

**Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Covenant Group Session
Trust**

**Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, Palatine, IL
Janeane Weprin, Jan. 2010**

Opening Reading

Excerpt from *dive for dreams* by e.e. cummings

silently if, out of not knowable
night's utmost nothing, wanders a little guess
(only which is this world)more my life does
not leap than with the mystery your smile
sings or if (spiralling as luminous
they climb oblivion)voices who are dreams,
less into heaven certainly earth swims
than each my deeper death becomes your kiss
losing through you what seemed myself,i find
selves unimagably mine; beyond
sorrow's own joys and hoping's very fears
yours is the light by which my spirit's born:
yours is the darkness of my soul's return
-you are my sun, my moon, and all my stars

Check-in.

Meditation: Light

Take a moment to make sure you are comfortable
Uncross your legs and arms
Place both feet flat on the floor
Close your eyes and
Take a deep breath in and let it go
Take another deep breath and let it go
Take a few moments to
Breathe-in slowly.
Breathe-out gently.
As you breathe, allow your body to just let go.
Allow your mind to be peaceful and relaxed.
Feel life flowing
With each breath in

With each breath out
Breathe in peace
Breathe out love
Breathe in peace
Breathe out thanks
Breathe in peace
Breathe out joy
Breathe in peace
Breathe out forgiveness
Breathe in peace
Breathe out love
Now focus on your heart
Visualize a tiny brilliant white spark of light
Right in the center of your heart
Focus your attention on this heart light
Allow it to grow and expand
Becoming ever brighter and brighter
Until you become the light
You are the light, the light of your heart
Notice how your light expands beyond you
To this room, to your family, to your friends
To your community, to your world
As far as you can imagine
You are a brilliant white star
Amongst the billions and trillions of stars
Shining in the Universe
Now visualize the night sky
On a cool crystal clear night
Ablaze with stars
As you look up at the sky
Notice you are back in your body,
Looking up
Notice you are back on earth,
Grounded, safe, warm
Your light is still there
See it shining in your heart, a tiny sparkle
Of joy, of life, of love
Now take a deep breath in and let it go
Come gently back into this room
And when you are ready, open your eyes.

Deep Sharing/Deep Listening

We are going to share about trust. This is very open to whatever you want to share. Here are some ideas...

- What is trust?
- How is trust related to faith?
- Is trust important to you? Why or why not?
- Who do you trust? Yourself, others, life, the universe, God?
- Are you trustworthy?
- Has your trust ever been betrayed and how were you affected?
- Have you ever betrayed anyone's trust in you?

Check-out

Closing Reading/Extinguishing the Chalice

by David Whyte from Fire in the Earth

It doesn't interest me if there is one God
Or many gods.
It want to know if you belong or feel
Abandoned.
If you know despair or can see it in others.
I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world
With its harsh need
To change you. If you can look back
With firm eyes
Saying this is where I stand. I want to know
If you know
How to melt into that fierce heat of living
Falling toward
The center of your longing. I want to know
If you are willing
To live, day by day with the consequence of love
And the bitter
Unwanted passion of your . . . defeat.

Preparation for CCUU Session: Trust

Food for Thought

- What is trust?
- How is trust related to faith?
- Is trust important to you? Why or why not?

- Who do you trust? Yourself, others, life, the universe, God?
- Are you trustworthy?
- Has your trust ever been betrayed and how were you affected?
- Have you ever betrayed anyone's trust in you?

Reading – Excerpt from *Finding Your Faith*

A SERMON OFFERED BY REV. TIM KUTZMARK

FEBRUARY 26, 2006 • UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF READING

<http://www.uureading.org/sermons/sermon060226.htm>

*"I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections
and the truth of the imagination."*

—Keats

The Sermon:

Where do we place our trust?

Once, there was an old man who lived in a village. He had lived a good life, and had been very loyal to the chief. In appreciation for all he had contributed to the life of the village, one day the chief of the village gives him a horse, a prize stallion. The neighbors gather round: "Such *good* news!" they proclaim. The old man replies: Good news, bad news—who can say?

The next day, the prize horse runs away. The neighbors gather round: "Such *bad* news!" they proclaim. The old man replies: Good news, bad news—who can say? The next day, the horse returns, bringing with him a whole herd of beautiful, wild horses. The neighbors gather round: "Such *good* news!" they proclaim. The old man replies: Good news, bad news—who can say?

The next day, when the old man's young son tries to tame the biggest and most beautiful wild horse, he is thrown and breaks his leg in several places. The neighbors gather round: "Such *bad* news!" they proclaim. The old man replies: Good news, bad news—who can say?

The next day, the army of a powerful War Lord marches through the village, pressing all the young men in the village into service. They march off to a bloody battle from which none are expected to return. Only the young son of the old man is spared, because of his broken leg. The neighbors gather round: "Such *good* news!" they proclaim. The old man replies: Good news, bad news—who can say?

Now, I don't know this old man's religion. I don't know this old man's beliefs. But I do know this old man in this old story is full of unfathomable faith.

Faith. *Faith*. What is faith? Where does faith come from?

James W. Fowler, a noted theologian and human development theorist, suggests that faith is perhaps very different from what we usually assume it to be. First, Fowler makes a distinction between religion, belief, and faith. They are three different things entirely. According to Fowler, religion is “cumulative tradition.” Religion is the shared shape and form of our deepest questionings. Religion is the stories, and songs, and community rituals we create together to make meaning out of life. Lighting the chalice, repeating our chalice lighting words each week, sharing our time of Joys and Concerns, praying together, meditating together, singing our hymns and chants—this is religion. *Religion is about what we do.*

Belief is different from religion. Belief is the holding of certain ideas about something—such as believing in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the importance of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the goal of world community with peace and justice for all, and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Whereas religion is communal ritual, belief is an individual decision. Although what we may choose to believe can simply be a parroting of what we’ve been taught in religion, we still claim it as our own. Belief is head centered, and engages the mind. Belief is about intellectual concepts. *Belief is what we think.* But *faith* reaches beyond concepts. Faith is an *experience* that goes beyond the mind. Faith engages all the senses. Faith involves relationships—between ourselves and others, ourselves and our world, ourselves and that which is greater than us. *Faith is our relationship with life itself.*

In her book: “Faith, Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience,” celebrated Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg expands on this understanding of faith. She writes: One day a friend called to ask if we could meet for tea. Knowing that I was writing a book on faith from the Buddhist perspective, she was confused and wanted to talk. “How can you possibly be writing a book on faith without focusing on God?” she demanded. “Isn’t that the whole point?” Her concern spoke to the common understanding we have of faith—that it is synonymous with religious adherence. But the tendency to equate faith with doctrine, and then argue about terminology and concepts, distracts us from what faith is actually about. In my understanding, whether faith is connected to a deity or not, its essence lies in trusting ourselves to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely. This faith is not a commodity we either have or don’t have—it is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience.

Faith is trusting our own deepest experience.

Poet David Whyte writes:

*It doesn't interest me if there is one God
Or many gods.*

*It want to know if you belong or feel
Abandoned.
If you know despair or can see it in others.
I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world
With its harsh need
To change you. If you can look back
With firm eyes
Saying this is where I stand. I want to know
If you know
How to melt into that fierce heat of living
Falling toward
The center of your longing. I want to know
If you are willing
To live, day by day with the consequence of love
And the bitter
Unwanted passion of your . . . defeat.*

This journey of faith, this learning how to unfold into our experience, this slow melting into the fierce heat of living, is inherent in our Unitarian Universalist heritage.

One of the leaders in our current understanding of faith development—of where we put our trust and confidence—is James Fowler. James Fowler outlines six stages of faith development. I share them this morning as an invitation to meditate upon where we might be on our faith journey. *In doing so, we can ask ourselves, where do we place our trust? For the placement of our trust is the definition of our faith.*

Stage One: The Self-Absorbing Mirror—usually ages 2-7. Trust is placed in what a child sees and hears from parents or guardians. A child in this stage is absorbing all the taboos and beliefs from the family around them. A child mirrors back the beliefs they see or hear, all the while assuming that everyone understands things exactly as they do. The transition from this stage begins as cognitive thinking develops, and the world expands beyond parents and family.

Stage Two: The Literalist—Age 8 to adolescence. Trust is shifted from family and is now placed in stories and explanations that are understood literally. What is written is what is true. For example: Adam and Eve were the first humans, they actually did live in a historical garden called Eden, and they actually ate a forbidden apple. These stories and explanations offer a sense of comfort, for they tell who we are in the world, and why things happen. The deeper symbolism of the stories is not understood. The transition from this stage begins as contradictions in stories leads to reflection.

Stage Three: The Loyalist—Early Adulthood. Trust is shifted from stories and explanations and is now placed in the need to belong to a group, and the need for

approval. Contradictions in stories and beliefs might be seen, but the need for approval and belonging deadens that insight. The need for safety, security, and answers is what can be trusted, and so questions are silenced and conformity wins. Religious authority figures are seen as bearers of truth. Rules abound and are followed. *Most people stop their faith development here, and remain at this stage.* The transition from this way of thinking usually begins, if it ever comes, with some experience that shatters the individual's trust in an authority figure, group, or set of beliefs. A contradiction emerges that cannot be reconciled or ignored. Self-reflection opens awareness that cannot be stifled.

Stage Four: The Searcher—Young Adulthood or into mid-thirties or forties, *if ever.* The searcher no longer trusts the old authorities or the group. Now, the searcher trusts their own need to search out new answers and create a new framework of meaning. Searchers examine their own experience to discover what is true in their personal lives. Discovering new insights and new answers are the goal. We become mostly concerned with the pursuit of what feels right and true for them. We often see the world through only the lens of personal truth and meaning. Distrustful of authority and organization, we feel a tension between individuality and group membership (something many Unitarian Universalists struggle with constantly). We place ultimate trust in the path, the search, and the questions.

Stage Five: The Seer—Midlife, *if ever.* We stop the search for a new framework of meaning, and trusts instead paradox, ambiguity, and uncertainty. We trust that clear answers can no longer be found. The need for a new truth to replace the discarded ones dissolves, as does the need for the search itself. One stops striving and control is no longer an issue. A person trusts the phrase: "Good news, bad news, who can say?" Experiences and beliefs from all the religions no longer feel foreign, but are somehow part of one's own experience. Nothing is rejected. The old images, stories, and symbols we walked away from are revisited, re-interpreted, and renewed. Symbolism rather than certainty is celebrated, and mystery is relished. Peace is made with one's past, and the unconscious is brought to light. There is a new openness to the strange and the other. (This is something that many long-term Unitarian Universalists are never able to accomplish—making peace with our religious past and, in fact, re-embracing old theological concepts and language and beliefs from a new symbolic perspective). All this trust is not just held as thoughts or values, or as an ideal. This trust is experienced and lived profoundly.

Last stage of all (that ends this strange, eventful history) is Stage Six: The Universal Spirit. This person trusts completely the universality of all life. They give themselves over completely to a force that attempts to unify the world. They are propelled by an inclusiveness of community, a radical commitment to social justice, and a selfless passion for a transformed world. Their insight is often not a choice, but a call from the Divine or from the demands of history. And that call is trusted completely and fully, no

matter where it takes them. Reaching this stage is rare: examples possibly include Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Mother Mira, Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Mother Theresa.

“For some this will be a very different approach to faith,” writes Sharon Salzberg. And then she makes an interesting observation. “In Pali, the language of the original Buddhist texts, the word usually translated as faith, confidence, or trust is *saddha*. *Saddha* literally means “to place the heart upon.” To have faith is to offer one’s heart or give over one’s heart. (12) “In Pali, faith is a verb, an action, as it is also in Latin and Hebrew. Faith is not a singular state that we either have or don’t have, but is something that we do. We “faith.” Faith is the willingness to take the next step, to see the unknown as an adventure, to launch a journey.” (12) “Faith is the animation of the heart that says, “I choose life, I align myself with the potential inherent in life, I give myself over to that potential.” This spark of faith is ignited the moment we think, *I’m going to go for it. I’m going to try.*” (16)

J.F. Packer perhaps says it best when he writes: “Belief is a truth held in the mind. Faith is a fire in the heart.”

And so I ask: “Is this good news, or is this bad news?”

Good news, bad news: who can say?

Blessed Be. Amen.

Note: The six stages of faith development are fully explicated in James Fowler’s classic book “Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development.” The summary of these stages included in this sermon was adapted in only the slightest manner from a source that is unknown to me, as the attribution page was missing from my summary sheet. The source would be credited if I knew the author.

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