

My Religious Faith

Sermon delivered by Tracy Springberry

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One of the deep pleasures of my seminary education has been the discovery of theology. At one time theology meant the “study of God.” Now, at least in liberal religion, it means the study of what is most meaningful and valuable. It is an incredibly interdisciplinary area of study. The best theologians try to take what we know from all sorts of fields: biology, physics, psychology, history, art, literature are a few examples, and then try to figure out the nature of human beings and the universe and what that might mean religiously and ethically.

Albert Einstein said, “All religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree...” Most academic disciplines study a branch of the tree. But in my experience, it’s the theologians who are trying to figure out the nature of the tree itself and then consider just what in that means for our lives. In theology classes, I’ve read a dense text on the evolutionary biology of emotional response, a fairly incomprehensible legal treatise on human rights, classical philosophers, and an economics book. Probably the most profound influence on my theology has been *A Short History of Nearly Everything* by Bill Bryson, which is a delightful overview of what we know scientifically about the earth and universe.

This morning, I want to share just one bit of my personal theology that I have developed over six years of reading, writing and discussing.

I want to talk about my religious faith.

The word “faith” and its cousin “belief” are challenging words for many Unitarian Universalists. Often we associate “religious belief” with a person’s intellectual confidence that God exists or that Jesus Christ died for humanity’s sins or that there is a hell. We then associate “faith” with “believing” in these ideas even when no logical evidence exists for their truth. For example, if I “believe” in a personal God who cares for me, then I have “faith” God is looking out for me. The most rational among us sometimes reject such ideas and feel there is little point to discussing religious faith and religious belief.

However, the word “faith” with no religious context refers to what any person trusts to be true about the world and life. What a person has faith in guides the decisions he or she makes about how to live. People have faith in all sorts of things. Faith can be based on reason, experience, external evidence, or cultural expectation and tradition.

People in our culture often have in faith in ideas such as:

- Somebody ensured the airplane we boarded on has no mechanical problems.
- The water in our town is safe.
- Children and youth will have better, richer lives if they are involved in sports or other structured activities.

- The scientific method is the best way to understand the world.
- Going to college, getting a good job, buying a house, and investing in retirement will ensure financial security and, thus, a good life.

Since most of us are 21st century Americans, we probably have faith, or have had faith, in many of these propositions and have made decisions about how to conduct our lives based on them. We drink water from the faucet without fear. We buy houses and invest in retirement. We read scientific discoveries as truth. However, none of these propositions is true all of the time.

The Hebrew word that is translated in modern Bibles as “faith” does not mean “belief in something without evidence” but means “steadfastness.” All of us steadfastly direct our lives by certain ideas. Even if we know that going to college and buying a house doesn’t always, every time, mean a good life and that the water in the tap might not always be safe, we choose to live our lives by those ideas.

We have faith.

But what of religious faith?

Religious faith, like secular faith, guides the decisions we make about how to live. Only religious faith is typically based on beliefs about what helps us live value-filled lives and what helps sustain us during times of despair. Religious faith is about what we believe directs our lives toward love and justice and hope. It guides how we act to make our lives and world better.

For Christians, Jews, Muslims, and some people in this room their religious faith is in God. God is the one who has the power to help steer lives toward love and justice and hope. This faith provides direction to people. It helps one focus on what is most valuable. When life is hard, a person can pray to and trust God. One can follow old religious traditions that have developed methods for aligning one with God and love, justice and hope.

Modern secular culture and much of Unitarian Universalism teach that what we can have *faith* in is ourselves. Both teach that it is our actions and our *will* to influence our actions that direct us toward what we value we most and toward love, justice and hope.

This was what I was taught growing up – that I was ultimately responsible for my own fate and for improving the world. The saving of the earth and ourselves, this implies, is achieved by what each of us is able to do. We have faith in ourselves and our ability to make and act on good choices.

I think this is partly true. Often I have faith in myself to do the right thing to make a difference and I do it.

But not always. I can’t always do it.

I cannot do all that has to be done and often what I can do, I cannot do perfectly. If what I can *will* myself to *do* is responsible for creating a good life and world, than what I do does matters tremendously, and it matters much more than I can deliver.

Many times I do not do what I know I should do.

We all have these experiences. We decide to lose weight, but eat cake the very day we make the decision. We decide to live in gratitude, but find ourselves wishing for an air conditioner or a different car. We decide to live in love, but find ourselves judging a difficult person. We decide to change the world, but do little of significance.

Other times I don't know what to do.

Does anyone really know the correct way to raise a child or deal with a challenging family member? Or the best way to spend time and money to end the pain of a suffering world?

I'm also certain that sometimes I act in ways that hurt myself and the world that I'm not even conscious of.

I know in my past I behaved in ways that seemed right and appropriate, but now I realize were damaging, because I have seen their results. I had a friend who grew up in a racist home and community and had no idea her attitudes were damaging until she was an adult and lived in other communities and met other people.

What do I do at these moments? Where do I turn? What guides my actions? Faith in myself provides no guidance. I simply feel guilty, hopeless and paralyzed.

To respond effectively to the world and live with hope, I need something more.

I know a wonderful man who has a deep faith in God. He works very hard to make the world better for people who struggle against oppression. But at the end of the day, he says, I have done my part; the rest is up to God. I envy the man's commitment and ability to do his part and then remain confident that his God continues to work while he rests. He is not guilty, hopeless or paralyzed.

I want that sort of faith.

I was raised by academics and am myself highly educated. What I was trained to do, and what seems as natural as breathing, is to think rationally. I mull the evidence. What I have faith in and what guides my moral choices cannot contradict the scientific evidence, cannot contradict what we know of history and of psychology, anthropology and sociology, and cannot contradict my experience. It is not part of my experience or tradition to find faith in a personal God who is beyond history and nature and can influence the world.

Still my experience demonstrates that this world is more mysterious than we can rationally understand: there is synchronicity, moments of grace, falling in love, call to vocation, and the intensity of birth and death. My mind, experience and heart tells me that there *is* something *beyond* myself that can guide me toward what is most valuable and toward love, justice and hope.

Henry Nelson Wieman, an influential liberal theologian in the early to middle part of the last century, helped me find what I'd been looking for. For Wieman the question of the religious journey was, "What can transform people in such a way to save them from the depths of evil and bring them to the greatest good which human life can ever attain?"

He had two answers. The first is what we can *will* ourselves to do – the emphasis of secular and Unitarian Universalist culture. He called that ethics.

His second answer addressed the question what "transforms us when we cannot transform ourselves?" What, in other words, can we have faith in to help us when we don't behave as we want, don't know what to do, or don't realize our limitations?

His answer was creativity or as he called it the "creative event."

Very simply, creativity brings together a person's experience of the world's diversity, mixes it within a person, and changes the person so he or she can experience new, deeper relationships. Through creativity a person's life and the world become richer, more meaningful, more full of love and more just.

Creativity requires engagement with the world. Wieman calls this "creative interchange." We must reach out beyond our own understanding to listen and appreciate the other – whether that is a pine cone, our friend, someone with the opposite political views, or our own mysterious breath. We must reach out with our time, attention, and heart.

One important element of this creativity is we do not control it. We cannot make the creative event happen.

We also cannot decide how it will change us. Wieman says, "The creative event cannot be used to shape the world closer to the heart's desire because it transforms the heart's desire so that one wants something very different from what one desired in the beginning."

However, we can lead our lives to make the creative event more likely to happen. For Wieman this meant increased appreciation of the world, times of silence, prayer and worship, and engagement with others particularly in sustained small groups.

Still, we cannot will creative change to happen.
It is out of our power.
It is beyond us.

Wieman's idea of creativity seems true to me.

The operating principle of the universe appears to be to be creativity – the combining of diverse elements to make something new. That is how we got atoms, molecules, flowers, blueberries and us. The operating principle of human culture also appears to be creativity. That is how we got democracy, the English language, and Unitarian Universalism.

So it makes sense that creativity would be what makes human change possible, help us live more by our values and align our lives toward love, justice and hope.

I have also experienced the transforming power of creativity, certainly many times, but I have one story that clearly demonstrates the change. In Spokane a couple of years ago, I took Spokane Alliance Leadership training. The Spokane Alliance brings together churches of wide theological differences, unions, educational institutions and non-profit agencies to work for meaningful non-partisan political change. Based on the work of Saul Alinsky, their philosophy is that people work together better across differences, if they know each other, and they do this through relational meetings, where each person shares their thoughts feelings on a specific question and the other listens and then they trade places. While practicing relational meetings, I was paired with a woman very different from me in age, class, political affiliation and religious belief. For some reason, I don't now remember, she began discussing Wal-Mart. I boycott Wal-Mart because of their labor practices. She did all her shopping there and was bitterly angry with people who criticized Wal-Mart. At first, I was surprised at her bitterness. Most people I know who shop at Wal-Mart at least feel guilty about it. Then I felt superior. *I* understood the issues. *I* was ethical. *I* stood up for what I believed. But because the assignment was to listen, I listened. And because I listened, I experienced her fear of living on a fixed income, prices rising and her standard of living slipping, until she saw herself homeless. Wal-Mart prices allowed her to live with a standard of living that she was used to, at least for the moment. I understood then how Wal-Mart is the result of a society that values consumerism above all else and where the poor are getting poorer. It's fine for me, financially secure, to be superior in my Wal-Mart boycott, but Wal-Mart is not going anywhere with its labor practices and philosophy of closing down local retail economies until the root issues of poverty and consumerism are addressed.

I had listened and I had changed. I no longer felt superior. I knew I needed this woman to work for justice and to end poverty. We needed each other. Love, justice and hope increased in the world at that moment.

My faith in creativity has changed my approach to life. When I don't do what I think I should or when I don't know what to do, I remember my commitment to creativity. And I always remember, I cannot *will* creativity to happen. It is like my friend with his faith in God. He does his part and lets God do the rest. I do my part and let the creative power work in me and in others.

So I do what I can. I do those things I know I can do to make my life and the life of others better. Then I open myself to creativity. I appreciate the world. I become "wholly

attentive,” as Annie Dillard said in this morning’s meditation. I listen. I meditate. I pray. I worship. I stay in relationship with people.

I have also been fortunate, as you are, to be in a congregation that provides opportunities that prepare us for creative transformation. Small groups and affinity groups, such as the quilting group and the mens’ group, allow us deepen and lengthen relationships. Non-violent communication teaches us to listen more deeply to others and ourselves. We worship together. We value generosity, community, gratitude, acting in love, and paying attention.

I find as practice my faith in creativity, my faith deepens.

Sometimes I am exhausted and overwhelmed: the study of ministry takes so long, family and work is demanding, hundreds die in Iraq each month, hundreds of others starve all over the world, and the glacial ice cracks as it thaws. All I can remember in those moments about the practice of my faith is that I should “appreciate” and be “wholly attentive,” to the other and myself. So I look at trees. I examine the chunky puzzle piece bark of pine trees and the new bright green growth at the tips of fir branches. I wonder at the stately trunks of pines and the branching trunks of apple trees. Often as I’m admiring this artistry a squirrel darts out, its bushy tail high as it scurries across the grass, or a bird sweeps down and flies gracefully among branches.

Mostly, I just breathe easier after meditating on trees.

But once, I was pulled deeper. In trees, squirrels, and birds I saw how amazing Life is. How it is strong, tenacious and creative in its expression of itself. Life can be a tree, a squirrel, a piece grass, an ant, or a lilac. Life is undaunted by change. When the atmosphere could no longer support Life in the form of dinosaurs, Life morphed and made other things – mammals and different of sorts of birds and reptiles. Mass extinctions have wiped out 98% of species that have ever lived, but Life is still abundant. From my yard, I saw magpies, robins, horses, petunias, phlox, honeysuckle, weeping birch, and day lilies. I couldn’t see, but knew they were there: worms, ladybugs, and the bacteria that decays leaves. What more Life I would see if I walked down the street or flew to Peru. I was awed by the abundance of Life.

Then I remembered that I am a bit of Life. I am strong. I am tenacious. I am creative. I can be alive in new ways.

I also remembered that I am only one bit of Life – just a small part and thus both significant and insignificant, both powerful and not powerful.

My exhaustion evaporated. I walked slowly back into the day – where I found my family and work, the journey toward ministry, and a world both suffering and flourishing.

I joined, bringing the vibrant piece of Life that I am to the webs I live in, realizing that I could act or, if needed, just be, and I could trust the creativity and strength of Life itself to be a part of whatever happened.

I knew that there would be love. There would be justice. And there would be hope.

May it be so.