

Questioning Faith

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 27, 2022

An untimely death can strip one of certainty as a rug pulled swiftly from below one's feet, leaving one to tumble into a cavern of doubt. Loss, trauma, guilt – these hardships can serve to question one's faith, those convictions held true until hardship descends upon us, and our truth no longer makes sense. Death, for me, shaped my faith as I questioned all of that which had sustained me through my early teenage years. My aunt's suicide led me on a quest for meaning. While atheism had served to answer fundamental life questions, new questions arose: "How can something so bad happen to someone so good?" "What comes next?" "Will I ever see her again?" These questions led me towards a belief in universal salvation and ultimately a belief in a God who is not all powerful, but who loves. Through this questioning, my faith became stronger than it had ever been, and new meaning began to take shape. My new truths served to sustain me in future crises as well. When my stepfather died, I was present not only in grief but also in beauty – that precious moment I was there for when he slipped from one realm to the next. My knowledge that he was safe and loved made my final words to him not "goodbye," but "until we meet again." I knew he was wherever my aunt was and wherever all of his beloveds were and that he was at peace. My own faith that had changed drastically led me to a deeper understanding of and appreciation for his Eastern Orthodox faith as well, which came to him after decades of questioning. My stepfather, Al, knew that his soul, after death, navigated this place we all call home for forty days before ultimately returning to his body, a body not referred to as "dead" but as having "fallen asleep," before ultimate resurrection. In this sense I knew Al was with me and my mom and his children and all of those he loved for those forty days, and that he was not gone forever, simply until he was resurrected and awoke again. My spiritual and theological questions led to a stronger conviction in my own faith which led to an appreciation for other's truths which led to beauty, even in death.

In Albert Huffstickler's poem Ostara read earlier the poet asks us to pray to be saved from certainty – to trust, instead, doubt. Doubt is where new things come from. Certainty leads to

living life on automatic.¹ Through prayer, the poet suggests a humble request from the holy for us to not fully understand, to shape our beliefs as things change, to reorient ourselves when life throws a curveball, to be open to a change in our convictions. An unchanging faith is comforting, but an unchanging faith does not hold true to who we are and what our holy is in each moment. Doubt allows us to renew our faith, to search and question and connect even more deeply to all we hold sacred.

And yet to some doubt may seem to be the opposite of faith. Important and meaningful questions are posed: “Isn’t faith a deep conviction to truth, and isn’t truth unchanging?” Author Anne Lamott suggests that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.² In this vein, I pose a different question: “How can we have certainty in something as unknowable as faith, as elusive as the sacred?” Certainty in the presence of something so mysterious, to me, offers the trap of living a shallow life, not engaging with all the beautiful and terrible unknowns we are surrounded by – all those questions that lead to a deeper connection with the divine. Author Sharon Salzberg poses a different contrast – that the “the opposite of faith is not doubt, but despair.”³ What is despair but the firmly held belief in the certainty that the future is forever shadowed in pain, that goodness has slipped away from all life, that there is nothing left to question? What is faith but the uncertainty of the future, an acknowledgment of some sort of inherent goodness in the universe, and an endless sense of curiosity?

Hardship does not need to end in despair. In the darkness of that turmoil, under the thick veil of those challenges that may seem insurmountable, activist Valarie Kaur asks us to reconsider what darkness we are encased in. Are we trapped in a tomb, expecting no future, anticipating no light, seeing only a tragic end, or are we in the womb?⁴ Are we in that shadowed place that leads not tragically to more hardship, but to a time of incubation that leads to new strength,

¹ “The Edge of Doubt” by Albert Huffstickler

² *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* by Anne Lamott

³ Sharon Salzberg quoted in Soul Matters March 2022 Worship Research Packet

⁴ “A Sikh Prayer for American on November 9th, 2016” by Valerie Kaur

new courage, new wisdom, new compassion? Are we in the tomb of despair, or the womb of life, crafted and shaped and molded by our never faulting yet consistently changing faith?

Faith doesn't mean everything will be ok, that in every life goodness will prevail and we end our time in this realm in a state of serenity. Questioning faith, while powerful and necessary, is not always to promise a brighter future. Sometimes, changing the trajectory of our lives is within our grasp, as we work to prevent deaths of despair – using faith to counter addiction or suicide. Sometimes, however, our own tragic death is beyond our control, as we are witnessing in the news each day. But faith allows us to persevere until the very end.

Faith keeps us going even if we do not know where we are headed. To me, when I questioned faith, I found sacred companionship. In my questioning I found the knowledge that I am loved and never alone. In our Story for All Ages, love, in my interpretation, is faith. Even when a wise old woman's apartment and belongings were burning to the ground, she pointed an innocent child's gaze to the sky and those burning stars, noticing and sharing the beauty, which she called love, which I call faith, that was present regardless of the sorrow she felt around her.⁵ Sharon Salzberg, an author who suffered from a very difficult childhood of parental abandonment and death, interpreted faith as courage. She writes of faith as the courage of taking that next move forward even if we have no idea where we are headed. To Salzberg, faith is connecting to our deepest strengths – being defined by our strengths and not by those difficulties we experience.⁶ I have developed my own theology of overcoming through questioning my faith and surviving my own hardships. My strength comes from those things we do survive. My strength and faith and my commitment to love comes from trying to find some way to make the world a little bit better in response all the hardship I have experienced, so that those hardship and deaths not to have been in vain. My strength comes from doubt.

⁵ Love by Matt de la Peña

⁶ Sharon Salzberg from "The Meaning of Faith" (conversation on *On Being* with Krista Tippett, April 11, 2003)

Author and priest John O'Donohue writes a poem that traverses a tale of grief. From that new strangeness to a heavy heart to guilt to a loss of self to sorrow to acceptance. The end of the poem brought tears to my eyes:

And, when the work of grief is done,
The wound of loss will heal
And you will have learned
To wean your eyes
From that gap in the air
And be able to enter the hearth
In your soul where your loved one
Has awaited your return
All the time.⁷

Our ancestors are awaiting within us; those beloveds who have departed from this realm remain inside of us. Our faith, all we hold true, is within us. What we were searching for in the beyond has been found within. Returning to our soul, to me, is renewing faith – what has been awaiting our return all the time. Hardships such as grief take us away from ourselves and our core and who we are and what we believe in and throw us into a sea of despair, with is not faith, or, perhaps, a pool of doubt, which is faith. Do we wallow in despair, or do we ask those questions that return us to our soul, with a deeper faith than ever before? I wonder – when we return to our core – what else is there awaiting us for us to tend to, to remember and embrace? What new understanding of faith and strengthened connection to our sacred can we find? Hardships may feel so insurmountable that a response of a deeper faith feels hopeless and contradictory. And yet, again, it is this faith that keeps us from slipping into a sorrowful life of chronic despair. It is times like this when we strip ourselves of the superficial, dig deep within, and really search for those most important things. What is our faith?

⁷ “Trusting Grief” by John O'Donohue

I feel an exploration of faith and hardship and doubt would be incomplete without examining some of the deepest hardships felt by those in our interdependent web. Viktor Frankl, author, psychiatrist, and Holocaust survivor writes extensively about living through and overcoming the hardships of genocide through a deep sense of meaning. In my own interpretation of his work, I can draw parallels between meaning and faith. Both meaning and faith connect us to something greater than ourselves. Both arise from deep questions of who we are and who we want to be. Both provide us with purpose and orient us in each of our days. Both arise from and are most powerful when they have been arrived at through sincere doubt and questioning. Frankl writes, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* that two people may go through the same terrible ordeal and yet have two drastically different outcomes, "any [human] can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of [them] - mentally and spiritually."⁸ This gives us the autonomy, freedom, and strength to persevere when we could easily be thrown into the depths of despair. Grounded in faith – in meaning – it is up to us. Several pages later, Frankl follows up with a similar and powerful conviction: "The prisoner who had lost faith in the future – [their] future – was doomed."⁹ Even in the midst of genocide the suffering are called to have faith in the future – faith that there will be some goodness, some worthiness, some meaning awaiting them – some "future goal" that renews "inner strength."¹⁰ Frankl posits that every single human life – each one – has meaning, and that finding this meaning allows us to survive.¹¹ He writes that any person who has found their "why" for existence can "bear nearly any 'how.'"¹² Purpose, faith, meaning – these things allow us to survive the unthinkable. When doubting, when questioning "why are we here?" When questioning this "why" even when facing the worst of adversity – renewing faith; finding meaning – this gives us that insurmountable strength need to navigate nearly each and every hardship.

⁸ *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl pg. 66

⁹ *Ibid*, 74

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 76

¹¹ *Ibid*, 83

¹² *Ibid*, 80

I draw a connection between faith and some sort of inherent goodness kept alive within and between us. I think of the goodness of the earth – those delicate flowers emerging through hard, crusty earth each and every spring. The goodness that somewhere, someone is in love, that someone is overcoming adversity, that someone persevering, that some child is laughing. Faith becomes this knowledge of inherent goodness, even if not each life or even each hardship will end in serenity, peace, or joy – it means we have something to believe in. Somewhere there is goodness. And, somewhere, there is love. Love and faith intersect in their persistence. In our *Story for All Ages*, we heard the sentiment, “Love, too, is the smell of crashing waves, and a train whistling blindly in the distance, and each night the sky above your trailer turns the color of love.”¹³ We will never be without waves. In our lifetimes, we will not be without trains. We will not be without the sky above us. With the death of my aunt and my stepfather, love did not end, it is held forever in my soul. And we will doubt faith and we will doubt love and through these questions our convictions will arise ever stronger. In our “why?” we find a “how.” In our soul is awaiting all that we have lost – it is within us – always within us – if only we look. So doubt. Question. Lose faith for a day or a week or a month. When you find it again – and you will – purpose and meaning will hold even more true. Peña writes to his young audience, “And in time you learn to recognize a love overlooked. A love that wakes at dawn and rides to work on the bus. A slice of burned toast that tastes like love.”¹⁴ I say, in time, we will recognize a faith overlooked. A faith whose goodness rests in emerging daffodils; in laughter. A faith found when we notice all we hold within. A faith that allows us to decide what will become of us. A faith that keeps us persevering against all odds. Let us know this. Let us seek this. Let us be held always by that sacred beauty of doubt.

May it be so, and Amen.

¹³ *Love* by Matt de la Peña

¹⁴ *ibid*