

«Does Faith Make Sense?»

Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, January 10, 2010

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Opening Words, adapted from William F. Schultz

Come into this place of worship
and let its music heal your spirit;
Come into this place of memory
and let its history warm your soul;
Come into this place of prophecy and power
and let its vision change your heart.

Meditation Reading, *The Thread* by Denise Levertov

Something is very gently,
invisibly, silently,
pulling at me – a thread
or net of threads
finer than cobweb and as
elastic. I haven't tried
the strength of it. No barbed hook
pierced and tore me. Was it
not long ago this thread
began to draw me? Or
way back? Was I
born with its knot about my
neck, a bridle? Not fear
but a stirring
of wonder makes me
catch my breath when I feel
the tug of it. When I thought
it had loosened itself and gone.

When I was a campus minister at Duke University, the students and I found ourselves talking about the subject of *faith* a lot. My first year there was 2001, and it was just a few hours before our group was going to meet for the first time that fall that we heard about the twin towers in New York City collapsing. That first week, we simply shared where we were with all of that. The second week I asked the question, "How is your faith helping you right now?" One student asked, "Does faith even make sense?" We revisited that question many times that year. One of those times I brought this poem by Denise Levertov, because when I read it, I realized that this is how faith *feels* to me. Something that very gently pulls at me, redirecting me, sometimes like a

bridle around my neck. And like the poet says, sometimes I really do catch my breath when I feel the tug of it again. It's a beautiful image of a feeling, an *experience*.

I wrote this sermon the following fall, as a way of putting some definition around the subject of faith. It has changed some over the past eight years. Still, I dedicated it then, and rededicated it now to those wonderful Duke students from whom I learned so much about my own faith process.

Historically, the word *faith* comes from our Western, Judeo-Christian tradition. Originally, it meant "setting one's heart on the right path." It was not something you *had*. It was something you *did*. It was an active verb. In the Old Testament, the word *faith* refers to an absolute confidence in the Hebrew God to be *active* in the lives of his people, to keep covenant with them, to stay turned toward them in love, and to their responsibility to do the same in return. Not to have faith, but to *keep* faith with God's will. And that *will* was to create a just society, for his people to treat one another well. The voices of the prophets, over and over, warn the people to return to the right path and create a system of social justice. This was *faith* to the Hebrew people.

We're much more familiar with the way *faith* is used in the New Testament. The new Christians saw the events of Jesus' life and death as evidence that the Hebrew God had kept faith with them by becoming incarnate, or embodied, so they could experience the Sacred in a tangible, direct way. It was an incredibly powerful event that demonstrated God's continuing care, God *keeping faith* with his people. The concept of keeping faith and the belief in that particular incarnation began to be used interchangeably in the Christian scriptures, and this is often the way we hear it used today: faith *in* Jesus Christ. This is what makes us so nervous about talking about faith today as Unitarian Universalists.

This belief system, which many take to be synonymous with faith, has continued to be constructed and tweaked for over two thousand years. When you're in seminary, you are required to take several semesters of courses that describe this tweaking process. It's called "church history". It can make your head spin sometimes, when you realize that this belief system relied on all this tweaking by *people*, brilliant as they were. It is not unusual for Christian students to come out of the seminary experience saying they have lost their faith. When your faith relies on a *belief system*, and you're asked to consider a slightly different one each week, you can find yourself on pretty shaky ground.

I realized that for me, for faith to make sense, I had to shake faith loose from belief. I don't always know what to believe. What I believe changes, based on who I've just argued with, what theology text I've just read, or on an experience or insight I've just had. But my faith doesn't have to shift with these changes. When I can separate the two, then when what I believe starts to shift, I don't agonize over losing my faith. Faith continues to be that fine thread that gently, invisibly, silently, pulls at me... drawing me back to the right path. I can keep an open mind about what I believe and still stay on solid ground.

Of course it's not possible to completely separate belief and faith. If they have *no* relationship, what do we have faith *in*? I want to share with you a definition of faith as given to me by one of my seminary professors, David Bumbaugh, because it resonates deeply with my own feelings. I believe he was paraphrasing Weiman, a process theologian when he said there is in existence a *power of creative process* which brought us into being, which moves through our lives every day, which has the power to transform us as we cannot transform ourselves, and which receives us back when life has used us up.

A power of creative process. This creative process is known by many names: many call it God or Christ, the Goddess, their Higher Power, or intuition. What is important is that we realize that all the talk about what this creative process *is* and how it *acts* is culturally constructed. At least, that is what I believe. That is to say that anything that has ever been said about the creative process carries the flavor of the culture and the experiences of the divinely inspired person doing the describing. This is why we have so many opinions of what the Sacred looks and acts like. And I believe this is as it should be. It means that in every point in history, in every culture, people have used their own experience and reasoning abilities to try to explain their relationship to this great Mystery which is ultimately beyond anyone's explanation.

If this is as it should be, then how do we get into so much trouble, arguing about and going to war over belief systems? We get into trouble when we forget or cannot accept that the wisdom literature is written by *people*, who lived in particular places, under particular circumstances, with particular needs and value systems. We get into trouble when we look at any Holy Scripture as the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God. When we give up the responsibility of interpreting these stories in light of our own experience, at the very least we end up with a lazy, boring, stagnant faith. At our worst, we end up with an abusive faith that refuses to take into account how it can cause real damage to people's lives.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, once a Unitarian minister, had much to say about stagnant faith. In 1838, Emerson addressed a class at Divinity College, now Harvard's Divinity School, as they were about to take on the role of Christian ministry. He told them that "Christians dwell with noxious exaggeration on the person of Jesus." When we focus on that one incarnational event, we miss opportunities every day to notice how the Sacred speaks to us, and through us. We expect grand miracles, thunder and lightning messages. We forget that each of us carries a spark of divinity, and that it will speak to us if we listen attentively. Emerson said that what was so unique about Jesus was that he recognized his own divinity, more than anyone before him or since. Emerson said that revelation has occurred throughout history, and will continue for time eternal. The creative process does not stop. And if this is in fact the case, then we have an awesome responsibility to, as Emerson put it, "pass our lives through the fire of thought," to figure out a belief system, and a faith, that makes sense for the here and now.

But we also get into trouble when we think that *only* our experience should determine our belief system. *All* belief systems are culturally constructed, including our own. It's only when we use our own experience, critiqued by our ancient wisdom traditions, that we begin to see the full effect of the creative process moving through time. We need the voices of the Old Testament

prophets to prod us into social reform. We need our Christian tradition to remind us that the divine spark is in each of us. We need the Buddhist philosophy of non-attachment to critique our materialism. We need earth-centered traditions to remind us that this earth is very fragile.

We call ourselves a faith-based community. What does this mean? How is it different from other organizations we might join? Being a faith community means that we have the responsibility to keep faith with this creative process. How are we going to do that? How do we use our experience, together with the ancient voices, to develop a belief system, and a faith, that makes sense? Where do we find transforming power? (repeat) We may begin by looking at the crossroads of these great traditions and where their paths cross with our own. Respect the fact that there have been centuries of people being inspired, telling stories, making sense of their lives, and keeping faith with this creative process. One of the reasons I became a parish minister is because I believe in the power of stories, and that we are best transformed in community – with one another and with the wise ones of history.

When people ask me about faith, I often tell them the story of Rosie the robot, a little robot at Duke hospital that used to deliver meds to the patient care units on the 7th floor of Duke North where I work in the evenings. Most of the time Rosie puttters along on its merry way without too many problems. If you stand in front of her though, she will stop, and her screen will flash a message: “avoiding obstacle.” If you move out of the way, she’ll continue on down the path to her destination.

One night as I walked down the hall, I found the little robot stuck in a corner. Somehow she had gotten herself turned around, would bang into the wall, her screen flashing “avoiding obstacle.” She would turn ever so slightly, bang the wall again and flash the same “avoiding obstacle... avoiding obstacle.” I watched for awhile... thinking, “Honey, I know just how you feel. I have been there!” And then I gently pulled her away from the wall, pointed her in the right direction, and away she went, blue light blinking happily.

This is how the Sacred often operates in my life. Faith doesn’t mean that we don’t ask the big questions. It doesn’t mean that I always get what I want, or that my life is not going to present obstacles. Faith means to me that I have experienced and trust I will continue to experience that gentle (or not so gentle) set of hands that lovingly shifts me back to the right path, even when I think I’ve been avoiding obstacles. Sometimes that shift comes as an insight when I’m reading Scripture or meditating. More often than not, though, it comes to me through the wise advice of a trusted friend... through the laughter of children... the touch of my partner... watching the sun rise from my kayak. Faith is not so much a matter of belief, but is rather a matter of sensitivity. It is having an appreciative awareness; paying attention; keeping your senses open; waiting and watching and knowing that eventually you will feel that gently set of hands that can set your heart back on the right path. God incarnate, every day. Keeping faith with *us*, every day. When I notice, a stirring of wonder makes me catch my breath. When I notice, faith makes sense.

Closing Words – these words are by Mary Jean Irion: Faith is not making religious-sounding noises in the daytime. It is asking your inmost questions at night – and then getting up and going to work.