



TOUCHSTONES

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Faith

Wisdom Story



dles; a capacity to live at more than a mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of a transcendent dimension.... Faith, then, is a quality of human living." Belief is content; faith is a process that influences the way we live, and makes it possible for us to live with meaning. Faith is a verb, not a noun.

James Fowler, author of *Stages of Faith*, considers faith to be our response to essential questions regarding our



The faith of a mustard seed

hopes and dreams, our commitments, and what we trust in life. He writes, "Faith is not always religious in its content or context. To ask these questions

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Thomas Potter's Faith

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

John Murray attended a Methodist church in England. His wife, Eliza, attended a Universalist church that taught that God was loving. John visited. At first he disagreed, but finally he became a Universalist preacher.

Tragedy struck. His baby died, and then his wife. He was heartbroken. Then he went to prison because he couldn't pay his debts. Once released, he sailed to America on a ship called the *Hand-in-Hand*. Off of the New Jersey shore, it got stuck on a sandbar. Without wind, it couldn't move.

The captain sent John ashore in a small boat to get food and water. He found a farmhouse and a small meetinghouse. John knocked on the door of the farmhouse. He met Thomas Potter and asked if he could help with food and water. Thomas said yes. John then asked about the meetinghouse. Thomas said that he had built it for anyone who would preach a sermon about God's love. John said he had preached about that when he was a Universalist preacher in England.

Thomas said, "Then you are the person I have been waiting for. Please preach in the meetinghouse." John refused. He was done with preaching. Thomas warned, "The wind will never come until you have preached a sermon about God's everlasting love." The wind remained calm for days. John saw this as a sign from God. He delivered a sermon on Sunday, September 30, 1770 to the friends Potter had gathered. In this small meetinghouse, in what would later be called Good Luck Point, John felt his sense of calling and purpose return. Because the wind didn't blow, John Murray started preaching Universalism again, and became the most famous Universalist preacher of his day.

Introduction to the Theme

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

Faith is a topic worthy of our consideration as Unitarian Universalists. Most of the time people use the word faith as if it were a synonym for belief. It is not.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a historian of religion wrote, *Faith and Belief*. His book draws a vital distinction between belief and faith. For Smith, belief was "the holding of certain ideas." He wrote, "Faith is deeper, richer, more personal. It is engendered by a religious tradition in some cases and to some degree by its doctrines, but it is a quality of the person and not the system. It is an orientation of the personality to oneself, to one's neighbor, to the universe; a total response, a way of seeing whatever one sees and of handling whatever one han-

Faith & the Common Good

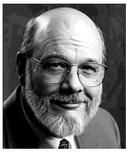
Robert Bellah, writing about Obama's commitment to the Common Good, claimed that, "When Obama said 'we are our brothers' keepers; we are our sisters' keepers,' he suggested, as he did in so many ways, that we all need one another, all depend on one another, ...using that biblical language at its most appropriate. And in his emphasis on public participation at every level, in his refusal to take money from lobbyists and political action committees, he was reviving the spirit of civic republicanism, of voters as citizens responsible for the common good, not political consumers concerned only with themselves."

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Reimagining the Common Good

Making Sense of Faith

James Fowler



James Fowler shares a wonderful story about himself that offers a way of examining our faith. He writes, "I started out from Interpreters' House, where I worked, toward Asheville, North Carolina, where I was leading a workshop on faith. Driving along, I reflected on my plans for the workshop. I rehearsed a set of questions I planned for the opening session, a set of questions designed to open up some honest talk about faith in our lives. I thought about what I would ask:

1. What are you spending and being spent for? What commands and receives your best time and energy?
2. What causes, dreams, goals, or institutions are you pouring out your life for?
3. As you live your life, what power or powers do you fear or dread? What power or powers do you rely on and trust?
4. To what or whom are you committed in life? In death?
5. With whom or what group do you share your most sacred and private hopes for your life and for the lives of those you love?
6. What are those most sacred hopes, those most compelling goals and purposes in your life?"

He continues, "Not an easy set of questions. No simple game of value clarification. I congratulated myself on my cleverness in coming up with such a useful, probing workshop opener. Then it hit me. How would I answer my own questions? My sense of cleverness passed as I embraced the impact of the questions. I had to pull my car over to the shoulder [of the road] and stop. For the next forty minutes, almost making myself late for the workshop, I examined the structures of values, the patterns of love and action, the shape of fear and dread and the directions of hope and friendship in my own life." As he sat in his car, Fowler was making sense of faith.

A Humanist Radicalism

Erich Fromm



The attitude of the majority is neither that of faith nor ... despair, but ...complete indifference to the future....

With those who are not entirely indifferent, the attitude is that of "optimism" or of "pessimism." The optimists are the believers in the dogma of the continuous march of "progress." They are accustomed to identifying human achievement with technical achievement, human freedom with freedom from direct coercion and the consumer's freedom to choose.... The dignity, cooperativeness, kindness of the primitive does not impress them; technical achievement, wealth, toughness do....

The optimists ...can afford to be "optimists." ...The "pessimists" are really not very different from the optimists. They live just as comfortably and are just as little engaged. The fate of humanity is as little their concern as it is the optimists'. ...Their pessimism functions ...by projecting the idea that nothing can be done, [while] the optimists ...persuade themselves that everything is moving in the right direction..., so nothing needs to be done.

Humanist radicalism ... seeks to liberate ...from ...illusions; it postulates that fundamental changes are necessary ...in our economic and political structure but also in our values ...and in our personal conduct.

To have faith means to dare, to think the unthinkable, yet to act within the limits of the realistically possible; it is the paradoxical hope to expect the Messiah every day, yet not to lose heart when he has not come.... This hope is ...impatient



and active, looking for every possibility of action within the realm of real possibilities.

Source: Fromm, Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt Paperbacks. 1992.

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seriously of oneself or others does not necessarily mean to elicit answers about religious commitment or belief. Faith is a person's or group's way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose."

While it is true that our faith can emerge without intention as we respond to life, an unexamined faith like an unexamined life does not serve us well. Unitarian Universalist scholar James Luther Adams writes, "An unexamined faith is not worth having, for it can only be true by accident. A faith worth having is a faith worth discussing and testing."

An examined faith takes into account all of the reasons in the world for pessimism, of which there are many, weighs them in light of what is possible, and finds reason for optimism. An examined faith never allows the enormity of a mountain to get in the way of trying to move it bit by bit for as long as it takes. An examined faith understands the leap of faith as one made "half-sure and whole-hearted." When we begin to examine our faith, to make sense of it, we understand how vital it is to life itself.

Without faith, we have little reason to even get out of bed in the morning. With faith, our reasons for living and loving multiply exponentially. Faith cannot be prescribed or proscribed. It must be uniquely fashioned out of your experience of life. Unlike belief, faith is individual. No one else has your experience, your values, your dreams, or your faith. You can share and examine your faith with others in religious community as a way of making sense of your faith. Through such examination, faith becomes an even more compelling motivation and compass in our lives, as it ignites our commitment. Since we are made of the stuff of stars, let our faith burn brightly, pushing away the darkness.

Readings from the Common Bowl



Day 1: "Modern people are drawn to faith while practicing doubt, as our ancestors confessed their doubts while practicing their faith." Adam Gopnik

Day 2: "Faith requires active questioning, and many religions demand it of the observant. Yet at the same time, many religions call for a rejection or suppression of independent will." Lisa Randall

Day 3: "Optimism is an alienated form of faith, pessimism an alienated form of despair... To have faith means to dare, to think the unthinkable, yet to act within the limits of the realistically possible." Erich Fromm

Day 4: "Skepticism is the beginning of Faith." Oscar Wilde

Day 5: "Faith is about doing. You are how you act, not just how you believe." Mitch Albom

Day 6: "Faith is the willingness to give ourselves over, at times, to things we do not fully understand... the full engagement with this strange and shimmering world." Alan Lightman

Day 7: "I have a lot of faith. But I am also afraid a lot, and have no real certainty about anything. ...the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns." Anne Lamott

Day 8: "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." Paul Tillich

Day 9: "Faith is not belief. Belief is passive. Faith is active." Edith Hamilton

Day 10: "Faith is courage; it is creative while despair is always destructive." David Muzzey

Day 11: "Reason is our soul's left hand, faith her right." John Donne

Day 12: "Faith is not contrary to the usual ideas, something that turns out to be right or wrong, like a gambler's bet: it's an act, an intention, a project, something that makes you, in leaping into the future, go so far, far, far ahead that you shoot clean out

of time and right into Eternity, which is not the end of time or a whole lot of time or unending time, but timelessness, the old Eternal Now." Joanna Russ

Day 13: "Faith... must be enforced by reason.... When faith becomes blind it dies." Mahatma Gandhi

Day 14: "Faith and doubt both are needed—not as antagonists, but working side by side to take us around the unknown curve." Lillian Smith

Day 15: "When you have come to the edge of all light that you know and are about to drop off into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing one of two things will happen: There will be something solid to stand on or you will be taught to fly." Patrick Overton



Day 16: "May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith in yourself and others." Saint Terese of Liseaux

Day 17: "This is my living faith, an active faith, a faith of verbs: to question, explore, experiment, experience, walk, run, dance, play, eat, love, learn, dare, taste, touch, smell, listen, speak, write, read, draw, provoke, emote, scream, sin, repent, cry, kneel, pray, bow, rise, stand, look, laugh, cajole, create, confront, confound, walk back, walk forward, circle, hide, and seek." Terry Tempest Williams

Day 18: "Faith enables many of us to endure life's difficulties with an equanimity that would be scarcely conceivable in a world lit only by reason." Sam Harris

Day 19: "The faith of a church or of a nation is an adequate faith only when it inspires and enables people to give of their time and energy to shape the various institutions—social, economic, and political—of the common life." James Luther Adams

Day 20: "Faith as ultimate concern is an act of the total personality. It happens in the center of the personal life and includes all its elements. Faith is the most centered act of the human mind. It is not a movement of a special section or a special function of (our) total being. They all are united in the act of faith." Paul Tillich

Day 21: "Faith is not something to grasp, it is a state to grow into." Mohandas Gandhi

Day 22: "My reason nourishes my faith and my faith my reason." Norman Cousins

Day 23: "Democracy is itself, a religious faith. For some it comes close to being the only formal religion they have." E. B. White

Day 24: "Faith is a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty." Brené Brown

Day 25: "The greatest act of faith some days is to simply get up and face another day." Amy Gatliff

Day 26: "When we blindly adopt a religion, a political system, a literary dogma, we become automatons. We cease to grow." Anais Nin

Day 27: "Faith makes things possible, not easy." Author Unknown

Day 28: "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." Martin Luther King, Jr.

Day 29: "Life without faith in something is too narrow a space to live." George Lancaster Spalding

Day 30: "Faith is an oasis in the heart which can never be reached by the caravan of thinking." Kahlil Gibran

Day 31: "I always admired atheists. I think it takes a lot of faith." Diane Frolov and Andrew Schneider

Pursuing Authentic Faith

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

Unitarian Universalist theologian and social ethicist James Luther Adams did not conceive of faith in terms of being



true or false. Rather, he was a champion of the development of authentic faith as opposed to faith that was inauthentic because of idolatry, dogmatism,

self-righteousness, etc. In summarizing Adams' concept of authentic faith, George Kimmich Beach writes in *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams*, an authentic faith



1. "...focuses our attention on ultimate issues, such as God, human nature, and the meaning of life, but in a way that connects with our ...life concerns. It links ...the *intimate* and the *ultimate* dimensions of life.
2. "...elicits ...a commitment that is costing in some significant way and degree. *The primacy of the will* ... follows from the commitment ...in favor of faith and its subsequent life decisions.
3. "...wrestles with ...'principalities and powers' It takes responsibility for the shape of things to come in the human community. It ...even ventures a new beatitude, *Blessed are the powerful*.
4. "...seeks to incarnate its spiritual and moral value commitments ...in social institutions. ...Therefore we may say, *By their groups you shall know them*.
5. "...takes shape in history through the commitments that we, the promise-making animals, make with others. It is shaped by the historical covenants we form within the ...*covenant of being*.
6. "...locates itself within the encompassing drama of history. It believes that there is a meaning in history ... that [requires] responding faithfully.... The heart of Adam's thought about the character of faith is that it *takes time seriously*." (pp. 289-290)

The final task of faith is its contin-

uous renewal. Beach summarizes Adams' belief about renewal when he writes, "Faith is formed through the historical process of human communities, and reformed through processes of 'deliberation and decision' within those communities." (This recalls the rallying cry of Ferenc Dávid, the Transylvanian founder of Unitarianism: *semper reformanda*, always reforming.) According to Beach, Adams' understanding of authentic faith involved a moral directive (i.e., "a way of living") and a critical principle ("a way of assessing life").

Crucial to this understanding was that, per Socrates, an "unexamined life" is not worth living and that, per Adams, an "unexamined faith" is not worth "faithing." Both forfeit one's freedom. Adams wrote, "The free person does not live by an unexamined faith. To do so is to worship an idol whittled out and made into a fetish. The free person believes with Socrates that the true can be separated from the false only through observation and rational discussion. In this view the faith that cannot be discussed is a form of tyranny. An unexamined faith is not worth having, for it can only be true by accident. A faith worth having is a faith worth discussing and testing." For Adams, Beach writes, "the quest for a reasoned understanding has no less religious significance than faith itself and it expresses an important form of faith, namely fidelity to truth." Adams would have had no patience for either "fake news" or "alternative facts." He would have called both demonic because they are reflections of the dark side of human existence.

For Adams, faith is not fundamentally about one's beliefs, but about one's commitments. With regard to belief, Adams' developed what has been called his *Pragmatic Theory of Religious Beliefs*. By pragmatic, he was not interested in the content of belief, per se, but in how you act based upon the belief and your feeling or feelings that are related to or are in tension with your action. For Adams, the concern went beyond one's personal belief. He also invited consideration of the ways in which a belief was aligned with or opposed to the behavior exhibited by social, political, religious, and/or econom-

ic institutions.

Emerson wrote, "A person will worship something—have no doubt about that." In like manner, Adams wrote, "The question concerning faith is not, shall I be a person of faith? The proper question is, rather, which faith is mine? Or better, which faith should be mine? For whether a person craves prestige, wealth, security, or amusement, whether a person lives for country, for science, for God, or for plunder, that person is demonstrating a faith, is showing that he[/she] puts confidence in something. ...Find out what that is and you have found his[/her] religion. You will have found his[/her] god."

While theology has often been defined as "faith seeking understanding, Adams was more concerned with ethics, which he defined as "faith seeking understanding in the realm of action." In this, Adams argued that an inauthentic faith is a "faith that it is not the sister of justice."

For Adams, authentic faith is prophetic faith. Beach writes, "Prophetic faith yields a theology of hope. It means proclaiming

in the face of present injustice, a justice to come, and in the face



of present hatred and fear, a peace to come—both as moral commitments and as articles of faith. It means knowing that the sin of religion is 'cheap grace,' offering spiritual comfort without 'the call to make some new sacrifices.'"

Given different approaches to faith, how are we to distinguish between authentic faith and inauthentic faith? The challenge is similar to distinguishing between false and true prophets. In speaking about a tree and its fruit, Jesus spoke of the good fruit of true prophets and the bad fruit of false prophets. Jesus concluded saying, "Therefore, by their fruits you will know them." (Matthew 7:20) For Adams, writes Beach, "The principle is also an ethics of *consequences* as distinct from an ethics of *conscience*, an ethics con-

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Authentic Faith

(Continued from page 4) **Faith & Theology**

cerned not only with right *means* but with good *ends* and not only with *motives* but with *outcomes*." Adams' tests for authenticity of faith are these: "by their roots you shall know them" and "by their groups you shall know them."

Given this commitment to a very intentional form of faith, what are we to do with inauthentic faith, our own and others? For us, it means ongoing self-criticism and openness to reform. It means resisting the group-think that is the consequence of dwelling within ideological bubbles. It means taking seriously that with which we do not believe to be true. It means thoughtfully engaging the authentic criticism of others. Beach writes, "An authentic faith is not a 'blind' but an 'examined' faith, Adams says. Its integrity depends on its ability to maintain a self-critical rather than a dogmatic or unquestioning stance."

Beach continues, "It is of course natural to resist criticism, and when it comes to matters of personal devotion, in which an emotional investment has been made, it is even more natural to resist self-criticism. While all religious traditions teach humility before the transcendent, many regularly violate the principle of humility, especially with respect to their own brand of religion." While we may be reluctant to do it, we are also required to make judgements about the faith of others, at least in terms of the fruit that they are peddling in the public square.

Adams was fond of repeating Goethe's maxim, "A tradition cannot be inherited, it must be earned." Whether born into this faith or someone who arrived in it as soon as they could, regardless of their age, how are you earning this faith? Beach suggests that, "You earn a tradition in the process of making it your own. You live with it, argue with it, and restate it in the language of your own experience." And you listen carefully and critically to the language and experience of those in this faith with whom you are journeying together. The journey of faith is one of ongoing renewal and action in service of justice.

Faithful Witness

In the Midst of a World

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker



In the midst of a world marked by tragedy and beauty

there must be those who bear witness against unnecessary destruction and who, with faith, rise and lead in freedom, with grace and power.

There must be those who speak honestly and do not avoid seeing what must be seen of sorrow and outrage, or tenderness, and wonder.

There must be those whose grief troubles the water while their voices sing and speak refreshed worlds.

There must be those whose exuberance rises with lovely energy that articulates earth's joys.

There must be those who are restless for respectful and loving companionship among human beings, whose presence invites people to be themselves without fear.

There must be those who gather with the congregation of remembrance and compassion draw water from old wells, and walk the simple path of love for neighbor.

And, There must be communities of people who seek to do justice love kindness and walk humbly with God, who call on the strength of soul-force to heal, transform, and bless life. There must be religious witness.

Source: <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28065>

Faith Beyond Belief

Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience

Sharon Salzberg



One day a friend called to ask if we could meet... 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. ... It is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience.



Source: <http://www.uucdc.org/worship/sermons/all-will-be-well>

Family Matters



Got Milk? Got Faith?

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

In her book, *The Gift of Faith: Tending the Spiritual Lives of Children*, the Rev. Jeanne Nieuwejaar writes, "There is a story of a little girl who asked her parents, as they drove to church one Sunday morning, 'What do we get at church?' in response to her parents' puzzled looks, she said, 'At the library we get books; at the bank we get money; at the grocery store we get milk. What do we get at church?'"

Got milk? Got faith?

The Rev. David H. MacPherson, minister emeritus of First Unitarian Universalist Church of Richmond, Virginia wrote the following years ago. "These children have a right to a faith in themselves, in the story of [hu]mankind, in their particular heritage, and in the vast universe home that is theirs." It is often used in a naming ceremony or a child dedication ceremony.

Within Unitarian Universalism a good place to begin building faith is with the seven principles. The principles as written for adults are important:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

A children's version of the seven principles reads:

- We believe that each and every person is important.
- We believe that all people should be treated fairly and kindly.
- We believe that we should accept one another and keep on learning together.
- We believe that each person must be free to search for what is true and right in life.
- We believe that all persons should have a vote about the things that concern them.
- We believe in working for a peaceful, fair, and free world.
- We believe in caring for our planet Earth, the home we share with all living things.

And this is where the creativity really begins: rendering the seven principles in language that a child can understand.

In the late 1980s, Elizabeth Katzman and Meg Riley, then in the Prairie Star District, created the *Rainbow Path* for the principles by using the colors of the rainbow as a mnemonic device.

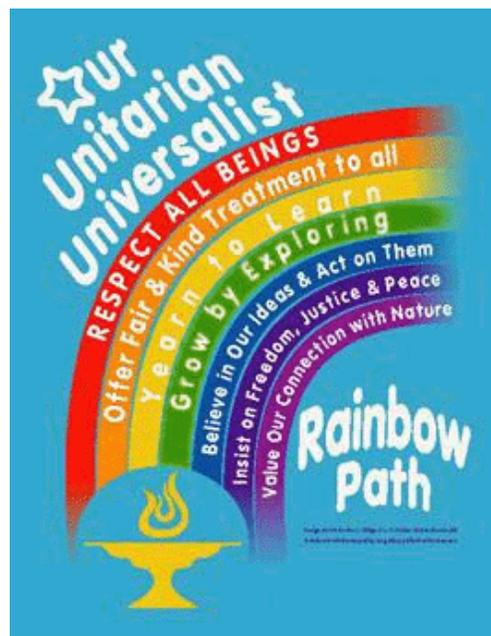
- Respect all beings. [Red]
- Offer fair and kind treatment to all. [Orange]
- Yearn to learn. [Yellow]
- Grow by exploring. [Green]
- Believe in our ideas and act on them. [Blue]
- Insist on peace, freedom, and justice. [Indigo]
- Value our connection with nature. [Violet]

How would you articulate these for children? Another version reads:

- Respect the importance and value of each person
- Offer fair and kind treatment to everyone
- Yes to spiritual growth and learning together
- Grow by exploring ideas and finding your own truth
- Believe in your ideals and voice your vote
- Insist on justice, freedom and peace for all
- Value our responsibility in the web of life

Family Activity: *The Rainbow Path*

Read the adult version of the principles as well as the two versions for children. Talk about what they mean and then re-write each principle so that it captures what you believe is important to convey. Using either a rainbow flag or wide pieces of ribbon in the seven rainbow colors, write your version of each principle in large letters and hang flag or ribbons in your home where you can see them each day.



Family Activity: *Our Touchstones*

In terms of Unitarian Universalism and your own family's values, what are the values that are most important to you. These might include love, honesty, wisdom, peace, justice, caring, hope and many others. Gathered around a table, brainstorm a list of as many as you can. Then talk about each one with the goal of choosing the seven values that are most important to your family. Get seven large, smooth stones. Write using a permanent marker one value on each stone until you have created your seven touchstones. Put these in a basket on the table where you have dinner. On some regular basis as part of a meal, invite each member of the family to take one of these touchstones and share why that touchstone is important to him or her.

Faith: the Spirit of Benedict, the Silence of Zen

The Taste of Silence

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

Bieke Vandekerckhove, author of *The*



Taste of Silence: How I Came to Be at Home with Myself (published in 2010 in Dutch and 2015 in English), died on September 7, 2015 at the age of 46. This was remarkable since she was diagnosed with ALS at the age of 19 in 1988 while studying psychology at the University of Leuven in Belgium. She was told that she would only “live” 2 to 5 years. Though paralyzed from the pelvis up, Bieke did not give up. Following the diagnosis, she was “led” to Saint Lioba Convent in Egmond-Binnen in

the Netherlands where she studied Benedictine spirituality. Three years later the disease went into remission. In reflecting upon her discovery of Benedictine spirituality, Bieke wrote, “I came upon the treasures of Christianity through a strange door. A little back door, actually. Half decayed, hidden under a thick layer of dust, barely known and noticed. But on the inside, jumping with life. You see, I got to know the Christian faith through its contemplative form, through abbeys. This is no faith of rules and merits. Neither is it a faith of dogmas that must be accepted as truths. Here I discovered a faith of lived experience and inwardness, preserved throughout the centuries and passed on.”



Prior to this experience she had seen faith as a collection of “notions that did not begin to make sense.” The breakthrough was reading the book, *Tuning in to Grace*, by André Louf, the abbot of Mont-des-Cats Abbey in Nord-Pas-de-Calais, France. From him, she learned that faith is, “about an experience of a dying—and that dying can be to anything—that

unexpectedly tilts to life.” Louf wrote about “bumping against the limits of our human capabilities” and, thus, “toppling over into inwardness.”

From Louf, Bieke discovered that when “we all come face to face with our fundamental poverty and loneliness, it’s a painful moment.” An inner balm facilitates healing in the process of becoming truly human. She wrote, “In that toppling over we land on a point of unexpected freedom—a universal interconnectedness opens up.” For Louf this was “a dying that, to your own astonishment, tumbles toward life.”

This conversion for Bieke, this turning around, did not involve assent to this or that belief. It consisted of a lived experience that occurred in the crucible of her diagnosis of ALS. Still, embracing Benedictine spirituality was only part of the process.

In the mid-2000s, Bieke added Zen to her exploration. Her ALS had, according to the koan of modern Japanese Zen master Hisamatsu, forced her to “Go stand where there is no place to stand.” She began her training at a Zen Center in Izegem, Belgium. Bieke noted that, “The power of the Benedictine tradition is that it’s verbal. The power of the Zen tradition is that it’s not.” She understood Zen as “a direct engagement with the Mystery in a mindful presence, without wanting to grasp that Mystery.” Ironically, the silence of Zen helped to reveal for her the core of Christianity. Practicing with Ton Lathouwers, she received formal transmission as a Zen Master (Ch’an Ssu) in the Chinese Ch’an tradition in 2014.

For Bieke, faith grows out of fragility and longing. She wrote, “When you experience the fragility of life, everyday things acquire an incredible glow. You understand how the ordinary is extraordinary. Everything becomes a source of wonder. It becomes precious, perhaps because you may be about to lose it, and you become

aware just how unique and valuable it is.”

The sister who was her spiritual guide at the monastery asked Bieke every time they met, “What do you long for?” Eventually, Bieke wrote, “What is longing? Why does it flourish? Why does it wither? I don’t know. . . . I am not talking here about the desires of youth. That is blossoming. That is the drive, the spontaneous joy of living that wells up inside of us when life is going fine and we have the wind at our back. What I mean is the strange, inexpressible longing that can set us afire when all blossoms have blown away. Longing that we experience as a completely unexpected fruit that we no longer thought possible. Longing that has to do with waiting, with having faith, with persevering, and with patiently allowing ourselves to be dug out by life itself.”

Through her experience of life and her exploration she realized that, “Benedictine spirituality and

Zen Buddhism became the two lungs through which I breathe.” This metaphor of breath, which is connected to spirituality, is compelling because with ALS the muscles that are involved in helping the lungs to breathe are weakened.

In terms of faith, Bieke agreed with Keats, “Oh, how much more than a life of thought do I prefer a life of experiences!” It was through experience that she learned to be at home with herself, which is an act of faith. Bieke wrote, “To be at home with yourself (*habitare secum* in Latin) is a basic exercise in the Benedictine tradition. It means to take time every day to listen in silence to what is within you. In other words, that you insert moments during which you dwell with yourself in silence, no matter how difficult it may be. It is also a basic exercise in Zen: *zazen*, sitting in silence, “being intimate with yourself,” as Zen teacher Frank De Waele calls it.”

completely unexpected fruit that we no longer thought possible. Longing that has to do with waiting, with having faith, with persevering, and with patiently allowing ourselves to be dug out by life itself.”

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Small Group Discussion Guide

Theme for Discussion: Faith

Preparation: (Read *Touchstones* and the questions.)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: “The caterpillar, / interesting but not exactly lovely, / humped along among the parsley leaves / eating, always eating. Then / one night it was gone and in its place / a small green confinement hung by two silk threads / on a parsley stem. I think it took nothing with it / except faith, and patience. And then one morning / it expressed itself into the most beautiful being.” *Mary Oliver*

Chalice Lighting (James Vila Blake)
(In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page 1.

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group Members read selections from Readings from the Common Bowl (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

Reading: “Faith is not about choosing something to believe in and then hanging on for dear life. Faith lets go. Faith is trusting in the creative process of life. It is moment by moment, unpredictable, creative, open ended, spontaneous, responsive and responsible, yet always directed toward more joy, more beauty, more love, more compassion, more justice. It doesn't need to be written down, and its secret cannot be memorized and recited on demand. The truth is not in

the words, not in any formula, but in the experience, in the heart, in the moment-by-moment response to being alive.”

Rev. Michael Brown

Living the Questions

Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving to the next.

1. In whom or what do you have faith (e.g., other people, the triumph of justice in the world, our capacity to love, etc.)? How does your faith influence how you live?
2. How would your life change if you did not have faith (i.e., a sense of confidence in yourself and others, the ability to trust, etc.)?
3. What does it mean to be faithful to yourself or to others? What, if anything, does your faith demand of you?
4. Have you ever made a leap of faith by risking trust in something or someone? How did it turn out? What lessons did you take from the experience?
5. Is faith blind, or is it an uncommon vision that is able to see with the heart what is hidden to the eye?
6. The theologian Paul Tillich said that, “Faith is the most centered act of the human mind.” Do you agree? Why?
7. What would you need to do for your life to be more faith-full?

The facilitator or group members are invited to propose additional questions that they would like to explore.

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person for the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice (Elizabeth Selle Jones)
We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Closing Words

Rev. Philip R. Giles
(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*

Giving Faith Life

Faithless Works

Rev. Dr. Jonipher Kūpono Kwong

They say faith without works is dead

So I worked for equality

Next to my queer friends who wanted to get married

And I worked for religious freedom

Next to my Muslim friends who were accused of being terrorists

And I worked for racial justice

Next to my Black friends whose lives were affected by police brutality

Yet I didn't feel fully alive even after working myself to death

Until I let my work become a spiritual practice

Until I let go of my attachment to the outcome

Until I stopped chasing after political issues, one after another

I still believe faith without works is dead

But works without faith is just as lifeless

Source: Sinkford, William, editor. *To Wake, To Rise*. Boston: Skinner House Books. 2017.



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The irony is that the dramatic decline in religious affiliation in America is accompanying an increasing crisis of faith. Not faith in the sense of belief in this or that, but a decline of faith in institutions, the Other as defined by other tribes, and even in members of our own tribe. Addressing this crisis is imperative.

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland