



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF THE LEHIGH VALLEY

# *Crisis of Faith*

Given by Tara Stephenson on February 19, 2017

What does the expression “crisis of faith” really mean? So many people think that “faith” and “belief” are equivalent terms, which really only confuses the issue.

## **A Crisis of Faith**-sermon for February 19, 2017

I have a friend who is an ordained minister in another religious denomination. We were students together at Moravian Seminary. She is extraordinarily intelligent, extraordinarily well educated and has an extraordinarily wicked sense of humor. She has 3 master's degrees and is currently working on her doctorate. Her Facebook profile picture has been Darth Vader, a mashup of Jesus and Shiva, one of the female fertility figures from the Lasquax caves, the musician Prince posed as Bob Ross, the painter, a pinup girl in a Santa Claus suit, Grumpy Cat, and occasionally, of herself. Currently, she is Jessica Rabbit, a character in the animated movie "Who Framed Roger Rabbit". I can hear her saying Jessica's famous one-liner, "I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way".

Anyway, my friend, whom I'll refer to as Vanna, contacted me electronically in very early November to ask me if I thought she was really a Unitarian Universalist and did not belong in the church where she makes her living. She said that she was having a crisis of faith. I responded that if the question came into her mind, then there was a reasonable chance that she was or at least that she had "leanings", but that we should talk

about it in person. I didn't really suspect that she would do anything rash or impulsive and actually, was honored that she trusted me.

She never answered my question when I asked her what she meant by "crisis of faith", but she HAD given me a sermon topic. I dug around for authoritative writing on the subject of faith to begin our time together today.

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There are a lot of people who use the word "faith" as if it were synonymous with "belief". You hear the term "faith-based" to describe funding streams, community action, and political organizing. It has a negative tone to many, especially in this denomination and among more liberal political groups, as it is associated with oppression and conformity.

But I want to talk a bit about the deeper meaning of the word "faith" and suggest to you ways that it might have meaning for people like us, where no single set of beliefs prevails.

There are a number of on-line dictionaries that give two definitions of the word faith. The word faith is from the Greek root "pistis", meaning to trust, to have confidence, to be reliable, to assure. In the New Testament, it is used to convey

“belief”, but also “trust”. Traditional Christian theology expects that the trust or belief will be based on understanding and generally has an unfavorable view of blind faith.

Twentieth century Christian theologian Paul Tillich has some very interesting things to say about faith, but before I go into those ideas, I want to give you some feel for the character and stature of Tillich and a little flavor of his thinking. He is widely regarded as the most prominent Protestant theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His existential bent drove him to comment on authenticity and the nature of being, and some more traditional thinkers cast a rather skeptical eye at him because of his insistence that the word “God” was a symbol for a particular ultimate concern, and was not necessarily an actual supernatural being. He argued that God, conceived of as a being, could not then be the source for other beings. He preferred to use the word God to mean “ground of being” or God above God.

Faith then, for him, meant “the state of being ultimately concerned”<sup>1</sup> It was not about “believing” in a literal entity, the way you or I might “believe” that this podium is real, or we “believe” in our cars or in lunch or in oxygen. That kind of intellectual agreeing with the presence of objects is **part** of

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<sup>1</sup> Tillich, Paul. The Dynamics of Faith. 1957.

what he means by the word “faith”, but to limit faith to mere intellectual assent is to minimize its importance. Faith also includes values and feelings, existential longings and motivations. Faith, for Tillich, is an “act of the total personality”<sup>2</sup> and certainly not a mere “act of knowledge that has a low degree of evidence”.<sup>3</sup>

If, then, faith is the state of being ultimately concerned and the object of that concern is not presupposed or dictated in any way, what areas of concern might so grip a person that they live in a state of faith? If, as Tillich tells us, the faith is more powerfully made manifest in the world when all parts of a faithful person are bent towards the object of faith, let us stop and reflect upon the things and states that most concern us. How about democracy? How about justice? How about love? Or peace, or freedom, or compassion?

What area or areas are of such concern to you that they shape the way you live your life? Think big! As big as you can get; according to Tillich, the way they shape your behavior is your faith.

Tillich worried, in his book, The Dynamics of Faith, that “success” has become an object of faith for too many in the modern world. By success, he is careful to note that that

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

means status and material gain, but he also notes that the private and individual definition of success is part of the root of the problem.<sup>4</sup> He shares this concern with Rabbi Michael Lerner, author of The Left Hand of God.

Some of you may remember Lerner's name in connection with the "*tikkun olam*" movement of several years ago, which essentially was about replacing our "bottom line" of financial success with a bottom line of human welfare. Lerner contends that those who lean to the left, or more liberal end of the political spectrum have done themselves a great disservice in neglecting people's spiritual needs. In reacting to the oppressive elements in religion by rejecting it entirely, liberals, or "lefties" as I will call them, have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Spiritual hunger hasn't gone away; it has merely been driven inward unto focusing on the individual's well being, on the individual's salvation, on the individual's gain.<sup>5</sup>

The tendency to think of self first, or as Lerner calls it, "me firstism", feelings of emptiness, disconnection from others, and isolation are signs of our national spiritual crisis.<sup>6</sup> They are the logical result of a narrow focus on one's self and one's own

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<sup>4</sup> Tillich. 1957.

<sup>5</sup> Lerner, Michael. The Left Hand of God: Taking back our country from the religious right. Harper: San Francisco. 2006

<sup>6</sup> Lerner, 2006.

community at the expense of a wider view. We even sometimes try to glorify the isolation by calling it respect for someone's privacy, but, honestly, in those cases, we could critique ourselves and look closely at our own motivations. Is it respect for someone else or is it fear of an authentic encounter?

The final commentator I want to invoke today is Rev. David Pyle of the Unitarian Universalist Association. I met David at the last UUPLAN annual meeting. He was the keynote speaker and the leader for the workshop I selected. Rev. Pyle was the JPD district executive after Richard Speck and when the JPD became subsumed in the Central East Region, went on staff there. David grew up Southern Baptist and has a story of when he realized that he wasn't Southern Baptist anymore, at the age of 19. As a consequence of his turning away from traditional, and even sometimes, oppressive religion, he is both comfortable with traditional language and a good source for translating it into language that UUs can relate to.

He says flatly

Faith is not about belief. Faith in fact has very little to do with what beliefs you hold, other than that it allows you to hold them. Faith is a sacred, deep, emotionally involved kind of trust. Faith is the kind of trust that you enter into with your

whole being. Faith is the kind of trust that, when it has been broken, it hurts deep inside...but faith is the kind of trust that finds a way to trust again despite the hurt.<sup>7</sup>

His definition of a crisis of faith is when a deep trust has been broken. It isn't really just the questioning of beliefs, except perhaps as belief and trust may be intertwined. Remember, that I said that Paul Tillich thought that faith was considerably more than just belief with a low degree of evidence? Pyle would certainly agree!

We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person-**I don't see empirical evidence for that; it's a matter of faith.** That people are inherently good isn't something that can be proven empirically; **it's a matter of faith.** That peace is a possibility **is a matter of faith;** there's no empirical evidence for it. All of these are articles of faith for UUs. All are matters of trust and often direct our words and actions. They are foundational ideas in Unitarian Universalism.

I have spoken several times on the concept of *shalom*. *Shalom* is a precious idea in Judaism. It has many layers to it, and cannot be defined by any one word. Some people think it means peace and peace is certainly part of its meaning. It also includes ideas of justice, of plenty, of compassion, of all the

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<sup>7</sup> Pyle, David. *By the Wayside of the Celestial Lands: Defining Religious Language: Faith*. 2008  
<http://celestiallands.org/wayside/>

things that go into a good life, a good community, a good world. The most concise definition I've ever heard is that shalom is the way things are supposed to be, where all natural needs are met and all beings are fulfilled and content. To work towards *shalom* is an act of faith.

My own faith has been challenged by recent events in this nation. That people I love were willing to look the other way while people of color were savaged, while children were shot to death in their schools, while poor people got poorer and more desperate, while the unscrupulous among our political leaders fraudulently engineered the system so that they could have more and more-has been devastating to me and I've struggled to recover the trust I once felt. There are so many people "thrown under the bus" in this country and it breaks my heart and challenges my faith in people's capacity for good, in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, in the possibility of peace, even in love and compassion.

I said that recent events had challenged my faith, but recent events have only challenged it more acutely than before. Turning a blind eye towards suffering in our world, or perhaps more accurately, towards the source of the problems, rather than just putting Band-Aids on their outward symptoms has been prevalent for so many years.

In my mind, the things I suggested to you might be matters of ultimate concern—democracy, freedom, peace, love, compassion, justice—are all part of my idea of shalom. I despair of the whole world ever knowing a state of shalom, but it drives me, eats at me, keeps me awake at night. Almost everything I do relates to my reaching for the goal of shalom.

Imagine with me! Imagine a world where no one is hungry, where everyone is able to seek medical attention when they need it, where children love to go to school and they all can! Imagine a world where no one erects barriers to each individual's fulfilling their whole potential. Imagine a world where every individual is accepted exactly as they are: not every behavior, of course destructive acts would be curbed, but no person's nature would be suspect. Imagine a world where the needs of the environment were cared for as a matter of course. Imagine a world without violence or the threat of violence. Imagine a world where creativity was nurtured and not regarded as the special characteristic of only a few. Imagine a world of equality and respect, where black and brown lives matter as much as white ones, where woman's voices are heard every time, where being gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender doesn't consign you to a ghetto existence. Imagine a world where every person is excited to

participate in the public life because they know they're all valued and cared for. Let's take a few moments to imagine all this. (*take a few moments*)

Are you with me? Are you with me? Will our faith keep us working for this world? Don't be polite; politeness can keep us shackled to the status quo, even if the status quo is unjust.

I'm looking to that world, that shalom. May it be so.

Lerner, Michael. The Left Hand of God: Taking back our country from the religious right. Harper: San Francisco. 2006.

Pyle, David. <http://celestiallands.org/wayside/> *Liberal Religious Faith...and the occasional political musing*.

1. Free Speech, Responsibility, and Religious Violence, 2012
2. Faith is Hard...and Liberal Religion Needs Some, 2011
3. The Purpose of Religious Communities, 2011
4. Religions of Differentiation, 2010
5. On Being A Murphist, 2010
6. Vision Is The Vertical In Our Covenant, 2009
7. Einstein's Library and the Power of Defining Reality, 2009
8. Why I'm Not A "Progressive", 2009
9. On the Origin and Nature of Evil, 2009
10. Defining Religious Language: *Tolerance and Engagement*, 2008
11. Defining Religious Language: *God*, 2008

12. Defining Religious Language: *Social Engagement...Action, Justice, and Witness*, 2008
13. Defining Religious Language: *Salvation*, 2008
14. Defining Religious Language: *Good and Evil*, 2008
15. Defining Religious Language: *War and Peace*, 2008
16. Defining Religious Language: *Faith*, 2008
17. Defining Religious Language: *Crucifixion and Resurrection*, 2008
18. Defining Religious Language: *Atonement, Redemption, and Sin*, 2008

Tillich, Paul. Dynamics of Faith: Faith and Belief: what they are & what they are not. Harper and Row: New York. 1957.