“What Is My Faith?”

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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.

Twenty-something years ago, a passer-by walked into the front office of Boston’s Arlington Street Church, where I was sitting around talking with a few of my coworkers.

Not quite knowing to whom she might best address her question, the woman immediately asked if anyone could recall a quote about faith that had been recently displayed on a sign outside the church.

Without skipping a beat, I blurted out: “To choose what is difficult all one’s days, as if it were easy—that is faith.”

I added that it was from Auden.

The woman was grateful to have her niggling question so swiftly answered.

But everyone else in the office was a bit dumbstruck by my up-until-that-moment-completely-hidden facility to summon snippets of obscure poetry on demand.

But the truth is that I knew that bit from W. H. Auden's epic Christmas poem, “For the Time Being”—and I knew it by heart—because it had also resonated so deeply with me, just a few weeks before when I, too, had spotted it on the sign.

Across the intervening weeks, I had been wrestling with what it meant, and with whether or not I agreed.
“To choose what is difficult all one’s days,  
as if it were easy—that is faith.”

Over two decades later, I’m still not completely sure.

The years have convinced me that this much is true:  
that faith, that having faith, that being faithful  
often involves choosing the more challenging path.

And there is certainly something that strongly resonates  
about choosing the difficult over the easy—  
and doing so, as if it were easy, even when it’s not.

Something in that accords with what I have experienced as faith—  
and what I have learned about keeping the faith—  
that I can very often choose the more difficult route  
(and hopefully do so with some degree of grace and composure),  
because I have an unshakable trust  
that it is the right, or the loving, or the life-giving thing to do.

The question, of course, is where such trust comes from—  
which I’ll return to later.

Where I continue to argue with Auden, after all these years,  
is over the notion that the faithful path is always particularly hard.

Not always, I say.  
And fortunately not every day.

Sometimes making a true leap of faith  
can be a very easy thing for us to do,  
because it flows so readily  
from the deepest convictions of our being.

We find, be it from within us or from beyond us,  
the needed power of will, or courage, or strength  
to act—or to not act—because we feel a profound confidence  
that gives us with what some have called “Blessed Assurance.”

I believe faith is rooted in what we set our hearts to—
what we most profoundly know and trust,
sometimes in ways that are beyond all explaining.

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Several months ago, I had dinner with Anne Murdock, who had purchased today’s sermon topic in our fundraising auction last year.

Anne’s question centered on the meaning of faith. How one lives it out. And how one leans on it, in our times of need.

I loved that Anne was posing such wonderfully theological questions—and ones that, we, admittedly, as Unitarians, spend little time really discussing, at least directly.

Part of that, I believe, owes to the discomfort many of us feel upon hearing, let alone using, theological terms.

Words like faith, and belief, and religion are “wounded words”—terms that have been sullied by centuries of religious abuse.

It’s no wonder some of us have such a strong allergic reaction to them!

And, yet, I find that such words often point to deeply meaningful concepts we just can’t get at as easily—if at all—by offering up watered-down euphemisms in their place.

Humanist UU minister David Bumbaugh puts it this way:

“We have [raced to] the ramparts of reason and are prepared to defend the citadel of the mind, but in the process of defending, we have lost...the ability to speak of that which is sacred, holy, [and] of ultimate importance to us.”

The resulting challenge is that we have been left very little language

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1 David Bumbaugh quoted in Andrea Greenwood and Mark W. Harris, Introduction to the Unitarian and Universalist Traditions, Cambridge University Press, p. 166.
upon which to draw to speak with intellectual integrity
while also giving voice to our fullest religious imagination.

So, as imperfect as they are, words are what we have to work with
to convey to others the inmost experience of our lives.

My hope, if you struggle with such words,
is that this sermon will provide a bit of immunotherapy for you,
and maybe even some rehabilitation of these terms,
as we seek more life-giving ways to understand and use them.

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To suss out the meanings of the words faith and belief,
I turn to the wisdom of my friend and colleague Jackie Clement,
who, not too long ago, went canoeing with her husband John.²

“At the end of a trip around the lake
[she] climbed out of the canoe first,
[with] one foot in the lake and one foot in the canoe.”

[And] “that’s when things went wrong.”

“While taking [her] foot out of the canoe,
[she] caught [her] heel on the edge.”

“Losing [her] balance, [she] instinctively reached
for the most solid thing within [her] grasp—the canoe.”

As she says, “There are times when grabbing on
to what appears most solid and stable
is exactly the wrong thing to do.”

“When [she] resurfaced, [her] husband [was] sitting
in [half a metre] of water fishing for his glasses on the lake bottom.”

In her attempt to save herself, she says,

² Jackie Clement, excerpted from Voices from the Margins: An Anthology of Meditations, ed. by Jacqui James and Mark D. Morrison-Reed (Skinner House, 2012).
she “took an innocent bystander down as well.”

She tells the story to help us understand
the fine distinction between faith and beliefs,
though the two words are often “taken to mean the same thing.”

When we’re not feeling steady,
when we’re fearing that we’ll tip over,
it’s understandable that we reach
for what seems solid, certain, secure.

In a religious sense, she says this can be like
clinging too tightly to our beliefs,
when what we need to hold onto is our faith.

“Faith,” she explains, “is a deeply seated confidence,
vital to our very existence;
belief is only what we think is true,
though we wouldn’t [necessarily] stake our lives on it.”

“Faith leaves room for mystery, belief does not.”

For me, I tend to think of beliefs
as what we hold onto with our heads.

Whereas faith is what we hold onto with our hearts—
and with a much firmer grip.

Both serve their purpose.
And faith and beliefs certainly can and do overlap.

But as Jackie says, the “things that appear more ethereal,
that may seem to be the toughest to grasp,
are in fact the most stable and secure.”

“Love, faith, and community may seem to be intangible ideals,
but if nurtured they can serve as the very bedrock of our lives.”

“Beliefs can fall away.
But the things that seem most insubstantial—
perhaps because they can be the hardest to come by—
have the greatest worth, and provide the steadiest base” to lean on.

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As I was becoming a minister,
in my work as a hospital chaplain,
I often encountered people who tried,
in their times of greatest need,
to hold onto their beliefs instead of their faith.

It didn’t tend to turn out well.

I remember one woman, in particular, late one night,
who was having a serious surgery the next morning.

As I sat with her, she repeated over and over to me
the assurances her religion had taught her to believe.

On an intellectual level, I think she truly believed them.

But the tears that were streaming down her face
said to me that there was much more going on.

In her heart of hearts,
she had little faith that she would be okay,
and she doubted she was truly being held in the arms of her God.

What this taught me—
about her, about myself, about all of us—
is that there can be a painful gap
between what we profess as our religion,
and what we depend on when times are tough.

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Our tradition, especially compared to other religions,
is quite modest in the assurances we venture to offer.

We make no promises about an afterlife.
We can’t provide a signed and dotted contract that ensures safe passage through this life.

We affirm instead that our days on this fragile planet are often marked by suffering and by struggle.

But also by wonder and by grace, by the resilience of human hearts, and the strength that comes in knowing we are not alone, but held together in the great web of life.

I know some find cold comfort in this.

But it is enough for me, and I will tell you why.

I have come to know, though I often forget, that it isn’t all about me.

But when I do remember, I know that I am connected, through and through, with everything else on this good green earth.

And while I sometimes worry about my own well-being, I take comfort in knowing myself as part of something so much larger, part of something that is more, part of something that is everything.

And in that bright and sacred light, at once intimate and ultimate, I see myself, just barely beginning to grasp that I am a part—as you are a part—of all that is, and ever has been, and ever shall be.

And in that place of deepest, elusive knowing, in conceding ours is but a tiny sliver out of the vastness of eternity, I find tremendous freedom, and I find the very foundations of my faith.

I find the source of enduring confidence that helps me to understand, in life’s largest frame,
that all shall be well.

That in no way is meant to deny reality.
If anything, it only amplifies it.

For I know I will suffer, and struggle, and die.
I know the sun will burn out.
And I know we may well blow our big chance at life,
long before we humans get that far.

But I find comfort in trusting that all shall be well—
trusting that having come from the stars,
the universe will take us into herself once again in time to come.

One response to this stark set of circumstances
would be to grow cynical and selfish.
To decide life isn’t worth living, if not on our own terms.

But the better path, I believe, is to lean into life.
To see ourselves as ambassadors of life and agents of change,
in the unfolding story of the universe,
doing what we can to bring more love and justice into being
while we are gifted with the breath of life.

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Recently, I heard a story told by my dear friend Aaron,
who is part of my ongoing study group from seminary.³

The story moved me, as it speaks so powerfully and poignantly
to everything I’m trying to say to you about faith this morning.

“Last summer,” Aaron writes, “my family sat with awe
as we watched baby turtles hatch and climb into the sea.

Almost every year, my family rents a beach house
with a group of friends in North Carolina.
We pack all our families together in a fun chaos

of adults and kids of all ages.
This year, we received a surprise.

Right next to the house, a loggerhead sea turtle laid 82 eggs in a nest. Incredibly attentive volunteers furiously protected the eggs all week. They put a little fence around [them] and warned any adult or child not to get anywhere near it. They told us to turn the lights off in the house at night, so the babies would follow the light of the moon to the sea and not end up on our porch. The volunteers built the equivalent of a little turtle highway with curbs. This sandy path led right to the water, so there would be no mistakes when it was time to be born.

They told us the eggs would hatch days after we left, and so [the extent of] our excitement would be seeing the nest. But, on the last night of the trip, something changed. We packed up our bags, the kids were in bed, and the adults were up playing games. Suddenly, in the glass window out onto the porch, an excited volunteer appeared. With her face pressed right against the glass, she said, “It’s time! They are hatching!”

My six-year-old kid is named after [Henry David] Thoreau and knows about every animal there is, so I knew he couldn’t miss this. I woke him up in bed and said, “Do you want to get up and go watch sea turtles hatching right now?” He flew out of bed! When we got down there, 30 or 40 people joined us as we watched these little sea turtles crawling in the darkness toward the ocean. In what felt like a celebration of reverse evolution, we clapped and cried and hugged each other as life crawled back into the sea.

One of the excited volunteers pulled me aside and told me the odds.
The chances that any of these baby turtles
would survive a year was about 1 in 1000.
The chances they would survive long enough to mate,
find this exact same spot on the beach,
and lay eggs themselves was even smaller.
Despite the odds, people with tears in their eyes celebrated.
Despite the odds, volunteers carefully guided turtles
who had gotten off the path and helped them into the water.
We cheered these 82 new creatures,
on their first day of life,
crawling their way into the sea.

“To choose what is difficult all one’s days,
as if it were easy—that is faith.”

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You can see yourself as the turtles scampering to the sea,
or the dedicated volunteers building that little turtle highway.

You can see yourself in the sand and the water and the moonlight.

For the wonderous truth of it all,
is that each of us is part of the great happening that is life,
here and now, and hopefully for a very long time to come.

Finding ourselves a part of this larger, largest sacred story,
may we also find our way to the faith
that we are held by the universe,
and called by life and love
to serve this marvelous venture
all the days we are given.

Blessed Be.