

*An Examined Faith*  
Sermon given at Palomar Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
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I've shared here previously an experience that I had early on in my seminary career that relates to the topic of today's sermon. A little over five years ago now I participated in a Samhain ritual that included a Labyrinth walking meditation. I spiraled through the labyrinth deepening my meditation. As I walked I received an insight that the foundation of my ministry would be faith, hope and love. I don't mind telling you I was rather surprised at this. It seemed so, well, conventional. But I have been mindful of these themes and engaged with them over the years as one would expect a minister to do.

So I have come to ask myself continually, what *is* faith?

Faith is generally most commonly associated with belief. Common usage defines faith as set beliefs, in fact Webster's dictionary defines it in part as "unquestioning belief that does not require proof," and "unquestioning belief in God." Now this understanding of faith is exactly what has given it a very bad reputation!

Yet liberal theologians and thinkers understand faith quite differently. Recognizing that beliefs may inform faith, bringing faith to expression, many see faith first as a way of being. UU theologian Gene Reeves, finds that "faith is what makes life meaningful." He states it is "the deeply felt conviction that my life- what I make of it, what I respond to, what I do – makes a difference."

James Luther Adams, Unitarian Universalist theologian, from whom the title of this sermon was taken, identifies three principles of liberal faith. First is the idea that our ultimate dependence for being and freedom is upon a creative power and upon process not of our own making." Life is more than the sum of its parts – we control our actions and our part in it, but not the processes of creativity and transform that underpin it.

We all have faith –in one thing or another. Our faith is that which we put our confidence in.

For Adams God is the creative processes that inform all of life, that which works in and through us giving rise to ideas and imaginings of the beautiful, the good and the true.

Others might call it the Spirit of Life or Love, the Sacred.

Faith is at once personal and transforming, as well as institutional and transformative.

First the personal...

Faith it is understood as that which one holds as ultimate concern, one's infinite passion.

James Fowler writes, "Faith is an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions... Faith involves an alignment of the heart or will, a commitment of loyalty and trust... the Hindu term for faith, *sraddha*, perhaps puts it best: It means, almost without equivocation, *to set one's heart on.*"

We each must ask the question, "On what do I set my heart?" It is here that we find and name our faith – this locates faith in experience rather than doctrines.

I sat in my yard yesterday as both longing and enjoyment permeated my being. The moments in the yard were bittersweet as I recalled my father's tragic death 17 years ago this week and the anniversaries this month of other deaths, and of those more recent. My thoughts wandered to others who I know who are hurting or afraid...and on then to those whose faces I've not seen, but whose pain is no less real and no doubt greater than mine.

My reverie was punctuated by bird songs that filled the air, soaring over the sound of leaf blowers and lawn mowers as neighbors worked on their yards.

In the next yard, behind a fence, I couldn't see, but I could hear, my neighbor worked in his yard with his two young sons. The boys talked/yelled to their dad in that excitedly earnest way that small children do when they are doing the Important Business of Helping. The dad in a patiently distracted way said things like, "Right over there buddy...yeh, that's great."

Hummingbirds chattered and argued with each other at their feeder and little birds with plumb bodies flitted on the branches of a tree utterly barren except for three small pink flowers pushing their way out into life...

And I thought about what I had written about faith, and what I would say to you about it...and I realized that

No matter if my heart aches

The trees push buds green and hopeful

No matter that the longing lurches;

Birds still sing with abandon and young children with sweet, serious voices of their own announce that life goes on

Luring the lurching longing to reach beyond it/myself...

And even if it gets stuck somewhere between my gut and my heart...

No matter, Life still lures to hope and

I can be reached and I can/must reach out to others in their joy and pain and therein lies my faith ...

Faith that the Spirit of Life however dimly perceived is in it all...

I am connected to all that is

And life flows on in endless song...

And that is what my heart is set on...

What do you set your heart on?

Adams further inspired these musings and the title of this sermon – an examined faith. He once said, "the unexamined faith is not worth having...and faith worth having is a faith worth testing and discussing." He names the dynamics of liberal faith both for the individual and the institution.

This is a critical position for Adams – the notion that individuals exist always in relation to community – we are forged and formed by our associations so the examination of our faith extends to the faith that we participate in.

Unitarian Universalism is said to be a free faith, a chosen faith – even for those 10 percent who are born into the fold, we understand this living tradition as a choice that we make. Making it, in the words of Fred Muir, the minister of church in Annapolis – a heretic's faith, for heresy means to choose.

Fred Muir writes, "Being liberal is currently not popular – the word strikes fear or animosity in the hearts of many. But like, heretic, liberal has a special meaning for Unitarian Universalists: its room means 'to be generous and open.' As religious liberals, we seek deeper and wider understanding, greater tolerance, broader definition, more inclusive language; we want to stretch our minds and souls, pushing the limits of thought and spirit, redefining boundaries of tradition and orthodoxy." And so, we have been on the side of heresies rather than dogmas.

We embrace not creeds, but deeds...

And this liberal faith is an evolving faith, open to, even dependent upon, self-critique...or it lapses into rigid orthodoxy if it fails to do so.

We are called to embrace new expressions of spirituality not as reversion back to some earlier time, but as reflective of people's experience of transcending wonder and mystery of life.

We are called, too, engage in civic discourse, to test our faith in the realities of life – of war, and economic injustice, of materialism and consumerism – to ask, what does our faith say about these things?

Adams wrote in the 1940's that the "task of religious liberalism was urgent because a neurotic yearning for security had developed...It is clear that the yearning is neurotic, for it fervidly rejects patient discussion as tedious and frustrating..."

We see this in rigid fundamentalisms that exclude all but a specific articulation of belief...

"The second principle of the free person's faith is that the commanding, sustaining, transforming reality finds its richest focus in meaningful human history, in free, cooperative effort for the common good. In other words, this reality fulfills our life only when people stand in right relation to each other. Only what creates freedom in a community of justice is dependable. 'Faith is the sister of justice.'"

James Luther Adams was influenced by his experience in Nazi Germany and his contact with the confessing churches as they fought the Nazi regime.

We, too, are called to test our faith in the light of social justice.

"The third principle of the free person's faith is that the achievement of freedom in community requires the power of organization and the organization of power..."

We join in faith communities. We give expression or form to faith – not rigid structure, but beliefs that are tested and critiqued, transformed and transmitted, and transmitted again. It is relevant to the times because it examines itself in the light of history and change. Unitarianism and Universalism have done this – opening to biblical criticism, opening to the Transcendentalists insistence upon experience as a source of knowledge about God, open and changing in response to insights from science.

Since merging in 1961 we have opened to the new forms it would take; articulating principles and purposes to affirm and promote the worth and dignity of every person; respect for the interdependent web of life ; building strong institutions of support for people on their individual journeys and always toward the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Faith, then, can be seen as inner determined and directed, as well as outwardly determined and directed.

Faith points us to that which we trust most ultimately. UU philosopher Charles Hartshorne wrote, "It is our loves that that make us anything worth mentioning."

Faith is that light which guides in our own dark nights and in the places in our society that need our help.

And so we go forth, with our light, the faith that we chose and that has claimed us.