

6/6/10 Sermon

“Faith from the Perspective of a Non-Practicing Atheist”

Kim Palmer, Speaker

Today, seeing this wonderful celebration as we welcome our newest members puts me in mind of when I stood in front of this congregation six years ago and became a member of UUMAN.

Like many who make this their church home, I felt as though I had found a place that was welcoming and life-affirming, where people shared my values, and where I could find meaningful relationships and friendships. But as I heard UUMAN referred to as a Faith Community, I was somewhat puzzled. I would wonder ... Faith in what?

So as we welcome new members into our Faith Community, I want to reflect on what it means to be a person of faith in this place. And I'd like to share with you my own journey toward faith.

First, I think it might help to get clear on what I mean by Faith. The word is one that in Unitarian Universalist circles may elicit a range of responses. Some may be comfortable speaking about Faith, while others may find it an uncomfortable reminder of the dogmatic or theistic religion of their upbringing.

Let me first clarify that Faith is not the same as belief. At UUMAN, we hold no single belief. On the contrary, our beliefs are widely divergent. Many believe in a higher power, or guiding force in the universe; some call it God, or Goddess. Some have kept a modified version of their Christian heritage, believing in a loving creator, and/or the wisdom of Jesus' teachings but discarding the dogmatic thinking that has been layered atop those simple early Christian concepts over the centuries. Others believe in the power and value inherent in the rhythms and cycles of nature, and in honoring our earth mother. We have humanists, and atheists who don't believe in any deity. We have members who believe in reincarnation, members who believe in karma, and members who believe in they-know-not-what. Clearly, in the non-creedal, liberal religious environment of UUMAN, joining this Faith Community does not mean subscribing to a particular belief.

What then is Faith? James Fowler, in his book, “Stages of Faith,” describes Faith as “that which we give our hearts to; the social and relational dimension of trust and loyalty to people and community; the dynamic system of values and commitments through which we make and maintain meaning in life.”

Are there things about Unitarian Universalism, about this institution, or about each other that we place our trust in, have loyalty to, give our hearts to, are committed to ... either collectively or individually? I believe there are. When we look at Faith in this way, separate from belief, then I very much think UUMAN is a Faith Community.

Because by and large, people don't come here just to get together socially, or to be educated on issues that interest them, or even to serve the cause of justice, although those may be the things that led them here initially. UUMAN has staying power because it is a place where people can engage with the deeper questions about the fundamental meaning of life and our place in it. It is through that process that I can see the development of some common loyalties among us, and perhaps across Unitarian Universalism as a whole. I do think there are things we come to trust here, to be loyal or committed to, some collectively, some perhaps individually or by degrees. I believe there are things that as a community we put our Faith in. Here are some of mine.

I have Faith that this is a place where I can explore who I am and what gives meaning to my life. That I can share ideas with others on this journey, and find encouragement on my own, without having to fear that what's right for someone else must be right for me. I have Faith that here, I am in the midst of people who share my values; people who strive to be their best selves and to work for positive change in the world. I have Faith that at UUMAN, I will be accepted for who I am, and as I am.

I have Faith that I will remain accepted and loved at UUMAN, even if I say something wrong, or sometimes behave poorly. I have Faith that if someone has done something hurtful to me, that it was not done with malice – or if it was, that those incidents will *by far* be the exception rather than the rule. I find that UUMAN attracts people of the highest character. Even when there is disagreement or controversy within our walls, I have Faith that we can love each other through those times and listen to each other's viewpoints, accept our differences, and heal our hurts.

These are not trivial things to trust, or ideals to give ones heart to. The opportunity for deep and honest relationship with our selves, each other and our world is what makes UUMAN a religious community, and the way we give our hearts to what UUMAN holds for us is what makes us a people of Faith.

Let me tell you a bit about my own journey to Faith. It has a few important milestones along the way that I'd like to share. One of the first occurred

shortly after I began attending UUMAN. Our very own Bill Horton accosted me at coffee hour one day, and asked about my theological beliefs. I told him I was an atheist. Bill replied, in that gentle way of his, "That's just a statement about what you DON'T believe. What DO you believe?"

I didn't have an answer for him. I'd never thought about it. At that time, I defined my beliefs in the negative – by the absence of the religion of my youth. Bill's insightful question started me on a journey of introspection that I found UUMAN provided ample opportunities to explore.

Over the next few years, I also had the opportunity to grow accustomed to the language of reverence used within our walls and within our denomination. Where I heard terms like God or goddess, higher power, spirit of life, all that is holy, or even prayer, I grew to understand that these were not rigid or limiting concepts, but rather ways of describing our relationship with a connecting force that binds us to all of humanity, all of life, and all the universe. Each person was free to apply their own understanding to these terms, or to have them stand in for whatever concepts were applicable in their own belief system.

As I participated in worship with others with beliefs and spiritual practices different from my own, I also grew to appreciate the diversity of belief within our own congregation, and the importance these beliefs held in people's lives. By extension, this began to open my mind regarding the beliefs that people held in other church communities outside UUMAN. I began to shed the prejudice against Christianity that I had carried into adulthood from my adolescence.

I also had the chance to ruminate on my relationship with the Christians in my life. My Catholic sister-in-law and niece, and Marty's fundamentalist Christian mother were people of good character – people who lived good lives, cared about others, and were non-judgmental. And of course there are people at UUMAN who identify as Christian for whom I have deep respect and affection. I realized that it was only certain behavior I found offensive: I disliked intolerance and hypocrisy, the narrow-minded, hurtful or bigoted behavior I saw. But that only comes from some, it doesn't characterize all.

All of these things made me more open to the idea of Faith, and the place it holds for people of all religions. And as I learned these things, I began to see how Faith was functioning in my own life. I came to truly see UUMAN as a Faith Community, and myself as a person of Faith.

As many of you know, I'm heading to Seminary in the fall, with hopes of pursuing a vocation as a Chaplain. As part of my application, I was required

to submit a biographical essay. It was through this effort, of being forced again to think about what I believe and how to express it, as Bill Horton once challenged me to do, I found that defining myself as atheist no longer felt adequate. It's true that I still don't believe in a deity, but that now seems immaterial to my faith tradition and spiritual life.

I explained in my biographical essay that I had identified as an atheist when I first joined UUMAN, and then this is how I presented my current beliefs to the admissions committee:

I feel that my beliefs have matured at UUMAN, and I find now that I define myself more by what I do believe than by what I don't. I believe in the basic goodness of the human heart. I believe in the transformative power of love; in the power of human relationship to sustain and heal. I believe that we all have access to the Holy, and that there are many valid ways to seek spiritual truth and meaning.

In my own spiritual journey, I have come to see a life of service in the ministry as consistent with a theological perspective of atheism. It does though, I will admit, puzzle others, especially those from outside our liberal religious tradition. My partner Marty has an amusing way of describing me that I think can be helpful here. When people say "How can you be a Chaplain? You're an atheist!" Marty will helpfully explain: "Yes, but she's a *non-practicing* atheist."

UUMAN made this journey possible for me, and I've been guided by the wisdom of my fellow travelers. May we all continue our journey to our true selves, finding and refining what has meaning for us, and may we continue to do it here, in the company of those we love. May it be so.