

What is Faith?

A sermon by Rev. John T. Morehouse

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As some of you may have read in the last issue of our newsletter, we are officially 291 adults and 70 kids. Actually, we have had four people join our church in the last two weeks so we now number 295. Membership in our church is perhaps one of the most important parts of who we are. Not so much in the numbers – we are not doing this for the numbers – but in the identity our common faith has. Because we do not require a subscription to a creed what truly does unite us is not one belief but rather an action: the action of being in community, communion. This kind of definition is known technically as covenantal. We covenant, or agree to be in community with one another. And that covenantal understanding stretches all the way back to the Pilgrims, our ancestors who founded the first and oldest church in America in 1620, First Parish, Plymouth, a Unitarian Universalist church. I value each of you new and veteran as part of this blessed covenantal community, whether you joined fifty years ago or today.

The longest term of a “newcomer” in my ministry has been 20 years. Chuck was a Vietnam veteran and then a peacenik and finally a insurance salesman. He came to our church in 1974 in search of meaning in his life. His was a life that was falling down. Divorced, battling alcohol and suffering crushing debt despite a successful law practice, Chuck admitted to me when I arrived that life was empty. “Like the tin man’s chest” he said as he pounded on his heart.

Chuck was living in apartment at that time, coming to church each Sunday, looking as much for a mate as the Spirit. After church one Sunday he came up to me and asked if I had any time next week. I thought “wow, I must have really made an impression on this guy!” “Sure” I said, feeling quite puffed up, “when do you want to come in?” “Oh, no” he chuckled “not time to talk. I have just bought a little house and I need some help reconstructing the wall in the back. It’s made of stone. They tell me you used to be a contractor.” Not a very good contractor, I was about to say, but caught myself in time. “Sure. I’ll come over.” And we set up a time.

I arrived late but he didn’t seem to care. We got right to work rebuilding the wall. Ministry is a funny business; it happens when you least expect it. I have learned to never anticipate what someone wants to talk to me about.

It's always a surprise. This time I had not intended to talk at all but this was Chuck's way of talking. Sometimes doing something together takes the heat off our self-consciousness and we can open up. So it was with Chuck. In fact, so it was with both of us. I admitted to him that I wasn't really very good at building things (there was a pretty good reason that I went into ministry – I was a lousy contractor) He admitted to me he wasn't a very good insurance salesman but he did pretty well at listening to other people. He didn't really need my help with the wall. He knew which stones went where but he did need the time to be with me. And so we talked. We talked about Vietnam, about the hell of war, about seeing his friends blown apart, children starving; we talked about his nightmares, the booze and the AA meetings. We talked about his failed marriage. The stones went up quickly.

“What do you want out of our church?” I asked. He sat down. “I want a solid place to be in. Like these stones. Something solid.” We talked about what that might mean; he enjoyed the services, the people were great but he wondered what we really believed. “I mean what does the church stand for? I mean after everyone has had their say, what is the faith?”

It took me a long time to answer that question: “What is the faith?” After all you can't make a faith out of freedom. Freedom is a necessary means to what we believe but it's not enough to stake your life on. When our kids ask us “What do you believe?” We can't get away with, “Well, I believe in the freedom to believe.” What's that?! Kids want something more substantial. I believe in God, Spirit, the goodness of people, I believe in you! Now that is substantial. Parents ask us all the time “What do I tell kids when they ask me about God?” And Frances used to say, “Tell them what YOU believe”. But be sure it is a belief and not another question. Kids can change their minds so you won't brain wash them with what you believe, but you have to tell them that you believe in something. Skip what you don't believe in or what you don't know, kids don't want to know that. Kids want to know what you have faith in. So did Chuck.

Faith. Faith is a funny word. It means to believe with all your heart and your entire mind. It is that belief which gets you through the night. It's that belief that takes you to your death. When those firefighters ran back into the burning World Trade Center, they did so with faith, not a belief, not a position statement, but with faith: faith that their destiny in life is to save lives even if they lose their life in the process. This is what it means to be faithful. Belief is provisional, faith is certain.

In the many years since Chuck challenged me as a minister of this religion, I have come to see that we do have a faith. It is real and you can live with it. It is rock steady, like those stones that symbolically rebuilt his life. By joining each Sunday we enter into not only a community of open-minded spiritual seekers but in an endeavor to build our faith. This isn't a social club or a debating society. This is a religion. We may all have our opinions but at the end of the day, when the long night stretches before us, when we want to know what to do or how to get on, we want faith.

What is faith? It can best be expressed in the metaphor of stones. We all build the foundations of our lives, I believe from stones of faith even if we build them differently. That's o.k. There are a great many ways to build a life. Each fall I teach the course "Building Your Own Theology" and in it this metaphor of stones seems so real to me. So in tribute to Chuck and to all those whose lives need rebuilding I offer up these stones of our faith. You can rest your life on these. This is what faith means to me.

1. We belief in each other. As a Unitarian Universalist you cannot be faithful alone. We need each other. Our Gods are not the same, much less the same fortress. We believe many things about the ultimate nature of the cosmos but what is real is the help we can give each other. That is real. We believe that there is comfort in a shoulder offered, ears that listen, arms that hold and hands that bring food. We may not have the answers but being there for each other IS something to live for. In all the heartaches of this last month, it has been the simple presence of each other that has given life its most beautiful meaning.

2. We believe in pursuing justice. "Faith is the sister of justice" wrote the Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams. We are called by virtue of being human but especially as Unitarian Universalists to by the "Jeremiah of a Just Community" as my colleague and former president of the UUA Bill Schultz put it. Justice is the making right of what is wrong. There are many kinds of justice. There is the retributive justice of crime and punishment "making right what is wrong without furthering the wrong" as Dostoevsky put it. This is the justice which flirts so closely with revenge; that justice which seeks to bring terrorists down. It has its place. But there is another kind of justice I want us to put our faith into; a harder justice. Over the years I have challenged my colleagues to seek the justice of redistribution. What if, as a practical matter, we all wrote out a check to aid the Afghani people? Henry David Thoreau once wrote: The Arc of the Moral Universe is long but it

bends Towards Justice. It is up to us through letters, actions and our money to help the bend.

3. We believe in good and evil. Yes, I said good and evil. Let me start with evil. Regardless of where you think evil comes from; we have to believe evil exists. It is not merely the absence of good. It is a force unto itself. The perpetrators might not call themselves evil but the taking of innocent life is the worst manifestation of wrongful doing. Evil exists in our world. Accept that as a faith statement and face it squarely. I shelter you from the evil I witness each week. But many of you have seen it up close and personal. Take it as doctrine my friends, evil does exist. Now the question is what can we do about it? This is the place of good. We believe in good. Who hear remembers the story about the Old Italian couple who planted new grape vines in a vineyard they would never see to fruition in the shadow of a coming war? The impetuous young man walks by and asks “Old man, why do you plant what you will never taste the fruit of?” The old man smiles and says, “I plant because the good never dies”. As we work towards justice I commend to our faith the belief that while we may never see the fruits of our efforts in this life time or even our children’s children's lifetime, we move the arc of the universe forward but acting and being good. This is why we do teach a moral code here. It’s not the Ten Commandments but its close. (And it’s certainly not the Ten Suggestions as many jest we would have if Moses had been a UU). We hold good and right these virtues; honesty, compassion, humility, courage, and the freedom to choose. I can say I would defend those virtues to my death. I hope you would consider that as well. “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the human heart” wrote Alexander Solzenitchin, it is right that we believe and act in the good so as to keep the evil as bay.

4. We believe in living in the present. Our faith does not depend on the promise of some unknown hereafter. We believe that this present moment is the most precious there is. Our denominational magazine is titled The World, not the Next World. This world. We must not get caught in the vise of cause and effect. “Oh, what can I do, my life was such a mess?” So what?! Everyone’s life is a mess. The question is what are you going to do about it? The past influences the present but does not determine it. The reason salvation is such a ho hum problem for us is that we believe that we are already saved. The key is to smell the roses right now and not wait for the time to sit down. They might be dead by then and so might you. “We need to worry a lot less about the “ought” and much more about the “is” of

life” wrote the great German theologian Frederick Von Hegel almost 100 years ago.

5. We believe in meeting suffering head on. Learning prepares the mind but suffering prepares the heart. We inherit, as Unitarian Universalists, a dual destiny; to respond to life with the reason of our minds and the compassion of our hearts. Our faith is made stronger not only because we have suffered and found that we could rely on these stones beneath us but also because we can cry with each other without a word said. “Hide not your light under the bushel, but bring it forth and let it shine.” It doesn’t take any more than your time; just be with suffering and make it bearable by your presence.

6. We believe in the priesthood of humanity. James Luther Adams, a quiet and tweedy man, doesn’t strike you as the kind of fellow who would smuggle Jews out of Germany or stand up to Joseph McCarthy and call him a hypocrite. But he did. And he did so because he believed that we are all called to offer up the rites of life. I believe in this so strongly that I get into trouble for it. I make almost no distinction between the ordained and the laity. Some of my colleagues don’t agree with that but I do believe that you are all ministers here. And I would, if I could get away with it, ordain the whole bunch of you right now. Robert Fulghum (of What I Learned in Kindergarten fame) was a UU minister in Seattle before he ordained his entire congregation and then sent letters of ordination to Boston. They didn’t think much of that and asked him to leave. All of you have the power to touch another, to hold a baby and give it a blessing. To soothe a tired head and give a soul permission to leave this life. All of you are priests of humanity called to shout down from the high tops the sound of justice on the wrong doers, the greedy and the mean. Those who lost their lives were priests, the nurses who tended the burns, even the politicians who for a time set aside their quest for power and led the country in courage, all of them priests. You are a priest; a giver of special love and special rites. You already have access to what is good and just. Believe it.

7. Finally, we believe in the mystery of God. None of us knows the ultimate answers to the ultimate question of why we are here and where we are going. We have certain faiths in the stories and that is good. But ultimately, as Moses was to learn, God is not to be seen. We can find metaphors to describe the ultimate being of which we are all apart but they are only maps to the territory, to the mystery that some of us would call God. The saying goes that the map is not the territory. When Mary lost her only son to cancer,

she came home from the hospital opened every window in her house and started to wail. Her husband worried about what the neighbors might say, called the priest who called a therapist. “Mary, Mary, please stop, the therapist is on the phone” Mary rounded on her husband and screamed “The therapist?! You talk to the therapist, Harry. I’ll talk to God.” And she resumed her screaming.

It took her many more months to find a normalcy to her life but the passion was gone. Two years after he died, she went with her brother to a Catholic church she had not been to before. It had been a long time since she had been in church. Unable to pray she wandered around and stopped before a statue of the Virgin. She stared for a long time until the tears started to flow, frozen in her heart she started to thaw “How could you do it, Mary?” she whispered to the statue. “How could you surrender your son? How could you find a way to live after he died?” Staring up at the immovable and peaceful face, tears rolling down, she said “I was good: a good person, a good mother. There was nothing more I could have done. Why? Mary, why?” Still crying she told the Virgin how young he really was, about how he forgets to eat and wash. “He needed a mother, Mary. He needs a mother there too. I don’t understand but I give him into your care. Love him, please.” And with that she turned away (adapted from *My Grandfather’s Blessings* by Rachel Naomi Remen).

Mary changed that day. She didn’t know how or why but it didn’t matter. May we have the faith to accept that much of life and our place in it is a mystery? Accept what life gives you and work towards its betterment. It might not answer all your questions but at least it’s honest. Ours is faith built of stones such as these. Built and rebuilt but solid and sure. Amen.