

“Leap of Faith”

Reverend Shawn Newton
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Earlier this week, while still in Montreal,
where I’ve spent the past several weeks of my study leave,
I emerged late at night from the Frontenac Metro Station
to find a young man in an absolute rage on an otherwise empty street.

He was yelling at the top of his lungs.
He slapped street signs with his arms
and kicked a fire hydrant over and over.

At the height of his fury, he punched his fist through one of those
illuminated plastic drive-through signs outside of Tim Horton’s.

Then he punched the other side and smashed the light bulbs inside—
all with his bare and bleeding hand.

I could only imagine the pain—on so many levels—that he must be in.

And yet I didn’t dare approach.

I didn’t feel my French to be nearly strong enough
to attempt some sort of intervention.

And, even if I had, his volcanic anger made it dangerous
for anyone who might be inclined to get close to him.

It was as I was thinking all of this through
that the flash of red and blue lights appeared.

Within seconds, the man was face down on the ground,
his arms handcuffed across his back.

I stood just across the narrow street for a very long time and watched the scene unfold to its end.

At one point, one of the officers and I made eye contact. He knew I was there.

For a moment, I debated whether I should pull out my phone and film what was happening—just in case.

I resisted that urge. And I hated the feelings that urge stirred inside me.

And, yet, with the visual memory of Sammy Yatim's tragic shooting so recently seared into my mind, I felt a certain responsibility to stay, to stand there, and to bear witness.

The two responding officers were as gentle but firm as you could possibly hope them to be given the circumstances.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

As they put him in the car and drove away, I hoped that that young man would, indeed, find the help he needed.

And as I walked on toward home in the sudden quiet of the night, I was left wrestling with uncomfortable questions of faith—or rather the *lack* of faith I felt in those moments as I watched this man being arrested and found myself fearing for his well-being.

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I typically settle on my sermon titles many months in advance. Occasionally, there's a change, but more often than not, once I have the title, I have a sense of where I might go with the sermon.

If I'm lucky, I also have a rough idea of a story or two, some snippet of poetry, or a bit of some sacred text that might work well.

I put all of this into a virtual stewpot and turn on the burner.

And then—at least to me as an agnostic Humanist—
a miracle happens: for better or worse, I begin to live in the sermon.

If I'm preaching about love, I soon find myself
tripping over poems and compelling examples at every turn.

If I'm preaching about community,
inspiring stories begin to come out of the woodwork.

If I'm preaching about conflict,
it's stunning how frequently (and how swiftly!)
examples of conflict begin to pop up.

While I don't believe the universe actually conspires to help me prepare
my sermons, I do believe this experience, which I've come to depend on,
does speak about what it means to at least try to pay attention—
at least sometimes, to something.

When we take up theme-based ministry next month and focus,
as a congregation, on a single topic for a given month,
I imagine many of you will begin to have a similar experience.

If our topic is compassion or courage, you may be startled
at how soon and how often you'll start to see all around you
stories and experiences related to both.

But, there is this other thing that frequently happens, though,
that I feel compelled to warn you about.

Along with examples and experiences popping up all over the place,
there are these prickly questions that can emerge,
nagging situations that confront your assumptions,
moments that fill you with doubt and leave you humbled and confused.

Living with a sermon for more than the few minutes it takes to deliver it
or to hear it can be trickier than it might seem.

Back in June, when I picked today's title, "Leap of Faith,"
I had imagined I'd explore the endless little ways
that we make leaps of faith each and every day—
from boarding a train, crossing a bridge, or eating street food,

to entrusting our care to a team of doctors,
our financial future to “the experts,”
and the common good of our society to the leaders we elect.

I thought I’d talk about how the fabric of our lives is weaved together
with engineers who test airplanes for safety,
with inspectors who assure boats and ferries are sea worthy,
with childcare workers that look after our children,
with office workers who prepare bills and process payments,
and with dishwashers who work over the steamy sinks of restaurants
to make certain our cutlery is clean and sanitized.

I thought I’d talk about that great fabric of trust that we live in—
the faith we have in one another and society as a whole
that makes our lives on this planet possible.

And, yet, this summer has been full of one example after another
that has sorely tested my faith in such faith.
Faith that everything will work.
That everything will work out.
That the world will work as it should,
and as I long for it to in the depths of my soul.

I don’t know about your most recent list of despair,
but mine is longer than I would like.

It includes the plane crash in San Francisco,
the deadly explosion in Lac-Megantic,
the ruling in the Trayvon Martin case,
the boys smothered by the snake in New Brunswick,
that horrible new law in Russia, the starved polar bear in Norway,
the horrendous violence erupting in the streets and mosques of Cairo,
a staggering and heart-breaking slew of kidnappings and murders,
and the ongoing scandalous sagas at City Hall and in the Senate.

I could go on. And you could, too, I imagine.

It’s been hard to *keep the faith* in a summer of such tragic discontent—
in the face of this litany of human error, poor judgment,
and even malicious intent.

I find myself torn between wanting to cry and wanting to scream.
I've wondered at times this week how truly far apart I am—
how far any of us is—from that angry man in Montreal.

There is, after all, much to be disturbed about.

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A couple of weeks ago, Robert Bellah, the great sociologist of religion,
died at the age of 86. Some of you might recall hearing him
deliver the Ware Lecture at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly
in Rochester in 1998.

He was working on his magnum opus at the time of his death.

After decades of scholarly examination of religion—
of looking at the how and why of the ways people believe—
Bellah had settled on a remarkably simple definition of religion.

In the end, he decided that religion
is “an awareness of an alternative reality.”¹

As is almost always the case as a Unitarian minister,
I had to question whether this definition applies
to me, to us, and to Unitarian Universalism.

But, I think it actually does work. It's a simple definition I can get behind.

I, for one, certainly hold an awareness of an alternative reality.

I don't call it Heaven or Nirvana and I don't see it as some other realm
to which I might someday travel, if I'm good enough or fully enlightened.

Instead, I have a vision of a world made fair, with people living
in peace and harmony right here on good old Mother Earth.
Like many before me, I call that vision Beloved Community.

It is, of course, an alternative we on this planet have not yet taken.

¹ Mark Juergensmeyer, “How Robert Bellah (1927-2013) Changed the Study of Religion,” Religion Dispatches,
1 August 2013, www.religiondispatches.org.

But my awareness of it figures significantly into the religion that I practise.
And, I would venture that the same is likely true for most, if not all, of you.

It is the longing for a better world—
the dream of a world that is just and sustainable,
if not for ourselves, at least for those who will follow after—
that informs and drives much of what we do with the energy of our lives.

Whether we're prone to use the word or not to describe it,
that drive can be called faith.

Now, faith is one of those “wounded words,”
which is why I've found such joy in the understanding
that the Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg brings to it.

In the preface to her book titled, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*,
she writes:

One day a friend called to ask if we could meet...
Knowing that I was writing a book on faith from the Buddhist
perspective, she was confused and wanted to talk.
“How can you possibly be writing a book on faith without focusing on
God?” she demanded. “Isn't that the whole point?”
Her concern spoke to the common understanding we have of faith—
that it is synonymous with religious adherence.
But the tendency to equate faith with doctrine,
and then argue about terminology and concepts,
distracts us from what faith is actually about.
In my understanding, whether faith is connected to a deity or not,
its essence lies in trusting ourselves to discover
the deepest truths on which we can rely.

I want to invite[, she says,] a new use of the word faith,
one that is not associated with a dogmatic religious interpretation
or divisiveness. I want to encourage delight in the word,
to help reclaim faith as fresh, vibrant, intelligent, and liberating.
This is a faith that emphasizes a foundation of love and respect
for ourselves. It is a faith that uncovers our connection to others,
rather than designating anyone as separate and apart.

[As she describes it:] Faith...is an inner quality
that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience.

Salzberg points out that in Pali, the language of many Buddhist texts,
the word usually translated as faith means “to place the heart upon.”

In Pali, the word for faith is a verb, as it is in Hebrew and Latin, as well.

Faith, then, isn't—or isn't simply—something that we have (or don't),
it is something that we do.

Faith isn't a set of beliefs taken to be true on little evidence.
Faith is a commitment to act, to yearn, and to strive
toward that we set our hearts upon—sometimes in spite of the evidence.

To live out this faith
that strives to uphold the dignity of all,
to honour the sacred bonds that bind together all of life,
to labour for a just world at peace with all her people one,
to seek to live out this kind of faith –
with love in our lives and hope in our hearts –
will certainly put us at odds, time and again,
with forces of violence, and oppression, and injustice
that abide and abound in our world's sometimes cynical stew
of ignorance, complacency, and malice.

But to be a person of faith is to recall that the worst of which we are capable—
individually and together—is not the whole of who we are.

It is to hang on to the conviction that the best of which we are capable
can carry the day, can turn the tide, and alter the course of history.

The trick is to hold fast to that conviction and not let go.

Anne Lamott, the marvelous popular writer, shares an experience about
her struggle when her best friend Pammy was diagnosed with cancer.²

She writes:

² Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, 256.

I'm just trying to stay faithful.

I heard this amazing... doctor talking about autistic kids who were so severely withdrawn that if you stood them up, they'd just fall over.

They'd make no effort to stand or even to shield their faces when they fell.

Then the people working with them discovered that if they ran a rope from one end of the room to the other and stood the kids up so that they were holding on to the rope, the kids would walk across the room.

So over the months they kept putting up thinner and thinner pieces of rope, until they were using something practically invisible, like fishing line, and the kids would still walk across the room if they could hold on to it.

And then—and this really [took] a brainstorm—the adults cut the fishing line into pieces, into twelve-inch lengths or something, and handed one to each kid.

[And] the kids would still walk.
What an amazing statement of faith.

I told this to Pammy, but she didn't really respond right away. She went over to where [my son] Sam was playing and sat down next to him and said, "[Your] Mommy's a religious fanatic."

She held him in her lap while he played with his toys, and she made him laugh, and then she started to cry.

"We need to get some," she said...

"Some what?" I asked.

"Some fishing line."

Friends, I think we all need some fishing line.

We need that sacred thread to hang on to,
that tether that binds us to the best of which we are capable,
that summons our courage to take the next step,
that reminds us that an alternative reality is possible and imperative.

If I had it to do over again, I would have found a way to share
some bit of fishing line with the troubled man outside the Metro—
and with the officers who took him into custody.

I wish I could remind each of them of the best that is within them
and the faith—the trust—that I want and need to invest in them.
I want to do it as though my life depends on it.
And I want to do it because I know
at some deep, deep level, that it truly does.

My life and your life.
The lives of all of us are weaved together in a great, complicated web.

And our well-being and our destiny
are held together with little more than fishing line and faith.

So, may we learn to trust more deeply
and take leaps bolder than our fears or our despair.

May we keep moving toward that upon which we've set our hearts.

And may we move ever faithfully together toward the best of what we can be.

So be it.

Amen.