

Walking Beyond the Edge of What You Can See

Jan K. Nielsen

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock

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“Within us is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, the eternal One.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Liberal theology is not for the faint of heart.

It points us in a general direction without telling us the specific destination.

It refuses to make our commitments for us but holds us accountable for the commitments we make.

The liberal religion is an invitation, not a mandate.

It invites us to live with ambiguity without giving in to facile compromise;

to engage in dialogue without trying to control the conversation;

to be open to change without accepting change too casually;

to take commitment seriously but not blindly;

and to be engaged in the culture without succumbing to the culture’s values.

Liberal religion calls us to strength without rigidity, conviction without ideology, openness without laziness.

It asks us to pay attention.

It is an eye-open faith, a faith without certainty.

“The Pinewoods” a poem by Mary Oliver

Sermon

“We’d like you to speak for the ‘nones,’” read the email in my inbox. Just to be clear, the writer meant not a group of religious sisters, but instead, the growing group of folks who, when asked to name their religion, check the box marked “None.” We need someone, the note explained, to write about end of life issues for those who might call themselves “spiritual, but not religious.” Anyone here ever self-identified as “spiritual, but not religious”? Though I do now call myself “religious,” (I, after all, am a *minister*), I, too, at one time, would have checked the box marked “None.” And I know that more than a few “spiritual, but not religious” folks find their way through the doors of our Unitarian Universalist congregations. And so I said, “Yes.”

The folks who contacted me had collected essays from over a dozen different religious, cultural and ethical perspectives but they realized that, by not including the “spiritual, but not religious” voice, they were missing a chunk of the population. According to a 2012 Pew poll, nearly a fifth of adults in this country (a record high) consider themselves “spiritual, but not religious.” While some of them may identify as agnostics or atheists, nearly two-thirds of the “nones” say they believe in God or some kind of higher power. And the most recent Pew poll released just last spring found that the Millennials, those born between 1981 and 1996, are increasingly driving this trend with more than a third rejecting any religious label and falling into the category of the “nones.” The “nones,” regardless of their age, are religiously unaffiliated, in part, because so many are turned off by the rigid rules and dusty dogma of traditional religion and, like so many people these days no matter what box they might check about religion, they’re fed up with institutions.

These trends away from organized religion and religious institutions have not gone unnoticed by the people who study and write about religion. We’re living in a time of profound global transformation, writes religion

scholar Karen Armstrong, a massive cultural shift that is changing faith communities everywhere. Diana Butler Bass, another scholar of the history of religion, calls our time “the great turning.” Others say we may be nearing a kind of “religious revolution,” a time of change more significant than any the world of religion has seen in 500 years, since the last “great turning” we now call the Protestant Reformation. Simply put, the “Age of Belief” is over and done, says Harvard religion professor Harvey Cox; we’ve now entered, he says, the “Age of the Spirit,” a time when we want direct experience of the divine, without any of the traditional filters of doctrine or dogma and also practical guidance – wisdom to help us live our lives.

If you’re new to our congregation or to our Unitarian Universalist tradition, you should know up front that we’re not big on doctrine or dogma around here but we do care *a lot* about how we live our lives. Wisdom *matters* to us. Sunday to Sunday, we’re searching together for wisdom, and now, during October, we’re looking at “faith” as a wisdom practice that might help guide our lives.

“Faith” is one of those words that can cause us to stumble. Maybe when we hear the word we think of “blind faith,” as in unthinking acceptance of dogma or doctrine – but that’s just not our way. Or maybe we think of “faith” as something we either have or don’t have – and if we assume that faith is the opposite of doubt, then we might think that given our questions, we just “don’t have” it - and flatly reject the whole idea of faith.

I used to stumble big time on the word “faith” until I learned more about faith as a way of living wisely and fully these lives we have been given. Faith is not something we either have or don’t have; faith, as a wisdom practice, is something we *do*. It was Frederick Buechner whose words first taught me that “faith is a verb, not a noun,” as he says, “a process, not a possession.” Faith is a process that can include our doubts and our questions. Since the Enlightenment years of the 18th century, we’ve come to think of “faith” or “belief” as the acceptance of a set of notions as literal and factual truth. The word “believe,” however, originally meant “to set the heart upon” or “to give the heart to.”

A look at languages other than ours also makes clear that faith is something we do. In both Latin and Hebrew, the word for faith is a verb, an action. The same is true in Pali, the language of the original Buddhist texts. “*The Pali word usually translated as faith, confidence or trust,*” writes Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg, *is “Saddha. Saddha literally means ‘to place the heart upon.’ To have faith,*” she says, *“is to offer one’s heart or give over one’s heart.”* I have come to see that faith is not about what we accept as fact; faith is about what we do with our lives. If you were here a couple of weeks ago, you heard Tucker preach a powerful sermon and maybe you can still hear the words of one of the hymns we sang that day: “Just as long as I have breath,” we sang together, “tell them I said yes to life.” Tucker testified about his decision to say “yes” to his very being, and in so doing, to say “yes” to life. Faith, as a wisdom practice, is about saying “yes” to life.

What about you? To what do you give your heart? In what ways is life calling you, right now, on this October morning, to say “yes”? Is it time for a change – maybe a change that could lead you to be who you were born to be? Is it time to return to a dream long buried? Is it time to step forward toward a place, either literal or metaphorical, you have always longed to be? What is your heart telling you? These are human questions, they are life questions and they are faith questions. They are questions that sometimes call us to look beyond the clear path, to forgo the easy path, and they are questions that sometimes ask us to struggle, to walk into the unknown – to walk beyond, in the words of our poet, “the edge of what our eyes actually see in the kindness of the morning.”

To live the lives we were born to live, we sometimes have to walk beyond what we can see; we have to walk, not just in the kindness of the morning but also into the mystery of the night. We have to walk, as the poet wisely says, “into the rough, uncharted pinewoods” of life “where everything is so quick and uncertain, so

glancing, so improbable, so real.” Life at some point will call us into a place where all we really know is that time seems to be moving fast and it seems like nothing is for sure and yet – and yet everything - everything is before us, and within us, including the improbable, but so real, miracle of our breath. The kingdom of heaven is here, Jesus said, here, not somewhere far away, but here, beneath our feet, spread out before us on this Earth that gave us birth, and here, deep within us, here in the miracle of our breath -- but we do not see it. The real miracles are within us and all around us, teaches wisdom, wisdom both ancient and contemporary, and so keep on, wisdom says, keep walking beyond the edge of what you can see.

The way of the world is to trust only what we can see. And so we can sometimes fall into the fallacy of measuring – measuring ourselves, and one another, and even life itself, by metrics. We can start to think that our worth depends on the numbers on our bank statements, or the degrees on our resumes, or whether or not we live on a “destination” street or drive the best car. A life measured by metrics, a life fed only by “the world’s empty praise,” (to borrow a line from that beautiful hymn we will sing) can leave us hungry.

Right now, in the midst of all that is changing in our culture, so many people are hungry. No matter who we are, no matter our circumstances, whether we claim a religious identity or whether we check the box marked “none,” we are hungry for wisdom. We hunger for faith -- the courage to say “yes” to life -- and to keep saying “yes” even when life is hard. We hunger to give our hearts over to life – to live lives that stand for something, to use our hearts and our hands to work toward something that will outlast our bodies.

We hunger for a world where no one is hungry in body, and all have enough to eat. We hunger for a world where people who disagree can still live together in peace, a world where no one will cause us harm because of whom we love, a world where schoolchildren and college students can learn in safety and we’ll know for sure that they will find their way home at the end of the day.

We are all hungry. Every one of us hungers to be accepted, as we are, imperfections, struggles and all. We may outwardly pride ourselves on our independence and self-reliance, but inside we hunger for connection, to know another, to be known for who we are in heart and soul. We hunger for sanctuary. Our work here together here in this great community of souls is about feeding that hunger for sanctuary and that hunger for wisdom. We know that none of us, and no one religious tradition, even our own, has either all the answers or a lock on the truth. Our search for wisdom to feed our spirits takes us beyond doctrine and dogma and puts us in conversation with different spiritual voices. Last month, we looked to the Jewish tradition for wisdom as we honored the High Holy Days and the Jewish new year. Today, we’ve heard from the voices of philosophers and poets, voices Buddhist and Christian, voices Unitarian Universalist and yes, voices without any category other than “none.” Over time, you will hear me draw from sources far and wide, as I seek to offer wisdom that might guide our lives. This is the Unitarian Universalist way: we offer not an easy a “pick and choose” faith, but instead an invitation to sanctuary and an invitation to search for wisdom so that we might live fully and deeply and wisely these lives we have been given.

We offer not easy answers; ours, in Paul Razor’s words, is a “faith without certainty,” a way of being spiritual and religious that teaches that what we do with our lives matters, and matters a lot. We believe that Grandma Moses was right: “Life is what we make it.” We are all, each one of us, like the girl in the story I shared with our children, sitting on our tickets. We help one another here -- we encourage one another – to find our tickets and to say “yes – yes -- yes” to life.

I leave you with these questions to carry on your hearts: *To what, in the days to come, will you give your heart? Where is life calling you? Will you hold back and play it safe and say “oh no, not me”? Or will you say “yes” and walk beyond the edge of what your eyes can see?*

