



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Verified Faith

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Friends, I had hoped that we might be gathering with some different news. As of Saturday afternoon, we now know the settled answer to the question that lay in the balance last weekend. Judge Kavanaugh will now be Justice Kavanaugh. We cannot know what is in store for our nation's highest courts, or what will happen at the midterm elections in only a few short weeks.

Now is the time we should pause and consider matters of what theologian of ultimate concern to us. This is a moment for us to consider what it means to have faith.

While I am not a Christian, a line from Paul's letter to the Hebrews has been running through my mind like the news ticker on the bottom of cable news channels.

"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

It's time to talk about faith when we need to feel the assurance and confidence in hope when we do not see it.

It was one of those weeks when it is hard to see hope. I know a lot of you are feeling disheartened, disillusioned, frustrated, angry, worried about the future, worried for our children for generations. I want to tell you that it's ok for you to feel this way. It's a really difficult time in the world. We are not able to see the world as we wish it to be. Progress feels elusive, hidden.

The language of faith can help us to remember that there are many ways of seeing.

The concept of faith is universal across multiple languages and religious traditions. The interesting thing is that English is the only language in which the concept of faith as a noun. In Greek, the word closest to faith is PISTUEO, which means to trust.

Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg and psychologist James Fowler have probed the oldest concept of faith in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, which use the word "sadha."

*Sadha* literally means "to place the heart upon."

To have faith is to offer one's heart or give over one's heart.

James Fowler's landmark book *Stages of Faith* goes further to describe "sadha" as a way of "seeing".

To set one's heart on someone or something requires that one has "seen" or "sees the point of" that to which one is loyal. Faith, therefore, involves vision. It is a mode of knowing, of acknowledgment. One commits oneself to that which is known or acknowledged, and lives loyally, with life and character being shaped by that commitment.

I want to explore an understanding of faith which is sturdy and bold enough for these challenging times of ours. I want you to feel as if you have a faith that can see you through.

When we cannot see hope with our mind, when we cannot see progress with our eyes, I want us to consider faith as a way for us to "see with the heart"-- to connect with the deep wisdom of our hearts... where we can

draw strength, but also the courage we need for the days ahead-- the root of the word courage is *coer*, Latin for heart.

This fall I've been having great conversations with newcomers and new members about faith. They have noticed that on Sundays I am using the term "person of faith," and talk about "our faith community." "Do Unitarian Universalists really have faith?" They ask. "Are we a faith community? Those coming from a more conservative religious tradition may have strong feelings about the word faith—positive or negative.

When coming into our tradition, people carry all kinds of baggage from religious pasts, particularly about what it means to "have faith." In many traditions, to be a person of faith requires adherence to a doctrine, a creed, a prophet, a confession. Primary to our liberal understanding of faith is the idea of the freedom to choose:

to choose what we set our hearts upon  
the sacred texts and wisdom which guide our belief,  
the practices, causes and movements worthy of our commitments.

But choosing our faith doesn't mean that we aren't wary of the pitfalls of faith.

We know there is such a thing as blind faith, faith without enough wisdom which can manipulate and exploit our human need for meaning.

We know there are steps in our faith journeys which lead us to make choices which deepen our faith and make it more rich and real to us...

Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg describes a first step of faith as "bright faith:"

The first, dazzling stage of faith is called bright faith. It is likened to sitting in a darkened room with the door closed, shut in and oppressed. Then for one reason or another, that door swings open. We may not see what is outside, but we know there is an outside.

That means there is light, there is possibility. There are a number of things that push that door to swing open: friendship, love, inspiration, intense pain. It might be art or music or an amazing place or a teacher.

Bright faith is "like falling in love." It is a soaring feeling of discovery, the light and possibility the heart needs to begin to trust and open to a deeper journey of faith.

But as with love relationships, faith must be experienced as reliable in times of actual challenge and struggle. You must question, doubt, and put your faith into practice to truly "see with your heart" that it is worthy to be trusted.

Salzberg calls this next step of faith "verified faith." She says, quoting the Buddha:

*"Do not believe anything just because I said it, because a great elder has said it, because you've read it in a sacred text. Put it into practice – see for yourself what is true."*

If you are going to put something into practice, that means questioning and wondering, examining what you've been told, investigating and seeing for yourself what is true. When our sense of truth is grounded in our own experience, not relying on the words of another or proximity to another, bright

faith has moved into verified faith... Faith is not a singular state that we either have or don't have, but is something that we do. "We faith."

Verified faith—seeing with your heart what is true.

Our heart is a muscle that strengthens faith with testing.

We ask you to bring your doubt, your concern, your woundedness, and also your hope to your faith journey. If your faith hasn't gone through some kind of crisis, if you haven't been disappointed or disillusioned, thought of leaving behind the enterprise of faith all together, if a community hasn't broken your heart or betrayed you, then your faith hasn't yet been verified. When you no longer have illusions that your faith will be perfect, when you doubt and question and lose faith, and then find it again, your faith finally becomes real, true, and useful to you.

You need a faith you can use, not a faith you are afraid to admit isn't working for you.

Having verified faith means that our faith has been tested and has ultimately come out strong and worthy of us "keeping it" and passing it onto generations.

A seminary professor of mine used to talk about the way that the Hebrew biblical tradition was "kept" over centuries-- developed from the oral tradition to the written canon.

How did the people survive exile, oppression, war and genocide? By keeping faith. The texts were "written on the tablet of the hearts" of the people and passed from generation to generation. This is how indigenous wisdom too has endured through harrowing efforts to subdue it. Songs like passed through generations, from grandmother to child.

When you reflect deeply and look into your heart, what is written there?

What or whom brings you deep purpose and assurance?

What is most sacred and life sustaining to you?

You might find that when you look, you find there are words, songs, and prayers written on the tablets of your heart-- touch stones like the Lord's Prayer, or the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, or Amazing Grace-- can bring a great sense of peace, reminders of what faith means to you. Just because we don't adhere to a creedal tradition does not mean we don't need these touch stones to help us keep faith. In fact, we need these perhaps more than the creedal traditions do.

Over the coming days, I invite you to name what is sacred to you—to really be able to see it clearly—not with your mind, but with your heart. By naming it, you will know how you are called to respond to the days ahead—each of us will have a role—perhaps with action, prayer, organizing, outrage, and hope.

So today, may you name what, and who, is precious to you and worthy of your faith. Name the ancestors who stand powerfully beside you, their arms outstretched to comfort and strengthen in these challenging times.

Name what is precious to you, what you know to be true.

Name this community as a source of life giving power.

And may we look to the days ahead not with despair, but with an abiding trust in the wisdom of generations—to make a way out of no way, not only to survive, but thrive.