

A Faith of Seekers

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 18, 2022

Perhaps your faith is felt most keenly when immersed in nature, noises of chirping birds filling your ears, sight overwhelmed with greens, purples, and oranges alike, body filled with the scent of pollinating flowers. Or perhaps it is when you are with your ancestors, connecting through prayer or artifacts or pictures interlaced with story to those who have come before and have since left this realm. Faith may be felt in prayer with the divine, or in the calling of the quarters. And this is one of the beauties of Unitarian Universalism— what matters is not how we experience faith, but that we experience faith. So, what, exactly, is faith? It is in part, in my understanding, the belief in something greater than ourselves. To the monotheist, this may be a deity. To the atheist, this may be the ultimate goodness of humanity. To the pagan it may be the goddess and to others perhaps the grandeur of nature. However we connect with that which is greater, we are called to come to some conclusion that allows us to engage with meaning-making, craft purpose, and act with love. Faith offers hope when we feel that all is lost - giving us something good to believe in. Faith offers strength through our doubts and questions. And thus, we craft a faith where we belong – where our lives are enriched and blessed with meaning and our questions are – at least temporarily – answered. Comfort, inspiration, guidance, hope, love – the gifts of faith.

As Unitarian Universalists it is not common belief that holds us together in faith but the way we covenant to engage with the world around us – by recognizing the web of life and committing to spreading love and care for all creatures on the planet. We are called to observe and acknowledge and honor that inherent goodness each human was born with. That is our faith. We are bonded by covenant – held firm in our Seven Principles. Our faith does not provide answers; our faith does not claim truth of any sort. Our faith is doubt. Our faith is questions. Our faith is a lifelong journey towards shaping and molding our understanding of the ultimate and is reflected in our actions and words each day. As a people of this faith, we

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are practitioners of questions and hope and love and interconnectedness. If we claim to espouse any truth, it is the presence of love.

My own journey through faith has been filled with questions that led to meaning that led to further questions and this cycle will continue to repeat for perpetuity. Initially I simply followed the faith of my mother and held close to atheism. For me, this was not a healthy atheism arrived at through theological questioning but a source of unhealthy judgment towards theists. And so I wandered, lacking a true source of meaning making, not intimately connected to hope and love. And I experienced death, and death shook my world. And I experienced hopelessness, and hopelessness led to questioning. I experienced prayer, and prayer led me to my divine. I ultimately found and created a life of theistic faith and love. And I still question – each and every day. And my faith is shaped and molded – every day. Why do bad things happen to good people? How can I find meaning in life? How can I connect with what I hold sacred?

Our faith is filled with people who are often termed “come-inners,” not raised in Unitarian Universalism but drawn to our faith after leaving another. I was a “come-inner,” leaving a life without faith and entering the doors of this covenantal community. Many who find meaning in this faith have been wounded by another and are looking for a source of healing; they are looking for a faith that will accept them as they are, whatever their sacred may be, whatever their transgressions, whatever their experiences and whatever gives them meaning. People are aching for this. And in many ways this is beautiful as our faith founded upon questioning, love, and forgiveness can provide meaning to lost and wandering souls. And there are pitfalls for us to be aware of. Are we focusing more on comparing our wounds, or on healing them? Are we too focused on finding a least common denominator between all of those in our midst, or are we creating a sustaining faith that moves beyond the wounds into a space of healing? Are we shaping our unique Unitarian Universalist faith, sustaining one another on our forward-looking spiritual journeys? May we not simply focus on the theological things we can all agree upon and instead encourage love and growth and a bouquet of theological understandings and meaning

making. May we heal our wounds so that we may shed what we are not and instead become who we are. May those wounded by a patriarchal God find the Goddess. May those hurt by purity culture find balance and freedom.

This leads me to reflect upon negative and positive theologies. Negative theologies are defined by beliefs we do not have, while positive theologies are defined beliefs we do have. Sometimes we as a faith can get caught up in the trap of defining ourselves by what we do not believe in. We can do this as individuals, and we can do this as a collective. It is safe to say that, as a faith, we do not believe in a damning God – that is what Universalism means. I think it's safe to make other assumptions as well – we are not hierarchical, we do not espouse a patriarchal understanding of the sacred, we do not demand common beliefs. But what, then, do we believe? Not what-are-we-not, but what-are-we? We are a community of seekers. We are a people guided by love. We are those who care about all in the web of life. We are questioners. We are curious. We are committed to justice. What is our faith? It is our Seven Principles that we covenant to live by.

We see this negative theology on an individual level, too. I think of my own theology. My sacred is not all powerful, not all knowing, not indifferent to the world nor unable to suffer. But what is my sacred? The easy answer is love. But what does love mean to me? To me, love means the immortal interacting with the minds of the mortal. It means the divine cares for every feeling of sorrow or fear or suffering that we may experience. It means the sacred urges us to do good. God is love because love is the ultimate, and perhaps the one truth of the world is that love will prevail – even if not every life is good, and even when people do evils to one another – there is still laughter and compassion and care and meaning. While not everyone understands love the way I do, love is still a tenet of our faith. I am reminded of a quote by Unitarian Universalist scholar and author Rebecca Ann Parker: “Even when our hearts are broken by our own failure or the failure of others cutting into our lives, even when we have

done all we can and life is still broken, there is a Universal Love that has never broken faith with us and never will”¹

This is the faith we belong to – this faith of questions and covenant and love. What does it mean to belong to faith? In this sense, it means we find a faith that offers us meaning and support that we can adhere to with confidence, security, and love. We need to lean into a faith that heals, to relearn that which may have caused harm, and to challenge ourselves to question and find a source of hope. And within this faith there are layers of ideas we may feel we belong to, as we respond to the fundamental questions held inside of us. For example, what does it mean to belong to the divine?

Before we can answer that question, we must grapple with another fundamental question: What is the divine? I think of the common metaphor of faith as mountain – that we are each finding different paths up the same mountain of one ultimate truth. But I counter this. Perhaps all Christians are on the same mountain, or all Buddhists or all Muslims. But are different faiths looking for the same ultimate truth, or looking for different truths and thus ascending different mountains all together? How can the mountain of a Christian God be the same mountain as the Tao in Taoism? And I think this is a unique and special gift of our faith – that we can each be on our own mountain, encouraging each other as we find our theological footing and make our way to the top. So, belonging to our sacred? To me, that means our ultimate belief gives us meaning, purpose, understanding and guidance. And we each find this in our own way.

Classical monotheism offers an understanding of God that has ultimately hurt many – a patriarchal, all-knowing, all-powerful, damning, judgmental being. Piece by piece many seekers have picked this apart, finding, instead, a sacred that is life-giving and life-affirming, whether this sacred be a deity, multiple deities, a mountain, or the ancestors. Seekers work to heal wounds and find a divine they can belong to – one that offers meaning and purpose.

¹ *Singing the Living Tradition*

As Unitarian Universalists, we belong to questioning. Our understandings of faith and the sacred are intimately interwoven with our life experiences – and we experience life each day. What made sense to us yesterday may soon be called into question. After a birth or a death, after any joy or any sorrow, after a particularly painful argument or a declaration of love, our heart and spirit have been molded and shaped and formed and reformed, and these changes can alter our understanding of faith. In Unitarian Universalism, there is no one, ultimate truth. Instead, there is an acknowledgement and even a celebration that, in faith, truth can never exist, for faith and the divine are fundamentally unknowable mysteries. Instead, there are different understandings that offer meaning for each individual each day, guiding every decision and healing wounds, derived from each person’s unique life experiences. I want to tie this together with another key element of our faith: doubt. Doubt in our holy, our doubt in the world, doubt in love or in each other. Doubt inspires questions and questions inspire growth.

What about belonging to prayer? I see the act of prayer as our own unique way of connecting with our sacred. In shaping an understanding of Unitarian Universalist prayer, I pull from rabbi and Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel. Heschel writes, “Prayer invites God to be present in our spirits and in our lives. Prayer cannot bring water to parched land, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city, but prayer can water an arid soil, mend a broken heart, rebuild a weakened will.”² I invite us to use any understanding of the sacred in place of the term “God.” In our faith, prayer may be directed towards a deity or deities, to the ancestors or to the expanse of a forest. Prayer does not lead to miracles of the physical world but to miracles of the spirit – healing and consoling us. Prayer connects us to those who have left this realm, to the sacred, to our own body and soul, a source of healing and strength and connection and love and sacred commitment. Prayer is holy, and prayer is unique to each person – a series of requests to the spirit of love and life, or several minutes in solitude with the ocean, simply experiencing the waves crashing and receding, or a connection to the ancestors and the sacred

² *Singing the Living Tradition*

during an act of witchcraft and magic. Sometimes I simply light a candle and tell my departed beloveds “I miss you. I love you” – this, to me, is a prayer.

What does it mean to belong to the interdependent web of life? Each thing we do ripples out to affect those around us – our good actions spreading to those we will never meet, our actions of jealousy or rage likewise affecting strangers. Let us be spreaders of goodness, faith, and love. And this web means we covenant to care for and respect all life on this planet – doing what we can to help heal the world we are destroying.

What does it mean to belong to the work of justice? It means we covenant to care for the least of these in our midst, doing what we can so that each person in this web can live a life of meaning and purpose, beyond simple survival. It is imperative that we aid others in healing their wounds and the harms inflicted by systemic injustice. Our faith calls us to this work, each in our own way.

Throughout reflecting on this topic, I reminisced about my own relationship to faith throughout my life. My faith has given me great meaning, which was missing while I remained an unquestioning, non-seeking atheist. My life shifted from one of theological judgment to one of radical welcome. Instead of being guided by fear or guided by anxieties, I now orient my life around love. I went from no sacred to a connection with many things greater than myself that I hold holy – nature, divine love, the ancestors. I connect with these things in intimate ways, and they offer purpose and solace. I have learned to see inherent goodness in each person I encounter, and covenant to care for and honor our web of life. A life of faith-led seeking transformed a rather shallow, painful life into one of purpose, strength, love, and meaning. And I still question every day and will for perpetuity. For this is what grounds us. This is what sustains us. This is what we need for purpose and spiritual growth. This day, and every day.

May it be so, and Amen.

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