

## **Gratitude, Hope, Love: Reframing Faith, Renewing Faith**

Reflection by Amanda Udis-Kessler, High Plains Church Unitarian Universalist, March 13, 2022

Years ago, I took up the practice of posting a daily gratitude on Facebook. I did this because I had read somewhere that a good way to cultivate gratitude in one's life was to keep a gratitude journal in which one wrote down things for which one was grateful. I loved that idea in the abstract, but I hated journaling and couldn't do it to save my life. Still can't. So, after a few failed journaling attempts, I decided to turn Facebook into my gratitude journal, and with rare exceptions, I have found something for which to be grateful every day of my life since then. It's not always easy, and some days are stretches. Some days are straightforward, and most days fall somewhere in the middle. Worst case, I can always be grateful simply to be alive – and, having survived cancer, I really am grateful just to be here.

A few years ago, a Facebook friend set me an interesting challenge. Gratitudes are all well and good, she said, but I bet you can't find something every day that makes you hopeful about humanity. Like heck I can't, I said, and promptly added a hope for humanity to my daily gratitude. If I'm honest, they are often one and the same thing because I'm lazy. But if you're my Facebook friend, you will eventually run into one or more of my gratitudes and hopes for humanity.

On a day-to-day basis, this Facebook posting is often mundane and I have to admit that I approach it as a bit of a chore, something to check off my list for the day. But I cannot deny that since I began this practice, I have become noticeably more grateful and more hopeful. I'm grateful and hopeful more often than I once was, and my gratitude and hope runs deeper today than it once did. Especially given the state of our society and the world today, that is truly amazing.

I mention this practice because I think it is a helpful, if modest, example of how I build and renew faith on a daily basis. To be very clear: I don't mean faith as the ability to do the impossible, as the Gospel according to Matthew suggests. I don't mean faith as the conviction of things not seen, as the letter to the Hebrews puts it. And I certainly don't mean faith as belief in religious doctrines to which we cannot possibly give our assent. What I do mean, and what I'm inviting you to consider with me today, is faith as gratitude, hope, and love, particularly as we put these into action. I'll take each of these in order, focusing primarily on faith as hope made manifest in our actions. I'll end by saying something about how this approach can help us think about renewing our faith.

First, faith as gratitude. My experience with posting gratitudes on Facebook is that gratitude as a feeling is deeply enhanced by gratitude as an action, or giving thanks. You heard my song "We Give Thanks in Hard Times" a few minutes ago. That song really captures my sense of both how difficult and how crucial it is to practice gratitude even when we are not feeling it because the world is one giant dumpster fire. Which, right now, it genuinely is.

So why give thanks, and what does that have to do with faith? Giving thanks for the good things and people in our lives does not make the hard things or the difficult people any easier, nor does

it magically make them go away, but it changes our relationship to them. If we refuse to look at the bleakness and brokenness, we can't be part of the solution, so ignoring the problems is not an option. But if we fail to notice the beauty and wonder, we are cutting ourselves off from emotional and spiritual nourishment and from joy, and that nourishment and joy helps us face the bad stuff with more resilience. If I can somehow hold the complexity of being joyous and heartbroken at the same time, terrified and grateful at the same time, I will have more energy and creativity to bring to working on the dumpster fire part of things. I'm more likely to donate money to good causes when I'm grateful, more able to listen compassionately to a sad friend when I'm feeling peaceful rather than overwhelmed, more insightful about making sense of the world's challenges when that reservoir of happiness is full.

Giving thanks as an act of faith is not about believing in things unseen, it's about widening our angle to see, or better, to acknowledge, everything that's out there: goodness and evil, generosity and selfishness, love and fear, and then insisting that it is appropriate to give thanks for the goodness even as we work against the evil, to be grateful for the generosity even as we try not to be selfish ourselves, to rejoice in the blessings of love even as we struggle with the temptations of fear. Keeping this complexity before us, refusing to reduce it to simple misery or simple pleasure, is itself an act of faith: faith in human complexity, faith in human capacity, faith that as long as there is both good and evil out there, we can work for good.

My song, "We Give Thanks in Hard Times," specifies that we give thanks for hope, peace, and love, all of which we find in our own actions and in the actions of others. If giving thanks is a form of faith, so too are acting in hope and acting with love. And if I had enough time, I would talk about the profound faith of acting peacefully, but that will need to wait for another day.

Literally half an hour before this service, I stumbled on a wonderful quote by historian Howard Zinn. It seems like a great way to introduce the topic of faith as hope, so I'll share it now. Zinn writes, "To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction."

With Zinn's quote in mind, what does it mean to understand faith as hope? Here, I want to bring in some other voices: a 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian theologian, a present-day Buddhist teacher, and the author of one of the books of the New Testament.

Unitarian theologian and philosopher Henry Nelson Wieman was born in 1884 and died in 1975. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he thought a lot about the meaning of faith in a liberal religious context. Wieman defined religious faith as "the act by which we commit ourselves with the fullness of our being, insofar as we are able, to whatever can transform and save us."

There's a lot to unpack in that definition. First, faith is an act rather than a disposition, a verb rather than a noun. We don't have faith – we do faith. Or maybe we simply "faith." Second, faith

is about commitment, not assent to creeds; indeed, it is the very act of committing ourselves. Third, faith is a deeply substantive commitment, involving the fullness of our being and the complete extent of our ability. Faith, for Wieman, was about courage, love, energy, passion. And finally, this faith has an object: we don't merely go with whatever seems interesting from one moment to the next but rather we fully and utterly commit ourselves to "whatever can transform and save us."

Now, many UUs are uncomfortable with salvation language, and with good reason; like the word "faith," the word "salvation" has taken on all sorts of historic and cultural baggage that we do well to jettison. But the idea of salvation originally comes to us from Jewish understandings of health, healing, and wholeness. I imagine many of us can support the idea of striving to be well and whole. And if being well and whole is important enough to us, we might be willing to attempt to commit ourselves to whatever can save us, meaning, whatever can make us well and whole.

And notice that Wieman does not specify what exactly it is that can transform and save us; he leaves open the possibility that different things might be salvific for different people. For one person, it might be God as that person understands God. For someone else, it might be participation in a broader community. Or it might be nature or music or therapy or social justice work or something else entirely. The point is, if we understand salvation as wellness and wholeness, we might be more disposed to practice faith-ing the Wiemanian way, committing ourselves with all our hearts and all our minds and all our bodies and all our souls to whatever it is that can make us well and whole.

Sharon Salzberg is an American Buddhist teacher and the author of the book *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. Notice right away that Salzberg's book is not titled, *Faith: Believing What Others Tell You Because They Tell You to Believe It*. Nothing like that. The Buddhist traditions invite us to be lamps unto ourselves as all of us must work out our own liberation; these are in fact thought to be the final words of the Buddha. If Salzberg sees faith as a matter of trusting our own deepest experience, what does that mean?

Salzberg understands faith as the willingness to perceive that change is possible, that things could be different. This means that faith, for Salzberg as for Wieman, is a verb grounded in being open to transformation. Faith, says Salzberg, is "the animation of the heart that says 'I choose life.'" In choosing life, we open our hearts in trust to what we do not yet know. Salzberg's definition gives new meaning to the idea of a leap of faith. We may traditionally have thought of that phrase as describing a leap off the cliff of reason into the chasm of assent to untenable creeds, but Salzberg's leap is a leap into a fully-lived life, even and especially when we want so strongly to hold back. The choice to leap into a fully-lived life is a choice of faith; the leap itself is an act of faith.

Finally, since I mentioned some Biblical passages earlier only to reject them, I want to consider a Biblical passage that may actually be of some use to us, as it is very much about acting in hope. The Book of James in the New Testament has a fascinating passage about the relationship between faith and works, or what we might call belief and actions.

James, an early leader of the Jesus movement, was concerned with a problem that UUs find troubling today: that people will simply believe something, or claim that they believe it, and then think they have no responsibility for behaving morally or making the world better. James doesn't reject the importance of faith, or what I'm calling belief, but he thinks faith without works, or belief without actions, is insufficient – a position with which most of us here probably agree. Here's what James has to say about faith and works, with a few language updates. As I read the passage, I invite you to imagine faith not as belief in creeds but as a deep trust in the universe, a relationship with life, a commitment to whatever will make you whole, and a leap into whatever in your life is awaiting you.

“What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a community member is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is incomplete... Show me your faith apart from your works and I by my works will show you my faith.”

*I by my works will show you my faith.* And that's the point, right? Faith as hope comes to life in the actions we take in hope – in faith – that they will make a difference, that what we do matters, that all people deserve to be treated well, that we still have time to save the planet. Pick your favorite article of faith along these lines, and you'll find that it is undergirded by hopefulness.

But we can actually go farther than James did. He claimed that faith without works is incomplete. What if faith and works are not simply incomplete without each other but are actually the same thing? If faith is a verb, a living into commitment, a leap, faith itself is an action. Which means that all the actions we carry out show our faith: they are the public presentations of our commitments, our trust, our leap. Anytime we are afraid and we act with love despite our fear, we have treated faith as a verb. Anytime we are angry and we act with compassion despite our anger, we have built faith, not as one assents to a creed but as one constructs a shelter. Anytime we feel greedy or needy and we give generously despite these feelings, we are faith-ing. Anytime the world is falling apart, such as right now, and we nonetheless find that we cannot keep from singing, that's faith at work as hope – not Pollyannaish optimism but gritty tenacity that keeps us going, keeps us singing, keeps us growing.

What, then, about faith as love? Here, it's worth considering the etymology of the words, “belief” and “creed.” We tend to think of “belief” as meaning “intellectual assent to a creed,” but the word “belief” comes from an Old English term, “be loef,” meaning “to hold dear.” And the Latin term “credo,” from which we get the term “creed,” did not originally mean “I believe in” or “I believe that;” it meant “I give my heart to.” Holding something dear, giving our hearts to it, is not about doctrines. It's about love. It's about commitment and trust. When the progressive Christian Biblical scholar Marcus Borg wrote that faith was not a matter of believing, it was a matter of loving, he was on solid etymological ground.

Faith lived out as love is nothing new to us; we sang about it in our opening song, where we referred to it as “the fire of commitment.” Having faith in someone or something is committing to that person or thing; having faith more broadly, as Henry Nelson Wieman put it, is committing

with every fiber of our being to whatever will nourish and heal us.

So, we can productively think of faith as gratitude, hope, and love, and the actions we take to build and express gratitude, cultivate hope, and offer love. How does that reframing help us take steps to renew our faith? The answer is profoundly simple, wildly complicated, and frequently difficult.

The simple part of the answer is that we renew our faith by renewing our gratitude, hope, and love, and we renew our gratitude, hope, and love through our actions. We cultivate gratitude where we can, and we act in gratitude whether we feel grateful at a given moment or not. We cultivate hope where we can, and we act in hope whether we feel hopeful at a given moment or not. We cultivate love where we can, and we act in love whether we feel loving at a given moment or not.

The wildly complicated part of the answer is that acting in gratitude, hope, and love don't always look like the same thing. For example, sometimes the most loving thing we can do for someone else is to withdraw and take care of ourselves first; sometimes it means putting our immediate needs aside and tending to their needs. This can be true of us as individuals or as members of social groups; as much as I want to focus on working against racism, I might need a breather when I learn about all the antigay and anti-trans initiatives around the country. Or I might need to offer my resources to racial justice organizations, even with all those antigay and anti-trans initiatives. If I work on developing discernment about the most grateful, hopeful, or loving thing to do in a given situation, I will get better about acting in gratitude, hope, and love over time.

That said, renewing our gratitude, hope, and love through our actions is often difficult as well. It's hard to base our actions in gratitude when we don't feel gratitude. It's hard to act out of hope when we don't feel hopeful, out of love when we don't feel loving. Hard, but not impossible.

Remember those Facebook gratitudes and hopes for humanity with which I began? I don't always feel profoundly grateful or hopeful when I post them. And I don't always feel profoundly grateful or hopeful right after I post them. But I cannot deny that the daily practice of posting them has deepened my faith in humanity, and my gratitude about humanity, and my hope for humanity, and my love of humanity. Over time, in fits and starts. But still, noticeably so. Today, I can look back at my years of carrying out this practice and say that I renew my faith on a daily basis. And that modest daily ritual has allowed me to take increasingly significant steps toward my own wellness and healing, toward my capacity to feel and not just to practice gratitude, hope, and love.

My friends, may we all find ways to give thanks in hard times. May we all become increasingly committed to whatever can save us. May we all be open to transformation and to the choosing of full, rich lives where possible. And may we all, by our works, show the world our faith. May it be so.