***“Renewing Faith”: A Sermon Series***

**Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman, Interim Minister**

**Unitarian Universalist Church of Muncie**

**March 2022**



**March 13:**

**Sermon:** “The Language of Faith”

**Reading:** from “A Faith for Free Men,” James Luther Adams

**March 20:**

**Sermon**: “What Do We Mean by ‘Faith Development’?”

**Reading**: “Spring,” Mary Oliver

**March 27:**

**Sermon:** “Risky Business: Faith Without Certainty”

**Reading:** “Cherish Your Doubts,” Michael Schuler

**“The Language of Faith”**

**13 March 2022**

**Unitarian Universalist Church of Muncie**

**Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman**

**Reading:** from “A Faith for Free Men,” James Luther Adams

Faith is by no means dead in the world. A devil’s plenty of it is loose on the planet. ‘a man bears beliefs,’ said Emerson, ‘as a tree bears apples’ …

The question concerning faith is not, ‘Shall I be a man 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 he lives for country, for science, for god, or for plunder, he shows that he has faith, he shows that he puts his confidence in something.

We must not believe every ‘pious’ man’s religion to be what he says it is. He may go to church regularly, he may profess some denominational affiliation, he may repeat his creed regularly, but he may actually give his deepest loyalty to something quite different from these things and from what they represent. Find out what that is and you have found his religion. You will have found his god. It will be the thing he gets most excited about, the thing that most deeply concerns him…. The fact that every man, whether he wills it or not, must put his trust in something, is no basis for any particular faith. Rather, the necessity as well as the fact shows only that man must *choose.* He cannot escape making a choice… *we have no choice but to be free in the choice of our faith…*. The free man does not live by an unexamined faith. To do so is to worship an idol whittled out and made into a fetish. The free man believes with Socrates that the true can be separated from the false only through observation and rational discussion. In his view the faith that cannot be discussed is a form of tyranny…. An unexamined faith is not worth having, for it can be true only by accident. A faith worth having is a faith worth discussing and testing…. The faith of free men …. Is intelligible and justifiable.

**Sermon: “The Language of Faith”**

With these stimulating words about free faith from James Luther Adams, we have a more analytic response to my opening question, what do you have faith in? “Faith” is our worship and Soul Matters theme for March. More specifically, the theme is “Renewing Faith,” which invites us to confirm and expand this quality called faith, an invitation particularly appropriate at this turning point in the covid pandemic. Today let’s consider The Language of Faith: that is, what we mean by faith; next week what we mean by Faith Development; and on the last Sunday in March, a revisit of Faith without Certainty.

Before delving into the meaning of faith, I want to offer some open and honest reflections with you, which I hope will expand your exploration of faith this morning. The word “faith” is often used in the context of church life. My friends, during this year-and-a-half that I have served here as your transitioning minister, I have often experienced a pattern which goes something like this: a word or a phrase which is part and parcel of Unitarian Universalism is used … in a sermon, in a written document, in conversation … triggers reactivity, usually negative reactivity from some, who don’t routinely use that word or agree with its use. Perhaps some of you have already experienced such reactivity this morning over the word “faith.” Often then, the conversation changes from an exploration of the concept of the term, to personal reactions to it. I expect that that shift in focus shuts off hearing new perspectives, gaining new insights, expanding applications of the concept. To everyone this morning, may I invite you to remain open as we explore “faith”, for as James Luther Adams said, every human is a person of faith by some interpretation of the term. Of course, there are many synonyms for “faith,” many other words for the concept. I respect your preferred terms --- I expect there are a good half dozen other words in this very worship space right now --- but please hear me, every time I say the word “faith” in this sermon, I can’t quality it by saying all those other half dozen words. I’m not disallowing your perspective and encourage you to do any translating of vocabulary which works for you, as you remain open to expanding your experience of renewing what I will refer to as “faith.” During these horrific times when world peace is so tenuous, renewing faith in many realms of existence is critical.

Dictionary definitions

Let’s begin with the meaning of the word “faith.” Faith has many meanings, many nuances and implications. Perhaps this exploration can inform conversations for you in Soul Matters small groups as you consider “Renewing Faith” this month.

The Soul Matters packet reminds us that the root meaning of “faith” has the same root as the phrase *semper* *fidelis*: that is, always faithful, always loyal. Dictionary listings explain faith as complete trust or confidence in someone or something. One dictionary illustrated with the phrase “this restores one’s faith in politicians” (go figure!!!) This trust angle parallels use of “faith” as a sense of fidelity or loyalty, as in honoring a loan “in good faith,” or faithfully attending church every Sunday no matter the subject of the sermon. Faith also implies conviction and deep belief: when I lived in the Boston area in the early 2000s, folks had faith that one day the Red Sox would win the world series pennant after decades of drought. Another sense of faith appears in the March Unigram, the monthly newsletter of this congregation, where Rev. Julia addressed “everyday faith” as a sense of confidence in the on-going honesty or integrity of people and things, such as faith that the lights will come on when we flip the switch. These illustrations of faith are based on reasonable expectation about the truth or reliability of the faith object. When I get on a ski lift to ride up a mountain for downhill skiing, I have faith that my run down the mountain will be safe, enjoyable, and free of collision with snowboarders, just like it has been for the thousands of times I’ve skied down a mountain before.

Faith may also imply surrender to what is less certain, to what is not within our control, to fates, to human actions, to Mother Nature. This lens on faith I expect is more challenging to the person who seeks proof and verification, or who prefers that the agency for their life comes from within themselves, rather than from an outside force or factor. Sometimes faith asks of us that we let go of control. Faith may feel like surrender to mystery, to something which is not concrete or definable by words, rather experienced by feeling or intuition. This sense of faith may be related to risk: in giving over to that which is not totally in our control, we may risk a new experience, a relationship, and more. Without faith, we could remain locked in fear of the unknown. I saw a sign just yesterday: “Let your faith be bigger than your fear.” If I were fearful of all the possible ways in which I could wipe out going down those ski slopes, I’d never get on that ski life and miss the beauty of standing on top of a mountain, looking out over snow-covered landscapes below.

Look at all these nuances of meaning of “faith,” and I haven’t even addressed religious faith yet. Surely there are lenses on the word “faith” or its synonyms which work for you in everyday conversations.

Religious Faith

With that, let’s shift to “faith” in a religious context. Notice parallels between the meaning of “religion” and the concept of faith. Just as James Luther Adams asserted that everyone has faith in something, so everyone is a person of religion in that the root meaning of “religion” concerns our common bonding in questions of human existence. Those same dictionaries I just referred to also define faith a “belief in God,” or more broadly belief in other articulated belief systems which support and guide those religious questions of life. A “person of faith” usually refers to someone we identify as “religious,” which may or may not include a concept of divinity.

The UU minister Rev. Daniel Kantor, who described himself as an “unbeliever” in an article about his experience moving to Dallas to serve First Unitarian Church, asked his new congregants to describe their faith. For many their initial response was to explain what they believe, or perhaps more likely, don’t believe. However, rather quickly their stories shifted to ways in which they are faithful, to stories about beliefs which have emerged from struggles to make meaning in their lives. Cantor wrote: “More than an adherence to a belief system, faith is an orientation to life, … to looking at the world from a particular perspective and using that perspective to consider the meaning of our existence.”

Clearly religious faith, with or without divinity, is a source of comfort, safety, and inspiration for many. The capacity to give oneself over to an unknown can open us to transcending mystery and wonder beyond rational explanation. The Rev. William Sinkford, past president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, tells of a tragic time in his son’s life, when the then fifteen-year-old overdosed on drugs. At that point, Sinkford was not a praying man … I think he usually identifies as UU humanist --- but sitting vigil in the hospital, all he could do was give over to prayer: pure prayer to some force outside himself that his son would live. As he did, he said he experienced a sense of not having to handle this frightening tragedy alone, that he was connected to greater powers and energies. Turning to faith he found comfort. Frankly, right now I desperately need to have faith that our world has seen the last covid variant and subsequent surge in illness and death. This nuance of faith is related not only to hope, but also to positive mental and physical health. Having faith that things will work out for the best even when we might have doubts supports a sense of purpose, a definable reason for a relationship or an activity or a mindset, even in the face of uncertainty. Having faith also means that we believe that grace can happen.

Soul Matters materials also explain that “faith” first emerged as a religious concept in the thirteenth century. It denoted fidelity in the sense of staying loyal to God’s commandments. That is, this core meaning of faith was about behavior, not beliefs. Doesn’t that sound a lot like our modern UU understanding of “covenant,” which we often explain as “deeds, not creeds.” This dichotomy of behavior and belief was expressed as early as the New Testament book of James, who described the religious life as consisting of both faith and works.

There is one more definition of “faith” we should include here: faith as organized religious institutions defined by particular doctrines and teaching which contribute to understanding this journey called life: for example, Protestant faith, Hindu faith, UU faith. Just consider the many uses of the word “faith” in UU programs, publications, readings and hymns, professional positions in the denomination, and more. It’s everywhere! For example, one of the most commonly read introductory books for newcomers to Unitarian Universalism is called *Our Chosen Faith,* by Buehrens and Church. Also, a handbook by Rev William Murry, a leading UU humanist minister and author, called *A Faith for All Seasons,* invites liberal believers to turn to liberal faith in times of personal pain and suffering, or loss and grief, or death. Still on the topic of faith traditions, most of these traditions include some written source to inspire the practice of the faith: the New Testament for Christianity; the Torah for Judaism; the Koran for Islam. Often there is a person identified as founder of the faith tradition: Jesus or Buddha, for example. Faith traditions may include a concept of divinity, or not: the faith tradition of humanism broadly stated is a faith tradition without God. I remind everyone about the pamphlet located in our lobby called The Faith of Unitarian Universalist Humanists, which includes writings by a dozen UU humanists.

This being women’s history month, let me remind you about a lovely reading about faith in our hymnal: #569, “Stand By This Faith” by Universalist Olympia Brown. Brown issued these words in one of her final sermons, delivered around 1920, after six decades in Universalist ministry. I’ve researched the background to this message. Brown meant faith in both broad definitions which I’ve just presented: as trust, trust in the Universalist doctrine that God loves everyone, and trust in the Universalist denomination, which she had left for several years over disillusion with the lack of support for women’s ministry. “Stand By this Faith, work for it, there is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals. “

Return to James Luther Adams

Let’s consider one more important message in the reading by Adams. He asserts that every person has faith in something --- “the thing they get most excited about, the thing that most deeply concerns them” --- because all humans need some source of comfort, meaning, courage, and reliability. He urges us to accept the reality that humans inherently give themselves over to someone or something. What he cautions about is that all too often some develop religious zeal for ideologies which are fundamentally malevolent. He suggested that a person might say they are of a particular faith … a regular church goer, for example …. And yet give their deepest loyalty to something quite different without examining reasons for doing so. That is, giving themselves over to some other cause without some “observation and rational discernment,” in Adams’ words. An unexamined faith, he says, is not worth having. In its extreme, an unexamined faith --- a faith which we cannot question --- is insubstantial and is also a form of tyranny, which can erase checks and balances on our actions: as in suicide bombers, for example, and other terrorists. Adams cited Nazism, which he knew first-hand from living in Europe in the 1930s. Today, we see similar apparently unexamined devotion to destructive ideologies among American of certain political persuasions as well as in some layers of the population in Russia.

I expect most Unitarian Universalists … indeed most persons here this morning --- agree with the imperative to examine that which we put our faith in. That is, we want faith as trust and faith as a religious denomination which we can choose, faith for which we are in the driver’s seat. Choice is core to this liberal, heretical way of religion: indeed, the root meaning of “heretic” is “choice.” Historically grounded in principles of American democracy, this liberal religion is here and available for any of us to choose to join, in contrast to some cultures or countries which have state-defined religions. Choosing to be part of liberal faith, we may also choose the particular spiritual path or paths we follow, the particular spiritual practices and the particular social justice we engage in. Those choices may change tomorrow, as we also respect and embrace choices of our fellow Unitarian Universalists which are different from our own. It makes sense, doesn’t it, that that fundamental reading about Unitarian Universalism I mentioned earlier is called Our CHOSEN Faith.

Your Applications of Faith

Getting back then to my opening question, as you consider what you have faith in, I hope yours is an examined faith, a faith which contributes well to this journey we call life. I will leave it for each of you to examine how you are faithful in matters of your personal lives. Let me, however, suggest a few thoughts about faith as it relates to this religious community.

I hope this community has faith and trust in how we all move forward from this pandemic: faith in congregational leaders who makes decisions about re-opening, faith in restoring in-person vitality of this community, faith that plans we make for the future will not be thwarted by a resurgence of the virus. I also call you to have faith in the process you have already started of going forward with a developmental minister starting this summer, that you have faith in the ongoing process of transitioning which that ministry will offer. Faith in the community of course starts with faith in one another, faith in each individual, including a new minister. When you do experience another’s choices and opinions which differ from your own, faith in each person’s inherent worth and dignity can help you turn to wonder and curiosity, not confrontation and attack. As you heard about last Sunday so eloquently from the visiting minister, Rev. Katie, I also hope you have faith in Welcoming the Stranger, the newcomer, especially the other who does not look like you. A mindset of radical hospitality will encourage your outreach to the wider Muncie community and to the many resources and activities available from the Unitarian Universalist Association.

To you, dear people of liberal faith, I hope you continue to have faith that humankind’s agendas to save the environment will make a difference. Finally, may we all have faith that principles of humanity and justice and love will prevail, to bring the current devastation in Ukraine to a close as soon as possible.

My friends, I have faith that each of you in this congregation can move forward well in living out the many layers of your own examined faith, to guide you on this journey of life.

MAY ALL THIS BE SO

*Please do not copy or quote without permission of the author.*

**“What Do We Mean by ‘Faith Development’?”**

**UU Church in Muncie**

**March 20, 2022**

**Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman**

**Reading:** “**Spring,” Mary Oliver**

Faith

is the instructor.

We need no other.

Guess what I am,

he says in his

incomparably lovely

young-man voice.

Because I love the world

I think of grass,

I think of leaves

and the bold sun,

I think of the rushes

In the black marshes

just coming back

from under the pure white

And now finally melting

stubs of snow.

Whatever we know or don’t know

leads us to say:

Teacher, what do you mean?

But faith is still there, and silent.

Then he who owns

the incomparable voice

suddenly flows upward

and out of the room

and I follow,

obedient and happy.

Of course I am thinking

the Lord was once young

and will never in fact be old.

And who else could this be, who goes off

down the green path,

carrying his sandals, and singing?

**Sermon: “What Do We Mean by ‘Faith Development’?”**

This month the worship theme is “Renewing Faith.” Last week I proposed that we consider two broad meanings of “faith”: faith as trust in that which cannot be necessarily proven; and faith as a religious tradition, as in the Presbyterian faith, or liberal faith. We placed all of these meanings into a context of renewal and revitalization. Today let’s fold both those meanings of faith into reflections on the concept “faith development,” an important avenue for renewing faith.

Last Sunday, I called you to examine your own experiences with faith: what does the term mean to you? Do you use the word “faith” and in what contexts? How do you consider your participation in this community and in this denomination an act of faith? If you are a newcomer, what dimensions of faith are your seeking in a religious community? Do the words of Mary Oliver speak to you, that faith, such as faith that spring will return, is an instructor? Might you think of the celebration of the equinox as ritual symbolizing faith in the turning of Mother Earth?

I wonder if you also include the word “faith” in your descriptions of church life? Perhaps you associate the word with “belief” as in creeds, which are required in some religious traditions. Perhaps you are like Archie Bunker, who said, “Faith is believing what any damn fool knows ain’t so.” If you are of the Archie mindset, may I invite you to stay with me this morning as we consider the word “Faith?” As I reflected last Sunday, by “faith,” it is not dogmatic creed I am talking about. What I’m talking about is this human quality of religious faith that it seems humans are hard-wired with: faith as it points to a search for meaning and purpose during this process of being alive, as we reflect on intimate and ultimate questions of existence. If there are any “Archies” among us today, may I invite you to stay open to considering how this theme of “faith development” is relevant to your life.

New Terminology at UUCM

There are several interpretations of the title of this sermon, “What do we Mean by Faith Development.” I have time to address two broad concepts. The first is in part semantic, but with great implications for word choice. For the past two or three decades, many in Unitarian Universalism have used the phrase “faith development” rather than “religious education,” that is, the learning component of church life. A program which used to be known as “religious education” is now called “faith development.” Persons working in this area of congregational life include the words “faith development” rather than “religious education” in their titles: rather than DRE --- Director of Religious Education --- which you are accustomed to, that professional role may be called DFD --- Director of Faith Development. These days the switch to the word “faith” fits with many other applications within the UUA: as in naming departments at the denomination’s headquarters in Boston. For example, the office which oversees ministers and other religious professionals is called the Office of Ministry and Faith. An important program within the Faith Development subgroup is called “Tapestry of Faith.” Many of our outreach and justice programs we refer to as Faith in Action, we have faith heroes, faith toolboxes, we go on faith journey, and more. So, it’s not unexpected, this transition from RE to FD, from “religious education” to “faith development.”

Further, by either terminology, we often identify religious education or faith development by age groups: that is, our churches have programs for Children and Youth, as here at UUCM, or programs for adults. Offerings in Adult Education have been limited during my ministry here because of the absence of staff and a lay committee dedicated to Adult Learning, but I’m grateful for the activities we do have, which many of you have had a chance to take advantage of: the Soul Matters program, a Sunday morning discussion group, and classes on Widening the Circle of Concern, Building Your Own Theology and Circles of Trust which I have offered. I strongly recommend that this congregation be more intentional creating a program in Adult learning. I also strongly urge every person in this room to enroll in at least one adult faith offering each church year, one of the best ways to support the core reason you join a church, to growth in faith.

Just a bit more about terminology … I expect many of us also know of religious education as “Sunday School.” When the concept of learning at church began at the end of the eighteenth century, “Sunday School” implied learning outside of the regular school week. I’ve tried to find out when “religious education” was added to UU vocabulary, but I know that “Sunday School” prevailed in many denominations even into the 21st century. How many of you went to Sunday School as a child? I know that in the history of this congregation, SS were present well into the mid-twentieth-century. Even today there is wide variety in usage.

Getting back to faith development, first, listen to the implications of the two words: rather than “religious” as the adjective, the word “faith” connotes that double meaning I introduced last week: faith as “trust in what is not necessarily provable,” as well as faith as in a religious practice or tradition. The purpose and goals of a faith development program parallels those two meanings of “faith:” faith development in a congregation nurtures our spiritual experiences of trust in this experience of life, and also clarifies the meaning, identity, and history of this religious denomination of Unitarian Universalism. As for the second word: rather than “education,” the word “development” moves this component of church life out of an academic mindset, toward an organic sense of life-giving growth, for individuals, for entire congregations. “Development” conveys a more whole-body quality than “education,” which we may associate more with activities of the mind.

Faith development should be the core mission of any religious organization, in any denomination. Faith development is the primary reason church exists and the primary reason we come to church, any church. Faith development is everything we do in the gathered communities that are our congregations. One of the important founders of the American Unitarian Association, William Ellery Channing, said this about faith development nearly two hundred years ago: “The great end in religious instruction is…. to excite and cherish spiritual life.” Faith development is central to why we worship, why we create this hour on a Sunday morning which is the central time of corporate life in a congregation, why we set aside this time as an hour in which we can experience both facets of faith: a deepening of trust in the spirit of life and increased knowledge of Unitarian Universalism. This hour of corporate worship is an important hour, perhaps the only hour in the week for many of you to get away from crazy schedules and hectic life challenges. Remember that the root meaning of “worship” is the recognition of what is worthy in our lives. The weekly hour of worship is important for faith development, and I call all of us to make this hour as sacred as possible for this gathered community. This hour of corporate worship is also critical for ministerial leadership, especially during a transitioning ministry: this single hour is the most focused time in the week to convey information and inspiration for your growth as a congregation.

Lifespan Faith Development

There is a second shift of mindset on this topic of faith development that I want to consider, to add the concept and use of the word “lifespan.” Thinking of faith development through a lens of lifespan denotes that we continue to develop in faith our whole lives through. ‘Lifespan’ signifies growth and learning from cradle to grave. This stuff of faith development never ends. Especially in liberal religion, in which each of us may choose our own spiritual paths as we ask the intimate and ultimate questions that are the stuff of religion, the mindset of continuing to choose new paths to explore is exciting and life-giving. I mentioned a book last week, *Our Chosen Faith,* which is commonly the introductory book for newcomers to Unitarian Universalism. Throughout our lifespan, we can choose new options for making sense of this stuff of being alive.

This is by way of saying, a Lifespan program in a congregation includes events for all ages: classes for children and youth, as well as separate programs and offering for adults. Thus, that wing of congregational life is called “Lifespan Faith Development,” and professional staff overseeing such a program are referred to as “Directors of Lifespan Faith Development:” or DLFD for short. But the Lifespan concept doesn’t stop there: Another important part of the mindset of ‘lifespan’ is the offering of activities in which all ages come together in some shared activity: a winter holiday tree-trimming; a buddy program for a summer ice cream social; an outdoor retreat with games for all ages. Children can learn and grow from being around adults, including adults not in their immediate family, and I daresay adults certainly can learn from being around children and youth, not only for help with social media and computer technology. All-ages faith development also occurs during multi-generational worship, such as we will return to on Easter Sunday. Multi-generational worship has a very intentional mindset: it is not about bodies of different ages sitting together in the same room. It is about worship experiences which cut across age boundaries and build new connections which are the stuff of religion.

Stages of Faith

The advantages of a lifespan approach to learning in congregations is made all the clearer by a concept in faith development that I want to explain a bit here, a concept which may be new to some of you called “Stages of Faith.” Now, I admit that explaining this concept is a bit pedantic, a bit information loaded, so I have included notes on today’s order of service. I invite you to hear out this theory, and then I want to ask how this theory speaks to your own experiences in church life, here or in other churches. Perhaps you will also hear applications to your personal lives quite apart from church activities.

The theory is simple. Human beings pass through several distinct stages as they mature in faith development. These stages are fairly predictable, just as are stages of learning in theories of teaching reading or math or other subjects. That is, our capacity to engage in experiences faith both changes through our lifetime and continues our whole lives through. Obviously, religious education leaders use this theory to plan curricula.

This concept of ‘stages of faith’ has been expressed differently by different theoreticians, but probably the best known are James Fowler, former professor of religion at Emory University, and Maria Harris, a liberal Catholic. Harris has also given us the concept of the “congregation as curriculum:” it is simply by being together in religious community with one another: in worship, teaching, caring for one another, social justice, social events, and more, that we learn this stuff of religion.

Awareness of stages of faith not only helps us plan curricula, it also as explains our personal faith journeys. I don’t want to turn this sermon too much into a lecture, but a bit of list-making may be useful. You may wish to consult the back of the order of service: I won’t read all the data: clearly the point is that the human’s capacity to experience faith grows and changes with biological growth:

0: Ages 0 – 2 years: Undifferentiated faith

1: Ages 2 – 5 years: Intuitive faith: no abstract thinking

2: Ages 6 – 12 years: Mythic and literal faith: faith as experience, faith as hands on

3: Ages 13 – 18 years: Synthetic faith: construct layers of meaning, dedication to the group

4: Ages 18 – 22 (30) years: Reflective faith: question assumptions and authority: often leave church of parents

5: Ages 30 - ??? years: Mature adult faith: more settled, accepting of paradox

6: Ages ????: Universalizing faith: enlightenment as reached by Gandhi, Mother Teresa, etc.: rarely achieved by most humans

Some see these stages as linear, the next more advanced than the previous. Other see these stages as nesting bowls, lying inside one another: we accumulate learning from each as we advance into the next. Some say the stages are like a pretzel: wound in and out, so that we can go higher and lower, in and out, depending on circumstances: my personal experience is mostly the pretzel theory. One point seems agreed on: that folks at lower stages probably won’t understand people at more mature stages of faith development, so conflict between perceptions of the world could arise: teens don’t understand why their 40-something parents insist on their attending worship services, for example. Theorists also agree that we may advance to new stages of faith at the time of crisis: personal, as in death of a dear one; or national: how full our churches were on the Sunday after 9-11.

Application

What do these theories about stages of faith have to do with you? Consider how they apply to you? For instance, if you were churched as a child, it was probably in the church of your family. If and when you broke away, it was probably when you started abstract thinking. As you age, you accept multiple explanations for the meaning and purpose of life. If you are not a birthright Unitarian Universalist, at what stage were you when you chose this liberal faith? Can you estimate what stage of faith development you are at now, and do you see the importance of ongoing growing in faith, for everyone, cradle to grave?

For adults, my challenge it out there, to consider how you can continue to grow in the fifth stage, the mature adult. I can’t emphasize enough the importance of your enrolling in at least one adult class or workshop each year: no matter which faith stage you are at, everyone is welcome. Come, learn more UU history and theology, about spiritual practices, about social activism to help dismantle white supremacy.

Being able to explain what you mean by faith development is especially important as this congregation moves forward to new professional ministry. What type of faith leadership do you hope for from a minister? How will you support that minister’s own faith development? How will you have faith --- that is, trust --- in your next minister as the spiritual leader of this congregation? How will you have faith and trust in one another as you move forward in developing your faith in Unitarian Universalism?

May faith be your instructor. May you each develop well as you experience this journey called life.

MAY ALL THIS BE SO.

*Do not copy or reproduce without permission of the author.*

**“Risky Business: Faith Without Certainty”**

**UU Church of Muncie**

**March 27, 2020**

**Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman**

**Reading: “Cherish Your Doubts,” Michael Schuler**

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the servant of truth.

Question your convictions, for beliefs too tightly held strangle the mind and the natural wisdom.

Suspect all certitudes, for the world whirls on--- nothing abides.

Yet in our inner rooms full of doubt, inquiry and suspicion, let a corner be reserved for trust.

For without trust there is no space for communities to gather or for friendships to be forged.

Indeed, this is the small corner where we connect --- and reconnect --- with each other.

**Sermon: “Risky Business: Faith Without Certainty”**

This month we are examining the meaning and role of faith in Unitarian Universalism. In previous sermons I’ve reflected on the wide range of meanings of “faith.” I’ve also invited you to consider how you renew your faith and engage in Faith Development, the focus of my reflection last Sunday. This time of turning ---in Mother Earth, in emerging from pandemic restrictions --- is a good time to renew faith.

Today let’s consider more about the particulate nature of faith in a liberal context, specifically the uncertain nature of liberal faith, and how this uncertainty is articulated in liberal theology. Unlike more orthodox or fundamentalist denominations, which define faith rather strictly and rigidly, in liberal religion, faith includes the capacity for questioning, inquiry, even suspicion and risk. Not surprisingly, an important and very readable book about liberal faith from UU theologian Paul Rasor is called *Faith* *Without* *Certainty*.[[1]](#footnote-1) You can find a copy in UUCM’s library. In liberal faith and liberal theology, revelation is never sealed and no belief is without the possibility of change.

A theological partner to uncertainty is the quality of doubt. We should not shy away from doubt in our faith life. Doubt and uncertainty are bosom buddies. Doubt as core to religion in theory might sound like risky business. Perhaps some people assume that religion is here to give us clear guidelines and authority for how to pursue this stuff of being human. This morning let’s consider doubt and uncertainty as core to liberal faith, as expressed in Rasor’s writing about liberal theology.

I realize that the concept of “doubt,” like “faith,” has many meanings. Here I mean doubt as experiences of being open-ended, so to invite questioning and critical inquiry. Doubt is by no means categorically negative, at least not when it comes to liberal religion: doubt carries with it a certain energy, as it stimulates on-going exploration of life’s meaning. With both uncertainty and doubt in the theological equation, we also open ourselves to a certain amount of risk, a certain amount of thinking outside the box, not living by the *status* *quo*.

Clearly, Unitarian Universalism is not the only liberal religion which encompasses doubt, and there is some degree of liberality in virtually all theological systems. There are many examples of liberal Catholics such as the Nuns on the Bus, who are out there on the front lines of advocacy. Furthermore, each of us individuals occupy a different place on the left side of the doubt continuum, each of us Unitarian Universalists, I expect, has boundaries around how much we will engage in risk in our faith life.

If we were to name the opposite of doubt, we might say “trust.” While the capacity for questioning and inquiry is important --- something I expect everyone in this room would not want taken away --- we also do well to heed advice in our reading. While Rev. Schuler calls us to cherish doubt, he reminds us to “reserve a corner for trust, for without trust there is no space for communities to gather or for friendships to be forged.” Let us reserve some corner for the capacity to believe in or to give over to that which is not certain or totally provable. In those corners we may be assured of connections with each other. Clearly, Rev. Schuler is advocating trust which is grounded in the real world. He’s not talking about a naïve or guideless faith, as in believing and following totally irrational opinions and reports which have no basis in fact or reality. Let both our doubt and our trust be reasonable, as we pursue Faith Development, the core reason we come to church.

Personal Reflection

Before we venture further into unpacking liberal faith and liberal theology, I invite you to reflect on your personal understanding or relationship with doubt and uncertainty: how you relate to doubt, uncertainty, and the capacity to question, probably has much to do with why you are attracted to liberal religion. Is doubt present in your life right now? Does doubt add an element of risk to your view of the world? We all realize that there is so much in the world right now which is uncertain: the threat of attacks, invasion, and terrorism, especially in Ukraine as well as many other places in the world; the future of climate change; the political landscape of this country. This feels like a time of exceptional uncertainty and unpredictability, but then, maybe all times do in one way or another.

Aside from world order, in your personal lives, you may be dealing with anxiety and uncertainty. Add to that, uncertainty and change here in this congregation, during return to in-person activities and transitioning to a new ministry. How do you respond to all this change, which by definition involves some amount of uncertainty? Perhaps you’ve taken one of those personality tests, which give you binary choices: Does uncertainty leave open the door to possibility, or do you prefer life to be clear and structured? When assessing an issue, do you usually take one-directional view, or consider multiple angles? Are you able to have faith and trust even when circumstances cause you to doubt?

As we explore “faith without certainty,” let me be clear that I’m not talking about faith without conviction. A faith and a theology of doubt and uncertainty is not spineless. Liberal faith holds the potential for just as much passion and commitment from each of us --- and perhaps even more because of the responsibility on us to do the work --- as do more certain religious paths. Our tradition of liberal religion has supported many individuals whose lives were filled with all sorts of uncertainty but whose commitment to their religion was steadfast and strong.

Let’s take one example from UU history to illustrate. Ralph Waldo Emerson is identified as one of the fathers of American liberal religion. His whole life was filled with uncertainty. Coming from a long, privileged line of ministers, when just in his mid-twenties, he became minister of one of Boston’s most prominent Unitarian churches. He quickly became filled with doubt and disillusion over empty church forms and lifeless preaching, and he quit his position after only three years. He doubted the role of a minister as a leader of a church, and he doubted many of the basic tenants and practices of Christianity of the 1820s. His doubting, his thinking outside the box, led to formation of the Transcendentalist school of American philosophy which he helped spearhead. Emerson had good reason for doubt about what good religion is. His first wife, Ellen, died at age nineteen; his son Waldo died at an early age; Ralph Waldo outlived three brothers. Life experiences could have made him bitter. Still, although often doubting, he wasn’t negative. He continued to believe in human goodness and in the presence of the holy, albeit in new manifestations such as Mother Nature, and in the power of his own creativity. From high school English, many of you remember Emerson’s contribution to American literature. Perhaps Emerson can inspire us at those times when it feels risky even to get out of bed in the morning. I expect many among you in this congregation evince the same positive spirit toward living as Emerson did. As I listened to the hearings for a new justice to the Supreme Court this week, I heard that same quality of staying positive, believing in the impossible, and most important, persevering in the face of challenge and opposition.

Defining theology and liberal theology

For the rest of my reflection this morning, I want to turn to theologian Paul Rasor’s explanation of liberal theology to understand more about “Faith without Certainty.” Before getting to his ideas, however, we do well to explain what we mean by theology, a question which we discussed this week in our class “Widening the Circle of Concern.” Theology is those systems we construct to explain our religious experiences, especially to find patterns, relationships, and commonalities among us humans. Theology is a discipline which is both descriptive of past experiences and proscriptive for making decisions about experiences in the future. Theology is expressed through many lenses relevant to Unitarian Universalists: feminist theology, Buddhist, Universalist, humanist, and more. Many of these theologies are conditioned by the cultures in which they arise: feminist theology by women trying to make sense of their role in human existence, Buddhist writings created in the cultures of India 2500 years ago, and more.

Theology has many subsets. Originally theology was a discipline of the head, because of its location in academia and seminary study. As an academic discipline theology has been around for about two centuries. Evolving from I might call “classical theology,” liberal theology incorporated ideas from actual living in the world, and since the world is constantly shifting and changing, so too are the premises of liberal theology. As Rev. Schuler wrote, “the world whirls on … nothing abides.” Especially because of its connections with changing events in the world, liberal theology asks more of us individuals than does more fundamentalist religion, yet I expect few in this room would want it any other way.

Here’s a conversational tidbit for your next social gathering: the man identified as the father of liberal theology is a German theologian named Fredrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher suggested the radical notion that religion is a felt experience, an experience of intuition, not doctrine. He knew that the experience for which he used the word “god” was real, because he felt this experience. He said he felt God. He influenced the shift in New England Congregational Churches toward Unitarianism and then ministers such as Emerson shifted again towards Transcendentalism.

In addition to emotions, liberal theology also engages the heart and the guts. These days there is a growing call for practical theology: that is, for theology which we not only think about, but which invites us to active engagement with how we live our lives. Theology such as liberation theology, defined by a preferential option for the poor and liberation for marginalized communities; or eco-theology, grounded on care for the earth as a religious matter. Another new branch of theology is publictheology: how we take our faith values into work in the world, led by both theologians and a range of community organizers.

Four features of liberal theology --- faith without certainty

To say more how doubt and uncertainty are central to liberal theology, let’s get back to the book by Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty,* He describes four qualities of liberal faith: the more a church or a person matches these, the more liberal their identity. As you hear these qualities, I invite you to think on how each applies to you personally and to this congregation. Evaluate where you are on the scale of liberalism.

First, informed by Schleirmacher, Rasor explains that liberal theology is informed by modern knowledge and experiences; and because knowledge is constantly changing, so are liberal theological principles. Truth is not fixed. An example: a twentieth-century approach to theology and philosophy is called “process” thought. Process thinking emerged from new theories in quantum physics, which replaced earlier Newtonian physics. In process ideas, a new creation of the universe occurs every second, and as we are living through those millions of seconds, we humans can the capacity to share in ongoing creation. Some days process theology is my primary spiritual path.

Second, informed by current knowledge, liberal faith blurs distinctions between religion and culture. It’s easy to understand this premise: if liberalism is informed by current knowledge, then we need to keep up with the culture which generates that knowledge. Changing our habits can be challenging. For example, overall younger people tend to avoid taking membership in groups, raising questions such as “Is one a UU if they believe its values but don’t commit to membership in a congregation?” Does gathering at a coffee shop rather than in a church building constitute a religious activity? Does participating in social justice during the week but not attending corporate worship on Sunday morning make anyone “less” a member? Is one a UU if they explain the UU Seven Principles in cultural terms, not as ethical values?

Rasor’s third feature of liberal faith: If liberal theology is conditioned by cultural context, then social justice must be integral to our faith life. It can’t be any other way. Liberal faith is driven by ethics, not doctrine: by how we live and work and walk together, not how we believe together. Liberal faith is grounded in trusting the potential for goodness in each person, in contrast to Calvinism’s human depravity our ancestors broke away from. The liberal ethic calls us extend ourselves into the world even when, or especially when, we are not certain about outcomes. One of the biggest challenges to liberal faith is that, because there is some correlation between the liberal mindset and education, and more education correlates with higher income, sometimes liberals willingly commit to the principle of social justice, but often not to the practice if it takes them too far out of their comfort zones. We want to be liberal, but not if we endanger our own privilege. Where do you stand in contributing to social justice?

Finally, Rasor’s fourth quality of liberal faith: faith without certainty is filled with tension and paradox. Constantly open to current new knowledge, it’s easy to see how paradox develops in liberal churches. I expect this quality of paradox may be one of the greatest challenges in congregational life. There is far less ambiguity in fundamentalism. I expect some of you have experienced paradox right here in this congregation. You are working on a project or a committee and others you are working with have different information or different opinions about how things are run. Or perhaps, while you are encouraged to follow your own theological path, you are also urged to respect the common mission of the congregation. Where do you fall on the paradox scale? Do you easily tolerate ambiguity, or do you prefer things ordered? Do you consider many facets of a situation, or prefer instead a singular view or opinion? A tolerance for paradox can also get us in trouble if it leads to talking ideas to death but never coming to closure through actions.

Examining Uncertainty

Life is filled with continuous paradox between clarity and uncertainty, between openness and fixed convictions, between talking about and taking action. These tensions may create doubt and uncertainty, at the same time as they strengthen our experience of liberal faith. Echoing this morning’s reading, cherish your doubts, but let there also be trust. Remember those places of trust which constitute the small corners where we connect and reconnect with each other in this experience of life we call religious. Remember that liberal faith, like life, is Risky Business.

MAY ALL THIS BE SO

*Do not copy or reproduce without permission of the author.*

1. Paul Rasor: *Faith without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)