

Are We People of Faith?  
A sermon preached by the Reverend Diane D. Teichert  
Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church  
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The "Thought to Ponder" printed at the top of your Order of Service is from the Introduction Sharon Salzberg's book titled *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. This is how the Introduction begins.

“One day a friend called to ask if we could meet for tea. 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 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.

Faith does not require a belief system, and is not necessarily connected to a deity or God, though it doesn’t deny one. This faith is not a commodity we either have or don’t have—it is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience.”  
(p. viii)

Salzberg is an American Buddhist and a founder more than thirty years ago of the Insight Meditation Center in Barre MA. She was the inspired speaker at the annual UU Minister’s Association gathering three years ago. I still remember her calm composure, speaking without notes for an hour, not at all boring.

Soon after, the phone rang in my former minister’s study in Canton, Massachusetts. The woman, whom I did not know, was calling to ask for financial help for her fiancé who was presently back in his home country. As she described a series of awful things that had befallen him there, preventing his return to the U.S., I became more and more dubious of the truth of his stories, especially when it became clear that he had asked for, and she had sent to him, a fair amount of money after each tragedy that befell him, and that her family had contributed in the past but would not do so now.

She sounded so sincere, and so in love with him, that I felt very mean suggesting that this latest calamity was perhaps a scam, a ruse to get money from her.

I asked how she knew these terrible things had actually happened to him. She didn’t answer. Instead, she asked me, “what ever happened to going on faith?”

I’m sure she thought a minister, of all people, would be willing to “go on faith.”

Her use of the word “faith” jumped out at me, in light of Salzberg's book which I was then reading.

The woman’s meaning was clear; it was the #1 definition of the word “faith” in the dictionary: “unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence.”

About the only aspect of my faith that is unquestioning, I thought to myself, is that my beliefs are open to question!

For those of you who are relatively new here today, as often happens in the month of September, we Unitarian Universalists are known for our questions more than our answers. We even sing in one of our hymns, "To question is the answer."

For me, as I suspect may be true for many of you, I do require evidence for my beliefs. I require evidence drawn from my own experience, deeply considered.

By the #1 dictionary definition of faith as "unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence" my answer to the question "Am I a person of faith?" is, well, "NO!"

Nevertheless, I refer to myself as a "person of faith" and I refer to Unitarian Universalism as a "faith tradition." In fact, I wish we Unitarian Universalists would assert our own definitions for what faith is and claim ourselves to be "people of faith."

The #2 dictionary definition of the word "faith" refers to "belief in God." By that definition, in any Unitarian Universalist congregation, some will and some won't say YES to the question "Are you a person of faith?"

But, again, I submit that we are all "people of faith."

I think that's one of the most fascinating things about us: that our congregations are usually happily-gathered religious communities that include people who believe in God, however they identify God, and people who do not. Our congregations typically include atheists, agnostics, secular humanists and spiritual humanists, as well as theists, deists, pantheists, panentheists, pagans and others for whom God or the Goddess is meaningful, though not necessarily in the ways of the Biblical God.

In some future sermon, I will define each of those categories and then invite you to stand for as many of them as you feel describe your beliefs at the moment. If this congregation is anything like the congregation I served for ten years in Massachusetts, where I did this exercise more than once during my tenure, many people will stand up more than once... the most number will be standing for the term "spiritual humanist" ... and several will remain seated throughout, not wanting or able to define themselves at all!

As diverse as we are, we somehow worship together every Sunday. Amazing!

That's another reason why I wish we would claim ourselves to be "people of faith."

It takes faith in one another to come together across our theological differences. And, when it sometimes happens here that an atheist speaks derisively of those who believe in God, or vice versa, it is up to all of us to remind one another that there is no creedal test for Unitarian Universalists. We are all welcome in the big tent that is our religion. One of Unitarian Universalism's perhaps over-used motto is "Deeds, not creeds."

Speaking of "Deeds, not creeds," this past week, the religion editor for *Newsweek* magazine reviewed *The Case for God*, the latest of Karen Armstrong's now nineteen books, quite a few of which I have read and from which I have benefitted. The reviewer states "Armstrong shows that for most of human history, "faith" and "reason" were not mutually exclusive and that even today all kinds of people believe in a God that in no way resembles the God [contemporary] atheists despise." She says that today "believers are refocusing their attention away from creeds and on practice—on making the activity of faith meaningful in daily life." The review, I think, makes a case for Unitarian Universalism, but we were not mentioned.

Sharon Salzberg says, "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." (Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience, viii).

I like that: the essence of faith lies in trusting ourselves to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely. What are the deepest truths on which you can rely?

If you think back to our Unison Reading of the six sources from which our Unitarian Universalist living traditions draws, the very first one is just what Sharon Salzberg is suggesting. We draw on "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

There it is, the evidence of our own experience, deeply considered: our own, individual direct experience..."

Thinking back to the other five sources of our living tradition, you will see that neither the #1 dictionary definition of "faith"--"unquestioning belief"—or the #2 dictionary definition—"belief in God" appears in any of them. Instead, Unitarian Universalists draw on "words," "deeds," "wisdom" and three kinds of "teaching"—Judeo-Christian, Humanist and Spiritual.

Not one mention do we UU's make of the dictionary-definition-varieties of faith.

This morning I want to say, let's develop a meaning for us of the word "faith." A meaning that allows us—unequivocally—to count ourselves among the faithful.

I think we can and even need to count ourselves among the faithful, for at least two more reasons.

One, for ourselves--we need a faith to live by in troubling times. We need to be able to "go on faith," even if it's not of the unquestioning variety.

And, reason two, for the world--I think the world needs us to speak as people having more than just opinions when we speak out. The world needs us to speak as people of faith. It cries out for the freedom, reason and tolerance that our liberal faith professes and preaches and tries to practice.

Three summers ago when I was reading Salzburg's book, the world news seemed to be especially oppressive. I was glad to be out in the woods for a couple weeks that summer, out of reach of television, radio and newspapers.

For that time, I was free to ignore the news that people of faith were going at each other with horrifying viciousness. That summer, Jews and Muslims had gone to war again on the Lebanese-Israel border, devastating many towns and the cosmopolitan city Beirut, only recently re-built from the last such war. The war in Iraq, initiated by our (self-identified) faith-based Christian President, continued and much of the death and destruction was perpetrated by Muslims of one sect against Muslims of another. And, news was reaching us of brutality in Uganda by the militia of a man whose Catholic faith had gone madly haywire for eight long years.

Is this what happened to “going on faith”? Nothing but death and destruction, people against people? Why do I want to call myself “a person of faith”?

At the end of the summer, though, I experienced something that spoke reassuringly to me of life’s durability. I was in rural east-central Vermont, where our family has gone for Labor Day Weekend the last maybe fifteen years. We stay with longtime friends in a simple cabin on a hillside from which you can see the morning mist rising off the Connecticut River, hidden in its valley, behind which is the massive Mt. Moosilauke of the White Mountains range. The cabin is well-worn and well-used from Memorial Day to Columbus Day by our friend's large extended family and assorted friends coming and going. It is a homey, peaceful place in whose presence I am always renewed for the coming year.

The cabin is surrounded by milkweed plants, the leaves of which—as you may know—are the food of monarch butterfly caterpillars. When our children were younger, we would hunt among the milkweeds there looking for caterpillars, hoping to take one and some leaves home in a jar, to give their former kindergarten teacher on the first day of school, so her new class could watch the metamorphosis from caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly.

When our kids got older, as you would expect, that pleasant pastime was left behind, sadly for me.

So, imagine my joy in finding a note from the mother of a five year old, whose visit to the cabin preceded ours, saying they’d found monarch chrysalises under the seat of the home-made wooden sandbox out by the vegetable garden.

I went out to look, crouching low to see under the seat not eight inches off the ground. Sure enough, I saw two small, brilliant lime-green ovals each with three lemon yellow spots, majestically hanging down by a mere filament from under the seat. Nearby, a flamboyant yellow and black striped monarch caterpillar, with green spots, crawled in the grass. And, to my further wonder, another caterpillar hung from under one of the other sandbox seats in a J shape, as if it was waiting to become a chrysalis. And a few feet away, under a table-like rock, I spotted a dried out, ripped and abandoned chrysalis hanging forlornly. Finally, in the same vicinity, a monarch butterfly flitted around the sun-dappled milkweed plants.

In that moment, I felt a palpable, humbling awe: such is the provision made for the future of the monarch butterfly! Astounding! And all of its life phases visible to me, in that moment, on my knees in the grass.

Somehow, somehow, I felt in my bones, at that moment, life will go on. It may not be my one life, nor the lives of those I know and love, it may not be my country or any country that now exists, or even human life that will go on forever, but the scene around that sandbox grounded me in my connection, our connection, to the ongoing force of life itself.

There is no proof that it will be so in the future, but there is evidence in the amazing life-cycle of the monarch butterfly that it is so now. That, for me, is one faith to go on.

But, really, I sense that faith is not something we have, it's something we do. It's not static. It's not an object, a possession. Just like there is "belief" and "believe"—a noun and a verb—there should be "faith" and "faithe."

In fact, Sharon Salzberg says that in Pali, the language of the original Buddhist texts, as well as in Latin and Hebrew, "faith" is a verb, an action. In Pali, the word usually translated as faith, *saddha*, literally means to "place the heart upon." (p. 12). To place the heart upon.

When the news seems grim or our own and others' suffering seems great, and our small actions for peace or justice and healing or helping or even that recently-maligned activity—organizing—seem futile, we would do well to remember these words of Sharon Salzberg toward the end of her book,

"There is a far bigger picture to life than what we are facing in any particular moment... When we see only the suffering before us and our own actions in response to it, it is no wonder we might conclude that what we do seems inadequate... [But] both the suffering and our efforts to address it are woven into an immense but hidden flow of interaction, a dynamic process of action and consequence that doesn't stop with us and our particular role.

We don't know the ultimate unfolding of any story; certainly not enough to decide that what we do has no effect. When we stand before a chasm of futility, it is first of all faith in this larger perspective that enables us to go on.

This openness of view is also attained by looking more deeply at what is right in front of us. As long as we remain on the surface of life, everyone and everything seems to exist as isolated entities. But when we look below the surface, we see strata upon strata of dynamic interconnectedness. If we look to the greatest depth, Buddhism says, we will see a world where no one and no thing stands apart." (pp. 127-128).

Before we left the cabin in Vermont for home an hour or so later, I took one last look under the sandbox seats. The two lime-green chrysalises were still there. The caterpillar that had hung in a J shape was curled up more tightly, and was already mostly encased in its oval chrysalis, still just a pale green, with only a faint suggestion of the three lemon yellow spots to come.

Though I wasn't there to see it happen, I go on faith, I faithe, that those yellow spots were brilliant by time we crossed the Connecticut River on our journey home.

I also faithe... that the awe and wonder of its beauty—and of the butterfly that will emerge—is present to me, and to all of us, in every moment of our lives for as long as we shall live.

Present to us... at any time... in our own experience, if it is deeply considered

Present to us as an inner quality

that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience...

And put our hearts upon it.

Present to us as faith.

Amen.