What is Faith to a Unitarian Universalist?

Reverend Susan Frederick-Gray

This December, we will be exploring what it means to live a life of faith within our liberal religious tradition. First let’s look at the definitions of faith:

- strong belief or trust in someone or something
- belief in the existence of God: strong religious feelings or beliefs
- a system of religious beliefs.

I have been asked what do I mean when I say “our Unitarian Universalist faith.” On one hand, it is simply another word for religion. This reflects the third definition. Even though UUs don’t have a system of beliefs, we do have a set of principles, strong values around equity and compassion, a particular history, and faith refers to the collective of all these.

Faith is a “fuzzy” word, a “slippery” kind of word for many Unitarian Universalists. Many of us associate the word faith with a belief in the incredible, the impossible, the supernatural, or the unscientific. Because of its irrational and sometimes dogmatic connotations, faith gets a bad rap among UUs.

Faith is not a word commonly used by or among UUs even though the truth is that we all have faith in something, even if it’s just the faith that we’re going to make it through another day come what may. In what do you place your trust? In whom do you place your confidence? What principles guide your life? One might say that your answers to these questions constitute your faith.

We sometimes use the word faith in a static sort of way, as shorthand for a set of beliefs or a frame of reference. This usage implies that faith is something stagnant, final, or absolute – not open to questioning. I believe that a mature faith respects, maybe even demands, room for doubt.

Take our Unitarian Universalist ancestors, for example. They doubted the doctrine of original sin. They doubted that all truth could be found in one holy book or in the teachings of the church. As time went on, some Unitarians doubted that humans had to believe in a god to be good. They had faith in human potential for moral, ethical behavior and decisions. They had faith in our human ability to experience and interpret sacred truths. They had faith in human reason. In their cry of, “Revelation is not sealed!” they had faith that each of us has the capacity to discover meaning and wisdom, that all truth has not yet been discovered, that truth is ever unfolding.

Keep the Faith!

Reverend Linda Lawrence

Faith, like other traditional religious language, can give us pause. Traditional definitions often don’t work for us. For example, we tend to ask “Faith in who or faith in what?” That question limits our way of looking at faith and suggests that the only way to understand faith is in relationship to a theistic belief in God. In other words, if you don’t believe in God, you can’t have faith.

In talking to members of UUCP about this theme, I heard people describe faith as showing up. “Showing up, keep showing up, even when things get difficult, that is faith.” Another person described it as being able, “even the most fearful times, to hold on to bits of hope and gratitude.” This leads me to the idea that faith actually has less to do with someone or something beyond ourselves, and more to do with our own capacity for perseverance and...
I first heard the "brain in a vat" argument during high school, on a long bus ride that was part of a band trip. Those of us near the back of the bus were loud and boisterous, yelling and playing cards. Some of the more adventurous boys even mooned some passing cars. A few hours later, the sun set and the bus settled into a quiet murmur. I distinctly remember the boy next to me suggesting, "It's possible that nothing really exists except your perceptions. How do you know that your brain isn't sitting in a vat, being programmed with sensory input? You think that you're on a bus talking to me, but maybe the bus doesn't even exist." (This was years before the film The Matrix vividly illustrated this theory for my generation.) I closed my eyes and considered this possibility, hearing the noise of the engine, feeling the floor of the bus shake as we sped down the highway, and watching the glowing afterimages on my retina. After a long few minutes, I decided to have faith that the world really existed. I couldn't know that it was true, but I decided to believe it anyway.

I'm more acutely aware of religious diversity around Christmas than at any other time of year, and I expect that others are too. Christmas is our most publicly celebrated religious holiday, and U.S. Jews, Muslims, Baha'is, Buddhists, atheists, and adherents of other religions can all feel marginalized in December because they don't hold Christian beliefs. Christians can feel just as isolated that their neighbors don't share their beliefs, as we see most obviously in the reports of a "War on Christmas." Even at UUCP, a community that purposefully welcomes religious difference, feelings of isolation and difference at this time of year can lead us to see faith as something that separates us.

But if having faith means believing in something without knowing it to be true, then we all have faith all the time. We all make sense of the world, as well as we can, while knowing how little we know. Some of us have faith in a higher power, even in some specific details about that higher power (i.e. their name, values, or favorite foods), while some of us have faith that no such higher power exists. I can't know that my life isn't simply someone else’s dream, that my brain isn't sitting in a vat and being fed sensory stimulation by a supercomputer modeling the world I experience, but I have a deep and abiding faith that this is not true, that the world as I experience it really exists.

I hope that as we sing hymns about faith during December, we can appreciate them in this inclusive way, with the understanding that all of us live in faith as we navigate this big world that we still have so much to learn about. We will sing of having faith that the world may improve, that there are things to hope for in hard times, and that help will come when we are weary. On the winter solstice, we will sing of our faith in the seasons, that we have reached the center of our temperate Arizona winter, and that summer will return. And at our Christmas service, as we sing well-known carols celebrating the birth of Jesus, let us remember that we care about each other across our religious differences, and that joining together as Christians and non-Christians to celebrate a Christian holiday is an opportunity to learn and be curious about each other’s traditions and beliefs, not a time to isolate ourselves based on our faith. While our specific beliefs may be different (after all, some of you may believe that your brain is in a vat), the process of making sense of the world without having all the answers – of having faith – is something we all share. □

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I recently came across an essay written by my sweetheart, Denise, and the essence of the essay was to know with confidence that God loves you. I admit I was bewildered and a little scared when I read it. She wrote it in 2009, a few years before I met her, and I have found myself thinking about it a lot. Denise’s beliefs and journey are different than my own, and I wonder sometimes how it is we connect with one another in the face of our divergent beliefs.

Denise was raised as a Christian Fundamentalist and identified as such until relatively recently. She raised her own children in this tradition. Her religion was a system that provided some organization to the chaos of an abusive childhood and a young adulthood where she did her best to fulfill the obligations of a role not of her own design. She was a “model” wife and an excellent mother, but knew little about herself. In her forties, Denise returned to college as her perspective began to shift. Her relatively isolated lifestyle of church and family weakened and was ultimately shattered by the tragic suicide of a beloved sister-in-law. It was terrifying for Denise to acknowledge the similarities between her life and that of her sister-n-law.

In fairly short order, Denise made dramatic changes in her life. She left her church, divorced, changed her political party and sexual preference and is now an active member of our congregation. It was not then and is not now an easy transition. Denise changed her religious affiliation and let go of the teachings of her former conservative faith traditions, but she did not let go of her faith in God. As we discussed me writing this article, she described her belief in God and her faith in God’s love as the constant anchor in her life that has seen her through both joy and sorrow.

I am grateful Denise has had this anchor in her life; it has clearly helped her through circumstances and life issues that could have easily disabled others. Grateful as I am for Denise’s sake, I have to admit I do not really empathetically comprehend its meaning. I am just too damn skeptical.

Most humans in the world live with some sort of spiritual or religious faith, so we skeptics are in the minority. Like many UUs, I looked to science to figure out why so many of us believe in God. I found an interesting article on the Psychological Science blog*.

It described a series of experiments where the subjects were asked to undertake unpleasant or difficult tasks. All of the subjects (of varying beliefs and nonbelief) were primed with religious or other words and images. In one experiment, the subjects were divided into various stages of mental fatigue. The results were unambiguous in showing the subjects primed with religious words and images demonstrated more perseverance and self-control than others in attempting the difficult or unpleasant task, even when the brain was fatigued. The conclusion of these studies is that religion provides important support to a person’s ability to exert self-control and can even replenish energy to a weary mind.

My skepticism aside, this makes sense to me. Religion supports self-control and fuels the brain when fatigued. From this perspective, I have a greater comprehension of how Denise’s faith has been an anchor in her life and why so much of the human race has faith in God or gods. It is about science. Or as Denise would say, “It is just the way God intended it.” Either way, she and I both agree and connect with the belief that self-control, perseverance, and support for a weary mind are good things for the human condition, whatever its source. □

*http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/news/were-only-human/why-do-we-have-religion-anyway.html
Faith in Each Other
Linda Bellantoni

On the big questions of Faith, particularly the kind of faith that comes with a “capital F,” I readily defer to Rev. Susan, Rev. Linda, and others. They have unique and special gifts that inspire us, challenge us, and guide us through our individual and collective search for answers to our (capital F) Faith questions. But there is an important aspect of faith that I bring to my work as Board President that is vital to accomplishing the work we do, and that is faith in you. And, maybe more importantly, faith in us.

In general, having faith in people is no small (or easy) task. Particularly nowadays, when it seems like a lot of people have lost faith in a lot of things. They don’t trust our leaders. They certainly don’t trust our government. They don’t trust the news (other than their own preferred sources). They don’t even seem to trust members of their own civic community (teachers, police, firefighters) who do their best daily to serve and care for others. It can be disheartening, to say the least, and this seemingly ubiquitous lack of trust in our institutions erodes our confidence in our collective ability to do good things and make life better for ourselves and others.

So how, and why, do I have such a strong faith in our UUCP community? Having faith in someone or something – being able to trust each other and rely on each other – depends on a commitment of “mutual reciprocity.” It’s having confidence that we can and will meet each other’s needs for love and care, respect and kindness, concern and compassion. We are interconnected, and interdependent, and together we create a space to build the relationships that open our hearts and foster the trust that enables us to have faith in each other. (I love how our worship themes are interrelated and build on each other!)

There’s another dimension, too, to my foundation of faith in us, and that is our shared values and aspirations. We come together in our UUCP community, in effect, because we are committed to a shared set of principles that guide us. We share a mission, the reason that we exist as a community and what we’re called to do and be together. And we share a set of collective aspirations, the specifics of an envisioned future that we not only hope to see, but that we are willing to devote our time, efforts, and resources to achieve. We come together to make the world a better place, in ways both small and large, on an individual level and a global scale. This is not to say that we don’t (or won’t) disagree from time to time – even adamantly – but what binds us together and keeps us focused is so much bigger than those issues that may occasionally divide us. We are not perfect, of course, and we will occasionally fall short in living up to our somewhat lofty values, but we acknowledge our shortcomings and forgive ourselves and each other, and recommit ourselves to do better and to be better.

One of the greatest and most personally rewarding aspects of working in a leadership capacity at UUCP is that my faith in the goodness of people is continually renewed and strengthened by the members of our congregation. On a weekly basis, I am inspired by your generosity, your hard work, your willingness to engage each other and open your hearts, and your commitment to our community and to our mission. Together we have so much capacity, so much ability, and so much potential to be the change that we wish to see in the world. Together we can do real, substantive “good.” I have faith in us. □
resilience. It is the ability to see some hope beyond the present moment.

Faith seems especially relevant at this time of year. It can take a lot of faith to get through the holidays. I say this both tongue in cheek and in all seriousness. The holidays tend to invite feelings of loneliness, revisiting loss and grief, unresolved challenges with our families of origin. Add to this the particular struggles we might each be facing in this present moment, health concerns, concern for loved ones, fresh grief at the recent loss of loved ones. It all often gets heightened in the holiday season. This month, may you find bits of gratitude and hope to keep before you. May you remember that you are alive and that this is a gift. And may we all continue to feel some hope beyond the present moment that keeps us engaged in nurturing care and love into our lives and world.

Some – maybe too many – UUs hang onto doubts, though, as if they are badges of honor. We sanctify skepticism and end up in a perpetual state of theological analysis paralysis – or, worse yet, we just don’t care about digging deep. We don’t see the relevance of discussing matters of personal faith or belief. But we all live with faith, in faith, even though articulating our particular, individual faith can be challenging. I hope you will take time this month to reflect upon your own faith. What keeps you going? What gets you through the day? The week? A crisis? What do you count on? What really matters to you?

Here’s a clue to help you think about how you might be living a life of faith: Think of faith as a verb. Observe your actions, not just your thoughts. What you do may be more telling than what you think about doing. Do your actions represent faith in some underlying assumptions you have about yourself, your world, the way of things?

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Here’s a challenge: Use this month to write a credo, a statement of belief or faith. Use some of the following sentence stems to help you get started: I believe in... I have faith in... Living a life of faith means... I put my trust in... I have confidence in... I depend upon _______ to get me through fear, uncertainty, resistance, and other struggles. You just may discover that you are, after all, a faith-ful Unitarian Universalist.
December Worship Theme:

Faith

Services bring our community together at 9:30 AM and 11:15 AM

Please note Service and Office Hours schedule changes in December.

**December 7, One Service – 9:30 AM: The Language of Faith**
*One Service at 9:30 AM followed by the UUCP Auction Bonanza at 11:00 AM!*

Service Leader: Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

What does traditional religious language, words like *faith, sin, salvation, prayer*, mean in a nontraditional age? What is the value in understanding them in our nontraditional faith?

**December 14: Tell Me About the Faith You Don’t Believe In**

Service Leader: Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

Even if you reject many traditional understandings of faith, there is still a lot of room to hold some hope beyond the present moment. So, I'll tell you about the faith I don't have and the faith I do.

**December 21: Faith is Showing Up: Light One Candle**

Service Leader: Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

Faith isn’t something we think much about when all is going well. It's when things are falling apart, when we feel lost that we need faith. Perhaps this is why so many religious rituals, from Solstice, to Chanukah to Christmas speak of hope and faith.

**Wednesday, December 24: Christmas Eve Services**

5:30 PM Family Service

Service Leaders: Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray and Anne Byrne

6:30-7:30 PM Cookies and Cider Fellowship Hour – *please bring cookies to share*

7:30 PM Lessons and Carols Service

Service Leaders: Revs. Susan Frederick-Gray and Linda Lawrence

*Child Dedications will be offered at both services*

Spend your Christmas Eve with music, community and candlelight at UUCP. Both services will be filled with the singing of carols and the lighting of candles. The early service includes a children’s play and the later service will include the music of the congregational choir. Everyone is invited to bring cookies and share in fellowship 6:30-7:30 PM.

**December 28, One Service – 10:30 AM: Hymn Sing!**

Service Leader: Benjie Messer

This is a season of music and singing! Together we will make a joyful noise as we sing some of our favorite hymns and some especially for the season.
*Child Dedications*
In Unitarian Universalist congregations, child dedications are an opportunity for parents to bring their young children to be blessed and welcomed into community. It is also a way for the community to offer their blessings and support to the parents and children. Child dedications are done with a rose and a sprinkling of water and words of blessing for the child. For more information, please contact Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray (susanfrederickgray@phoenixuu.org).

**Special December Calendar Announcements:**
- **Sunday, December 7th** – One Service at 9:30 AM followed by Auction Bonanza at 11:00 AM
- **Wednesday, December 24th** – Evening Services at 5:30 PM and 7:30 PM
- **Sunday, December 28th** – One Service at 10:30 PM
- **UUCP Office closed for holiday Thursday, December 25th – Thursday, January 1st.**

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**Unicare News**

In remembrance:
- Anne Carlson, sister-in-law to Sarah Carlson, passed away on October 29
- Susan O’Dell, sister/sister-in-law to Carl and Val Bailey, passed away
- Karl, step-uncle to Jim Fike passed away on October 24
- Becky Sandberg, cousin of Heidi Singer, passed away on October 24
- Jason Cooker, significant other of Belinda Clark’s daughter Cayla, passed away on October 20

Serious illness/hospitalization:
- Tom Byrne, brother of Anne Byrne, has entered hospice care
- Ann Bixel’s daughter Renee and grandchildren survived a car accident on October 10 and are home recovering
- Linda Bellantoni and daughter Jenna survived a car accident on October 10; both are home recovering
- Gretchen Manker, wife of Minister Emeritus Ray Manker, had outpatient surgery and is recovering at home

Milestone celebrations:
- Jan Kaplan retired from the Mayo Clinic on October 3
- Sarah, daughter of Mike Sheffer, married Joshua Jones on October 19
- Sally McDade’s daughter Jean married her partner Dawn on October 23
- Susan Sharma, daughter of Sylvia Sharma, became engaged to Nick Gilbert

Other news:
- Bob Aitken welcomed his 7th grandson, but is still awaiting a granddaughter!

For more information on significant events in the life of UUCP members/friends, sign up to be on our Unicare email list at unicare@phoenixuu.org.

Maureen Jeffries,
Unicare Coordinator