

FAITH AND TRUST

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)

November 15, 2009

[Insert Sharon Salzberg's story from her book *Faith*, pp. 1-3]

It's hard to imagine that anyone with such horrible experiences during childhood could possibly end up writing a book titled *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*, but it's true. In a few minutes I will tell you how that came about for Sharon Salzberg. But for now, let me just say that her story illustrates the close and sometimes fragile connection between **faith and trust**. My talk today is the second installment in my monthly sermons about faith—a word that frankly does not sit well with some Unitarian Universalists because of its close association with **belief**. As I emphasized in my reflections on this subject last month, there is a subtle but important **difference** between faith and belief.

As Sharon Salzberg says, “With their assumptions of correctness, beliefs try to make a known out of the unknown. They make presumptions about what is yet to come, how it will be, what it will mean, and how it will affect us. Faith, on the other hand, doesn't carve out reality according to our preconceptions and desires. It doesn't decide how we are going to perceive something, but rather is the ability to move forward **even without knowing**. Faith, in contrast to belief, is not a definition of reality, not a received answer, but an **active, open state that makes us willing to explore**. While beliefs come to us from **outside**—from another person or a tradition or heritage—faith comes from **within**, from our alive participation in the process of discovery. [Zen Buddhist] writer Alan Watts summed up the difference simply and pointedly as, ‘**Beliefs cling, faith lets go.**’” [Sharon Salzberg, *Faith*, p. 67]

It is this **inner dimension** of faith that I want to explore today. For me, a person's faith evolves **from the inside out**. This view of faith differs from the one that has been the dominant model of faith development for several years, which describes faith development as a series of discrete **stages**, like the rungs of a ladder. In his book *Stages of Faith*, James Fowler argues that these stages always occur in the same sequence (i.e., from lower to higher) and that once a person advances to a “higher” stage of faith, s/he does not regress to an earlier stage. According to Fowler, once you leave a particular stage behind, you don't return to it. In contrast, I view faith development as an evolutionary process that is similar to the biological evolution of the human brain: **from inner to outer layers**, with each new layer enclosing but not eliminating the deeper layers within it. Each layer encompasses a wider range of experiences. However, like the human brain, our faith can and does involve interaction between “lower” and “higher” levels as we continually strive to discover meaning in our life experiences—especially those that evoke a response from the innermost core of our being.

What lies at the innermost core of faith? **Trust**. A basic sense of trust forms the foundation not only for our faith, but for our personality development as well, because trust undergirds our primal sense of the meaning of life itself. An abiding sense of trust enables us to face the challenges of life with hope and confidence. And its opposite, basic **mistrust**, fosters a sense of hopelessness and despair in the face of adversity. The emotional tug-of-war between

trust and mistrust during infancy is the cornerstone of Erik Erikson's theory of personality development. Basic trust (or mistrust) develops as a result of an infant's interactions with adult caregivers. If the quality and reliability of care is poor, the young child comes to mistrust others, but also **to mistrust their own feelings**. The result is a lifelong pattern of avoiding close relationships with other people, as well as disconnecting from their own emotions.

On the other hand, a positive resolution of the tug-of-war between trust and mistrust during infancy can also have lifelong implications. "Over the life span, the sense of trust is transformed and matures into an inner paradigm for understanding life. Among older adults who have a strong sense of trust, many of life's disappointments and complexities are minimized by a growing religious faith. Their basic sense of trust evolves into a powerful belief in a great source of goodness and love in the universe, a force that can transcend the pain of daily tragedies and give integrity and meaning to their dying as well as to their living." [Barbara M. Newman & Philip R. Newman, *Development Through Life* (7th ed.), p. 172] For millions of people, this ultimate source of goodness and love in the universe is viewed as a personal figure—the loving Father of Christianity, the merciful god known as Allah of Islam, or the Hindu deity Krishna, who is both the source and the object of unending love. Such divine figures are experienced by their devoted followers as "**out there**" in the sense that their existence is independent of the worshipper.

Among the greatest threats to faith in a benevolent personal God are the twin problems of **suffering and evil**. How can a loving God cause or even allow the suffering of innocent people, as in the example of the tsunami that claimed more than 200,000 lives in Southeast Asia in 2007? Or the deliberate murder of more than six million innocent victims during the European Holocaust? In spite of the attempts by "Old Testament Christians" such as Pat Robertson to somehow blame the victims of natural catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina, the more likely response to meaningless suffering is a **loss of faith** in an all-powerful but untrustworthy deity. A recent survey found that more than sixty percent of Americans reported that they sometimes felt anger toward God. Either you admit that God is capable of great injustice or else you place limits on God's power. As the authors of a chapter on spiritual struggles conclude, "It would seem more difficult (though not impossible) to attribute suffering to God if God is viewed as an impersonal energy force or an abstract figure far removed from human affairs." [in Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park (eds.), *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, p. 317]

That was the solution that Sharon Salzberg discovered in the teachings and practices of Buddhism. Overwhelmed by feelings of despair and hopelessness, she embarked on a long and arduous spiritual journey that eventually landed her at a Buddhist retreat in India. There at last she found a refuge in a community of kindred souls who were also seeking freedom from suffering. Buddhism teaches that the root of our suffering is **attachment**—our cravings and desires, but above all our attachment to our existence as a separate self. Reflecting on her experience, Sharon Salzberg writes, "Whether or not we have any interest in Buddhism as a religion, the potential to realize the Buddha's insight, compassion, and courage is a part of who we already are. . . . Taking refuge in the Buddha was, for me, like having an uncommon mirror held up before me, and seeing myself in ways I hadn't before—rich with the potential for transformation, and possessed of innate beauty. Hearing my own inner world portrayed as

containing such seeds of abundance filled me with joy.” [*Faith*, p. 35] For her, faith means **trusting in your own deepest experience** (which is the subtitle of her book).

“What distinguishes faith in ourselves from conceit is the fact that conceit lays claim to specialness, while our fundamental nature is not personal—it’s universal, it’s shared. When we look at the Buddha or [some other] great teacher, we can see our own potential for happiness, for vibrant wisdom and sustained compassion—a potential that all beings share. However, if we stop at faith in another, admiring him or her and overlooking ourselves, our faith remains incomplete.” [p. 157] “We all have the absolute right,” Sharon Salzberg concludes, “to reach out, without holding back, toward what we care about more than anything. Whether we describe the recipient as God, or a profound sense of indestructible love, or the dream of a kinder world, it is the act of offering our hearts in faith that something in us transforms, . . . proclaiming that we no longer stand on the sidelines but are leaping directly into the center of our lives, our truth, our full potential. No one can take that leap for us; and no one has to. This is our journey of faith.” [pp. 175-76]