

Word Games In Faith (What's pulling at your heart?)
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Doris Thurston, Speaker
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I'm missing the choir . . . profoundly!

I could say I don't even have the choir to talk to, but that's not totally true. You are the choir.

First of all, my title is a play of words. Am I speaking of word games in Faith, or of Faith in word games? What I'm going to say this morning is part of my story and your story – why we're all here. It is both history and the future. It will be personal testimony as to how I arrived, and why it is important for me to stay.

But not all personal history. With apologies to the true historians and scholars in the congregation I want to play with words that helped bring me (and many of us) to the statement of Faith made by Unitarian Universalists - the acceptance of all who come to our door.

In that acceptance what is our consciousness, what is our wide-awake awareness of the interplay of words in daily lives that leads us to this Belief, and when does Belief become Faith?

I dare ask this question of "Belief into Faith" because the etymology is interesting.

1) Belief is, according to Webster, an opinion or conviction, a confidence in the existence of something as truth . . . not always explainable.

2) Faith is used interchangeably with Belief in many aspects of life, but for religion it goes beyond above-named existence and confidence to a declaration of clarity, a system of Belief and obligateded observations. Religious Faith is a system of doctrines designed to deal with finalities – death, judgments, state of the future, etc.

We open our door wide, and as people come we listen and watch for needs deeper than doorstep acceptance. We listen for questions and laughter, for tears and fears. Each individual - the inquisitive child, the lonely elder, the home-keeper, the wage-earner that seeks respite from the competitive world - each individual brings those needs to our statement of belief . . . and shares his or her life with us.

I confess that at times I hear in our Credo the self-righteousness of being the only way. You know, the "we-are-the-only-truth tone of voice". And that's when the questions arise for me - how do we best embrace inclusiveness and mystery, and the almost indefinable questions of ongoing Creation? Love. Generosity. Tolerance. Justice in living our lives . . . yes! And how do we maintain a sense of self- recognition without settling into the narrowness of self-love? Is there a difference between conscious Faith and, say, unconscious laxity/complacency?

You'll note that I haven't yet mentioned God or the life of Jesus. Many of us come from the words and worlds of older traditional Faiths - European and western Christianity, Jewish, Buddhist, Zen, Islamic backgrounds, so I'm going to read a small article from the Christian Science Monitor that points out the often-forgotten likenesses of Faith from all sources.

THE GOLDEN THREAD

Christians call it "The Golden Rule," and it is found in every major religion.

CHRISTIANITY: Therefore all things whatsoever that ye would men do to you, do even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. King James Bible, Matt, 7:12

BRAHMANISM (orthodox Hinduism): Such is the sum of duty: Do not do to others that which, you would do harm to yourself. Mahabharata 5:18

JUDAISM: That which you hold as detestable, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole law: the rest is but commentary. Talmud, Sabbat 31a

BUDDHISM: Injure not others in the manner that would injure you. Udana Varge 5:18

ISLAM: None of you is a believer if he does not desire for his brother that which he desires for himself. Sunnah

CONFUCIANISM: Here certainty is the golden maxim: Do not do others that which you do not want them to do to us. Analects 15:23

TAOISM: Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss. T'ai Shang Kan Ying

Though none of the above mention God, they imply the presence and guidance of Faith in a "higher being," and they appeal to the biblical maxim of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Upon closer examination there is permission, or at least room, for aggression. Ideological intervention. Revenge. War.

Whom do we call brothers and sisters?

Whom do we call neighbors?

When does injury become justification for the unthinkable of killing?

Where would or could Universalist Unitarians close their door?

These are concerns and controls seemingly outside myself, but they strike inside when I stop in the tracks of what I am doing (or trying to do) and say, "God, show me the way." There are times when a quiet and meditative stance smooths this path of decision. Both prayer and meditation are personal practices of Belief, and Faith in a Creative Force outside myself that will give me something larger than what I already know.

And yes, Intuition is another name given this selected moment of spiritual trust and the learned ways - what are they?

The terms “The Way” and “The Path” prevail in old Chinese literature. Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching sounds as though written for today, although (twenty-four hundred) 2,400 years old. Our modern western writer Ursula LeGuin believes in the beauty and authority of the language, and gives accord to that mystery as shown in her far-reaching prose. In her anthology of Lao Tzu’s poems (called chapters) is this one (the images are traditionally associated with what is simple and natural):

RAW SILK AND UNCUT WOOD

Stop being holy, forget being prudent,
it will be a hundred times better for everyone.
Stop being altruistic, forget being righteous,
people will remember what family feeling is.
Stop planning, forget making a profit,
there won't be any thieves and robbers.

But even these three rules
needn't be followed:
what works reliably
is to know the raw silk,
hold the uncut wood.
Need little,
want less.
Forget the rules.
Be untroubled.

Albert Schweitzer, in his quest for understanding Christianity and his commitment to living it (remember, he celebrated his 81st birthday in Africa while on his 12th medical mission) said:

“The Gospel of Jesus deals with man. . .and teaches him how, through living and working in this world he should be inwardly free from it. Paul, speaking as a man mighty in spirit, says in the wonderful word in I Corinthians 7 that we should weep as though we wept not, rejoice as though we rejoice not, and buy as though we possess not.”

Then Schweitzer also says:

“The one essential thing is that we strive to have light in ourselves. Our strivings will be recognized by others, and when people have light in themselves it will shine out from them. Then we get to know each other as we walk together in the darkness.”

Both Le Guin and Schweitzer found the challenge in their lives to question - to recognize the creative force called God in so many languages and to live by the answers they found. And so do you and I.

Hasn't this happened through all history of mankind? The Greeks, the Jews, the Christians all translated and adapted from what answered as “old testament” to new – in

translations from oral traditions to written. Each era represented change of culture and language – Hebrew Diaspora was dispensed into and then transformed out of Arabic, Yiddish and Latino. Reformation after reformation raised conflicts over “truths,” spurring war after war.

We’re still doing it, aren’t we? Yet the remarkable thing (and we see it today in our forward-thinking, accelerated world enveloped by destructive wars), the closer people come to “the word,” whatever form and language acclaimed, the greater the impact in their lives. Believers enact their Beliefs into their Faiths.

Have we learned? Not enough. Thomas Frank in “What’s the Matter with Kansas” explores deeply the language of religion and politics.

Bill Moyers, in his “Moyers on America,” opens an early chapter with this commentary:

“A headline I saw on the web ‘Marines cross Euphrates,’ got me to thinking. Do they know, these young marines, this young elite fighting force: Do they know Alexander the Great crossed the Euphrates, too, on his way to battle and empire, with his engineers, architects, scientists and scribes and an army forty-thousand strong, their thirteen-foot spears gleaming in the sun?’ Then he goes on to describe several other conquerors who crossed the river Euphrates in like conquests.

Will we learn soon enough to avoid self-destruction? Will new archeological findings open the history of biblical minds and narrative to new examination within the fundamental ranks of Belief and Faith?

After all, every yesterday is a history. No matter how it is written and spoken it will be reheard and re-understood and redrawn to meet current culture and belief.

Thich Nhat Hahn, in his Living Buddha, Living Christ has a comforting fly-piece statement: “When you are a truly happy Christian you are also a Buddhist; and visa-versa.”

Will we ever learn?

I’ve said all of the above, not as a historical or biblical scholar, but as a member of this congregation who was asked to speak of some “pullings and concerns in my heart.”

In the accelerated world climate of change, even without considering the war, I find my personal grounding of Faith under assault. My personal values have not changed, from what was taught in childhood – loving-kindness, honesty, joys in music and art. I learned to “make do with what you have” during the big depression of the thirties - that has served me well during various “lean spots” in my life, and helped teach my 5 children differences between essentials and indulgences.

Faith has grown to be reliance on a creative force that loves me – has grown through the several faces and names I have given it while growing up to this privileged station in life.

I see Jesus as one of us – aren't we all children of God? He learned how to lead in an exemplary fashion. But I have also learned much from Gandhi, from my mother's gentle insistence and my father's respect for nature, from Pope Paul the 2nd, among many others ... all children of God, as from the written word passed through so many centuries through so many hearts and minds. "God loves me" is still here as I learned as a child when I can feel and allow it.

Granted, the face and the name is a little different than that of the Presbyterian Father of Good and Evil that walked the aisles of my early church. I still remember the fear experienced the Sunday I was picked from the end of a long wooden pew and marched with several other youngsters of varied ages to the podium in front, and renounced for sins I didn't even know about. Though we had belonged for a long time (I was baptized there) we moved to the Methodist Church two blocks away; Mother didn't believe in raising children in fear. I would like to say the next Sunday but I just remember it as very soon. We left behind my best friend and fellow singer Eloise and I sang duets, or solos, regularly. It took me a while to earn a similar place in the Methodist congregation.

During high school I sometimes attended the Catholic Church with an Italian girl-friend, a year older than I, and was caught up in the musicality of chants and holy invocations. But when a schoolmate was killed in a drowning accident I sang the solo with my acappella octet in the Methodist Church.

In college I attended few services, but participated with a youth group in the Methodist campus house at the University of Oregon. This was "new" Methodist philosophy of the early 40's, more participatory than the small-town rural Methodism. But we didn't resist that war.

In 1941 - a lowly sophomore - I married a graduating senior, traveled to a base camp near Pollock, Louisiana, then lived in Baltimore for a year expecting the war to be over immediately - and his return home. I saw New York City and Washington D.C. before returning to the west coast. That was a 2 ½-year span.

I had an exceptional spiritual experience in an East Baltimore neighborhood meeting hall and I can't even remember what form of service I was attending. I had a soaring experience, a physical and spiritual lifting above myself and fellow worshipers that sent me out for a long walk afterwards, and has remained an influence in the ensuing adult years.

On the west coast again I lived in Astoria, Oregon, near my parents. I tried (oh, brave soul) radio announcing, and loved it; and worked in a stationary store. Also worked in the USO serving coffee and hotdogs to the Navy guys, and wondered why they were based at home and my beloved was overseas so long. My husband did come home. He could not talk about the war or his fire-line experiences. We lived in Seattle where he did his GI Masters in business at the UW. Our first, a son was born at Doctor's Hospital. We had no church attendance or other socialization for the first two years. Then we went to be near his father in CA, spending 28 years in Mill Valley, Marin County, and there was

our first church experience together. . . the United Church of Christ, an amalgamation of four split-offs from the Church of Christ, Lutheran, Methodist and one other.

It was a congregation of the 60's, before the 60's happened! But when the 60's came we marched for lettuce workers, against war, invited gay ministers to speak, sang traditional hymns and praised God. It was a warm and loving community.

After a chosen divorce, and after the last of my children graduated from high school and left home, I returned to the northwest, found some land, built a pole-house on Chicken Coop Road between Sequim and PT, met a man for 13 years of good marriage. I finished my Bachelor's degree at Evergreen at age 63. Then again alone, not by choice this time, there were many good years of weaving, some music and writing in community, and some attendance to Quaker and UUF churches. There was much meditation in my life, back-packing and canoeing with Clara and Wendell. Camping in Europe with Richard Vogt and his party. Finding my way again.

Someone last week said, "You ARE going to read some of your poetry, aren't you?" I think that I said, "Of course." So here are closing poetic thoughts, written about two years ago, when I was deciding about joining QUUF.

WE HIDE BEHIND WHAT WE KNOW.

Faith, by some, is called certainty - the assured spirit.
Blind believers know the places of not being –
they run and run endlessly, or run and hide behind
words of someone else's thinking.
Belief becomes Faith becomes Creed
and Creed is being what we know without questions
of what we don't know - sometimes
a restful place in the darkness of knowing.
Will there be an open door
to walk through as Faith becomes a surge of sunlight
when clouds have passed over?

Do I hear the call of Faith - do I see
the surge of light in what I want to Believe?
The opening is so small. When I am tired
what I know is a blanket of comfort
a certainty of place and space
in the sky of the unknown.

As in the Beginning
God created the Heavens and the Earth,
questions and answers, storms of Belief
and Man was created in that image,
each to his own, each

committing to find God in his own way.

Looking - assured Spirit to open doors
of Faith - to see the light.

In Creed we close doors - Creation
becomes Man's instead of God's.

I hold out my hand, in Belief
that Creed will not stand between the assurance
of my knowing and
the possible light beyond that knowing.

And here I am, grateful for the companionship and spiritual ways shown, and the support
in getting acquainted with all of you.

Covenant has a new meaning for me.
Belief and Faith have new dimensions.
I am changed, but I am myself.

Thank you.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon delivered by Doris Thurston at the
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on June 26, 2005. The spoken sermon is
available on audio cassette at the Fellowship.)