

## Words with Baggage: Unpacking “Faith”

Amanda Udis-Kessler, Flame of Life Universalists, September 21, 2014

Here are two brief stories to get us started. The first concerns a UU couple who are friends of mine. I was talking with them about religion maybe eight years ago. I don't recall how this came up, but one of them responded to something I said by saying, “Oh yes, we're believers.” I knew these friends were not Christian but I did not know exactly how to interpret the comment so I changed the subject. Much more recently I was reading postings on Facebook which is such a marvelous way to procrastinate, and I noticed a comment from a college friend who converted to Christianity after she graduated. Her comment began, “As a believer, I...” The rest of the sentence doesn't really matter. In her case the word “believer” clearly meant “believer in Christian doctrine.” And her status as a believer in Christian doctrine clearly shaped whatever she went on to say next.

What do these stories have to do with faith? I think they speak wonderfully to part of the struggle we may have with the word “faith” when we think it is synonymous with “belief in doctrines to which we cannot possibly give our assent.” Of course, there's also the use of faith as belief in something that cannot be observed scientifically or proven empirically. But today I want to focus on the idea of faith as it has come to be used in religion. Specifically, I want to uncouple the term “faith” from the idea of doctrinal belief in hopes of reclaiming it to some degree. We'll also talk about the term “belief” along the way and see that it does not need to mean what conservative Christians have made it mean in our time. But let's start with faith, beginning with the history of the word.

If we look at the etymology of the word faith, we see that it originally meant something that was less about belief and more about commitment and trust. In its mid-13<sup>th</sup>-century Old French form, which I will not even try to pronounce here, the word we know as faith meant the duty of fulfilling one's trust. Then there's the word fidelity, which we get from *fidere*, which we get from a proto-Indo-European root, which means faithfulness today but in its earlier forms implied trustworthiness. Other terms we might use beyond commitment and trust are faithfulness, loyalty, allegiance, and even attentiveness as in a relationship. I don't know about you, but I haven't heard anything here about assent to doctrines. Indeed, the entire feeling of faith as trust and commitment is pretty much the opposite of numbly reciting creeds that one does not actually believe.

Reimagining faith as fidelity and trust opens up some important questions and opportunities for us. To whom or to what are we faithful? In whom or in what do we place our trust? The “whom” questions are a little easier. We may answer “my spouse”, “my family”, “my friends”, “my congregation”, “my community” or in many other ways. The rock band Journey even has a song about this, in which the final line of the chorus, directed to the singer's wife or girlfriend, goes. “I'm forever yours faithfully.” But what's important here is that this kind of faithfulness, this kind of trust, can also be directed toward values. We may say, “I place my trust in love” or “I seek to practice compassion faithfully.” And when we make these commitments, we are affirming that we have faith. The word may still itch or irritate, but hopefully we have made a start toward reimagining what it can mean to have faith without having to believe specific,

completely ridiculous things. I would caution us only to remember that if we use the term with the meaning I've suggested while in conversation with people who use faith in the more common way, we might be talking past each other. But for now, at least we can ponder whether the word can be reclaimed in these ways.

But before we leave the idea of faith, let's examine three more ways of thinking about it. One comes to us from a 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian theologian, one from a present-day Buddhist teacher, and one from the Bible.

Unitarian theologian and philosopher Henry Nelson Wieman was born in 1884 and died in 1975. He wrote about a wide range of topics, among which was the meaning of faith in a liberal religious context. He understood 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 are a few interesting things to notice in this definition. First, faith is an act not a disposition, a verb not a noun. We don't have faith. We do faith. Or maybe we simply "faith." Second, faith is once again about commitment, not assent to creeds. Third, faith is a deeply substantive commitment, involving the fullness of our being and the complete extent of our ability. This is light-years away from participating in a rote service in a detached fashion. This is faith as courage, faith as love, faith as energy, faith as passion. And finally, this faith has an object; we don't merely commit ourselves to whatever seems interesting from one moment to the next but rather we fully and utterly commit ourselves to "whatever can transform and save us." I don't think I need to say much here about the language of transformation, as many of us are already fairly comfortable with that. We mostly acknowledge that we have growing to do and are more or less willing to struggle with transforming ourselves so we can go out and transform the world.

In contrast, many Unitarian Universalists are quite uncomfortable with salvation language, and in fact I will be devoting a service to it in a few months. But, spoiler alert, the idea of salvation comes to us from Hebrew understandings of health, healing, and wholeness. I imagine most 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 well be willing to at least try to fully and utterly commit ourselves to whatever can save us. Notice that Wieman does not specify what that is. For some people it might be God. For others it might be a broader community. For yet others it might be nature. The point is, if we understand salvation as wholeness, we might be more disposed to practice "faithing" the Wiemanian way.

Sharon Salzberg is an American Buddhist teacher and someone whose wisdom and compassion I've encountered in her writing, including her book *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. Faith, says Salzberg, is "not superficial or sentimental: it does not say everything will turn out all right." What is faith then? The willingness to see the possibility for change. Like Wieman, Salzberg understands faith as a verb and also perceives it as necessarily tied to being open to transformation. Faith, says Salzberg, is "the animation of the heart that says 'I choose life.'" In that choosing, 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.

Finally, since I've discussed a Unitarian understanding of faith and a Buddhist understanding of faith, I might as well add the Bible to the mix. The Book of James in the New Testament, has a fascinating passage, which we read a version of earlier, about the relationship between faith and works. As I reread the passage now, try 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 brother or sister 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. But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works and I by my works will show you my faith. For just as the body without the spirit is incomplete, so faith without works is also incomplete.”

*I by my works will show you my faith.* We usually think of faith and works or actions as two different matters, contrasted with each other in this passage. But what if the author of the Book of James is wrong? What if, beyond being incomplete without each other, faith and works are actually the same thing? If faith is a verb, a living into commitment, a leap, faith is an action. And we can take this idea further: all the actions we carry out show our faith; they are the public presentation 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 makes a shelter. Anytime we feel greedy or needy and we give generously despite these feelings, we are faithing.

Now this is all rather abstract so let me give a personal experience. I have struggled my whole life with eating and weight. Sometimes the struggle goes well, sometimes not. Or to use language you have heard me use before, sometimes I support my best self, sometimes my less than best self. And the less than best self really likes breakfast at Burger King, lunch at McDonalds, and dinner at the Olive Garden. I'm back in the struggle to eat better, exercise a lot, and lose weight, and it's not easy. But every time I eat a healthy breakfast, I am faithing, living my faith as a verb. Every time I sweat on the treadmill, which fortunately is in my bedroom, I am faithing, living my trust as a verb. And every time I get on the scale, my knowledge that whatever it says is not the end of the world is a result of all this faith-as-works.

What about the term belief? It may have an even worse reputation than faith among Unitarian Universalists because it seems to point directly to believing incredible, impossible things. We have early church father Tertullian to thank for this. He supposedly wrote, “I believe because it is absurd.” Well, he wrote it in Latin, but you get the point. I believe because it is absurd. How can we possibly rescue the idea of belief from such absurdity?

Again, let's start with language. The closest etymological ancestor of belief, as far as I can tell, is the Old English "be loef," to hold dear. Sounds a little like commitment, right? But what I also see here is the idea of love. Maybe the term really should have come down to us, not as belief, but as *belove*, as contemporary Christian theologian and biblical scholar Marcus Borg argues. Interestingly, the Latin term *credo*, from which we get our current term *creed*, originally meant "I give my heart to," "Not I believe in." I give my heart, the deepest part of myself, in trust and love. So again, to whom or to what do we give our hearts? It's not about tepid words. It's about passionate, risky lives.

Another way of reclaiming the term belief is to define its opposite. The version of belief with which we are so familiar, and which so many of us find so disturbing, has as its opposite such terms as disbelief, heresy, and nihilism. Belief as loving trust has as its opposite mistrust, anxiety, and fear. Think about how different these pairings are. I'll gladly claim the term belief, and the term faith for that matter, if the alternative is being fearful, anxious, and mistrusting.

Unitarian Universalism already accepts trust as a meaningful spiritual value. Consider our music today. We began by claiming that if we take it step by step the longest march can be won. How do we know this? Do we have empirical, data-driven evidence for it? No, I would say we don't. But we have faith that this statement can be true if we make it true, if we treat faith as a verb and we practice *faithing*, step by step, we may yet see the world we long for. It's a matter of trust. And on a much smaller scale, when we affirm in song that we know this rose will open we are acting in trust, trust in ourselves, trust in our healing, trust that love will outlast fear, trust that we have a soul that has wings to unfurl, however literally we may take that idea. These are songs of faith, songs of belief. Not creeds in the modern use of the term but songs of commitment and hope. And we sing them with commitment and hope.

I'd like to end today by going back to our two starting stories, each of which I think has a positive take-away for us. Remember my UU friends who understand themselves to be believers? I still don't know what they meant that day but as our friendship has continued over time, I have come to see them as believers in the best possible sense, believers as people committed to love, compassion and justice, people who live out their belief in human goodness. I want to be that kind of believer. If people can understand the word the way I've discussed it here today, I would be perfectly fine being considered someone for whom faith is about love, courage, trust, commitment, and action.

What about my other friend, who began her Facebook post "As a believer, I..."? Actually, I think it's perfectly good and reasonable that where someone places their love and trust should influence their ideas and actions. How would I finish my friend's sentence using today's understanding of faith and belief? Here are a few possibilities: As a believer, I do my best to commit to living out my values every day. As a believer, I always need to keep growing and learning. As a believer, I know that love can be profoundly risky but it's always preferable to fear whenever possible. As a believer, I ache for those who suffer in the world, from personal pain, social mistreatment, or the damages of large-scale violence and war. Does this sound strange? Of course, but only because we have let a perfectly good word be stolen from us. It's ours to reclaim if we want it.

Friends, however you feel about the terms we've considered today, I wish for you all lives of love and trust, passion and commitment, and joyous leaps into the unknown ahead. Amen and blessed be.