

“Where Faith and Doubt Meet”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading

“The Edge of Doubt” by Albert Huffstickler

There is always
that edge of doubt.
Trust it.
That's where
the new things come from. If
you can't live with it,
get out because,
when it's gone
you're on automatic,
repeating something
you've learned.
Let your prayer be:
save me from that tempting
certainty that
leads me back
from the edge,
that dark edge where
the first light breaks.

Sermon

*Heroes of faith in every age, far-seeing, self-denying,
wrought an increasing heritage, monarch and creed defying.
Faith of the free! In thy dear name
the costly heritage we claim: their living and their dying.
Faith for the people everywhere, whatever their oppression,
of all who make the world more fair, living their faith's confession:*

*faith of the free! Whate'er our plight,
thy law, thy liberty, thy light shall be our blest possession.*

These are the words we sang (or hummed) in our Opening Hymn earlier in the service. They were written by Unitarian Universalist minister Vincent B. Silliman in 1944 during the fifth year of World War II.

Songs of freedom, then as now, were reminders of what was at stake on the global front in the resistance to fascism and even closer to home where freedom was still elusive for many, and Japanese Americans were newly finding their freedoms taken away.

*Faith for the people everywhere, whatever their oppression,
of all who make the world more fair, living their faith's confession*

Our worship theme this month is “Renewing Faith.” In this time of upheaval and crisis on many fronts, how do we renew our faith?

Faith is a word that can sometimes be tricky for Unitarian Universalists, whether you're someone raised in this tradition or new to it later in life. Faith is a complex word for spiritual seekers of all kinds.

Faith can sometimes be taken to mean certainty. If this definition is applied to theological beliefs, well then doubt is a much more constant companion to most UUs.

Being doubters and questioners may be one of the most common characteristics among Unitarian Universalists. During our New UU class, we always begin by inviting everyone to share a bit about their religious or spiritual background and what brought them to this church. When folks tell their stories, people often share that they were the ones in their Sunday school classes who asked a lot of questions.

The questions are crucial. This is where our own doubts and uncertainties can inform our search for truth. The open-mindedness and healthy skepticism we bring to the religious endeavor can certainly help us to discover the meaning in our lives without becoming dogmatic or rigid.

But, what if we understand faith in a different way?

For me, faith doesn't imply certitude or an attempt at positing any guarantees about life or death, about this world here on earth or a world beyond. Faith in the liberal religious context actually depends upon doubt and uncertainty.

The theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich put it this way: "If faith is understood as belief that something is true, doubt is incompatible with the act of faith. If faith is understood as being ultimately concerned, doubt is a necessary element in it...Existential doubt and faith are poles of the same reality, the state of ultimate concern."

Doubt raises the questions and leads us on our journeys of faith.

Throughout the history of Unitarianism and Universalism our religious ancestors held the tension of doubt and faith. They wondered about their relationship to God, the existence of God, the nature of human relations, human relationship to power and authority, human relationship to other living beings, how to live with justice, equity, and peace. Their faithfulness, and ours today, was driven by the prospect that at any moment these matters of ultimate concern could be in jeopardy.

I invite you to travel back in time with me to 16th century Poland. In this time and place, we find the story of some of our Unitarian ancestors whose faith in freedom and faith in the authority of reason compelled them forward through uncertain and risky circumstances.

At the time, the Catholic Church was the dominant religious force, yet there were people, including priests, who defied Catholic doctrine. They looked to scripture to formulate their own beliefs rather than accepting the official church-sanctioned creeds.

One of these people was a Lithuanian priest named Peter Gonesius. In 1556, he stood before an assembly of Protestants in Poland, Calvinists and Bohemian Brethren, and stated his belief in God the Father as the sole God and denied the divine coexistence of Jesus Christ with God the Father. You might imagine that this was a very big deal and quite a divergence from accepted church teaching.

The antitrinitarian strain of Christianity was growing in the region. The ministry and writings of Peter Gonesius, who died in 1573, inspired others. By the mid-16th century, those who espoused antitrinitarian beliefs split off from the orthodox Calvinists. This body of believers would come to be known as the Minor Reform Church of Poland.

Tolerance of religious freedom was tenuously emerging in Europe, and the Minor Church increasingly found itself in a precarious position.

A woman named Jadwige Gnoinskiej, was a Unitarian as well as the wife of a wealthy Calvinist. She was especially concerned about the plight of others in the Minor Church, many of whom were suffering persecution. She persuaded her husband to establish a new town where religious tolerance would be guaranteed. Together, they established the town of Raków, about seventy miles north of Kraków. It was named for the *rak* or crab on her coat of arms.

The town had a chaotic start but then recovered and became a strong center for the Minor Church and the evolving theological movement that grew from it.

Around this time, a young, Italian theologian named Faustus Socinus found himself traveling through Eastern Europe. He chose to settle in Kraków and immediately sought admission to the Minor Church. He became a defender of the church and their Unitarian beliefs. Towards the end of his life, Catholic hostility to both Calvinists and Unitarians was on the rise and Socinus came under personal attack. He narrowly escaped an attempt by a mob of Catholic students to take his life and went on to convene two major religious meetings in Raków to bring more unity within the Minor Church of Poland. Socinus died in 1604. His grave is marked with an impressive monument erected in 1933 with funds from American Unitarians. Now, it would be tempting at this point in the story to move speedily along towards a happy, triumphant ending for the Polish Socinians, as they came to be called. An ending in which they triumph over their adversaries or in which religious tolerance grows in time for their survival and thriving alongside their once religious opponents.

What happened instead is that the church did enter a period of vitality and growth with estimates of at least 125 congregations in the region at the start of the 17th century. However, religious protection soon broke down and the Minor Church found itself under attack once again. Socinians were forced into exile abandoning Raków as their religious center and establishing a new college near the Hungarian border. They soon found themselves caught in the political turmoil of the revolt of the Cossack peasants of Ukraine as well as Russian and Swedish invasion of Poland.

With their numbers dwindled, the Socinians made the exodus to Transylvania where the Unitarians there warmly received the exhausted and sickly refugees. Socinians remained in exile for another half century or so and a few congregations survived into the 18th century before the last had closed its doors and the religious movement came to an end.

The Polish Socinians maintained their faith in freedom and their faith in reason as a source of religious authority despite the enduring persecution they suffered. Yet, I am sure that many of them faced moments of intense doubt along the way.

They must have questioned whether their suffering was worth it. They must have asked where God was while they were forced from their homes.

Yet, because they held onto that tight rope of faith and doubt and chose to follow it to the end, we are here today. In a house of religious freedom asking our own questions and wrestling with our own faithful matters of ultimate concern.

Our own faith and doubt meet us in this moment centuries later.

In the long shadow of war.

In the emergence from two years of a pandemic.

In the midst of ecological crisis.

We find ourselves at the edge of doubt with our faith in humanity, in democracy, in progress a bit dimmer than it once was.

But, perhaps Albert Huffstickler is right. Perhaps this dark edge is where the first light breaks. Facing this edge of unknowing we wait for the new possibility that will emerge.

In the words of Victoria Safford: “Faith lets go of every outcome, awaits possibilities as yet unseen and unimagined. It seeks the grace to dwell right here, right now, breathing in, breathing out, without or with the thing we think we want.”

And so it is that faith and doubt meet in a subway station in Kyiv and on the road to El Paso. Faith and doubt meet in the chemo treatment chair where one hopes for yet more life to savor. Faith and doubt meet on the backseat of a car where a family sleeps tonight the dream of a home of their own still deferred.

Faith and doubt meet in that pew and on your living room sofa with your own nagging sense that something could be different and the hope that the first light of possibility will find you.

Faith and doubt meet in the endurance of love.

Despite.

Because.

Until.

At the edge of doubt, it is love that also finds us.

These are the words of Unitarian Universalist minister, Robin Tanner.¹ A theology of faithful love even with all that would say otherwise.

“Pray”

Pray

To be brave when fear is catching you.

“We have to be brave because of the children.”

She is clear-eyed, flushed and leaning against a steel column in a subway station.

One child sleeping against her leg,

The older boy staring,

Round, brown eyes

Fixed on his resolute, rosy-cheeked mother.

Pray

To be clear to speak truth.

She offers sunflower seeds to the Russian soldier

Before she curses him

She reminds him that he will die for a dictator

Who asks him to betray their humanity.

Before she curses

She levels her eyes to this young man to remind him

She could be his grandmother, she unarmed and ready to fight.

Take this truth, if you will die here, remember the flowers will grow again.

Pray

To endure when the waves crash over your head.

My grandmother’s hands

¹ <http://www.revrobintanner.com/writing/pray>

Ukrainian hands
Always with a long slim cigarette
Even as she moved the hand mixer
And sipped cold coffee.
My not understanding
The meaning of chocolate cake with raspberry sauce
Until this moment
Staring generations forward
At the rosy-cheeked mother.
The weary lines that hid a world war
And the endurance in the ocean of grief, to mix, bake, find life in depression.

Pray

To resist, even if your name will never matter.

Ordinary people
Under a fascist
Ordinary people who in a moment
Grabbed a coat, made a sign, and stood in the public places
Knowing they will disappear
Die without
fame or name
And who resist because some day, they will say, “not all the people were silent.”

Pray

*To love enough to cry and kiss the head of your child, filling their pockets with sunflower seeds
as they board the last bus out of town.*

Hands pressed to windows as one last ritual of love
Because we know
We may not see the sunrise
But someday when the sunflowers bloom
They will return to harvest seeds again
To feel the warmth of sun
And to sit quietly before the arching open bursts of yellow,
That mark the memory and prophecy.

“We have to be brave because of the children.”

Pray for peace, yes.

Pray for the truth, also;

Pray for endurance, amen.

Pray for resistance.

Pray to remember that love

That can never be

Bombed

Obliterated

Or silenced.

The children

The flowers

And the sun

Return.