FAITH, Part One - Anne Marsh

When we lit the chalice this morning, I said it was a "symbol of our free faith." Did you feel okay about that word "faith"? Like sin, salvation, grace, and other traditional religious terms, "faith" is a word many of us avoid. That's understandable, for faith gets used in a lot of ways we reject. And yet, I'm unwilling to let traditional religionists have a monopoly on faith. Unitarian Universalists *are* people of faith. But our faith does not require us to believe in virgin births or a six-day creation of the universe. We subject faith to tests of reason, science, dialogue, and experience, and we are open to changing as new knowledge and insights appear.

Tests get us only so far, however. Eventually, reason bumps up against the wall of mystery and meaning, and then, well, then even UUs take things on faith, which is to say that we, too, believe some things we cannot prove. One of the fundamentals of our faith, for example, is that each person comes into the world with inherent worth and dignity. We can't prove that in a laboratory, yet we choose to ground our outlook on life and many of our values and actions upon it. The conviction of individual worth brings us our commitment to freedom of conscience, to justice, equity, and compassion, to giving each person a voice in their own destiny. Our UU principles are articles of faith.

But principles don't encompass all of our faith. Loren Eiseley once described floating in a river and feeling unable to tell where he left off and the river began. I know that sense of oneness; you probably do, too. And it adds another dimension to faith: faith that the sacred is in the ordinary, the super is in the natural, and one spirit of life connects us to the flowers along the arroyo, the stars in the sky, the stranger on the bus. The secret of being in touch with this aspect of faith is deceptively simple. Just one word: attend -- a word with several meanings, all

of which apply. To attend is to show up, to be present. To attend is to pay attention, to notice. To attend is to await. And to attend is to wait upon, to serve.

The more I attend to moments of connection, the more important relationships become. When I have been in pain or in need, a hand has reached out to me. Somehow, someone has been there. Thus, I've found yet another dimension of faith -- that I can grow only so far on my own; I need other people, and I especially need a religious community. So I have faith in this congregation that makes a place for all, that challenges and nurtures, and tries, however imperfectly, to put values into action in the world. Here we plant seeds we will not live to harvest, but we plant them anyway, in faith.

There is, of course, always an element of risk in faith, a chance we could be wrong. UU minister Scott Alexander tells of running with his friend Stan on a glorious autumn day. They came upon a huge pile of leaves someone had raked up by the road. As Stan jogged on, Scott, seized by an impulse he had no desire to control, dove headlong into the leaf pile. He emerged grinning with delight. And his friend said, "Alright, wise guy, what if there had been a big pile of dog do-do just under the surface of those leaves?" And Scott replied, "But, Stan, there wasn't... there wasn't!"

In the leaf piles of life, however, there is often dog do-do. Faith doesn't spare us that. Faith doesn't protect us from fear, despair, or loss. But faith has enabled me to be utterly convinced that life is worth living anyway. As Scott Alexander puts it, "If we lean into life with trust, openness, gratitude, and gladness, we will discover that creation mysteriously rises to meet our expectations." That is faith. Our UU faith gives us values to live by and offers an attitude of heart that finds meaning in moments of connection, sustenance in community,

wonder in the everyday, and gratitude for life and love. Is that enough to sustain, to heal, to transform? Rev. Jane will reflect on that in a few minutes.

I'll close by returning to our earlier chalice lighting. The congregation Wade and I served in NY spoke those words together almost every Sunday of our sixteen years there. That might sound boring, but as we lit the chalice, I listened to the littlest children, who knew the words by heart. When I heard their young voices tell me that new light, new truth, and new love are waiting, I believed them. I still do. The darkness around us is deep, but a light ever shines, and together, we can move toward it. So may it be.