

## **Each Day in Faith**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 6, 2022**

The darkness of night scares me, it always has. Surrounded by the unknown, not sure of what may be concealed beyond each bend or what may be tucked behind each suddenly ominous object, the cloak of darkness thrusting me into a vulnerable state. The inability to clearly see the path ahead becomes disorienting and frightening. And yet I remember one dark night where I did not feel fear, but comfort. It was well into a cold winter evening in upstate New York where we were tucked into heavy jackets with a thick layer of snow covering the ground. I found myself navigating between cabins at a retreat center following a route that I could hardly traverse in the light of day. And yet, at this moment, I was not alone. Alongside me was Eric, my then friend, my now husband. An experienced boy scout, Eric reassured me that he had traversed many paths in the dark, that, with his help, I would not get lost, and that I could trust him. Even without a flashlight or a lantern, his presence became a light that gently guided me through the unknown and, together, we made our way to the cabin, safe and with a newfound companionship.

Human rights activist Ella Baker spoke the words, "Give people light, and they will find a way." To me, this speaks to the heart of faith and spirituality. Faith, to me, is hope. Is strength. Is companionship with the sacred and the confidence in life's inherent goodness and beauty. With these held in one's heart, any path can be illuminated. While my husband is not my sacred, his guidance, reassurance, and request for trust gave me what I needed to make my way from cabin to cabin when, on my own, I could have quickly succumbed to overwhelm and panic.

What is faith? Poets and clergy and artists and any curious individual with a journal or an artbook have delved into answers to this elusive question. One anonymous author summed their idea of faith into one simple metaphor of the qualms of a songbird: "A bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking, because her trust is not in the branch but in her own

wings.” A branch is stable and we feel safe and for whatever reason it breaks and we plummet. With faith as our wings, no matter what falls out from beneath us, we have the capability to fly – we have a source of survival. Our God – our holy – our sacred – whatever that may be – this thing that is greater than ourselves is our wings. And those practices we hold dear – a connection to the sacred through prayer or meditation; a relationship with core, your soul, through art, music, or hiking – this keeps our wings beating. Similarly, in the poem Ostara read earlier, faith is the air that a hawk in flight rests upon, faith is the water below a swimmer<sup>1</sup> – faith is holding us up, keeping us from falling or drowning even if we cannot see it, feel it, or understand it. Faith keeps us afloat. Or the Jewish prayer. Faith as the belief that the sun is there, even when hidden behind thick clouds amidst a rainfall, or the belief in love when immersed in hate, or the belief in the sacred even when we feel abandoned.<sup>2</sup> What is hidden behind each tragic death? Behind each argument? Behind each plummet into doubt? With faith, beyond each of these quandaries there are eternal memories, reconciliation, and a reminder of self-worth.

What about faith in the Unitarian Universalist tradition? Two of our Principles encourage us on this journey of discovering exactly what it is that gives us wings; precisely what we are floating on when our bodies lay flat on a pool of water. We covenant to accept one another and encourage each other’s spiritual growth. We covenant to explore our own search for truth and meaning. This is a sacred imperative to find what gives our own lives meaning; what answers our big life questions: What is the sacred? Why are we here? What happens when we die?

To me, an important part of any faith exploration is trusting that there is something much greater than our individual selves and journeying to discover just what that bigger thing is. For me, I have come to find solace and strength in two different greater beings: God, and nature. There are many different names for the holy – whether spirit of love and life, Goddess, God, Allah, higher power – to me, I use the word God. To me, this God is a loving, caring presence,

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<sup>1</sup> “The Avowal” by Denise Levertov

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous

not omnipotent, but with the ability to try to persuade each person toward choosing goodness; a being that suffers when we suffer and delights when we delight. And nature – reminding me of the inevitable cycles of life, the inherent beauty on this planet we all call home, and a reminder that – through storm or through sunshine – something good and pure will always persist. God, nature – two powers beyond me that serve to guide me from cabin to cabin when immersed in cold, snowy darkness.

My understanding of God and of nature is unique to me – each person has something unique to them that can serve to spark the belief in the good no matter what our current predicament may be. My idea of God stems from the familiar Jewish and Christian understandings of the sacred prevalent in our society. Perhaps yours as well? Is the sacred all powerful? All knowing? Persuasive? Detached? Loving? Perhaps what is greater than you is another deity, another sacred, a source from another world religion. Perhaps it is not a deity at all – but other forms of the sacred. The inherent goodness of humanity, the power of nature, a call to justice, or the presence and wisdom of the ancestors. What matters is not what the sacred is or what we call it, but that we have something – whatever that something may be.

Why are we here? To many, we are here purely by chance. By the profound miracle of physics. To others, we were intentionally placed here by a deity, some higher source of good and meaning in the Universe. To many, our beliefs are somewhere in between. Any belief can be good and true if it gives us the strength to persevere and be a source of good in the world. Are we here due to the physics that dictate the universe? This makes the probability of us even being alive so small and minute and precious that we would be fools to waste it. Are we here by design? This faith can give our lives inherent meaning and purpose.

What happens when we die? Again – a big question that gets us through one of life's inevitabilities. We will each face grief as we lose another, and we each must grapple with our own ultimate death. To some, with death, we are simply gone, bodies disintegrating in the earth. This makes our life right now so precious – these few years or decades are all we have.

To others, there is eternal life with the sacred – we never have to say goodbye to all that gives our life meaning; what is good will always exist. For many, again, we are somewhere in between. All around me I feel the presence of my stepfather, my aunt, my grandparents – they are with me. To me, there is another realm, although where I am on my own faith journey thus far offers me no further explanation as to what this is.

Our understanding of what is greater than ourselves, our answers to how we got here or what happens when we die, these beliefs and understandings change – they changed for me as I traversed the path between atheism and theism. Each thing we experience – small or great – affects how we live in this world and how we understand ourselves and all that surrounds us. For me, the change was facing untimely death. And yet this fact that beliefs change does not make our convictions any less true. Whatever makes sense and offers meaning and sustenance to each of us at each moment in our lives – that is truth. What matters is what gives us the ability to live in this world with meaningful, fulfilling, faith filled lives not succumbing to that overwhelm and panic I would have inevitably felt if stranded at the retreat center on my own.

Our faith calls us to explore what is most important to each of us – to prioritize that which gives us meaning and fulfills us. To some faith, is a calling to love – to bring love to the world. Others take to the streets as their faith calls them towards justice. Some commit their time to meditation or prayer as their faith calls them to be present with the holy in each moment. Or perhaps we ground ourselves in gratitude, offering regular practices of thanks for all that we have been given throughout our days. We can find that which orients our days through our callings – to be a minister, a teacher, a parent – our faith guiding us towards our best possible way to give back to this precious world. We can follow our souls towards creating beauty in this world – whether through art or planting a garden or raising a voice in song. Others who have endured great hardship are called to use their experiences to create good in this world. Faith makes us more than simply a compilation of cells because it gives us meaning and purpose.

We need faith when we are plummeting. And we need faith each day of our lives. Faith answers those big questions, and faith offers us that simple yet profound support we need each day of our lives. Those things we face – arguments, doubt, loneliness, anxiety – we need faith. When that branch snaps because a partner storms out of the house in anger, when our path is darkened because of overwhelm at work, when self-doubt strips the air from under our wings, or when anxiety holds us in its clutches, we need to trust that things will be ok – and in our core we know that is true because of our faith. We need to know that if we let go, our sacred will catch us.

Our theme for this month is Renewing Faith. For, ultimately, we will lose faith from time to time. But before we renew our faith, we must be confident in what our faith is. Divorce, addiction, death, injury, illness – for myriad reasons we lose faith, and yet it is times like this when we need our faith more acutely than ever. When we take that daring look into our future and we are afraid things simply will not work out, or when it feels our lives do not and will not have meaning, when our hardships have no end in sight, when all we perceive is ugliness and earth's beauty is nowhere in sight, our faith can silently slip away, or leave us kicking and screaming. This is when our faith needs renewal. Sometimes renewal is finding a new faith all together, and sometimes renewal is a fresh covenant between ourselves and all we hold sacred. After a tragic death, when my faith needed renewal, I traversed the path from atheism to agnosticism to Unitarian Universalism, and ultimately all that gave me pain led me to a new faith – a faith I still explore every day – a faith that saved me then and saves me each day when I stumble or slip into those mundane yet ugly hardships.

Renewing faith means countering despair with hope; having hope for our own lives and those we love and those we will never meet. When we restore our faith, we restore our trust with our sacred, and know in our hearts that we are being held. Sometimes we are called to keep going forward – to keep doing that next best thing – even when we do not quite know where we are headed. When things are hard our faith reminds us that there are cycles in life and that our hardships will end as new beauties begin to poke through the cracks. When we return to

our core and engage with what is bigger than ourselves, we see the beauty neatly tucked away behind all that seems so ugly. We are surrounded by beauty each and every day – we need to simply notice. The beauty of nature, or that perfectly imperfect art or music we create ourselves. Perhaps the greatest leap of faith is daring to love, even though we know love will always end in loss.

So let your faith shine. Bring your beauty to the world. If your faith calls you to love, go out into the world and love fiercely. If your faith is a call to gratitude, give thanks every day. If your faith dictates that you are a force for good in the world, take your next step towards justice. For we are each a part of something much greater. We have been given our lights. We can find our way.

May it be so, and Amen.