Preparation for Renewing Faith

In America, faith is often considered synonymous with a belief in God and conventional religious doctrines. While some UUs experience a sense of the Divine, others do not, or have beliefs that don't fit traditional religion. For them, "faith" might seem irrelevant. Or it might bring up feelings of loss, hurt, or anger if other religious traditions have rejected their experience or their search for meaning.

As UUs, we explore meanings for religious terms. Faith, then, does not require belief in God or a set of doctrines. We are all theologians, people of faith, because faith and theology are about life's "big questions." "If we are living, breathing, hurting, laughing, crying, questing human beings, it is impossible not to be theologians," says Richard S. Gilbert, in "Building Your Own Theology."

Gilbert's theology-building, as often used in UU study groups, begins with personal experience, looking at the faith environment we grew up in and how our faith has changed. Individually and as a group, people explore ideas about theological subjects such as God or ultimate reality, human nature, ethics, living in community, suffering, evil, death, and what happens after death. This approach aligns with the UU 4th Principle, the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning," and our Six Sources, which encourage exploration using our experience, religious traditions, and wisdom sources.

Much of faith development is personal: life calls us to find meaning, and we respond according to our experience and the wisdom sources that resonate with us. The call to faith often combines meaning, emotion, and practice, such as meditation, prayer, gratitude, helping others, being in nature. If the experience of nature is especially powerful for us, for example, we may be drawn to earth-centered traditions. If we tend to be introspective, we may be drawn to meditation traditions.

Faith is meaning and practice. It is also part of our deepest emotions – love, compassion, connection, awe, longing for freedom or expression. Faith is our ground of action. Rev. Christine Robinson, in "Listening Hearts" (with Alicia Hawkins) says that we all take "leaps of faith" – falling in love, planting a garden – taking action when we don't know how it's going to turn out. Faith – meaning, deep emotion, what is most important – is the ground of the most significant things that we do.

The Theology section in the UUA Widening the Circle report describes the idea that UUs "can believe anything we want" as a flawed view of UU theology. Perhaps it's more that our faith encourages multiple dimensions. One of those dimensions is community. Sometimes we might think of our lives in society as a sort of "add-on" to our spiritual inner lives. But our lives in community – relationships, ethics, inclusion, justice – also call us to develop our faith. And, grounded in faith, to act.

At this time, our UU church is calling us to reinterpret our faith by exploring the 8th Principle, to dismantle racism and oppression and build beloved community. Varied wisdom sources can help us explore this faith dimension. Engaged Buddhism looks to move through meditation to action to reduce the suffering in this world. Some contemporary Christian theologies, such as liberation and womanist theologies, reinterpret the gospels and the life of Jesus as models for the survival and liberation of the oppressed. Our Universalist heritage, which began with the idea (radical in its time) that God's love would save everyone from hell, also offers a perspective on community. Some teachers in the Universalist tradition extend salvation theology to suggest that the spirit of love in each one of us can build a world that is saved from the hells of suffering and injustice in this life.

So what calls to you, and how are you responding to that call to build your faith – your beliefs, your deepest emotions, your practices? Life calls to each of us in more than one dimension of faith. Perhaps this moment in our shared lives is a moment to develop our faith both individually and in community.

As you reflect on renewing faith, consider the following quotes.

Who am I? … How shall I live? Is there a God … what kind of God? What do I believe about human nature, and how does this affect my actions? … How can I learn how to love? To come to terms with life? To make peace with death? All these are theological issues. *UU Rev. Benjamin Maucere*

The dominant motive ... is no longer to escape from earthly existence, but to make earthly existence as abundant and happy as it can be made. Modern religion ... must glorify, spiritualize, sanctify the world. *Clarence Russell Skinner, Universalist minister*

Love and justice are not two. Without inner change, there can be no outer change; without collective change, no change matters. *Rev. angel Kyodo williams*

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 are saved by love. *Reinhold Niebuhr*

Faith is a passionate intuition. *William Wordsworth*

Liberation theologies, including Christian feminists, charge that the experience out of which Christian theology has emerged is not universal experience but the experience of the dominant culture … liberationists, therefore, propose that theology must emerge out of particular experiences of the oppressed people of God. *Jacquelyn Grant*, *womanist theologian*

Faith is not about finding meaning in the world, there may be no such thing – faith is the belief in our capacity to create meaningful lives. *Terry Tempest Williams*

Questions to Ponder

1. If you grew up with religion, what did you believe as a child? How have your beliefs changed?

2. Is there an element of faith – belief or practice – that you have accepted from another tradition?

3. What are the sources and practices that help you develop your faith – nature, meditation, religious traditions, art, helping others, personal experiences, community, science, relationships … ?

4. Reflect on some of the big questions, set #1. Is there a God, or some ultimate reality? Does life have a purpose or ultimate meaning? Do people have souls? When we die, does a part of us continue?

5. Reflect on some of the big questions, set #2. Are people inherently good? What is evil? Does suffering have meaning? What does a mystical experience feel like? How do we love our neighbor?

6. Reflect on a difficult time in your life when an element of faith helped you get through.

7. How do you see the relation between your spiritual life and social justice?

Words of the Day

Before the Gathering, reflect on the dimensions of your faith – beliefs, emotions, practices, wisdom sources. Words of the Day: "The dimensions of faith that are most meaningful for me include …"