

A HOLY RHYTHM
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Redwood City
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I've been wondering about faith a lot these days. In my close circle of friends and family, there has been so much illness and death this past year, tectonic plates moving and shifting the landscape of my world. I realize that I am not in control. Have you ever had times like this?

Eve's song during our service today has been a sort of text for me. I've found the words to the chorus running through my mind as I brush my teeth, as I walk my dog.

Just let it go, take it on faith.

This is not an easy message for Unitarian Universalists. We are activists, doers, problem-solvers. We are capable, bright, determined, working hard for peace, justice, equality, health care reform, standing on the side of love. How can we "*just let it go*" when we want to turn the world around?

And "*take it on faith*"?

What is our faith?

Many who find a home in our churches have fled from the wounding faiths of their childhood.

For some, even the word "faith" is loaded with baggage. It conjures up bad associations.

Unitarian Universalist history is full of heretics, and these days our reputation is that we are skeptics who don't really believe in anything. True, we have no dogma, no party line, no explicit creed.

But we do share a common faith.

Our chosen faith is rooted in our principles, in our open minds, in our attitude and actions in this life, not focused on the afterlife. We affirm the worth and dignity of each human being. We respect each one's search for truth and meaning. We value the authority of reason and conscience and democratic process.

UU theologian James Luther Adams asserted that, “an unexamined faith is not worth having.” I agree.

We have an examined faith in the transformative power of love and community.

In the famous words of the 16th century Unitarian preacher, Francis David, we know that “we need not think alike to love alike.”

As UUs, we can choose to have an examined faith in both science and religion, medicine and prayer, mysticism and reason...

As UUs, our spiritual practices can include Sunday worship, meditation, ritual, dreamwork, drumming, chanting...

In our pews, we sit shoulder to shoulder - Buddhist, humanist, Christian, pagan, atheist, Jewish, agnostic, Sufi - rainbow communities committed to supporting one another in our seeking.

In this heady brew of possibilities, in these challenging times, a question I would like to explore with you this morning is what role does doubt play in faith?

One of the best books I’ve read on faith is by Sharon Salzberg, an American Buddhist teacher. The book is called *Faith – Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*.

In language familiar and accessible to Unitarian Universalists, she describes faith as a journey, rather than a destination.

At the beginning of our journey, we may find what she calls “bright faith,” like falling in love. Although bright faith has some of the same dangers as blind faith, this kind of faith can inspire us to surrender our cynicism and apathy. It has tremendous energy that can propel us forward into the unknown in pursuit of a dream.

In my own faith journey, I found bright faith in the natural beauty of Yosemite National Park, where I lived for five years in my 20’s. Getting lost in the roar of Yosemite Falls in the springtime, watching the moonrise over Mono Lake, walking through a quiet redwood forest, falling asleep to the sound of the Tuolumne River – I experienced these sacred moments as grace, like music playing all around me.

My favorite peak in Yosemite Valley has always been Half Dome, and every day I lived there I marveled in awe and wonder at its beauty. Its quiet ancient strength grounded me. I have strength like a mountain. For almost forty years, Half Dome has been a tangible image of my faith.

I remember one time some out-of-state friends visited me in Yosemite and I wanted to show them Half Dome. But that day a big storm was coming into the valley and all the peaks were hidden behind a wall of black clouds. I took my friends out into a meadow and held up a postcard. Pointing toward the clouds, I tried to show them what was just on the other side.

For me, Half Dome has served as a symbol of constancy and strength. In the flux of constant change - the sun rising and setting, the moon waxing and waning, snow falling and melting, wildflowers blooming and fading – I have had faith, that even when clouds and mist hide its face, even when I move away and live in a city, Half Dome remains, solid and steady. I have seen it. I remember. I have faith in a mountain.

I found another source of bright faith in 1991 when I discovered Unitarian Universalism, the “love that will not let me go” that has called me into ministry.

I imagine that all of you have fallen in love with a bright faith at some point in your life. I hope that you have.

But just as falling in love with a person transforms over time into something less bright, becoming darker and deeper, the next stage in my faith journey, and perhaps of yours, is one that Sharon Salzberg calls “verifying faith.”

Faith grows only “as we try teachings out by putting them into practice to see if they really make a difference in our own lives.”

She writes that “to develop a verified faith we need to open to the messiness, the discordance, the ambivalence, and above all, the vital life-force of questioning.”

In other words, we need to be open to doubt.

In my faith journey, following my call to ministry has moved me out of my comfort zone and away from the privilege I so often have taken for granted. As I put my teachings about compassion and interconnection, about anti-racism and countering oppression into practice, I find myself wrestling with difficult questions:

How do I live in accord with the beauty of a sunrise in the mountains when I am in the Tenderloin of San Francisco on a street retreat with the Faithful Fools Street Ministry?

Can I still hear the music playing all around me when I am a chaplain at Highland Hospital and I hear a mother wailing with grief at the loss of her son who was shot in the streets of Oakland?

What does my faith in the strength of Half Dome have to do with the execution at San Quentin that took place during my internship at the San Francisco church, and the lines of homeless people I saw waiting in the rain for a hot meal and a mat on the floor to sleep on?

In asking these questions, and living into the answers, I have faced the challenge of putting my faith into action.

One of the things that helps is to shift how I see the world. I find that I am losing my faith in concrete objects - even objects as vast and solid as a mountain – and finding a more nimble, mature faith in how inextricably and intimately we are connected.

I want to see the world through what theologian Howard Thurman calls “quiet eyes.” The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn calls it seeing deeply, like a poet. He writes:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper.

Without a cloud there will be no water; without water, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, you cannot make paper.

So the cloud is in here. The existence of this page is dependent upon the existence of a cloud.

Paper and cloud are so close.

I realize that my “verifiable faith” is in the other half of Half Dome, the invisible half that we can only see when we look deeply.

Look deeply at the cascading waterfalls and rivers,

Look deeply at the crushed granite,
Look at the wildflowers – the mimulus, the grass of Parnassus,
Imagine lilies, lupine, gentian, paintbrush,
Wildflowers budding, blossoming, dying...

All are dependent on the mountain,
part of the ever-changing interdependent web.
As I reflect on my own faith journey, fraught with questions and doubt,
I think of a story I heard recently from Andy Karlsen, a young
ministerial colleague.

Biosphere II was an experiment in self-contained living, a multi-million
dollar compound of domes in the Arizona desert that was intended to
house a community for two years, cut off from the outside world
except for communication. No outside food, no outside air.
The planners of the Biosphere planted orchards inside the domes, so
that there would be fruit for the people inside to eat.
What they found is that the fruit would grow to a certain size on the
tree branches, and then it would just fall off.
Eventually they realized that in the real world outside the domes,
every breath of wind - from a gentle breeze to a powerful gust -
shakes the tree's branches and fruit.
And every movement creates hundreds and thousands of tiny,
microscopic breaks in the wood. When the tree heals these breaks,
bit by bit, the wood becomes stronger, so as the fruit gets bigger, the
branch is able to bear its weight.
Without the wind, without the brokenness and healing, the sheltered
wood never became strong enough to hold the fruit.

It is the wind and brokenness that give trees the strength to bear fruit.
It is our doubt and questioning that gives us the strength to have faith.
Genuine faith is dependent on doubt.
Like the paper and the cloud, faith and doubt are so close.
The true threat to faith is not doubt, but despair.
It can cause us to lose our faith in everything.
Despair may come on gradually, an accumulation of small
disappointments and disillusionments, or it may be sudden – a death
or a stroke or a diagnosis - that causes the bottom to fall out from
under us. Whatever the cause, we may wake up one day to find
ourselves feeling helpless, hopeless, all alone.

I think of the words to a hauntingly beautiful song called “The Valley” by Jane Siberry:

*You rise every morning
wondering what in the world will the world bring today-
will it bring you joy or will it take it away?*

In a chapter called “Faith and Fear,” Sharon Salzberg writes about the stroke that her close friend Ram Dass suffered one day in 1997. Before his stroke, Ram Dass had been an eloquent spiritual teacher. After his stroke, he regained some ability to speak, but his speech was halting, only a few words at a time.

One afternoon about a year after his stroke, Sharon and Ram Dass sat together on a porch, listening to the birds, feeling the breeze, grateful to be alive.

Ram Dass mentioned the name of a woman they both knew who also had a stroke. He said that for thirty years she had believed in a God who was beneficent. After she had her stroke, she lost her faith. What inspires me is that Ram Dass did not lose his.

In Sharon’s words:

“He looked right at me, and in his eyes I glimpsed the immensity of what he had seen since the stroke. It was like looking at a whole cosmos – of shock and pain and frustration and shame.

But unlike that woman, whose picture of life excluded suffering, Ram Dass had opened his worldview wide enough to include it. And so he knew that in that cosmos, alongside pain was gratitude, love, care, and learning to receive. The look in his eyes was so intense, I almost fell over.”

May we have the courage, may we have the heart, to bear witness to the immensity in one another’s eyes.

How can we deal with the pain we witness and feel?

Sharon borrows the language of a musicologist when she suggests that we learn to “take apart the chord” of pain.

“Instead of viewing pain as static and fixed, we begin to see its ever-changing elements, its component parts.....

[We see that] physical pain may be composed of burning, throbbing, pressure. Emotional pain such as anger may be made up of fear, hopelessness, frustration....

When we take apart the chord of our pain, even though the experience may remain difficult, the pain becomes an alive system, with movement and variation and flux.

In Sharon’s words, “Just as the world is breathing, the pain is breathing...inhaling and exhaling, and there is space between its arisings.”

For any of you who have given birth, doesn’t this sound like labor pains? In this season of Chanukah, Solstice, Advent - in the spirit of anticipation and longing, let us learn to take apart the chord, to feel the world breathing, opening ourselves to the miracle of new life, to the possibility of hope.

Let us have faith that sometimes when we feel the most hopeless and lost in the labyrinth of our lives, we find that we are closest to the center, closest to giving birth, closest to home.

Remember the wise words of Forrest Church:

“Love what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are.”

In closing, I want to share with you the words to a song by Becky Reardon about what we can do when we feel lost:

*When there is no road, I look for the path
When there’s no path, I look for the footprint
When there’s no track, not one bent blade of grass,
I follow the motion of my breathing*

This is the holy rhythm.
breathing in and breathing out,
embracing faith, embracing doubt.

Let the wind of life and love and loss blow through you,
breaking and healing your heart,
breathe in pain,
breathe out compassion

You do what you can but some things are just out of your hands, so

*Just let it go
take it on faith*