

Faith: Thoughts on a Wounded Word
The Unitarian Church of Montreal
Rev. Diane Rollert and Members of the Congregation, 7 December 2008

You may not realize it, but we are writing a book together. Here's the working title: "Wounded Words: A Unitarian Universalist Congregation Reflects Together on the Words They Love and Love to Hate." I've got a draft of the first chapter stored in my computer. Chapter One: Faith. More than twenty pages long with contributions from eighteen of you, plus an academic article entitled "Pistis as 'Ground for Faith' in Hellenized Judaism and Paul," for the appendix, of course.

In October I introduced to you the concept of Wounded Words, a phrase borrowed from fellow Unitarian Universalist minister Barbara ten Hove. Wounded words are the words of religion that may have been used to wound us -- or they can be words we love whose definitions have been co-opted by others. I asked those of you who were here to nominate wounded words you'd like to discuss as a community. "Faith" was the word that got the most requests, followed by "God," the wounded word for January. Your response to the word Faith was inspiring. Are you having fun yet? I am.

Some of you are dying to know the statistics. Out of eighteen responses, four contributors felt strongly that the word "faith" should be dropped from our vocabulary. The other fourteen contributors tended to feel more flexible. There's good faith and there's bad faith, the majority said. Several people shared their personal definitions of faith. Today, I'll offer some snapshots of what I received. I apologize in advance for the edits and cuts I've made. I do hope to make the full texts available soon. Or you'll have to wait to read the book.

I had promised myself that I wouldn't spend a lot of time quibbling over dictionary definitions. However, the word "faith" may actually prove a theory I've had for a while. Like people, all dictionaries are the product of their social location. You know how it goes. We are each products of our social class, our race and culture, and that shapes our perspective on things. (Hence, beware of the preacher and her bias.) The same goes for your favourite dictionary. Think about it. When and where was it published? Who was on the editorial board? Who got to decide which definitions would take precedence over others?

My advice: read your dictionary with a healthy dose of scepticism, or better yet, consult many dictionaries, including a few older ones. You will find that definitions can come and go with the fashion of the times. Sadly, we tend to throw out our old dictionaries, innocently replacing them with newer dictionaries, not knowing what twisted perversions—of words—may lurk inside.

As Diana Kleins wrote to me, "I refer you to Webster's New World Dictionary where Faith is defined as: confidence, belief in the Christian religion, followed by 6 totally unacceptable definitions, by Unitarian standards."

I refer you to the American Heritage Dictionary 2000 edition where Faith is: "1. Confident belief in the truth, value, or trustworthiness of a person, idea, or thing. 2. Belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence. 3. Loyalty to a person or thing; allegiance: keeping faith

with one's supporters. 4. often Faith *Christianity* The theological virtue defined as secure belief in God and a trusting acceptance of God's will. 5. The body of dogma of a religion: the Muslim faith. 6. A set of principles or beliefs. Idiom: In faith, truly, indeed.”

Tracing the etymology of the word faith can be headache producing. Several of my sources point to the word as coming from the Latin root *fidere* “to trust,” and from the Germanic root *bhidh*, related to the Greek root *pistis*, all of which point to the word “bid” in English, as in “to command, persuade or trust” (I bid you to follow what I’m trying to say). In England, circa 1250, faith would have meant the “duty of fulfilling one’s trust.” By 1300 it began to be used to mean different religious groups -- I’m guessing as a way to describe how different people fulfilled their trust.

Elizabeth Morton, our resident expert on wounded words that are derived from the Greek, tells me that during the time of the Roman Empire, Jewish scholars like Philo often used the word *pistis* or faith to mean “evidence.” Paul, the Hellenized Jew, whose writings became a critical foundation of Christianity, understood the word “faith” to be an “utterly rational conviction based on clear evidence.” Elizabeth writes:

Pistis “also had related meanings....[including] confidence, trust, trustworthiness, reliability, assurance. ...[or] "firm conviction" without qualification.” For the Stoics faith or *pistis* meant “firm, unshakeable confidence in the truth, which always...was based on absolute rationality...

“All of these meanings are as far removed as possible from our idea of "faith" as some irrational, utterly blind adherence to doctrine for its own sake. In fact, that radical notion of faith arises,” Elizabeth believes, “only quite recently (theology being a very ancient discipline), with the move to a very radical interiority and emotion-based piety in the late Reformation period and on.” Elizabeth thinks “particularly since Kierkegaard we have come generally to associate "faith" with his really quite wild idea of a "leap of faith." Once you get as far along as Kierkegaard you have completely lost the meaning the word carried in ancient Greek philosophy and in early and medieval theology. Theology was (and is) a discipline very closely allied to philosophy, which in turn was fiercely rational and intellectual.

“It is modern American evangelicalism which has,” Elizabeth continues, “taken this notion of "faith" in almost its Kierkegaardian sense, or at least with that idea of faith lodged in a radically personal interiority characteristic of the late Reformation, and turned it into what is now almost our sole understanding of the word. In all of this, of course, American evangelicalism (a very modern movement) has co-opted the entire vocabulary of the Christian tradition and in many cases turned it upside-down entirely. It is altogether too bad that others who are not evangelicals have let them get away with this! They win, of course, because what they say is so very simple, and the truth is always anything but simple - it takes a lot of learning!”

Several people wrote to tell me how just how painful this can be. Jean Freed writes:

“Sorry, Diane, but to me “faith” and its sister word “belief” mean oppression. These are the words that people have repeatedly used to justify the active oppression of people different from them. Years and years ago, I heard it used to justify the oppression of blacks. Recently I have

heard it used by pharmacists who refuse to fill prescriptions for birth control pills. And they have both been used many, many times, by numerous people, as a justification for why gay and lesbians should not be allowed to marry.”

“Here goes one brave attempt at this impossible task,” writes Hari Thakur:

“Faith by definition is rejection of reason, the one characteristics that distinguishes humans from all living beings. Des Cartes said it for us all: "I think, therefore I am". Faith glorifies "unreason" for the questionable benefit of certitude in an uncertain world. It impedes change and progress. It baffles me why we hold it so high.”

Mickey Van Riel writes:

The word "faith" for me is synonym with the word "trust", although I prefer the word trust, because for many people faith includes something to do with a god and since I do not believe in a personal god who looks after me, I prefer the word trust. I trust in what comes to me in my life, is part of how the universe works and it is up to me to align myself with this force, and either rejoice in it or learn from it the lesson that is coming my way.

From Kirstin McKeown:

“Faith both is and isn't a wounded word for me. Having faith, whether it was in a person, or an ideal or in God has kept me going in some pretty dark times. But being told to have faith in something has been hurtful.

The passivity of faith in the way it's often discussed bothers me. Have faith and God (or whomever) will heal you, fix the problem, whatever. It relieves everyone, including the one who is to keep faith, from the responsibility to actually do anything. And it's a handy way to blame the sufferer if the pain is not instantly, miraculously (very deliberate word choice there), cured. You obviously didn't have enough faith. Faith can move mountains...

I am really attached to the bit about faith in Hebrews 11:1, the evidence of things not seen and the substance of things hoped for. To me that describes the un-wounded faith.”

allen lobo (who prefers his name in lower case) writes:

“Faith - to me is " I have limitless power - everything is mine already - infinite purity, infinite freedom, infinite love and power." [As] Swami Vivikananda said in a talk he gave to a London audience on Nov. 10. 1897, " a man who does not believe in Himself - is an Atheist ! --- all the powers of the Universe are already ours --- "

But allen warns that “saying "faith can move mountains" - if based on blindness, the WRONG mountain could be moved !!!! So Faith is both beautiful and ugly --- it is basically just Energy - yet powerful energy - so it needs to be used with wisdom ---- Blind faith is for lunatics.--- Mindful faith is for those who are master's of their own destiny --- they have in effect re-entered the Garden of Eden and are in heaven now. Oh to be such a person!

From Denis Barsalo:

I started writing a long response to you this morning just to realize that I don't really know what it means to me after all. I'll try again...

To me, faith is belief in myself. Having trust in my life's decisions and journey. Having a sense of assurance that no matter what, things will be alright. At the same time, I sort of tie it into "fate". I have always believed that things just happen and that making the right choices make them happen in your favour or in the favour of a better world. I guess you could say that I have faith in fate. Fate = destiny, Faith = belief.

From Harvey Shepherd:

“Why do we need to define “faith” in religious matters in a restrictive way that we would not insist on in other fields of inquiry? We can talk about having, or not having, faith in Barak Obama, Stephen Harper or a friend or loved one without anyone supposing that we are talking about the existence or non-existence of these individuals. Of course, these are individuals whose existence no one doubts. But we can also talk about faith, or the lack of it, in democracy, free enterprise, Unitarian Universalism and so forth without really having a precise idea of whether these can be said to exist. Why not God, Jesus, the Great Mother, Santa Claus or whatever?”

“Faith does not relieve us of the need to think. We rightly denigrate “blind faith” – implying, I take it, that there is some other kind. I think I see faith and reflection as operating in tandem, each kind of checking up on the other and helping us make adjustments from time to time.

“There may also be a reciprocal quality in faith: that it is influenced by the kind of response we get. As Christmas approaches, may I suggest that “Santa Baby,” made popular in 1953 by Ertha Kitt and also interpreted by a number others, including Madonna, is a carol with more theological content than it is always given credit for. You will recall that the singer is asking Santa in a sultry voice for costly gifts like a sable and a car. In particular, I refer to the verse:

“Come and trim my Christmas tree
“With some decorations bought at Tiffany’s.
“I really do believe in you
“Let’s see if you believe in me.”

“Maybe this helps.”

Elizabeth Charbonneau writes:

“For me, Faith is not confined to any church walls, neither to any particular creed, nor even to dogma itself. For me, Faith is something much broader than that. Faith, in my mind, is belief in the positive, akin to love, trust, confidence, and hope, regarding oneself, others, and the Cosmos- whichever way we see the Cosmos, and explain and make sense of it personally.

“We need to beware of the demons of self-doubt, deceit, distrust, and cynicism, among others, that gnaw away at Faith.”

So this is where we end for now. If faith is defined as something narrow and oppressive, as something that leaves no room to be challenged or questioned, then by all means let's throw it out. But I'm not ready to throw out a definition of faith that allows for an opening up of understanding, that humbly admits that we don't have all the answers, that gives us space to trust that there may be something worth living for in this universe.

What happens if we choose to live without faith, without a belief in the trustworthiness of anything? Pure reason and experience can certainly convince us that humans do more evil than good. Do we thus become a nation of cynics, sure that there can never be any goodness in humanity worth our aspirations? What if we choose to have no faith, no trust, no belief in ourselves, or in anything else? Do we pack up, go home and live in isolation, never trying to engage in the difficult work or the difficult conversations, because there isn't any reason to try?

The truth is that words will always be imprecise, and definitions will come and go with the wind. What you mean may never be what I mean, but if we keep trying in good faith (not blind faith), in fellowship, in trust, and in love, our openness might actually expand our horizons. Wouldn't that be glorious? Oh to be such a person.

Amen, namaste, blessed be.

Readings:

Faith

Faith sustains the poor
as they try to forget their grumbling bellies;
it soothes the powerless
while their voices are drowned

Have faith, they say to the young mother
as if offering a slice of cake
but faith does not feed her hungry child
or hold her up as she takes a stand

Faith is noble

The CEO and the world leader do not need faith;
they greedily consume money and power
hooked up to their PDAs, iPhones, emails and cell phones
they dominate our dog-eats-dog world

Faith is a weakness

No matter how dark the night is I know that
the sun also rises
I have faith
because in my heart
heavy with pain, sorrow and grief
there is room for nothing else

Faith is a prayer

--Chantal Bourbon
(Member of the Unitarian Church of Montreal)

Foi, nom féminin

Sens 1: Confiance, croyance.

Exemple: Avoir foi en quelqu'un.

Synonyme: croyance; Anglais: trust

Sens 2: Croyance ferme en un dogme.

Exemple: Avoir la foi.

Synonyme: croyance; Anglais: faith

Synonymes; confiance, croyance, fidélité, spiritualité

Citations avec le mot 'foi' :

“A cette époque, je n'avais pas la foi. Ceux qui me l'ont donnée, ce sont quelques athées, plus tard, que j'ai connus.”

--Sacha Guitry

“Crois et tu comprendras ; la foi précède, l'intelligence suit.”

--Saint Augustin

“Un chien affamé n'a foi qu'en la viande.”

--Anton Tchekhov