

Faith in Our Future

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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“Faith,” said, Ali, the cousin, son-in-law of Muhammad, fourth of the Rightly Guided Caliphs of the Muslim community, faith, he said, “stands on four pillars: Patience, Certainty, Justice, and Striving.” I don’t usually pair up those four words with faith. But when I started wrangling with the thoughts and feelings that are my dread and welcome companions on Thursdays through most Saturdays, and as I started writing down the words I am reading on this page, “the four pillars of faith”—patience, certainty, justice and striving seemed fitting and helpful. *Patience and faith?* I have to patiently attend for the arrival of feeling/thoughts and then type them out word by word; it doesn’t come quickly or in one fell swoop. I have to trust that if I wait and welcome them, they will arise to greet me in my mind and heart.

Certainty? An odd choice perhaps to be paired with faith—but think about it: we say we have faith in reason; or that we have full faith and credit in government bonds; we had faith that the sun would rise and the world continue on the day after December 21st—it did, didn’t it? Certainty—I knew that we would be worshipping together this morning, that I would have a sermon to share with you, and that it would be written out before 5 pm Saturday! It takes a measure of trust, that not just anything, but *certain* things, including our rendezvous here, would and will take place.

Justice as a pillar of faith? Looking up the root meaning of the word—I was pleased to discover that our word justice goes all the way back to its origins in the ancient language of Sanskrit where it means “to join”—that is, to connect things according to what is fitting like well-plumbed pipes in a building, or the repossession of rights denied through means of the

justice system. Justice?—trust that we will be rightly joined together in worship and community, and that I might do justice to this topic.

And the fourth pillar—*Striving?* Though Martin Luther, the great 16th century Reformation leader, hated it and would have written it out of the Bible if he could have, I always thought that the *Book of James* in the Christian Scriptures had it right, where we read that “faith by itself without works”—or striving—“is dead.” Every artist, every parent, each and all of knows that without striving, without works, all the faith in the world is idle, wishful thinking. The power of positive thinking wasn’t about to write this sermon, or get you out of bed this morning; it took effort. But here again, the striving is sustained by trust—trust last Friday that I would get these words written, and trust that if you journeyed to 49th and Oak at 11 a.m., we would be meeting and worshipping together.

“Faith stands on four pillars: Patience, Certainty, Justice, and Striving.”

I wanted to talk about faith in our future because it’s time. I feel the wheel of time turning. I feel it in my own bones. I’ve felt it recently in the number of memorial services I have been conducting; and doubtless, there will be more. The cycle of generations is moving on; those who, for years, have been in the vanguard of our faith are journeying toward life’s horizon; we find ourselves stepping forward in the middle ground to take their place—stewards of this community, our religious heritage and their well-being, called to nurture them in trust for the generations rising and approaching behind us and at our side. And how can we best embody and enact that trust placed into our hands?

I wanted to talk about faith in our future because the world is changing around us, and that has momentous implications for our religion. I was born in the middle of the last century in a

time of rotary phones, vacuum tubes, typewriters, the rise of rock music, civil rights, vinyl records and reel to reel tape. I remember when the introduction of polyester, no-iron shirts was a big deal. My mother brought some home for me one day and said, “I’m never going to iron another shirt again.” I hated those polyester shirts, and ever since, I bought and have worn button-down cotton ones and ironed them, every one, ever since. But I digress...

Back then when I was growing up, Canada and the States were church-going, synagogue and temple-going societies. If you didn’t attend, you kept the fact quiet. You went to church because that was what was done, especially if you had kids, and it was a world booming and crazy with children. Except for watching hockey and football on the tube, there was little else to do on Sundays. The neighbour who mowed his lawn on Sunday morning was something of a scandal, and shopping was hardly an option. In BC, you even recited the “Lord’s Prayer” every day in public schools. Do you remember all that?

In this landscape, people showed up at Unitarian churches—like this one—because they *had* to belong to a church; but Unitarian churches were different even then—they were free from the requirements of doctrines and dogmas that people couldn’t affirm or believe in. That was, in Christine Robinson’s words, our “successful niche,” and she put it crudely like this: *back then, Unitarians were free to believe whatever they wanted to, and most of us didn’t.* (Rev. Christine Robinson, “The Future of Unitarian Universalism: What’s Possible?” Minns Conference Lecture, 2011. A lot of what follows is informed by that and other 2011 Minns lectures.)

The times have changed haven’t they? Certainly we live in a world transformed by technology; the social sensibility has mutated too, from something more like a “we’re in-this-together” outlook to one far harsher, more impatient, individualistic, and if it’s possible, more

hedonistically driven, more anxiety ridden and awash in medications, too; don't think that's a coincidence. Or is that just me thinking?

“The relationship of society to religion has changed just as much.” (Robinson) It's not exactly news that we live in an increasingly un-churched society; plenty of people don't participate in organized religious observance, and British Columbia leads the way in this trend.

From the late 40s to the end of the 90s, weekly church service attendance *nationally* dropped from about 65% to the low 20s; and in the 18-34 year old age group those numbers nationally have declined into the low teens. Even organized conservative religious denominations, whose leaders and supporters in the media have long sneered at the decline in mainline, more liberal church attendance while vaunting their own relatively robust numbers, have recently been having to grapple with the flat-lining and decline in their own figures—from attendance to financial support. (On the Canadian data, see Reginald Bibby, *Restless Gods...2004*, pp. 12-25. On trends generally, and conservative churches in particular, see how this is presented and analyzed in: www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx. I have commenting on the latter phenomenon in my September 2012 and February 2013 *UCV Bulletin* columns.)

Today, most people, including parents who bring their children to church, are *choosing* it over a plethora of competing options: shopping, family time, chores, TV, movies, computer games and in-and out-door recreation. As well, the right to believe “what your heart and mind suggest to you is true, including “nothing,” is taken for granted in much of elder society and in virtually all of younger society.” (Robinson) Religious observance and affiliation is no longer a privileged part of the social landscape in most parts of the nation. When people decide they're going to try religion again, or for the first time, and let's take ours for example, it's not because they want freedom or because they're interested in community as such—we have freedom in

spades: the right to believe and practice *or not* across a whole spectrum of religious and spiritual options; and there are all kinds of community we can join—from dragon boat clubs to Facebook.

Why do people show up at our door; why do we? And what does it have to do with faith in our future as a religion?

We show up to experience something that just doesn't happen, that we don't get at the gym, or a political party headquarters, or an island cabin, or on the road for a wine-tasting festival. We're here because the gods are restless, the spirit moves, real existential crises and questions arise—and what we need is a safe and sustaining place to explore what happens to us when we feel moved to deepen our lives in the most profound and fulfilling ways for ourselves and our children. “We are looking for a religious community, not a secular one.” And for those of us who've tried more orthodox options but can't bring ourselves to sign on, or who already know what they don't believe—they are the ones, we are—who might just show up at those doors. “This is our natural constituency...these are the people we are supposed to be serving... this is our niche in the religious landscape.” And it's going to take patience, certainty, justice and striving to sustain our trust, our faith that we and they have a future here. *And if we don't serve these needs for real “depth, heart, spirituality, hope, faith and love outside of an orthodox” or none-of-the-above “setting, who will?”* That's us. Welcoming a sustainable future will entail a change in our thinking about what we are doing and require something of a different focus on who we are. (Robinson)

Remember the successful niche we provided in the mid 20th century? It read like this: “Unitarians are free to believe whatever we want to and most of us don't.” And that was an important role we willingly took on; it was a crucial service we provided in a landscape soaked

with religious convention and conformity. But the landscape is changing. And while it is true that the secular tide that rose up and washed over most of the organized religions of Europe in the 1900s seems now to have finally reached the shores of North America, and church attendance is plummeting while the ranks of the “none-of-the-aboves” is rising, the number of Canadians who express deep and abiding spiritual needs includes far more than half of us, and far, far more than the number of those who are actively participating in religious groups. (see Bibby, 190-7)

Now that we’re well launched into the 21st century, and the religious landscape is changing, and the wheel of generations is turning, what was once our niche: “free to believe in whatever we want to and most of us don’t,” needs to change to read more like the following: *“Unitarians worship and grow in spirit in religiously diverse congregations.”* (Robinson) That is, we respond with integrity and vision to real, if less conventional spiritual needs; and we provide a place in our hearts and in our congregations publicly where that deep search for meaning can flourish.

Ever since our evolution into conscious beings who know we are going to age and die we have sought out the meaning of our existence. That search, expressed from the individual out into the collective, the community is what we call religion. We wish to participate in something larger than our individual concerns. Sometimes that desire is focused on political and secular goals, but when it’s focused on the meaning of our existence—its whys and wherefores and wheretos—when it takes us into the spiritual terrain of our lives and when it coheres into beliefs, history, practices and community, we call it religion and spirituality burns at its core.

Here, young and old, young adults and the middling aged can meet. While formal adherence to an organized religion bottoms out among the 20 and 30-somethings, don’t be fooled

into thinking that they're a bunch of hedonistic heathens. Questions about and needs for meaning and real purpose in life run as deep in them as in any human cohort. All of the data and analysis on spirituality and religion in North America bear this out. The difference is that they are not as attracted nor as dependent on the time honoured institutions, beliefs and folkways as we older people are—less enamored of the sermon, the hymnbook, the formal committee meeting, the Sunday morning put-your-backside-in-the-pew church service. And they really get impatient with us, and for good reason, when we don't understand the crises they face: their howling need for affordable and decent housing, their worries over finding dependable and meaningful work and a livable wage, and their deep anxieties over a planet heating up and getting depleted by us.

And the kinds of conflicts going on in too many of our churches that soak up institutional energy and suck up all the available oxygen in the room?—they just don't have time for it, nor do they get it: a UU church that spent the better part of two years arguing over whether or not the minister could use religious language: like “worship service,” “prayer” and “God,” or another church that spent years arguing over what colour hands should be on their church's banner with accusations of racism shooting back and forth—all the while, the need for de-centering, other-regarding, going down deep prayer and the devastating facts of systemic poverty and racism in one's own backyard go unattended with timely, decisive action—you get the picture, and I could go on with other lamentable examples, some of them closer to home.

Given all this: the myriad choices available on Sundays and throughout the week, the waning of commitment to institutions, the soul-sucking, me-centered, pointless conflicts, the rise of a generation of image-based learners who haven't been socialized into a world of classical

music, sermons, and kumbaya, whose outlook underlines that there are a lot of paths to enlightenment and salvation, and experience that tells them that, all-too-often, we just don't get their world—*still*, as Roger Daltry of the Who sings—“after the fire the fire still burns”—and so burns the enduring, abiding need for meaning, purpose, depth, heart, spirituality, reverence and faith. If we feed that fire, that hunger—there will be those—younger and older—who will be attracted to our church and connect with it; but it's going to take getting serious about religion; it's going to take getting over the hump of thinking that Unitarianism isn't an alternative TO religion, rather, it's an alternative RELIGION that can meet *them and us*, welcome *them and us* with faith in our future and with deep hospitality which knows that when one welcomes a stranger, one is likely to be changed, transformed by creative interchange with that stranger.

I see lots of encouraging signs, of portents that give me faith and builds my trust that we have a future worth living and giving and deepening into. Men's and women's and families groups that have spontaneously sprung up; a meditation group that meets before worship services; adult education that includes a Carl Jung seminar, pilgrimage as a spiritual practice, yoga and tai chi classes, monthly social justice letter writing potlucks, groups meeting to encourage neuro-diversity and a Unitarian theologies class that could make a seminary proud. We have young people putting on their own coffee shop evening of performances of poetry and music, and preparing to go off to New York to attend a United Nations international youth conference. As well, I've had a number of youth talk to me about their interest and desire to go into ministry and social service—who get it that “our whole lives” means that we have a spiritual self, not just a sexual one, not just a self training for the rat race and the marketplace.

You want to see what church might look like down the road, then check out our own home grown, Young Adult “Church Presents” program—whose third big evening event of food, art, ping pong, music and the spoken word will be taking over Hewett Hall and the Sanctuary this coming Saturday, February 2nd. You should look at their website and get a load of the more than 250 people who’ve “liked” “Church Presents” on its Facebook page.

And last, and certainly not least, I am very pleased to announce that beginning next week, Morgan Reid will become the Director of Religious Education for Children and Youth, and Jennifer Rashleigh will be the Associate DRE of Children and Youth. With Morgan and Jennifer in this DRE job-share, we’re going to experience new direction, vision, energy and skills coming to CYRE that’s going to encourage families to line-up and sign-in so that they can get a piece of what’s going to happen at UCV. Congratulations to them both! And to us! I think we’re really going to be jazzed and heartened by what’s coming our way. And I encourage all of us to really support our new RE leaders and their programming ideas and projects.

And for all the rest of us—book groups, the Chalice choir, the Library, Environment, Social Justice, B&G, the Board, the staff, membership, canvass, communications, Daytimers, on and on—what can I say but my humble, heartfelt thanks, gratitude and blessings; blessings on and for all that you, that we are and do here to creatively produce, sustain and build toward our future. If we deepen, we will attract, we will hold, we will bless.

“How Firm a Foundation” I used to sing as a kid...may the pillars of our faith—patience, certainty, justice and striving be strong. May we risk—that’s that leap of faith thing—may we risk offering our heart, our means, our spirit, prayer and blessings—a people of deep faith, wanting to go deeper, clear about our mission, and passionate and purposeful about this amazing

religion of ours—nearly five hundred years now it has provoked, inspired and blessed. As the circle of the generations turn, may we do our part to ensure its future.