

The Language of Faith

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UFWC

Many years ago I took part in a group experience in my home church where we explored our understanding of spirituality. This was in the early 80's before the word, "spirituality" came into vogue. Some of the sessions were very loosely modeled after the teen's "About Your Sexuality" course, a very popular program that I would imagine some of you remember. It was the sex education course we used before OWL. One session of our "Spiritwork" course in particular was entitled "Spiritual Dirty Words." The exercise involved us each taking a list of words and trying to measure our emotional response or reaction to the words. The list contained words that ranged from absolution to worship and included blessing, born again, confession, evil, faith, hell, piety, redeemer, sacrament, and sin. In the exercise we were told to quickly glance through the list and mark the words to which we had a negative reaction. We then compared our reactions and discussed them with one another. My friends who created the course noted in the leader's manual that the words that got the most votes at that time were "born again" and "original sin." The conversation we had that followed made it pretty apparent that those among us who had left another faith tradition unhappily had much stronger feelings about some of the words than those that were brought up as Unitarian Universalists or those who did not harbor painful experiences that were religiously provoked.

Several years after my experience with the exercise, I had the opportunity to lead the same course as an intern minister in Portland Oregon. Then I led it twice again with the small congregations I served outside of Portland. What is most interesting about the progression of time is that the old adage, "things change," is true. Some of the words that invoked strong reactions in Arlington in 1984 were hardly noticed in Portland in 1992, and I dare say, might have an even milder reaction today. That is not to say that Unitarian Universalists are any less contentious than we used to be. We remain strong individualists who care a lot about words and how we communicate ideas.

We have entered the era where framing ideas and parsing words has become more important than the ideas themselves. Its not what you are trying to sell, it is how you sell it that counts.

Arguments about words and their meaning began when people began talking about forces beyond their comprehension, when people realized that there was something creating and possibly controlling the universe in which they lived. The debates that went on about the exact wording of the creeds are historic, some would say epic. Unitarian Universalists are by no means unique among religious people when it comes to wordsmithing. Every time any group or committee comes together in this congregation or any other congregation to draft a statement representing the views of more than one person, there will inevitably be a conversation, if not difference of opinion about how to phrase things just right to convey the intended meaning. Why do we care? Because words are important to us. They inform us, they affirm us, and they can hurt us. In contrast to the children's rhyme, "Sticks and stones can break our bones— words *can hurt and haunt us.*"

As I have taken part in the process of examining words that come from the vocabulary of faith with congregants over a period of years, the subtle change in attitudes about the vocabulary have become the subject of analysis. When looking at the time period of the early 80's and the general

population of folks in our congregations, we were at the tail end of welcoming a majority of new members into our congregations who had left another church or the faith tradition of their childhood for some reason. As we began to enter the '90's we were beginning to find a larger and larger number of people joining in with our congregations who had not been raised with any particular faith tradition. We were leaving a generation of "come-outers" and entering into a new era filled with the "unchurched." Our vocabulary and how we feel about religious words has been changing accordingly.

This was the subject of part of the extensive interview I had with your search committee last winter. Since I became part of this movement, this faith tradition I tuned into the effect words had on me. When I entered into the realm of the profession of ministry, it became clear to me that a large part of my work has to do with vocabulary. As I wrestle with the meanings of words I appreciate that you do too. It is my job to examine and present words and concepts that belong in the spiritual or religious vocabulary of a religious liberal, to redefine and reclaim some words that are part of the language of faith that we ought not cede to fundamentalists of any character. Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong wrote a book titled "[Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism.](#)" He has spoken to gathered liberal people of faith around the country, including Unitarian Universalists. More and more, we are finding ways to re-claim perfectly good words and stories which have, by their association, been stricken from our vocabulary and our narrative.

In years past I have tried to re-claim a few of the words of the old time religion, whatever that religion might have been. I've talked about God, Sabbath, alleluia, amen and grace. Along with those go prayer, soul, and free will. These are words that are easy, understandable and comfortable for some among us, but not so for others. They are words that are sometimes used as weapons or code words by others, but they can have meaning for us as well and I would hate to see us shy away from them because of the meanings that others might give them. Like the rabbi and the Presbyterian poet who is also active with the Benedictines, the sources of our readings this morning, we need to rebuild our religious vocabularies, dust off the words "of the accretions others give them," try to understand what they might have originally meant, and then try to understand what the words mean to us. That is a tall order, but it is what we are all about if we are really to be engaged in our religious or spiritual journey.

I want to look at the word "faith" this morning, because it is hard to understand the language of faith without having a notion of what faith itself is. Considering the reality that our congregation contains among its membership people who consider themselves Christian, people from Jewish roots, probably some staunch atheists and Buddhists, and everything in between, the concept of faith, a simple one syllable word, is something that many of us find challenging, if not impossible to use or embrace—at least in terms of religious faith. Both Kathleen Norris and Lawrence Kushner had their own way of illuminating the word, "faith." Ms. Norris wrote:

"Faith is still a surprise to me, as I lived without it for so long. Now I believe that it was merely dormant in the years I was not conscious of its presence. And I have become better at trusting that it is there, even when I can't feel it, or when God seems absent from the world. No small part of my religious conversion has been coming to know that faith is best thought of as a verb, not a "thing" that you either have or you don't. Faith is not discussed as an abstraction in the gospels. Jesus does not talk about it so much as respond to

it in other people, for example, saying to a woman who has sought him for a healing, "*thy faith hath made thee whole*" (Matt. 9:22, KJV). And faith is not presented as a sure thing. Among Jesus' disciples Peter is the one whose faith is most evident, always eager. Then, in the crisis of Jesus' arrest and trial, Peter is the disciple who denies him three times. "I do not know the man," he says, and weeps.

The relentlessly cheerful and positive language about faith that I associate with the strong-arm tactics of evangelism fails to take this biblical ambiguity into account. I appreciate much more the wisdom of novelist Doris Betts' assertion that faith is "not synonymous with certainty ... [but] is the decision to keep your eyes open." It corresponds with what a fourth-century monk, Abba Bessarion, said "The monk should be all eye." My new understanding of faith as like energy itself—fluid, always in motion but never constant—has been instructed by the Bible, the Christian theological tradition, and my own experience. Faith is a constant, always there, but surging and ebbing, sometimes strongly evident and at other times barely discernible on my spiritual landscape."¹

The Jewish mystic takes the word "emunah" to mean both secrecy and faith. He elaborates:

"Faith can either be arrogant constantly flaunting and proving ones spiritual mettle, or it can be humble, confident in one's abilities and one's world. The former conceals anxiety and insecurity, the latter conceals only itself. A sure sign of genuine reverence is secrecy.

Arrogant faith, blind faith challenges physical laws and can only be satisfied with increasingly difficult tests. "If you really have faith, then you'll do this." Opposed to such spiritual brinkmanship is a quiet, gentle trust that never calls us to pit our piety against the natural order. Instead, we hope only to understand our place in the scheme of creation. As Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev said, "God, I do not need to know why I suffer; I pray only to understand that it is for Your sake."²

Do either of these pictures of faith seem to fit your own concept? I know that there are those among us who might protest that faith is not a part of their reason for being here, that there is no such thing. Where I agree that some, perhaps many, do not find any comfort or faith in a higher power that some of us might call god, none the less, we all have faith in something. For some, it may be faith in science or technology, for others, faith in human kind, for others, faith in their own abilities and talents. In each of these cases, faith remains something that is unseen. It is the decision to keep our eyes open. It is our hope in understanding our place in the scheme of creation. The late George Marshall, UU minister and author of the Challenge of A Liberal Faith said, "Beautiful ideals, which are creeds, not deeds, are religious window dressing and are meaningless. The test of faith is life."³

Testing your faith is not something we see as our job. Life does that for us every day. Helping you

to explore your faith is what we are here for. We come together to share what we see with our eyes open and our senses attuned to the mysteries of life. Along with our open eyes, we must remember to open our minds. As Kathleen Norris said, "The dictionary definitions of potent religious words, while useful in understanding one's religious heritage, are of far less importance than the lived experience of them within that tradition."⁴ Rather than sanitizing our vocabulary, we need to understand it. There is a power in words that we cannot dismiss. But just like anything that we might fear or turn away from, knowledge and understanding diminish the fear and bring us to new awareness of life and our place in it.

We as a people of faith tend not to trumpet ourselves. We don't present a picture of piety or flaunt ourselves in the public sphere. Nor do we try to impose our understandings of faith upon others. Faith, to us is an individual pursuit just as is belief. In a time when more and more people are wearing their faith on their sleeves, we quietly go about our business. But as we do so, we know that our faith infuses what we do and who we are. Blessedly in this community we are aware of what we have to offer and are actively engaged in spreading the word to those looking for what we have. As our spirits grow, so will we because our faith is one worth having and sharing.

There is a greeting card that I bought more years ago than I can remember. It was affixed to my refrigerator along with a whole lot of other bits of wisdom. It says "Courage is the willingness to be afraid and act anyway." The companion sentiment is one I learned around the same time as I found the card, "Fear knocked on the door. Faith answered. There was no one there." Again from Kathleen Norris, "Faith is the decision to keep your eyes open."

If we see "faith" as something requiring that we keep our eyes open and respond to what we see, my faith calls me to be active in trying to change the world for the better. My faith moves me to action. I do not hesitate to use the word faith, it is a part of who I am. We are all guided by some overarching principle, for some it is faith, for others conscience, or morals, or ethics.

As seekers bound together in religious community, may we not shy away from powerful words, redefining them as needed. And may we find the words and actions that prompt us to lead more authentic lives, lives that are grounded in faith, justice, and hope.

¹ Norris, Kathleen, **Amazing Grace**, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998) pp. 169-170

² Kushner, Lawrence S. **The Book of Words**, (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights Publications, 1993) pp. 99-100

³ Tomlinson, Gerald, **Treasury of Religious Quotations**, (NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991) p. 84

⁴ Norris, p. 3