

How Can I Believe In You?

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Opening Words

We are here
as we are, neither pretending nor regretting,
just present fully with our whole lives.
Praise the gift of another morning!
Praise the reliability of open hearts and minds!
Our praise takes the shape of these words:

Mindful that we share a common world, but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.

Sequence

I'm a trusting sort,
at least for a skeptical kind of guy.
You see, I trust that the leaves of the maple
(now trying their hardest to resemble
jagged pieces of a terrific sunset)
will eventually carpet the ground, and
not fly high to compete with the geese.
I trust that when I breathe in,
I will breathe out
within just a few seconds,
and that my blood will flow
through my veins and arteries with due speed,
and that my vocal chords will continue
to vibrate all the way through to the end of this
sentence (at the very least).
I trust that Caesar will remain in his grave,
that Joan of Arc will lead no more troops,
and that the whole population of Columbus,
which rode horse-drawn streetcars
to the Statehouse on the day when Lincoln's body lay in state there,
will remain safe in the
warm embrace of history books.
And I trust that any bird that lights on my finger
will fly away unharmed, and I trust in the love that survives even the end of love;

but I, right now, I place my trust in the silence
that brings me rest.

silence

I trust that my life has always been lived
in the company of those who came before me
and those who will survive me, and those
who are at my side right now.
I honor that great community of the ages
by naming, now especially, those whom I have
loved or been loved by, in a way that has transformed me for the better.
Aloud, or in silence, I name them.

naming

I trust in the coming of the music,
which brings with it the full beauty of the world:
cooperation, skill, beauty, passion, discipline,
attention, community and love.

The First Reading *is from psychologist David Richo, whom I much admire, in his book
“When The Past is Present” 2008*

Our basic trust flows from an ongoing belief in the capacity of the world to grant us fulfillment of our needs. This basic trust is gained early in life through a series of reliable fulfillments of our needs by our parents. Our parents build our trust when they show they understand us. For example, a parent holds us when we are afraid, and gives us a sense of safety.

In adult life, when someone shows trustworthiness, we receive it and feel appreciation. If we notice that someone is untrustworthy and has betrayed us, we withhold our trust. This is the adult style of trust as a basis of relationship: our trust is in ourselves rather than only in a partner. Indeed, unconditional trust is a disregard of the given of life, that people are not always reliable. As we say “Yes” more and more to that given, we reconcile ourselves to *moments* of trustworthiness.

The Second Reading *comes from Lillian Smith’s amazing book Killers of the Dream, written fifteen years ago. She writes of growing up in the south, and of the nursemaid who raised her. I learned about Lillian Smith from Sharon Welch, a professor at Meadville Lombard Seminary in Chicago, who did the program at our ministers’ retreat.*

I knew that my nurse, who had cared for me through long months of illness, who had given me refuge when a little sister took my place as the baby in the family, who soothed

me, fed me, delighted me with her stories and games, let me fall asleep on her deep warm breast, was not worthy of the passionate love I felt for her, but must be given instead, a half-smile affection. I learned to use a soft voice to oil my words of superiority. I learned to cheapen, with tears and sentimental talk, my “old mammy,” one of the profound relationships of my life. I learned the bitterest thing a child can learn: that the relationships I valued the most were held cheap by the world I lived in.

Sermon

Sometime after President Kennedy was assassinated, a center for the performing arts in Washington D.C. was named in his honor, the Kennedy Center. On opening night, it premiered a commissioned theater piece by the then very famous and popular composer, Leonard Bernstein. With multicultural bravado, the Jewish composer, who had often written pieces based on Jewish themes, like *Kaddish* and the *Chichester Psalms*, decided to compose a Mass, to rightly honor President Kennedy’s Catholic culture and practice.

It wasn’t a traditional musical Mass, like the celebrated pieces of Beethoven, Bach and Dave Brubeck. No, it was the whole ceremony, with all the prayers, and the consecration of the holy bread and wine. What made it controversial was that Bernstein portrays the Celebrant coming to a place of doubt and disbelief during the Mass, a crisis of faith if you will. That’s when he takes the sacred chalice and platter of bread and dashes them both to the floor, breaking them and stomping on them in sacrilegious rage. You can imagine it didn’t make some people very happy.

But Bernstein also disturbed some people by including a number of what he called *Tropes*, where jazz singers interrupted the ancient Creed as it was being chanted by the choir. After they sing in Latin “Credo in Unum Deum” “I believe in one God,” a jazzy voice breaks into the text and starts to sing:

*“I believe in God,
but does God believe in me?
I’ll believe in twenty gods,
if they’ll believe in me.
That’s a fact. Shake on that.
No taking back.
I’ll believe in sugar and spice.
I’ll believe in everything nice.
I’ll believe in you and you and you...
and who’ll believe in me?”*

Bernstein here is playing sport with modern English, which has a tendency to allow definitions to slip and slide. Normally, if “I believe” in someone, it means that I have confidence in them, I trust them, I have faith in them. If I say “I believe” in a *religious* context, however, it means something else. If I say the sentence “I believe in God,” for example, it means that I am convinced *that* such a Being exists somewhere, and is not a

fiction. It does not imply, as it used to back in Reformation days, that I have a trusting relationship with that Being. It doesn't even define God. It just says: "There is one."

Five hundred years ago, "I believe in God" used to imply relationship, a relationship of obedience, trust or grace, for example. But the philosophical critiques of the Age of Enlightenment changed all that, leaving us with only a simple *thumbs up* or *thumbs down* in regards to God.

But Mr. Bernstein is also playing with a new and surprisingly playful use of the word "belief" or the concept of trust. Politicians and Fox News voices proclaim their faith in God with the regularity of a metronome...but for them, it's all a one-way street going toward God. They never assume faith can go the other direction. But Bernstein does. He reverses the direction of belief: "Does God believe *in me*?" Or even, "Do *you* believe in *me*?"

I confess. It feels good to have people believe in me. It feels wonderful when people trust me, and put confidence in my potential. And, conversely, it feels good to believe in you, to trust in your potential. It feels good when I can trust you, rely on you, have confidence in you. "In our adult life," writes David Richo in the First Reading, "when someone shows trustworthiness, we receive it and feel appreciation." He's saying it's downright exciting to be able to trust people, to know that when they say they are going to do something, they do it, with care and skill and a capacity to adapt and learn, with sincerity and honest commitment.

But, on the other hand, it feels awful when I can't trust someone. It's discouraging when I have lost faith: in lover; in friend; in community, in certain spiritual language, or even in nation.

Our historic religious organizational structure, in fact, is based *on just this*: mutual faith and confidence. I know some in this room are still not very fond of the word, but really, that's all the word "covenant" means. Our ancestors formed their radical religious communities, not around a list of supernatural agreements, but rather, on faith in each other, reliance on each other. Trust. They agreed to walk together, talk together, figure things out together, be there for each other during the long haul, during sadness, crisis, and rejoicing. They promised to forge a community not on final answers, but on the living practice of mutual trust. To modify Bernstein's words:

*"I'll believe in you, and you
and you and you...
and you'll believe in me."*

Why was this kind of faith so important to our ancestors? Because they saw such faith as the true sign and basic condition of what it means to be human at all. And for me, a congregation is a place where we can shore up, practice, rehearse, clarify, strengthen and even forgive the mishaps of our very real humanness. Being human and learning to trust go together. Richo puts it this way: "*Our basic trust flows from an ongoing belief in the*

capacity of the world to grant us fulfillment of our needs. This basic trust is gained early in life through a series of reliable fulfillments of our needs by our parents. Our parents build our trust when they show they understand us. For example, a parent holds us when we are afraid and gives us a sense of safety.”

Exactly. Of course, that doesn't always work out quite right. My mother, whom I loved, and whom I knew loved me, just didn't trust me when I was nine years old to cross the street without her permission. She had to watch me, standing there on our little porch to make sure I would be safe. I was embarrassed because none of my friends had to ask their mother for permission, and hadn't since they were seven or so. It felt creepy not to be trusted at the advanced age of 9, and it felt discouraging that I must seem less trustworthy than my friends. I was ten years old before she let me cross the street by myself.

Later, I found out why my mother did what she did. When I was about three, I had somehow found a way to open the gate in our back yard fence. I waddled across the street while my mother was inside talking on the phone. They were building a new public school across the street, (by coincidence called “Columbus School,”) and the equipment had dug a pretty impressive pit that would one day be finished as furnace rooms. I went to edge of the pit, apparently, and looked down. Suddenly my mother, very upset, came behind me and scooped me up in her arms, wailing that I had almost fallen into the hole and killed myself.

Now, of course, I don't remember being frightened of the hole. I really don't remember anything, since I was three. I only heard this story from my mother many years later. But I learned then that she never wanted to experience electric fear like that again, so she developed a sense of over-protectiveness when it came to me crossing the street. It helped me to understand things a bit, though I still wince when I remember how ashamed I was to be alone.

But listen. I never lost faith in my mother because of this. She was trying to do the best she could. I knew that, even then. My own sense of self-trust was not damaged, and so I grew up with a capacity to trust others, and to have faith in them. However, many people grew up in families where the actual sacred boundaries of body and spirit were crossed many times: by drunken parents, bullying sibs, or emotionally impaired relatives, and thus they were hurt deeply, as the prophet Zechariah put it, “wounded in the very place where people supposedly loved them.” And unfortunately, the sense of necessary trust that had been building in them before the drinking binge or bullying ended, collapsed, and never emerged again, even when they were fully grown adults. It makes perverse, but real, sense that a person could believe that that no one else in the whole world can be trusted if members of *your own family* are not trustworthy. And so, even when these wounded children grow up and leave their family home, their grown-up relationships often fail because of their necessary, but entirely self-defensive, inability to trust. It's very sad, such brokenness. But very real.

Now Richo rightly reminds us that no trust is perfect, in *any* relationship. In the covenant of marriage, the covenant of friendship, or the covenant of religious community, we are all bound to disappoint each other sometimes, bound to do things which might lessen the trust people want to place in us. Perfection is simply not possible in this world.

As mature adults, says Richo, we may have to get used to the idea that trust comes in moments, not perpetuity. There are no perpetual motion machines in the world of the heart, any more than there are perpetual motions machines in physics.

But more importantly, Richo points out that we have to *trust ourselves* first. We have to show faith in ourselves, or our faith in others will be without any real grounding. “This is the adult style of trust as a basis of relationship: our trust is in ourselves rather than only in a partner.” Simple. Easy to get. Yet entirely profound.

And just as sometimes, when trust has been broken with others, it takes time to restore relational trust, so sometimes we have to take time to restore trust in ourselves. When we make mistakes...and we all make them...they may leave us distrustful of our next move now and then. But it seems important to me, not only to find a way to channel our anger into con-structive work, as I said last week, but to also take the time to deepen our sense of self trust which will allow us to live out our days with greater courage and compassion.

Now this is not as tough as it sounds. It doesn't require exotic spiritual disciplines. It just requires paying attention to our feelings. Even children, who may have been taught that their own feelings are not trustworthy, that they need to submit to the distorted views of their loving parents, know better than that. The rhyming story this morning is a case in point. I knew better at age seven when I first heard the story of Noah's Ark. My reasoning heart taught me there needed to be some way for the animals not to eat each other in that cramped space. I didn't know what it was, but I knew it had to be there. I was told to pipe down for asking such a question. But my child's mind was wise. It knew that the story lost its meaning unless that question could be addressed openly, and without me being silenced.

This understanding that we are wiser as children than we often are as adults is what moved me about the second reading, by Lillian Smith. Not only does she love the nursemaid who raised her, she *knows* that she loves this woman. She trusts that *her feelings of affection are real*. She was warned *not* to trust them, she writes, and she confesses that she “learned the bitterest thing a child can learn: that the relationships I valued the most were held cheap by the world I lived in.” But because she *did* trust herself, she was able to *unlearn* that “terrible and bitter thing” which cheapened her love. And since she trusted her own heart, her own participation in what Sharon Welch calls “fragmentary experiences of racial equality,” she grew up and made her life a model of social transformation. She didn't live her life based on a creed proclaiming a vision of a utopia where love would flow freely between people of different colors and cultures...no, she experienced all she needed to know and feel on the warm breast of her beloved nursemaid.

So, for 33 years until 1948, Lillian Smith was the director of the Laurel Falls Camp. As Margaret Gladney wrote in the introduction to Smith's book, at Laurel Fall Camp, Smith *"provided for other young southern women the experiences that enabled them to see and challenge racism. There she began systematically to examine and then confront her society's concepts of race and gender. There she also came close to creating the kind of world she wanted to live in, where every child could experience esteem, where old ideas were questioned and new ones explored, and where difference could be appreciated."*

Lillian Smith's amazing camp could serve as a model of a great Unitarian Universalist congregation where members covenant in mutual trust to pay attention to the positive experiences of real love in their hearts, as well as gently encouraging each other to question the commonplaces in their socialized minds. And then to find ways to detach themselves from *systems of hurt and wounding* which they learned unconsciously in their own, and quite often loving, homes, but which unfortunately have kept other people down and out.

So this is what I conclude about the need for trust and faith in our religious lives. I say having faith in a utopia coming down from heaven like a New Jerusalem to make everything right is an idea without issue, a fantasy without heart. I say believing that some righteous, bloody revolution will produce a bloodless peace and human equality is like planting a tomato and expecting a golden egg. No, the real revolution, the deeper transformation, is when we turn to trust our own experiences of love, momentary as they are, and then turn in trust to each other, reaching out in faith to join hearts in communities of people who sing to each other: "I believe in you and you and you, and you'll believe in me!"

That's when it really begins...

Offering

Prayer adapted from words of Sharon Welch

Come, Wellspring.
Flow through us,
and deepen our ethical commitments.
You are not a vision of utopia,
nor an angry declaration that the world
could and should be otherwise.
You are only Love.
You invite us to love this life in which people die,
in which people suffer, where there are limits and where we make mistakes.
You, Love, are this:
the deep affirmation of the joy,
richness, and blessing that the world is.
Yet You are also the ground from which we rise to challenge all injustice and oppression.

You are not a vision of what the world could be when the “Realm of God” arrives,
or come the Revolution.

No. You are gratitude itself,
the beginning of our journey as well as our end,
our heartfelt desire to honor the wonder of that which is.

Come, Wellspring.
Flow in us as we cherish,
celebrate, and delight
in the gifts and joys of life.