

Ultimacy and Intimacy
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(Note: all persons below are quoted with permission)

A relatively new member, Donna, said to me recently: I'm curious about this word faith. You and so many others at UUCP, all sign off your emails with words like faithfully, or in loving faith. What does the word faith mean to a Unitarian Universalist? I'm confused.

It was a good honest question. But I must admit that internally I went: Aiiii, how DO I answer that one?

Another member, Judy, wrote me an email recently and said, I want to come to your "Building a Spiritual Practice" workshop but I'm hoping it will include a time when you will tell us what your definition of God is, and how you came to it. Aiii I thought. How DO I answer that one?

Old familiar worries came up: oh no, I have to prove my belief? Why? Why do we have to argue about these things? Can't we just "let the mystery be", but still cultivate an intimacy with the mystery? *Why can't I just live happily in paradox? I love paradoxes. Can't we get beyond our opinions to just **experience** life?*

Paradox, and poetry, are the lens through which I prefer to view spiritual and religious life. Para- beyond. And Doxon- opinion. Beyond opinion. Definition of paradox: A statement that seems contradictory, unbelievable, or absurd but that might actually be true. Like this one: God is both utterly unknowable, a mystery, and at the same time completely present and knowable, in every moment.

I was driving down route 17 dodging in and out of traffic, while thinking about all this stuff, and suddenly in the midst of all that busyness internally and externally I heard a sentence wander lazily through my mind. I almost missed it, it was so quiet. And so, today I can tell you, Judy, and everyone else, quite simply how I came to believe in a higher power, which I sometimes call God. And I thank Donna and Judy for throwing me into such a dither; otherwise I wouldn't have realized this.

"I believe in God because when I became a minister, I took up residence in a foxhole, 24/7."

And there are, as you may have heard, *no* atheists in foxholes. Actually a member of a former congregation once told me that there was at least one atheist in a foxhole in Europe during World War II and it was him. He said he had no fear of dying, and no thought of God as bombs strafed the land and bullets whizzed by his head. And he thought with wonder, it's just me, I'm alone. I could die here. And he looked up at the stars, and this being alone with the stars was just fine with him. And he told me that ever since then when someone says "there are no atheists in foxholes" he gets an image of his own head popping up out of a hole in the middle of a bombed out field in France saying "here I am. Here's one."

I loved his story. Ironically today as I think about it I hear echoes of some Biblical stories in his "Here I am". In some of the Bible stories you hear repeated over and over a call and response. God calls out to someone Eli, or Samuel, or...Eli, Eli, where are you? as Eli is wandering through the temple. And Eli responds: "*here am I*". So in my mind I sometimes picture that that in my friend's story it is God or "the Universe" that is calling out: atheist, atheist where are you? And up he pops: here am I.

It may appear from my description of ministry as a foxhole, that what I mean is I feel like I'm getting fired on all the time, with hard questions, or demands. That's only a part of it. To be honest, it's really less about external conditions and more often internal. So let me explain what I meant by ministry being a foxhole. The truth is that faced with the constant demand, to deal with questions of both ultimacy and intimacy, I find that I have to have some constant in my life, a faithful center to depend on. The demands of ministry on my particular personality were absolutely overwhelming at first glance, at first:

To listen really really completely and really really often and for long periods of time.

To respond always with kindness and good humor even when faced with criticism.

To deal with conflict as a regular normal part of life, and face inevitable confrontations. And to have to do this with hundreds of different personalities.

To speak the truth with love in difficult situations, even when I am afraid of the outcome.

To deal with a dozen different philosophical and theological positions and needs, and somehow reconcile them all into one worshipful hour.

To come up with something to say every week that might be meaningful to at least some of the many and varied personalities in the pews.

This is just to name a few of the frightening and awesome parts of ministry. Is it any wonder I screamed out "God help me"! It was absolutely astounding to me to realize, and to *have* to accept, that I would often fail at this, and that I still had to go on and try

anyway. And I had to acknowledge I could not do it alone. And so, first day on the job I called out: God where are you? And in one way or another God has always answered: Here am I. As a result my faith has grown. And I have never stopped calling out, though sometimes I forget to and then my life and ministry quite simply don't go as well.

This is how and where He or She for lack of a truly descriptive pronoun answers me:

In any number of situations where I am afraid or uncomfortable and I draw a complete blank mentally or emotionally. Or when I listen to someone who has an issue, and I watch my reactions spin around in my own silence, and I pray: God help me, I don't have a clue what to say or do. And then I get calm. And I allow nothingness to take over, complete blankness. I fall into it. But I keep listening. And then eventually something stirs, begins to move, just like a muscle inside me, but I couldn't tell you where it's located, it's more like a soul muscle, and a few words, pop up or pop out saying: here am I. And sometimes they are actually helpful ones, or the words frame a clarifying question.

Or when I'm in a small group or in a discussion with someone one on one and we're both really listening and both sharing. And I'm not just waiting to get my turn to talk or convince, but we're building on each other's thoughts and we end up coming to a place neither one of us would have alone. And suddenly there it is: A new image, or vision, or solution. And neither one of us can claim sole authorship.

I believe that is a power greater than either of us at work. I more than believe, I have begun to *know* it. And so my faith has grown.

Or, after I have spent years working on a conflict. Say with one of my brothers. And I try to solve the conflict with him, meaning I tell him all that he's done that's made me mad, or hurt my feelings. And I do this calmly thinking I'm being very mature. And I talk about the conflict, for years with friends, building my case. And we analyze him and agree on some good labels for his behavior. Intermittently I look at my part in the conflict. And I notice how I help perpetuate it by doing things like rolling my eyes when he goes on and on without interruption or asking a single question of me, when we talk on the phone. You probably know that even 3,000 miles away a person can see your eyeballs rolling.

So I figure some of it out, but I'm still not sure I can ever talk to him honestly because he "just doesn't listen". Then one day I decide to just let it go. I won't try anymore. Two weeks later he calls me up and says: You know what? I've decided I'm on a one step program and the one step is to try not to be an a--hole for the rest of my life. And then we have a conversation like we haven't had in 30 years. And he does most of the talking, but he does listen, really listen too, and when he doesn't listen he doesn't mind me mentioning it and he says: "hey I'm trying" and we laugh. And I have my little brother back. And I believe that too is a higher power at work.

I am as a UU minister not ordained to convince you about a higher power. I don't tell you these stories to do that. (I might be telling them to make you feel sorry for me, I'm not sure). Not everyone wants God, or needs God. And here in UUism that's Okay. Some of us, like me, do need God. And here, that's also okay. I believe that the universe

in all of its complex and mysterious and strange sense of balance needs all of us, atheist and theist and everyone in between and beyond.

Recently I spoke with yet another member of UUCP, Al, who is a humanist/atheist. He says he has really been honing his thinking on spirituality, and humanism and religion since becoming a UU. I could sympathize with him. He said something interesting, that if he was terrified in a foxhole he'd most probably call out to God. But that's human, he said. It's part of the frailty and character of being human even for an atheist. He also talked about awe and wonder and all kinds of spiritual questions and responses toward life as being part of his repertoire, but, he said: It's all part of the character of the human condition. Everything is part of being human including the idea of God.

Actually I agree. I just happen to think that all of that being human is pretty divine. He and I could have gone around and around on that, and we did. And I find it interesting, and it stretched some of my thinking. And I enjoy discussions like that. We had another one as a group at the New Members session on UU history last Thursday about miracles.

But I am still left uncomfortable if we leave it just there, in the realm of discussion only. As a UU movement, we do allow so many different expressions of faith to exist, faith in humanity and faith in divinity and so many variations on both, and that's great, but there's always been something missing for me in our Societies. I'm working to understand what it is. I think it is the lack of sharing, and the building on our stories.

We need a body of knowledge, about what it means to live by our principles and purposes in this world. And a body of knowledge needs to grow about what it means to

live in a diverse community of faith. We need a body of knowledge about our diverse beliefs and how we live them out and how they coexist.

So I ask you: How do your beliefs affect your daily life and your relationships and your work life? Do they help you treat people better? Do they help you treat yourself more kindly? How?

Do you live by the seven UU principles? Do we as a community? How? What do you do to remind yourself of them in various situations?

If you try to live by them do you find that you're growing spiritually?

If you have a higher power, or something you might call Inner Guidance, or Great Spirit, or God, or something else, how do you cultivate your relationship to that? Or is it just a concept to be brought out in debates and discussions?

How do you practice intimacy with the ultimate?

What direct experiences have you had with "a transcending mystery and wonder"? How has this affected you? Do these experiences stay in some private vault like precious jewels or can they be shared? Multiplied?

What I am talking about here is spiritual growth as a common goal. This is not about being perfect but about practice. Given that: How will we learn to make of this house of faith (and Donna I still don't know what anyone else here means by faith so you'll have to ask them) a place that is safe to be imperfect?

Can we speak the truth to each other with loving kindness?

Can we practice "choosing to be kind, before trying to be right"?

Choose being kind before being right. That one practice alone has begun to change my life. I think it could change anyone's. I think it is particularly powerful in UU communities. In my foxhole I find myself saying it over and over when I want too hastily to reply to someone: *Maj-Britt, choose being kind before trying to be right.* (I try to say this kindly to myself). I fail miserably some of the time. I love to advance my opinion. But other times I don't fail. My life, and my close relationships, have dramatically changed as a result.

All of this needs to be studied, with our lives, together in groups, and one on one. We need to as Nell Morton, a Womanist writer says: "Hear each other into speech".

The good news is you are already starting to do this. Of course you do it informally here and there all the time. But I'm not just talking about that. I'm talking about your small groups: the covenant groups. Not everyone knows what a covenant group is so let me explain. They are small groups of no more than ten people who meet to listen to each other, and to be heard, deeply heard. There are three groups in the congregation meeting right now. Each one is led by a facilitator who does a reading. And then each person takes some time to share on the reading. There are guidelines; there are structures which keep the meeting safe. No cross talk, no interrupting. Imagine that! Simple. But powerful.

12 step groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, and Al anon and Narcotics Anonymous and so on, have of course been doing this for over 50 years. And they have built up a whole culture and a whole body of knowledge as a result. I would love to see us do the same.

Over a hundred years ago the Christian Story ceased being our single unifying story in Unitarian Universalism. Our circle widened to include all the sources you see written there on your order of service. In a way then we lost our narrative thread, and we have struggled with our identity ever since. What is the unifying purpose in UUism? We agonize over this. The small group ministry movement, which has swept UUism over the past five or so years, is seen by many as a place, a container where this purpose might find its voice.

I think in a way our unifying purpose is clear and always has been. And it's not unique. We want to become better people, and make the world a better place. We're just choosing to do it in the most complicated situation possible: this diverse mixing bowl. So we have a huge responsibility to listen; because we aren't all starting from the same place.

This is called the small Group **MINISTRY** movement for a reason. In a way what members of our congregations are being called to do is: Jump into the foxhole along with your ministers. Not 24/7 perhaps. But this small group movement is about the radical spiritual experience of sitting in the midst of uncomfortability. If there are, say 10, people in your group it means you're sitting there listening 9 times more often than you're talking. Not being able to talk back means listening without being able to react, or try to change another person's opinion. It means trying to be kind (listening with complete attention is a most basic kindness), before trying to be right. It means buttons may get pressed but instead of entering into a verbal volley, one just sits. And one watches what is going on inside in response. This is one kind of spiritual practice.

Imagine what body of knowledge could come from this, over time!

Kate, your Board Vice President said on Thursday night: do we have a Bible, like a sacred text? Nope, I said. We use sacred texts from all the world's religions. But as I wrote this I thought: maybe we will one day. It will be the story of how beloved community is practiced in the midst of diversity. It would be the story of our values practiced between us and our values practiced out there in the world. What is miraculous to me is that today at this moment: no one of us alone, has the power, or the knowledge to even imagine what this book could say. Nor could we write it alone. And yet it could happen. It is to this process, this hopeful experiment in living which I believe is both human and divinely human, that I am faithful.