

A Labor Day Faith
Reading, Sermon and Benediction
Sunday, September 5, 2021 10 a.m.
Dave Hudson



READING

Our reading this morning is an excerpt of Rev. Mary Foran's sermon *Faith and Doubt: The Practice of Knowing without Knowing* delivered at the Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Alameda on August 24, 2014.

So, let's talk about this word faith (she says) ... what is it – if it isn't a set dogma or list of beliefs that cannot be proved? UU minister Tom Owen-Towle says, "...faith is deeper than belief or doctrine. Faith is the energizing spirit that gives birth to our convictions... faith is that confidence which allows, indeed implores, us to keep on moving forward even when we see partially, know incompletely and act imperfectly." (Tom Owen-Towle, *Theology Ablaze*, page 94)

The Latin word "credo" is often translated as "I believe." Owen-Towle says more accurately it means, "I give my loyalty, my heart, my faithfulness to ...". Credo... faithfulness is about what grips my being, what underlies and inspires the firm commitments we make in our lives. (Owen-Towle, page 95)

Unitarian Universalism invites, encourages, and urges us to take faith seriously – throughout our lives – to claim and live our values, seeking ever more depth about what that means.

Sharon Salzberg, (the) Buddhist teacher connected with the bringing of insight meditation to the West, describes faith as "an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience...No matter what we encounter in life, it is faith that enables us to try again, to trust again, to love again. ... Faith links our present day

experience, whether wonderful or terrible, to the underlying pulse of life itself.” (Sharon Salzberg, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*, italics added. pages xiv-xv)
Thank you, Sharon.

I think of these two perspectives on faith as representing different aspects of faith. OwenTowle’s “energizing spirit” being a blaze that fuels discernment and action. And Salzburg’s trust in our own deepest knowing holds us up when we lose heart and beckons us back to the “pulse of life itself” when all seems dry and broken.

In Pali, the language of the Buddha, the word for faith or confidence or trust is saddha. Saddha means to place the heart upon. Faith is offering, trusting, risking one’s heart. In Hebrew one meaning of the word denoting faith is willingness to take the next step.

Faith is a Verb. It’s about beliefs, but it’s about the beliefs we develop from our experiences that propel us into living our values. Faith is what we do.

MESSAGE

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Dave Hudson

Some have asked, “What is the point of religion for those who don’t believe in God?” By which they usually mean a supernatural mover and shaker, bearded cloud-sitter and scepter wielder. The question isn’t one of *belief*; it’s a question of *being*. It’s a question of the nature of human existence, which is *to be fundamentally connected to the Whole of Creation – to be full participants in it – to be card-carrying, full-fledged members of its glory*. “We are stardust,” as Joni Mitchell sang at Woodstock. Yes, we are, and stardust we will be again.

We participate in religion and religious community because here we might get closer to that understanding – an understanding that Buddhists and others call Enlightenment – and we participate in religion and religious community to experience the peace that accompanies that Enlightenment or understanding – a peace that can be called Grace – Grace because there’s nothing we can do to create it. We can make ourselves accessible to it, let it into our lives; but it simply is the nature of existence, in my humble opinion.

Religion, at its best, when it is more than what Franciscan priest Richard Rohr calls our “personal salvation project”, at its best, addresses our fundamental existential angst, our core wounds of isolation, loneliness, separateness, and unworthiness. Regardless of how we experience and interpret the Mystery, Wonder, and Power of life – regardless of our concept of the Divine – wherever we are on the atheist-theist continuum – religion, at its best, provides us with a sense of worthiness and belonging.

Here at Mission Peak, as in other churches of many stripes, you experience worthiness. You come to know, I trust, that, regardless of your abilities and your histories, your heritage, your baggage, your IQ, your gender, your sexual orientation, your age – you are worthy. And here, you experience belonging – on a number of levels – the immediate level of daily interaction and belonging in community – and, if you are paying attention, the more fundamental sense of belonging that can flow from that experience of worthiness – the sense of belonging to the Whole of Creation—of participating in the Mystery and Wonder of Creation—in the Miracle of simply walking on the earth, as Thich Nhat Hanh says.

If there is a core wound in America today, it is that of a pervasive isolation, loneliness, separateness, and unworthiness. That wound is not unique to this country, but it may be stronger here than elsewhere because of our cult of individualism and the Horatio Alger myth of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps—which have bred a hyper, laissez-faire, winner-take-all capitalism that pits us against each other, fosters a scarcity mindset that breeds fear and suspicion, and impoverishes us all—spiritually, if not economically.

We have lost faith in each other's basic goodness—because so often it is not apparent. We have lost faith in each other. We have lost faith in the power of cooperation and community. We have lost faith in the powerful notion raised by Martin Luther King—the idea that “I am not whole if you are not whole”. The notion of the common good has fallen on hard times. To riff on a familiar UU hymn, sharing—for many—is *not* an answer.

Not so for most Unitarian Universalists. For we understand on a visceral level, I believe, why we come together in religious community. The Latin root of the word religion—*religare*—means to “bind together again”, to make whole. We get that. America, on the other hand, in many ways has come *unbound*.

It was not always so in this country. In the early 20th century, exploited workers had enough faith in the strength derived from binding together—uniting—to suffer brutality and risk death at the hands of the state and heavy-handed bosses to do that—binding together and forming unions. Faith.

In an interview with Scott Simon on his Weekend Edition radio show a few years ago about a movie he had directed and starred in, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, Tommy Lee Jones told Simon that his was a “journey film.” “(The protagonist),” he said, moves from a bad place to a good place, having learned something.” And then he made a statement that lured Simon into trouble. He said, “The movie has something to do with the consideration of the mechanics of faith.”

“In what sense do you mean faith?” Simon asked, innocently. “F.A.I.T.H.,” responded Jones. There was a long pause - awkward, of course - after which Jones tried to pull his interviewer out of the quicksand by adding, “Flannery O'Connor once said, “Faith is what you know to be true, even if you don't believe it.”*Faith is what you know to be true even if you don't believe it.....* He went on: “Our movie looks at life from that

perspective; what do you have faith in, and, once you do have faith in something, what happens.”

On this Labor Day weekend, let me offer an example of that kind of faith. I think our oldest son Ty understands this. Ty, who, as a child, spent Sunday mornings in UU RE classrooms, is now a union organizer and researcher in Oakland. In college he became involved in an organization and movement called Students Against Sweatshops, which is dedicated, as the name implies, to convincing colleges and universities to buy clothing – hats, T-shirts, sweatshirts – from companies that do not employ sweatshop labor; through that engagement he became interested in other labor issues on his campus; and, eventually, like a number of his friends, he became interested in the labor movement beyond his campus. When he graduated, he took a job as an administrative assistant in an office of the university, so that he could become a member of the clerical workers local and, from there, work to further union causes on the campus. When his cover was blown (he was seen at a rally on the New Haven Green), his alma mater, Yale University, promptly fired him. (In fact, they had suspected he had been encouraging his coworkers to attend.) He then went to work for the service employees union – S.E.I.U. – in Stamford, Connecticut, organizing nursing home employees, and a year later he moved to L.A. to work for the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union – H.E.R.E.

His mother and I had supported and encouraged his anti-sweatshop and union interests, although we did ask him to try not to give the school an excuse to expel him, for he was at the center of that activity, helping to organize protests of the school administration’s labor policies and serving as a lead student negotiator with the university president. But we were also concerned that this direction was leading him away from what we perceived his strengths to be; he was a brilliant English student – Magna Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa. He had spent summers as an intern at the Atlantic Monthly and Yale University Press. We saw for him a future as editor, publisher, writer.

And we worried that union organizing required strengths that he did not have, those of easy sociability, of the extrovert, which he was not. In organizing we saw him working from a position of disadvantage, of deficit.

When he graduated, he interviewed with a few interesting magazines, but that really was not where he wanted to be. His heart wasn’t in it. His heart – his passion – was in the struggle for economic justice, for improving the lot of those upon whom our economic system is built. He followed his heart.

In fact, organizing did not come easy for him; the Connecticut local let him go after a few months; they didn’t have the time or patience to train someone who was not a “natural”. And after several months on the job in L.A., he decided to resign from his organizing position. He felt that to really learn the job, he needed to experience the struggle firsthand. He wanted to be part of an organizing campaign from its very inception, at the very grass roots level, not as a professional organizer, but as a worker, building a union at his own workplace, struggling alongside his own coworkers, and uniting with them in solidarity.

So, with the union's blessing, he went to work for a large non-union hotel near the Los Angeles International Airport that was on the union's list to organize. He worked first as a switchboard operator on the night shift, and then at the front desk. For nearly four years he did that, patiently - far more patiently than I could have—working at the hotel, laying the groundwork for the organizing effort that went public only after three and a half years. During this time, dozens of his coworkers met secretly with union organizers - for months (some for years) - never allowed to talk about the union at work or even to know who else was involved, due to the danger of losing their jobs should their union sympathies be revealed.

Once, as the union was preparing finally to go public, he called. He had just come from the very first organizing committee meeting, in which workers who had committed to leading the campaign—housekeepers, drivers, dishwashers, cooks – finally acknowledged to each other, openly, that they were in this together, and told their stories – who they were, what their jobs were like, how they were exploited, why they wanted a union, what their dreams were. It was very moving, as you might imagine. “I am not a religious person,” he said, “so I have never known what to think of the concept of faith, but in that room, I felt what I think I can only describe with that word – faith. There was a religious feeling in that room – in the way that those people felt about this struggle, in their hope for it, their belief in it, their commitment to it and to each other, in their feelings for each other. I have never felt that before. It was amazing. It was profound. It was moving.”

There had been no doubt in our minds – Kate's and mine - that this young man had faith. How else could you describe his life and work of the previous four years? There certainly had been no guarantee that this organizing effort would get even as far as those early meetings. On more than one occasion during those years we had wrung our hands, together, wondering whether he was beating his head against a wall, but he had persisted, kept the faith, as they. He says that he is not a religious person, whatever that is. To that, UU minister Tom Owen-Towle would reply, “Religion is ultimately about what you do with who you are.”

“What do you have faith in, and, once you do have faith in something, what happens?” Tommy Lee Jones asks. What do we as Unitarian Universalists have faith in? I submit that the answer to the first question is found in our Principles, specifically, in the first and the seventh—in our espoused belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the related belief in the interdependent web of all creation, of which we are a part--both articles of faith because on a level not purely rational, they are not provable.

What do we do with these articles of faith? Truths, we might call them. We do what we have done throughout our history as Unitarians and Universalists—and as Unitarian Universalists. We do what other faith traditions committed to the same articles of faith do. Those who have arrived at these Truths.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist, says, “We commit to looking deeply at things in order to *understand* their true nature, as Buddha did... To *develop* understanding you have to practice looking at *all living beings* with the eyes of

compassion. When you understand, you love; when you love, you naturally act in a way that can relieve the suffering of people.” *You naturally act in a way that can relieve the suffering of people.*

The late Rev. William Sloane Coffin—the anti-war activist, Yale chaplain, and senior minister at Riverside Church in New York—expresses the very same idea when he says, “The highest purpose of Christianity—a way of life, not a set of beliefs—is to love one another....and love *demand*s that all our actions reflect a movement *toward* and not away from or against each other.” *Toward each other! Like workers understanding that they are better off supporting each other than going it alone. And citizens understanding the value of the common good and contributing to it.*

And “Faith,” says Coffin, “is being *grasped* by the power of love....*Recklessly*, you leap and *then* you grow wings.... It is not so much a leap of thought as of action....In matters of faith, it is *first* we must *do*, *then* we will *know*.” Coffin goes on, “First we will *be* and *then* we will *see*. One must, in short, act *wholeheartedly* with *absolute* certainty....*trusting* without reservation.”

These are the mechanics of faith. This is Flannery O’Connor’s acting on what we know to be true, in our guts, whether or not you believe it, which is to say, without concern for the proof – aware of profound truth, called by it, committed to it, quitting your job and taking a lower-paying one in the *hope* of some day being involved in an organizing effort there.

The lives of the faithful suggest that it is the power of their faith that fuels their actions – their good work, and, further, I would submit, that *it is not possible to be so engaged in the relief of suffering* – of bringing decency and dignity to people’s lives (in Tom Owen-Towle’s words) *without some kind of faith*. This is what our son’s life tells me.

And what my wife’s life tells me. At a Moral Monday rally for Medicaid expansion a few years ago at the Georgia State Capitol in Atlanta with other UUs—all wearing their yellow T-shirts—she encountered Rev. William Barber of Repairers of the Breach and the Poor People’s Campaign, who came across them and said to them, “Ah, I know those shirts. You are UUs. You are the love people.”

Indeed, we are the love people because—in William Coffin’s words—we have been “grasped by the power of love”—our faith—and, in Thich Nhat Hanh’s words, we have “*naturally acted* in a way that can relieve the suffering of people.”

We cannot change the world—or our country—individually, but acting together, we can help move it toward justice. In Coffin’s words, again, “we act buoyed by *hope*, despite the evidence, knowing that only by so doing can the evidence be changed.”

May it be so.

BENEDICTION

Dave Hudson

As we leave this sanctuary and go on about our lives, may we be filled both with Tom Owen-Towle's *energizing spirit* that fuels our discernment and action *and* with Sharon Salzberg's *trust in our own deepest knowing*--a trust that holds us up when we lose heart and beckons us back to the "pulse of life itself" when all seems dry and broken. Go in Peace, open to such faith.