundance of the world's beauty and intricacy. One moment of truly paying attention releases boundless gratitude for the wonders, the extravagant wonders of creation, a creation that we are part of, that we are not separate from. The great wisdom traditions agree that to move forward in faith we need to act toward our fellow human beings, in fact we need to act toward all beings, with love, compassion, and generosity, more and more letting go of our own self-centered view point to understand the truth of our interconnection. As we grow in faith we live more impeccably a life of integrity.

For Unitarian Universalists, what we believe isn't the test of our faith. I think that's important enough to repeat. For Unitarian Universalists, what we believe isn't the test of our faith. The test of our faith is what we do and how we live. It isn't which particular story of human progress and the human journey makes the most sense to us, it's how we treat our fellow human beings, how we contribute to the common endeavors of this world, whether we in our actions and thoughts make a difference for good or for ill. That's how we test our faith. That's how we see if we're on the right track. Are we acting with less selfishness than we did? Are we acting with a better understanding of truth than we did? Are we able to let go of outworn ideas more easily than we did. Here again, I think Buddhist teachings can help. What makes the difference between an action that is skillful and an action that is not skillful is intention, the intention for the good of what I am about to do or say. That seems simple enough, but we fool ourselves far too often. Growing in faith becomes being more truthful not only with others but with ourselves about what our intentions are and to act out of compassion and wisdom and generosity. The second is, is our action once our intention is clear skillful or unskillful? You can tell the truth to someone who needs to hear it in a skillful way. I'm sure you've had the experience of telling the truth to another person in an unskillful way, or having it told to you that way. Finally, there are the results of our actions. Unfortunately, we don't have control over the results of our actions. We don't know what the final result of our action is going to be. Because we live in such an interdependent reality, my action has a response in you, which creates actions in you, which creates actions and actions and actions and actions.

We can control our intentions. We can control the skillfulness or unskillfulness of our actions, but we cannot control the results. I think this is comforting. No seriously. In a world like the one we are living in today when despair, which is by the way the opposite of faith, is an ever-present possibility for people who want to see a world that is just, compassionate and wise, where every human being is honored, where people live together in peace and are allowed the full flowering of their potential, if we yearn for such a world, people who sometimes call themselves progressives, we look out on that world and we work for peace and we work for justice and we do what we can and sometimes we don't see results immediately and we are tempted to despair. The fact is

we need to keep working because we don't know what the results will be. The Berlin Wall came down, I believe, not because our administration outspent the Russians. The untold story is that all over east Germany in churches people met together quietly, in defiance of their government, with danger to themselves, and talked about freedom and human dignity and that message spread as one person had the courage, and another, and another, not expecting that wall to come down because of what they said or did, but because it was right. That's why I think that wall came down. Salzburg says, "When it comes to saving the world, we cannot know what is enough. We do what we can in faith, but when we don't do it nothing happens." When we don't do it, nothing happens.

Amen.