



# *Faith*

## Small Groups: December 2014

This December, we will be exploring what it means to live a life of faith within our liberal religious tradition. First let's look at the definitions of faith:

- : strong belief or trust in someone or something
- : belief in the existence of God
- : strong religious feelings or beliefs
- : a system of religious beliefs

I have been asked what do I mean when I say "our Unitarian Universalist faith?" On one hand, "faith" is simply another word for religion. This reflects the third definition. Even though UUs don't have a system of beliefs, we do have a set of principles, strong values around equity and compassion, and a particular history - faith refers to the collective of all these.

Faith, like other traditional religious language, can give us pause. Traditional definitions often don't work for us. For example, we tend to ask "Faith in who or faith in what?" That question limits our way of looking at faith and suggests that the only way to understand faith is in relationship to a theistic belief in God. In other words, if you don't believe in God, you can't have faith.

In talking to members of UUCP about this theme, I heard people describe faith as showing up. "Showing up, keep showing up, even when things get difficult, that is faith." Another person described it as being able, "even in the most fearful times, to hold on to bits of hope and gratitude." This leads me to the idea that faith actually has less to do with someone or something beyond ourselves, and more to do with our own capacity for perseverance and resilience. It is the ability to see some hope beyond the present moment.

Faith seems especially relevant at this time of year. It can take a lot of faith to get through the holidays. I say this both tongue-in-cheek and in all seriousness. The holidays tend to invite feelings of loneliness, revisiting loss and grief, and unresolved challenges with our families of origin. Add to this the particular struggles we might each be facing in this present moment: health concerns, concern for loved ones, fresh grief at the recent loss of loved ones. It all often gets heightened in the holiday season. This month, may you find bits of gratitude and hope to keep before you. May you remember that you are alive and that this is a gift. And may we all continue to feel some hope beyond the present moment that keeps us engaged in nurturing care and love into our lives and world.

Yours in love and faith,  
***Rev. Susan***



# *Living the Theme: Faith*

Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience faith and what you learned from the practice.

## **Pencils and Pens**

Artists often begin a drawing with a pencil, using their eraser liberally. When they are happy with their drawing, they “ink it in,” using a pen to make it permanent. You can do something similar with old and new beliefs and doubts. Begin by making a list of words that evoke old and current beliefs and doubts, both religious and other, from the Tooth Fairy to God to alternative medicine. Using a pencil, arrange them on a blank page in some artistic way, varying their size, weight, and placement to indicate their importance in your life. Keep those beliefs and doubts you have left behind in pencil, but “ink in” the beliefs you feel sure of with a colored marker.

## **Journaling Suggestions**

Faith and doubt often go hand in hand. The following journal exercises come from a chapter on doubt (see book below). **Choose one or more** journaling suggestions to explore:

- Make a list of some of the things you used to believe that you now doubt (religious and nonreligious, from “Sinners go to hell” to “If he loves me, he’ll go to bed at the same time I do every night”). What made the change for you?
- Think about some of the things you believe and where those beliefs come from. How much weight do you give to your experiences versus the experience of others?
- Is there someone in your life now who encourages you to doubt or who listens without judgment when you express your doubts? How do you respond to that? If you are an encourager of questioning for others, how do they respond?
- What are some things (religious and nonreligious) that people around you believe but you doubt? How does your doubt affect your relationships with those who believe?
- How are faith, belief, certainty, and doubt related in your life? How do you feel about the idea that doubt is a good thing for faith?
- If you are questioning your theology at this time in your life, what are some questions you are focusing on?

(From Heart to Heart: Fourteen Gatherings for Reflection and Sharing by Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins)



## *Some Questions to Live With*

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

- **Is there a difference between faith and trust or confidence?**
- **Is faith the same thing as religion, or is religion the same thing as faith?** How do you see them as related or different from each other?
- **How do you feel about the language of faith?** What do words like "sin" "evil" and "redemption" mean to you?
- **Are there traditional words from a language of faith or language of reverence that still have meaning for you, even if you understand them in new ways?** Some examples include holy, sacred, worship, spirit, sin, salvation.
- **How does faith show up in your life?** What does it mean to you? Was there a time in your life when you really needed and found faith? What did it look and feel like?
- It is during times of difficulty, that people most often look for faith. **What keeps you going, what gives you hope, during very difficult times? Would you call this faith? Why or why not?**
- **How do we convey (how do you convey) your Unitarian Universalist faith to your children or grandchildren?**
- Do you believe in God? UUs may be familiar with the sermon topic "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." What about the faith you don't believe in? **Can you have faith if you don't believe in God?**
- We all have faith in something. **What is YOUR UU faith? What is OUR UU faith?**
- **Does faith imply or require action?**
- **If you were accused of being a UU would there be enough evidence to convict you?** What would the evidence be?
- Alan Watts said, "... *the attitude of faith is the very opposite of clinging to belief, or holding on.*" **What is your personal definition of faith?**
- Susan L. Taylor states, "*Seeds of faith are always within us; sometimes it takes a crisis to nourish and encourage growth.*" **Has your faith ever been tested?**
- Mahatma Gandhi notes: "*Faith is not something to grasp, it is a state to grow into.*" **How has your faith evolved with age and experience?**
- *Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith.* -Paul Tillich  
*Faith which does not doubt is dead faith.* -Miguel de Unamuno, [The Agony of Christianity](#)  
**How does doubt play into your faith?**



## Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

### *First Thoughts and Wise Words*

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#### **Faith:**

: strong belief or trust in someone or something

: belief in the existence of God

: strong religious feelings or beliefs

: a system of religious beliefs

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*Faith is not a product of reason, or knowledge, or evidence, or even experience, though each of these plays an important role. Faith is a leap of the moral imagination. Faith looks at what is and believes in what might be.*

*Religion is the collection of external forms that we use -- songs, symbols, stories, rituals, obligations, sacred spaces -- to carry our faith along from day to day and generation to generation.*

Rev. Galen Guengerich, UU

*You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is like an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.*

Mahatma Gandhi

*Do not think that love in order to be genuine has to be extraordinary. What we need is to love without getting tired. Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies.*

Mother Teresa

*Faith is taking the first step even when you can't see the whole staircase.*

Martin Luther King Jr.

*Faith is not a momentary feeling but a struggle against the discouragement that threatens us every time we meet with resistance.*

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, [Spiritual Literacy](#)

*My mom, who passed away in 2002, always had a quiet but firm confidence that "things will work out." Whenever I was wrestling with some problem or decision, she always encouraged me to do whatever seemed most right and not to worry too much; she had faith that things have a way of working out. I've come to believe that is true, not always, but often enough, because of the good will and good works of people, like her, who live with a spirit of kindness and humility and faith. The faith bends the arc.*

Worship Associate

*Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens.*

J.R.R. Tolkien

*All the world is made of faith, and trust, and pixie dust.*

J.M. Barrie, [Peter Pan](#)

*I am coming to terms with the fact that loving someone requires a leap of faith, and that a soft landing is never guaranteed.*

Sarah Dessen, [This Lullaby](#)

*Words are easy, like the wind; Faithful friends are hard to find.*

William Shakespeare

*Sometimes your only available transportation is a leap of faith.*

Margaret Shepard

*I have great faith in fools - self-confidence my friends will call it.*

Edgar Allan Poe, [Marginalia](#)



*None of us can ever save himself; we are the instruments of one another's salvation, and only by the hope that we give to others do we lift ourselves out of the darkness into light.*

Dean Koontz

*When trouble comes, may we be quick to draw upon the abiding resources of inexhaustible power, quietly accumulated through the years, available at a moment's notice, adequate to every necessity,--the faith, hope and charity of mankind, ours to use in times of stress, ours to increase by the fidelity and courage of our times of strength.*

*For we are members, one of another, sharing each other's joys, consoling each other's sorrows, helping each other in all the chances and changes of our common life.*

Frederick M. Eliot

*A UU friend of mine says, "Faith is what gets you up in the morning."*

Worship Associate

*Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.*

*Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.*

*Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.*

*No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.*

Reinhold Niebuhr

*Faith is the willingness to have one's story tested by a larger narrative that one takes on trust.*

Alan Jones, in Heretics' Faith

*Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark.*

Rabindranath Tagore

*Completely close, the love of God, and yet so very far - as near as every breath we take, as distant as each star. We live a faith of paradox, belief invites, but reason mocks*

Dosia Carlson, God's Glory: Hymns

*Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.*

Albert Einstein

*It's funny, though I lost my early religious faith, I cannot help but think of Bible verses when I contemplate faith. I see them now with a new perspective. One of these verses is Hebrews 11:1:*

*"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*

*When I first learned this verse I interpreted "faith" in terms of a personal God. Now I think in terms of faith in my fellow humans on our journey together. As Abraham Maslow said, "...the great lesson is that the sacred is in the ordinary, that it is to be found in one's daily life, in one's neighbors, friends, and family, in one's backyard." The fact that we can take steps toward bending the moral arc, even when we don't know what the outcome of our actions will be, is faith. It is "evidence of things not seen" that are nevertheless possible.*

Worship Associate

*Sometimes I doubt, sometimes I believe, and I like not making myself believe when I am doubting, and not making myself doubt when I am believing. Surely neither God nor accident need my consistency....*

Hugh Prather

*Faith is a state of openness or trust.*

Alan Watts

*In the Bible, faith, hope and love are often discussed together. I Corinthians 13:13 reads:*

*"But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love."*

*Love is the greatest of the three because it is how faith manifests- with loving awareness and action.*

Worship Associate



*The most beautiful experience we  
can have is the mysterious.*

Albert Einstein

*Whether your faith is that there is a God or that  
there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts,  
you are either kidding yourself or asleep.  
Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They  
keep it awake and moving.*

Frederick Buechner

*In his letter to James (2:14-17) St. Paul wrote:  
"What does it profit, my brethren, if someone  
says he has faith but does not have works? Can  
faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked  
and destitute of daily food, and one of you says  
to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and  
filled,' but you do not give them the things which  
are needed for the body, what does it profit?  
Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have  
works, is dead."...Here Paul is saying that  
dogma isn't what is important. Acting out one's  
faith in a loving way is what matters. I can see  
that type of loving awareness and action around  
me, and it has become the basis of my faith.  
Like Mr. Rogers' mother who told him "look for  
the helpers" in situations of great tragedy, when  
I look with clarity, I see people acting with  
intelligence and care.*

Worship Associate

*The moment we cease to hold each other,  
The moment we break faith with each other,  
The sea engulfs us and the light goes out.*

James Baldwin

*I used to think that having faith meant turning  
off your brain and just saying "I believe." And  
if you had a little trouble believing everything  
you were supposed to believe, it was implied that  
you could just sort of do some magic trick, like  
turning around three times, saying some special  
words and you would suddenly have  
"faith." Now, I think of faith as living "as  
if": as if life has meaning; as if things will work  
out somehow; as if there is value and meaning  
in living the truest life possible; as if you can  
just rest in a deep "okay-ness."*

Small Group Facilitator

*During these turbulent times, we must remind  
ourselves repeatedly that life goes on.*

*This we are apt to forget.*

*The wisdom of life transcends our wisdoms: the  
purposes of life outlast our purposes,*

*The processes of life cushion our processes.*

*It is just as important as ever to attend to the  
little graces by which the dignity of our lives  
is maintained and sustained. Birds still sing. The  
stars continue to cast their gentle gleam  
over the desolations of the battlefields, and the  
heart is still inspired by the kind word and the  
gracious deed.*

*Therefore, the evil in the world around us must  
not be allowed to move from without to within.*

*This would be to be overcome by evil...*

Howard Thurman, Life Goes On

*Dream a story full of faith*

*Let the vision grow*

*Cultivate wisdom at each age*

*Marvel at how minds grow.*

Dosia Carlson, God's Glory: Hymns

*Here's what I have faith in as a UU:*

*That the natural forces of the universe will  
continue to function,*

*that the sun will come up tomorrow morning,  
and set tomorrow night.*

*That the earth will continue to move around the  
sun. (At least for the next 2 or 3 billion years.)*

*That the human race will continue to evolve  
at a rate of two steps forward and one step  
backward...*

*in different places at different times.*

*But progress will be made.*

*That love is better than hate-*

*Forgiveness is better than vengeance-*

*And peace is better than war.*

*That the mysterious forces of the universe are  
somehow connected in a positive way to the  
human spirit.*

*That keeping faith with each other is our  
primary mission in life.*

Small Group Facilitator



*I've been mulling over the relationships between hope and faith. Barbara Kingsolver says, "The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what to hope for.*

*And the most you can do is live inside that hope." This quote seems to reinforce what I was thinking - hope is about the future - we hope for something in the future: we hope for peace, we hope for a bike for Christmas, we hope we will become more of who we are.*

*Faith is about the present - we either do or do not have faith that peace will come, that we will get a bike for Christmas, that we will become more of who we are. Maybe living inside the hope is some part of what faith is.*

Worship Associate

*Whenever we experience a setback, suffer a personal slight, or witness an injustice, we turn on "Badlands" by Bruce Springsteen. This rock song meets us in the pits of depression, when we are aware of "trouble in the heartland" and we feel "caught in a cross fire" as a result. From the song, we learn that "the broken hearts stand/as the price you gotta pay." Bruce tells us to "keep pushin' till it's understood/and these badlands start treating us good." He urges us to be defiant: "It ain't no sin to be glad you're alive." He says we need to have faith: "I believe in the love that you gave me/I believe in the faith that can save me/I believe in the hope/and I pray that someday it may raise me/Above these badlands." Those ringing words root our resolve, and we vow not to give up or give in.*

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, Spiritual Literacy

*Why does anybody tell a story? It does indeed have something to do with faith, faith that the universe has meaning, that our little human lives are not irrelevant, that what we choose or say or do matters, matters cosmically.*

Madeleine L'Engle

*Something opens our wings.  
Something makes boredom and hurt disappear.  
Someone fills the cup in front of us.  
We taste only sacredness.*

Rumi

## The Growing Season

*"I am not religious," says my neighbor, as he hoes the rows between his beans and corn.*

*"Oh yes, you are," I say to myself.  
To plant a seed is an act of faith.  
To collect compost is a response of gratitude to the creator.  
To water, fertilize, and mulch the ground is an expression of religious responsibility.  
To kneel down and pull weeds is prayer.  
To harvest is to participate in the fullness and grace of the spirit.  
To protect and replenish creation is to love God.*

*"I am not religious," says my neighbor.  
Yes, you are, I say.*

Sarah Moores Campbell

*If faith does anything, as shown by the prophets and Jesus, it leads us into the injustice and suffering of the world.*

Daniel Berrigan, activist Catholic priest

*Faith is a path of heart that enables us to perceive the mysterious meaning of life, to confront and overcome obstacles, to live with doubt and paradox, and to be at home in a world where the Ground of Being is always present.*

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

*I have another friend who has devoted most of his adult life to resisting the madness of war through actions of justice and peace...So how does he stay healthy and sane? How does he maintain a commitment to this sort of active life? (He said) "I have never asked myself if I was being effective, but only if I was being faithful." He judges his action, not by the results it gets, but by its fidelity to his own calling and identity.*

Parker Palmer, The Active Life

*Faith is the touching of a mystery. It is to perceive another dimension to absolutely everything in the world. In faith, the mysterious meaning of life comes through...To speak in the simplest possible terms: faith sees, knows, senses the presence of God in the world.*

Alexander Schmemmann, a Russian Orthodox priest



*Faith consists in believing when it is beyond the power of reason to believe.*

Voltaire

*None of us knows what might happen even the next minute, yet still we go forward. Because we trust.*

Paulo Coelho, Brida

*To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible.*

Thomas Aquinas

*To have faith is to trust yourself to the water. When you swim you don't grab hold of the water, because if you do you will sink and drown. Instead you relax and float.*

Alan Watts

*The keys to patience are acceptance and faith. Accept things as they are, and look realistically at the world around you. Have faith in yourself and in the direction you have chosen.*

Ralph Marston

*The depth of man's questioning is more important than his answers.*

André Malraux

## **Additional Resources**

### **Articles:**

Quest for Meaning, "Living Faith"  
Church of the Larger Fellowship

<http://www.questformeaning.org/quest-monthly/living-faith-2012/>

James Fowler's Concept of Faith Development-  
An Evangelical Perspective by Fred Hughes

"Faith has to do with the making, maintenance, and transformation of human meaning"

<http://klice.co.uk/uploads/whitfield/Vol%202.5%20Hughes.pdf>

Debating God: Notes on an Unanswered Question

[http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/13/notes-on-an-unanswerable-question/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&smid=fb-share&r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/13/notes-on-an-unanswerable-question/?_php=true&_type=blogs&smid=fb-share&r=0)

The Abortion Ministry of Dr. Willie Parker

"There's more than one way to understand religion and spirituality and God. I do have belief in God. That's why I do this work. My belief in God tells me that the most important thing you can do for another human being is help them in their time of need."

[http://www.esquire.com/features/abortion-ministry-of-dr-willie-parker-0914?click=main\\_sr](http://www.esquire.com/features/abortion-ministry-of-dr-willie-parker-0914?click=main_sr)

### **Books:**

A Heretic's Faith, by Fred Muir

Amazing Grace - A Vocabulary of Faith, by Kathleen Norris