

ON FINDING FAITH  
SERMON BY  
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This morning, I'd like to share some, just a little piece, of my own faith journey and I begin by telling a story.

Once in a land long, long ago, a great tragedy occurred. No one could have predicted it and no one could have prevented it. In fact, all seemed to be well. The land was teeming with life; flourishing with flora and fauna. The sun shone brightly and there was plenty of food. Until one day, a giant ball of fire fell from the sky and crashed into the land. The skies grew dark and the air grew cold. The bright sun could no longer reach the land. Great living creatures began to die from a lack of warmth and a lack of food; creatures we now call dinosaurs; until each and every last one was no more.

Out of this great tragedy also came a great blessing. For those living in the shadow of the dinosaurs now had a new opportunity for life. These tiny, fur-covered, scrappy little creatures were able to survive the catastrophe by eating insects and the meat of the frozen dinosaurs. As time passed, they flourished. They grew and developed in new and amazing ways; becoming bigger, stronger, and smarter. For a long time, they lived within the safety of the trees; gathering food from wherever it happened to grow and eating meat only when the opportunity presented itself. Their hands grew agile and they developed opposable thumbs. They began to walk upright and their manner of reproduction changed. Menses became hidden and serial monogamy developed for the first time.

More time passed and they continued to flourish; growing exponentially in knowledge. They created stone tools and taught themselves how to hunt with purpose. They learned how to manipulate fire and make clothes; keeping themselves warm and expanding the variety of foods they could eat. They became aware of themselves and their place within the great mystery of life; finding new meaning in the ritualistic burial of their dead.

Finally, and with all of this wondrously new knowledge in place; they were ready to embark on the greatest of journeys. Slowly, and over time, they began to spread out; some leaving their homeland, a place we now call Africa, far behind. They continued to grow and develop in amazing ways. A capacity for language emerged, then music, and art. Eventually, they learned how to domesticate other living animals and plants for their own use in horticulture and agriculture. Today, these creatures we now call human continue to flourish.

This story I just told, this story we all share, is my sacred creation story. I have heard it told many times by my elders, by those who are older and wiser than me, and even though I have never held a fossil hominid bone in my own hands, and even though I have never journeyed to Africa to confirm this story for myself, I trust that it is so. At times, this story seems to me incredulous; perhaps even miraculous; yet, I have never doubted it. My faith in this story remains unshaken. Even as we grow in knowledge and understanding; even as the details of this story change, sometimes almost hourly; my faith in this story remains unshaken.

To question my belief in this sacred story of evolution seems to me as startling as the question: “Do you believe in life?” To my mind, concepts of belief and unbelief are irrelevant to matters of faith. Michael Dowd, in his book “Thank God for Evolution” suggests that this is so. He says: “Faith and trust are synonyms; faith and beliefs are opposites.” Faith and trust are synonyms; faith and beliefs are opposites.

Before I went to seminary, and even early into my seminary experience, I held many beliefs about the Bible. I believed there was wisdom to be found there; just as there was wisdom to be found in all of the world’s scriptures. I believed the study of the Bible would be intellectually stimulating and academically rigorous. I believed that learning about the Bible would be fun, interesting, and enjoyable. And I believed that the contents of the Bible were mostly, if not wholly, irrelevant to my actual faith. My faith was to be found in the story I just told, the sacred story of human evolution. My faith was to be found in the living, growing, ever-changing, mysterious reality of life in the universe.

As time wore on, I found that not all of my beliefs were justified. I learned to look for the stories behind the stories; the back-stories. I learned to look at the ways in which the stories of the Ancient Israelites were both similar to and different from the stories of Ancient Egypt and Babylonia and Mesopotamia. I learned to let go of the “why” of the stories, the theology that didn’t always work for me, and instead look at what actually happened in the narrative. In doing so, in allowing the “why” to fall away; the “what” came into sharper focus. This is the story which emerged for me.

In the earliest of times, man and woman lived amongst the trees in a place they called the Garden of Eden. Food was abundant and feeding themselves as simple as reaching for a piece of fruit growing on a nearby tree branch. Over time, they

gained in knowledge and learned to make clothes for themselves. In a manner which probably felt catastrophic to them; their means of reproducing themselves changed drastically from what it had been before. So too did their means of feeding themselves. They felt forced to leave the Garden. They learned, with difficulty, how to till the ground and keep flocks of animals. Over time, they spread over the face of the earth and their language became unintelligible to each other. Today, their descendents still tell this story, still feel the grief and loss of their ancestors, still feel the pain of catastrophic change.

The similarities of this most ancient of stories with the more modern and scientific story of human evolution are striking; at least, they are for me. I was not expecting to find my sacred creation story within the confines of the Bible and I was plagued by questions. So I let go. I let go of my expectations. I let go of the concrete and literal story and I delved into the myth and the mystery. I allowed myself to wonder. I allowed myself to feel awe. And I emerged with a newly-found faith. I discovered that my faith lives in the mystery, in the unknown, in the questions. I learned that my faith is not to be found in literal readings of scripture, nor in the hard scientific data, but in the spaces in between, in the not-yet-known. I realized that Mystery is everywhere; that the more I learn and grow and know; I can only gain a deeper appreciation for exactly how much it is I don't know. I have faith that there is more to be known, more to be discovered, more to be understood. I have faith that all will never be known.

Now that I've shared with you a little bit of my own faith journey; I'd like to tell you a story about a man of truly great faith. This is an old Hasidic story I once heard.

There once was a man, a man of great faith, who was found reciting the Hebrew alphabet. Aleph, beit, gimel, dalit, hay, vav, zion, chet, tate, yod, kaf, lamed; on and on, over and over again. He said it earnestly, as if he were pouring his whole heart and soul, his very being into the recitation. Aleph, beit, gimel, dalit, hay, vav. Eventually, someone asked him what he was doing. This is what he said: The rabbis have taught me that it is best to pray in Hebrew. I am a poor and uneducated man and I do not know Hebrew. I can't speak it or pray in it, but I do know the aleph beit. So I pray in the only Hebrew I know, and I trust that God will be able to know what is in my heart, and God will rearrange my letters into the proper words and sentences.

I say the man in this story was a man of great faith for three reasons. He had faith in himself. He trusted his own sense of right and wrong and did the best that he could within his limited circumstances. He relied on his own internal sense of authority. As Unitarian Universalists, we might say he relied on his own inherent worth and dignity.

He had faith in his teachers. He trusted that his spiritual leaders would teach him the best truth they knew. He relied on the inherited wisdom of his faith tradition and made his best effort to remain true to his heritage. As UUs, we might say he recognized the inherent worth and dignity of his teachers.

He had faith in God. He trusted that God would be able to see inside his heart and recognize his human frailty. He relied on a source outside himself which would feed and nourish his spirit. He recognized his existence as only a small part of a larger whole. As UUs, we might say he placed his faith in the interdependent web of existence.

I'd like to think that as Unitarian Universalists, we might use this Hasidic story as a sort of road map for finding our own faith. In just a moment I'll invite you to take just such a journey with me. But before we do, I'd like to pause and state what is, perhaps, the obvious. Faith is complicated. I find it almost impossible to say: "I have faith" and leave it at that. Doing so feels like an unfinished sentence or clause. Something is left hanging. I feel compelled to finish off the thought by saying, "I have faith that such and such a thing will happen". Or: "I have faith that all will turn out well." Or "I have faith in my brothers and sisters, in God, in the universe, fill in the blank... Faith itself is an interdependent concept. I don't think we can easily talk about faith without talking about where we place our faith or where we find our faith.

Take a moment and consider your own faith. In what do you find faith? Where do you place your faith? If you struggle with the word faith, what do you trust? What is of ultimate value to you? I invite you to take a few moments to gather your thoughts in silence. ... Does everyone have at least one thing in mind? Great, in a little while I'm going to invite you to share. Nothing scary, I promise. Just a simple waving of your hands.

Let's get back to our road map. The first place the man in our story found faith was in himself. He trusted his own internal sense of authority to determine what was best practice for his own spiritual life. As Unitarian Universalists, we are the inheritors of a long legacy of doing the same. We were among the first to engage in the practice of modern Biblical criticism, to apply reason to our systems of theology, to welcome the findings of science. We trust that we can know our own minds and hearts. We trust that we can reliably set our own course of spiritual growth. We trust that we can access our own inner truth and that we have something valuable to say about that which is of ultimate worth.

I am curious to know from our exercise a few moments ago, how many of you came up with answers which can relate to having faith in yourself? Wave your arms up in the air, if you will... Thank you for sharing.

The second place the man in our story found faith was in other humans, specifically in members of his own faith community. He trusted others to share their

best wisdom with him. I thought a lot about this one yesterday, about the faith which we find and share within our own community. Yesterday, 5 of us from First Parish attended a day-long youth advisor workshop. We did this so we could learn how to be better advisors and ministers to our youth. I share this not so we will receive kudos for the time and effort we put forth, but so that you/the youth will know that you are important in the life of this congregation and so you will know that you are loved. This is ultimately a matter of faith. I have faith in our youth. I trust that the youth have something of value to contribute to the greater world as well as my own, personal spiritual development. I know that I learn as much, if not more, from them as they learn from me. We form our faith together.

In considering your earlier responses about the question of faith, how many of you can say you find faith in others or within the context of community? Again, just wave your arms up in the air, if you will. Great! Thanks.

The third place the man in our story found faith was outside of himself, outside of humanity even. He found faith in the greater transcendent whole, in what he called God. As a former hospice staff person and now as a minister, I have often been present to people who find themselves in a deep crisis, facing death or some other great tragedy. So often, in these times of crisis, people, even those who usually don't consider themselves very religious, turn to the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." There is something very comforting to be found in this theology, despite its antiquated language. Although I have, actually, herded sheep and cattle at one time in my life; I imagine the analogy is not very meaningful to most contemporary people! Perhaps a better translation is: "The eternal is my guide, I have everything I need." As UU's, we can find faith in the eternal. We can allow ourselves to be guided by the principles of justice, or of love, or of evolution and growth; principles which are eternal. We can find faith in that which is greater than ourselves, in the whole of reality, in life itself, in whatever it is that we hold to be of ultimate value.

In returning to your thoughts on the question of where you find faith, how many of you can relate your answers to this third category, to principles greater than yourself? If you will, please wave your arms in the air. Thank you, all, for joining me on this journey of finding faith.

In closing, I leave you with one of my favorite prayers, an offering, if you will. It is the refrain from a song called "Mystery" and it sums up my faith in the way only music can. I hope that you will find it meaningful as well.

"O Mystery, you are alive!  
I feel you all around  
You are the fire in my heart  
You are the holy sound

You are all of life  
And it is to you that I sing  
O grant that I may feel you, always in everything  
O grant that I may feel you, always in everything"

Amen and Blessed Be