

**A Faithless Faith?  
Is Religion without a Supernatural Leap Valid  
Rev. Steve Wilson**

*( From the editor: This is an edited version of an address given at the Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship on Sunday, January 22. Because of the inspirational nature of Steve's delivery and his sometimes disregard for grammatical correctness I have chosen to re-work some of his notes and must therefore take responsibility for bits of the content in what otherwise is a brilliant address. I have tried to use brackets for words which I have inserted in the text. Eric Stevenson )*

**Is there really religion beyond faith, and if so what?**

Is faith in God/a Goddess, Jesus or something similar, ...something bigger,... essential for an effective, practical, valuable, contemporary religious/spiritual life? Is belief in something bigger... essential to religion? Honestly, seriously, is some leap of faith required? And what does it look like when you don't feel like you can?

It is a great question. And I ask it because we as humans –here in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century- knowing all that we now know, and all that we don't know...have never been in this position before. And I ask it, because it is our question to train and churn on. It is .... Our question to get right. I ask it because we can't save religion from itself, and irrelevancy unless we address this question honestly and well.

When I ask if you need faith to be religious... I suspect that many of you as good organic Unitarians are inclined to jump in with a proud, perhaps a touch indignant, "NO!" .... Right behind that proud "No" can be a very existential and practical, "Then why bother?" that deserves some real attention, and we should have a response to that earnest question of ourselves. We or at least many Unitarians have staked our very "faith," if you can call it that, on proceeding forward without the assurance of a strict belief. I ask this question today because beyond the few of us in this room, there are millions of others who live in the world between religion and science, and need a few guideposts as to what to do with their yearning. (This is) because the world is asking, and worse, ignoring for lack of any guidance the following questions:

What do you do, when you don't believe the premise that there is some more perfect world or realm on which this world is modeled and to which we might be returning? What do you do if you give up on the idea that there is a personality that cares what happens to us or me, and that there is a guiding hand or fate, and that history has a meaningful arc to it? What happens to someone religiously when you come to believe that that is "hype" and more importantly, what do you do when you are skeptical enough, perhaps even offended enough by the religious hype across the years to resist falling in line? What can keep you from giving up? The world outside these walls wants to know.

In a world where so much of the religious heritage we inherit tells us that our faith will save us, so likely does your very own heart want to know? So what do you tell your kids about life? What do you do when the plane starts shaking, or when the Doc thinks she found something? And you find you don't think you believe anymore?

The other day I stepped off the bus at Wynyard had a few minutes to kill before meeting Barbara, Colin, and Eric at Circular Quay for a trip to Fort Dennison. I decided to step into St. Patrick's and sat to enjoy a moment of peace. I sat in the church, and truly enjoying the colors and the space and the stillness, was taken aback by how overwhelming, how exclusive and how particular the expression of the holy was. I love Jesus, find him inspiring and heroic, but looking at him in every single image every where I turned, I found myself offended even embarrassed for him. And for me, as a person and a second rate theologian I take that feeling seriously, mostly because I know I am not alone.

Since so much of what anyone believes theologically is autobiography projected as philosophy, I should start with me. For me theologically, the first thing that I want to say is that I think faith in "something other" helps. I think... some grieving and some honesty as one transitions from the faith of their childhood. Gulp. There I have said it. I think it and I believe it. It helps to have a sense of the transcendent, because left to our own devices, without a strong other to serve as a witness, we can fall prey quite easily to a meaninglessness that we fail to address head on.

I think belief helps because a witness, in particular a witness with a personality who cares about us and is powerful- a God for lack of a more unique term- is frankly to a finite vulnerable creature who in general hopes to extend beyond the boundaries of this life,- frankly comforting. So when the God that was either created by us, or truly is the source, the impetus for our belief goes away, it matters. Whether we ourselves are over that question or not, it matters...How we in particular answer that question matters because whether (or not) there is a supernatural realm of Gods or Goddesses, as social creatures meaning is socially shared and constructed, and because of that, what we stake our "faith" in will almost inevitably be shared. We care about Jesus, Buddha, and Shiva, or for that matter Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, or Mother Theresa because we collectively participate in, share, and construct reality.

To humans, (my)self included, who have felt intimate enough to call the speculative transcendent Father, or for that matter, Mother, Great Spirit, or even Zeus, it matters when that is shaken. For all of us, and for all those outside who have lost their first faith, let's take a long moment of silence. But it doesn't mean everything! And it shouldn't. A faith extended up to what might be the source of love, compassion, or all of creation is a wonderful thing. If you are a person who sees God, or Gods as behind all that we see as holy. Great!

But for me, I believe our reverence and faith is better staked to the attributes -so often given to God- on their own merits. It seems to me that that, even more than a sermon, that answers the question of whether faith in the supernatural is required. Today is really more about attending to the qualities (that are) granted (attributed to) the supernatural.

Listen to the chalice lighting words we used (for this service):

"To your enemy, forgiveness.

To an opponent, tolerance.

To a friend, your heart.  
To a customer, service.  
To all, charity.  
To every child, a good example.  
To yourself, respect.”

The things that although we cannot see or touch we know are true.

With all due respect to the God, I occasionally, and a third of the world fervently prays to, if that God, does not exist, does forgiveness, tolerance, friendship and charity lose its poignancy and lecture? NO! That might be the **1st sound-bite** of our effort at a faith beyond faith. A faith in God is not essential to validate the values we generally attribute to the holy.

If that feels irreverent ask yourself this (I think a parallel with the god's of the Greek and Roman Pantheon applies):

If we no longer worship at shrines of Venus or Mercury does that mean that beauty or speed no longer exist? Are any less real? Certainly not!

Too often people loose faith because they hitch their faith, their entire spiritual lives, to their belief in the existence of a God that, among other things, guides history, ...created the earth in a few days, ...or would never let bad things happen to good people, in particular Me, and are inevitably disappointed. Seriously, to me “belief” -the assertion that this or that particular thing is true, is to me a more flimsy foundation for our religious lives than traditional religion would ever want to acknowledge. See, if someone stakes their claim:

That the earth is the center of the universe,  
That my particular religion is exclusively true  
That religious leaders or traditions are infallible,  
That the Bible, Torah, Koran was written by God,  
That if you are a good person you (will) be protected.

is not your spiritual life not put in a vulnerable place? In this modern world of ours, Yah, I think it is. How many good hearted modern people just like us, at times have rejected hope, have rejected paying attention to the subtleties of their love? How many good hearted people just like, perhaps you, are leery of cultivating their compassion, simply because they have lost faith in something they once asserted (was) true? Have not a lot of modern people stopped pulling their proverbial religious cart because they no longer believe in the horse? That is sad, but I think it's right.

We are built to be religious. Our endless ability to pick ourselves back up after getting it wrong is astounding when you think of it. Those people, those increasing millions of people like us might benefit hearing in church that, belief is a bit overrated. I like that... “belief is overrated.” That might be the 2<sup>nd</sup> sound-bite line of the sermon.

It is true that what we believe truly can change us, and with it our perception of the world, which is huge. What we believe should not be underestimated for its impact. But more often it is over-rated because what we believe, or even **that** we believe does (not), will not change the nature of things. Said another way, rain dances may work, but they have never worked to make it rain. Never did, never will.

A mature religious life, to me, begins with our experience, our own humble experience of who we are, and what we know, not what we speculate God to be. I don't have to be a believer, to have the experience of the sacred, any more than all the religious people of the past did not have religious experiences because we no longer believe in their God's. Let's put that in our new theology. "Spirituality begins with our experience, and is validated by our experience." Or, you don't have to define it correctly, to feel something. Yah, I like that.

To me, a mature religious life, humbly knows that God may truly exist, may truly govern all eternity, or may not. A mature religious life today, knows that we do not know enough to really know for sure. What we do know though is that we can love more or less, still ourselves more or less.

What we do know is that our view of God and or the supernatural has always come and gone like the weather. A mature spiritual life to me knows that we are always changing our mind and getting it wrong! But (yes) we are! As Christopher Hitchens humorously but poignantly notes, "Everybody is an atheist except for the last God." Not another bad idea for our new theology- We always get it wrong, and yet the questions never go away.

I think this helps us skeptics. Unitarian Thinker and Preacher Theodore Parker noted more than 150 years ago that like the weather religious opinions are always shifting, and yet that behind those constant shifts there is a true religion, a real religion that, like the broader climate, lasts. I love Parker, (who was speaking about) things like hope, love, mystery, compassion, and EVEN that yearning we call FAITH. His point (was that they) even if the faces and shapes of God always shift and are always changing, are eternal, like climate.

Parker asks us to ask, do we revere Jesus because he was wise, compassionate, courageous, and welcoming, or do we validate compassion, tolerance, and courage because Jesus said or embodied them. The deep spiritual values are eternal, always come first.

Is religion possible without an active faith in something transcendent? The answer to that is an indisputable Yes!

There is enough magic right here.

The truth is,  
Our Spiritual natures pre-ceed any particular belief.  
Our Spiritual natures pre-ceed any particular belief.  
Our religious natures pre-ceed any leap (of) faith.  
Always have and always will.

Binding ourselves to a path, pre-ceeds and will last longer than any one path. That's a nice addition to a faith beyond faith repeat.

“The faithful” (make quotation marks) and the traditions that preserve that faith, clumsily are always at work incorporating new truths, new language, new ways of being into the old wineskins of their faith. In the same way we are imperfectly working our deeply held values and principals into a religious context that sometimes has left us clumsy language to describe it. So both the faithful and the skeptics have their work cut out for them. Well, so be it.

Every Sunday here in Unitarian Churches all across the globe I need not tell you that right here, we live out our spiritual yearnings and doubts, hopes and fears, ask our questions, seek real truth, and yearn for and pursue justice without a firm anchor in another realm. So when someone asks you if you can be religious without a supernatural faith you can look at them incredulously and say, “Believe it. I've seen it”.

Ok, that is the formal end of the sermon question, but I am not exactly done.

The better question for all of us, -still faithful, still believers or not- is this, what do **I do** with all I am and all I know? See, being religious, or spiritual, might be possible without the transcendent, but I do not believe it is possible or at least genuine without holding some deeply felt sentiments, without trying to cultivate certain virtues, and making some commitments. The sad news is so much of what many of us have been taught is not religion. Religion is not what we believe, but how we live. Religion now, for it to stand the scrutiny of our world, will better serve to see its job as building people not creeds. Religion is an issue of autobiography not doctrine.

Religion should not ask, do you believe in things you cannot really know, but “Are you fearless enough to live with integrity, but without the promise of a reward?” Religion today should not ask any of us if we are worthy of performing a ritual, it should ask, “Are you committed and immersed enough in the ways and principals and values that you would wish to live to “be bound to something?” “Are you willing to live a life that may not be documented or witnessed beyond those ripples you obviously will leave behind with your actions, or imprinted on the hearts of those closest to you?” Truth is, ~~our spiritual lives and~~ churches must do (better than any creed can do) a better job-~~of (than) comprehensively brainwashing us. better than any creed or even particular belief can.~~ And, I pray, that we here at Spirit of Life Fellowship are brain-, nervous system-, and soul- washing ourselves to be the people that can really believe in peace, fight for justice, seek truth, and live compassionately.\*

Now that we are done with the philosophical, I ask you personally, “What do you call on yourself to do faithfully?” If you're philosophically liberated, you're still not morally entirely free. In religious terms, more relevant than what you believe, is how you live. If you want to be religious, more than a leap of faith, I think a leap of commitment is (more relevant). So, I think the religious question, now, is not so much what you believe, but, “Are you brave and engaged and most importantly concerned enough to pick and sort and

work through who it is you want to be, either with or without a supernatural parent looking over your shoulder”?

Even, if you cannot say that you were given a duty from the great beyond, have you paid enough attention to what goes on in our little spinning green and blue planet to give yourself a job, and a blueprint, for how to live your life here now? If you have, and mostly hold yourself to it, and love the opportunity to define your life on your terms, then you are living proof that religion is possible without a faith in the supernatural.

So when someone asks you if you believe in a religion that is not rooted in faith, you can say, incredulously, “Believe in it? I’ve seen it”. You don’t need faith to be religious. You don’t need a leap to a belief that defies your reason to be spiritual, but you can’t really be fully (spiritual) either, without action and experience that binds you to if not the transcendent, the things that are most attributed to the transcendent.

And, that is all I have to say about that.

**AMEN**

\* In this paragraph I think Steve was stating that either personally or through church institutions, responsibility needs to be taken for “brainwashing” ourselves into a new and better way regardless of whether we believe in God or not. The brain-, soul-, or nervous system-washing consists of giving preeminence over belief to a life of peace making, justice, truth seeking, and compassion. ES