

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 handles; 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 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 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.