



The Substance of Faith

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Faith is the activation of our aspirations, the life based on unseen realities. It is conviction translated into deeds. In short, it is the word become flesh. Hebrews 11:1, translation by Clarence Jordan

One of the most important questions we all can ask of ourselves is, “What is Faith and how can struggling with a deeper understanding of Faith be personally transformative?” It doesn’t matter whether we consider ourselves Christians, Buddhists, Atheists, Humanists, or other - our relationship to Faith is critical to understanding who we are individually and collectively. Unitarian Universalists are part of a vibrant Faith Tradition that goes back many millennia and taps into the core thought and practice of all religious expressions. The religious historian, Karen Armstrong, states in her book on the axial religions, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*, that every one of the world’s religious traditions has a common understanding of ethical behavior. Armstrong found that at the core of each religious tradition is the idea that we should always treat all of living existence in the same way we would want to be treated. Sounds familiar doesn’t it? That’s because the “Golden Rule” is so central to our existence. Humans, and all living things, exist in a social context. How we behave toward one another in that context is of critical importance for our own well-being and for the well-being of the world. Every religious and non-religious ethical tradition therefore acknowledges the primacy of the interdependent web of all existence and they build traditions and codes of conduct that begin with that one premise. We Unitarian Universalists know this as our 7th Principle and it speaks directly to our faith.

You must be asking yourself at this point, “But you still haven’t defined Faith. What’s faith got to do with all of this?” Put as simply as possible, a UU Humanist might say, “Faith is putting our bodies where our mouth is.” The author of the *Book of Hebrews* in the Christian *New Testament*, which I read earlier today, is even more succinct. He says, “Faith is the Word become flesh.” “Word Become Flesh?” Growing up in a Christian church I had absolutely no idea what that meant. The Christian Apostle Paul also referred to Jesus as the “Word become Flesh” and I, at that time, put it in the category of some magical and literal transformation of God becoming a human being. But, when put in the metaphorical context of Faith it helps us understand our Universalist (and Unitarian) understanding of the essence of Jesus’ ministry. The author of *Hebrews* didn’t say faith is a bunch of belief statements. He implies that faith is action. Faith isn’t about salvation or some magical transformation that created Jesus as half human and half God. Faith is about making our ideals (the Word) real, in the here and now. This is the truth of what Jesus called the “Kingdom of God”. We UUs might call this living in right relation with one another and the world. Jesus was all about acting as though the Kingdom of God was right here, right now, not tomorrow, not next month, or in the by and by. It is all about behaving in such a way that all people can immediately experience the love that rules the universe.

Given this, it might be easier to see the difference between what I have defined as Faith and what we all commonly associate with Belief. In modern usage belief refers to a set of principles, truths, or ideas by which we live our lives. In the Christian *New Testament*, however, the Greek words for Faith and Belief were used interchangeably. This can lead to confusion for us today. The famous line in the second chapter of the *New Testament* book of *James* that says: “*Faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*” It makes more sense to substitute the word Belief for Faith in this passage. This allows us to actually redefine Faith into a more powerful word that encompasses both belief and action. And Clarence Jordan, once again, comes to our rescue on this. He wrote, “*So, as long as the word (our belief) remains a theory to us, and is not incarnated by our action and translated by our deeds into a living experience, it is not faith. It may be theology, but it is not faith. Faith is a combination of both conviction and action. It cannot be either by itself.*” For UUs then, the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism are a set of belief statements that are dead unless they become Flesh.

There is one other reason for UUs to differentiate between Faith and Belief. Ever since the creation of the Christian Church of the Roman Empire in 326 Belief took on a new meaning in the history of Christianity. Some (not all) of

the Belief statements of Christianity were reduced to a creed or a proclamation about the nature of God, Jesus being the son of God, born of a Virgin... and it goes on. If you were raised Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, or in some other form of a creedal church you know this Apostles Creed very well. From a Unitarian Universalist perspective there is very little here that interests us. This is not a code of ethical behavior, it is a series of statements that one either agrees with or not. It has nothing to do with our definition of Faith – the combination of Conviction and Action. This doesn't mean that creedal people do not have a vibrant faith that they conscientiously practice, they most certainly do. But the Creed ultimately became a vehicle for determining who will be saved and who will not. It doesn't matter if the Creed defies scientific and natural law; agreement with the Creed is a requirement for membership and for salvation. Theologians like Harvey Cox mark the year 326 as the dividing line between the Age of Faith of the first century Christians and the Age of Belief, which is set in motion by the Roman Empire and the Nicene Creed. Cox goes on to say that this is also the origin of religious fundamentalism in Christianity. This helps to explain why the Non-Creedal Free Church tradition of the Radical Reformation became such a threat to Calvinists, Lutherans and Catholics alike. The Quakers, Mennonites, Brethren, many Baptists, and yes, even the Unitarians and Universalists all identified themselves as non-creedal people because they all agreed that what matters most is the life you live not the beliefs you profess.

So, the next time you hear someone say, *“Faith is the belief in things in spite of all evidence,”* remember the words of Clarence Jordan, *“That is not Faith. That is foolishness. Faith is not belief in spite of evidence, but a life (lived) in scorn of the consequences.”* Clarence Jordan knew very well of what he was speaking. He and his community of friends at Koinonia experienced many consequences because of their faith. It all started when Clarence and his wife, Florence, moved to Americus, Georgia in 1941 to build an intentional Christian interracial farming community called, Koinonia. Clarence, with a Master's Degree in Agriculture and a PhD in Theology and Greek New Testament, felt the call of his faith to build a little piece of the Kingdom of God in southern Georgia. They referred to themselves as God's Demonstration Plot and set about to live as though the Kingdom of God was already here and doing well.

The White Citizens of southern Georgia thought otherwise and proceeded to prove to these communist race mixers that *“Only White Lives Mattered”*. So, by the early 1950's Jordan was kicked out of the Southern Baptist Church, Koinonia's produce stands were repeatedly burned to the ground, farm buildings and implements were continually sabotaged or destroyed, their homes

were riddled with machine gun bullet holes, community members were regularly harassed and assaulted, an economic boycott was placed on all Koinonia products, and their farmland served as a favorite site for Klan Cross Burnings. This is what Clarence meant by living in scorn of the consequences. Astonishingly, throughout all of this Clarence found time to translate many books of the Greek *New Testament* into Southern vernacular creating the *Cotton Patch Version of the Gospels* and the translation of many of the New Testament Epistles. Koinonia's experience is very similar to the life of Faith that many first and second century followers of Jesus experienced. No wonder Harvey Cox refers to these early years of Christianity as the Age of Faith. Clarence often joked with other pastors who built fancy churches with illuminated crosses. He would say, "I declare, you spent way too much money on that cross. If it's a cross you want all you have to do is lead a Christian life and the Klan will deliver crosses to your front steps and, you know what, they will even light 'em up for ya, all for free!" Clarence's sense of humor, like Jesus' was very infectious.

Koinonia Farm still exists today in the same location still living by the same mission. One of its institutional offshoots is Habitat for Humanity, now known internationally for building houses with and for people in need. Through everything Clarence Jordan relied on his Belief rooted in Action, but he and Koinonia didn't do it all by themselves. It was also the Faith of others who reached out to Koinonia to offer a lifeline of support that helped them survive. The Friends of Koinonia started right here in Cincinnati under the leadership of Maurice McCrackin. McCrackin's Presbyterian Church in the West End, the Cincinnati Quaker Community, St. John's Unitarian Church, First Unitarian Church, and others all participated in a fundraising and marketing campaign to sell Koinonia pecans and other products to combat the economic boycott that was crippling their farm in Georgia. The bags said, "Help us ship the nuts out of Georgia!" I don't know if anyone here today remembers the campaign inside First Church, but our member, Fritz Casey-Leininger, vividly remembers eating Koinonia Pecans in his childhood home because his Quaker parents were actively engaged in the effort. It seems like such a simple thing to do today, but this was done during McCarthy Era. People lost jobs and careers in the 1950's for just being accused of sympathy for Communism and Clarence Jordan was a Communist, out to destroy everything America stood for--or at least that is what we were all told. A few faith communities in Cincinnati had the courage to stand up and say, "Wait a minute!" and they decided to do something about it, consequences be damned.

Many churches in Cincinnati, however, did not participate. They couldn't understand why this loudmouth preacher from Georgia couldn't be more respectful of the Southern Way of Life. "If that is what the majority of people in the South want then they should be allowed to have their own social rules." "Koinonia was breaking the segregation laws and should just accept the consequences." "If only they weren't so confrontational and controversial." "There are two sides to this story—Koinonia is provoking this violence and bringing it on themselves. We should not support that." "There are other places they could live." "Upsetting people like this is not the way to get things changed." How similar are these comments to the objections raised by many white people of faith today against the Black Lives Matter campaign? Now, I recognize that many of these comments were driven by fear. Remember, however, what Jordan said about fear? *"Fear is the polio of the soul which prevents our walking by faith."*

There is also something else that is present. People, like us, who live in relative comfort and privilege in the midst of great injustices, find it easy to critique the people that dare to challenge those injustices. We demand absolute perfection from those people and movements before we are willing to support them. At the same time though, we tolerate, and by default support, the absolute obscenity of a system that uses racism and brute force to keep some people oppressed and in a second-class status. This, my friends, is where we actually touch the Substance of our Faith and it is not always a comfortable space to occupy. This is where our comfort and our privilege can prevent us from walking by faith. In one of the GA Breakout Sessions this summer someone projected a quote from Lila Watson, an Aboriginal Activist in Australia. She said: "If you have come to help me—you are wasting your time. If you come to me because your liberation is dependent on my liberation, then we can walk together."

Our Faith needs to lead us to the understanding that our own liberation is dependent on the liberation of others who feel the pain of injustice and systematic oppression. They have much to teach us. This is the kind of Faith that UUs James Reeb and Viola Luizo exhibited when they gave their lives in Selma, Alabama in 1965. As Sweet Honey and the Rock sang for us today—*"We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes."*

When we look at the pressing issues of today how often are we controlled by our fears? How often are we demanding absolute perfection from the people who point out that our economic and social order stinks and that things must

change in order for all of us to survive? This is precisely why we need Faith (Beliefs Rooted in Action) to help us discern how we should live our lives.

Our Principles, the Ethical Beliefs for our Faith, speak Loudly and Clearly. Let me read them to you:

1. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. We believe in justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. We believe in the acceptance of one another and encouragement for individual spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. We believe in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. We believe in the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. We believe in the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for everyone;
7. We believe in respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Our 7 Principles challenge us to our very core. They give us great cause for self-examination. How have our fears, our privilege, our wealth, our social blindness prevented us from walking by Faith?

Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Maybe the Unitarian Universalist corollary to this is, “The unexamined Faith is not worth practicing.”

Note:

All Clarence Jordan quotes are taken from a sermon he delivered called “The Substance of Faith” found in a collection of his sermons titled, *The Substance of Faith*.

All references to Harvey Cox come from his book, *The Future of Faith*.