

**This I believe. How about you?**  
A Sermon Delivered on February 28, 2010  
By  
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Let me begin by thanking you for lending me your free pulpit this Sunday. It is a bit like a homecoming for me as I lived here as a graduate student wife back in the early seventies. I used to work at Robsons department store downtown. Sadly I did not know about Unitarian Universalism back then or you would have seen me here before.

In my old country Denmark the sanctuary is literally called the ship and often has a model ship hanging from the ceiling. I think that is a great metaphor for what happens every Sunday as the congregation and minister set sail together on a mutual journey of discovery. It is always a pleasure to visit another congregation and meet some new ‘inquiring minds’ and free souls. If you are visiting here today and new to Unitarian Universalism, then I bid especially welcome. We do have good news to share here.

It was the creativity and courage of the youth in my congregation that inspired me to tackle this topic. One evening, at the end of our ‘Coming of Age’ program, we adults, parents, mentors and teachers, sat at a banquet among festive candles and balloons, and listened in awe to an amazing variety of responses to this question: “What do I believe?” There were musical responses, funny responses, philosophical responses, charming responses, visual responses, a reggae and a rap response. They were all so real and honest and I loved it. Well, I thought, if they are brave enough to do this, how about me, a professional holy woman with enough books for at least one very eclectic bookstore, with a Master in Divinity degree hanging on my office wall? What do I believe now at sixty three years young, after some twenty years of ministry? And yes I know they say sixty is the new thirty but time does seem more precious now.

My excuse was that I was too busy with the daily ministry and had no time left over to go on that kind of soul journey. The time sickness of our society had seeped as a dull fog into my life so that it seemed as if I never, ever, ever had enough time. Now I bet I am not alone in this. How about you? We live crowded lives in an information age. The demands of jobs and family, even it seems at times, of retirement, asks of us that we juggle more and more roles. One reason why meditation is so popular, I believe, is that there are so few places of silence any more. So as you listen to my story this morning I invite to think of your own soul’s journey. No matter how much you love what you do, no matter how important it is, unless you take the time to take that journey, a part of your self will remain undiscovered territory. In such territory they wrote on ancient maps: beyond here be Dragons.

Let me be clear. I am not complaining, I am confessing, in a UU fashion. I love ministry, I love this faith. I am so lucky to be able to do work I believe in. But the temptation for me, and for many of us, is to let the heavy spiritual inner work go and say: Ok I will do that this summer, or maybe on retreat sometime but not right now. Besides I’m late, I’m late for a very important date!

The truth is that a soul journey can be very uncomfortable. You are likely to run into a few dragons along the way. Especially, if you have allowed the path to get overgrown from lack of use and given them plenty of hiding places. So with proper humility I confess that I am neither superwoman nor indeed super minister and I do not like to face my dragons. Talk about bad breath! And I also confess that I have no systematic theology to offer you today, just my own journey and nuggets of faith I have picked up along the way.

When I was very young I worshipped trees. My father took me on long walks in city parks and we would rest in the shade of ancient trees. Their trunks were wrinkled with time and they reminded me of my grandmothers face. Maybe I thought the trees like her knew a thousand stories and many magical secrets. I loved to look up into the canopy of an old horse chestnut tree. When it bloomed the white flowers had a soft fragrance and glowed like candles in the dark. I held a leaf with five fingers, just like my own hand, up to the light and saw the green veins, just like my own veins, and asked my father if the tree knew I was here? His answer was that it had a spirit just like mine but that it was less aware, growing and resting in beauty. The spirit he said, is asleep in nature, awakens in animals, but becomes aware of its self in human beings. This I still believe though I may now use words like interdependent web or our seventh principle. We are all strands interwoven in this complex and resilient web of life.

From my childhood I carry with me a sense of grace. Grace as a precious gift that makes living with hope possible. For the other knowledge I had, for as long as I can remember, is that life is a dance in and out of shadows. Death, real or only in my imagination and night time fears, was a constant presence. When you grow up with stories of the occupation, in the shadow of a world war, before heroic medical measures and sense your parent's fears, as you get all those diseases no one gets any more, well death is a fact of life. I spent a lot of time in bed. The grace was found in small things. Snowdrop flowers in a vase in January, sunlight on my pillow, books that opened up the world to me. I always knew somehow that human goodness was possible. That love was stronger than death.

That I still believe. It is true that we thinking apes can do horrific acts of cruelty toward our own kind. From the Holocaust to Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan we hardly need reminders of how good we are at creating hell on earth. But as we saw the devastation and horrific images of human suffering after the earth quake in Haiti, we also saw many, many shining images of compassion. And we saw Haitian women, covered in dust, walking down the street among the dead, singing. The human spirit is resilient even in despair. If you found it hard to watch, good for you. If you needed to take a break from the suffering, that is a sign of mental health. But celebrate that you felt compassion and like many of us did what you could. Be grateful that your heart can break for it makes you human in the best sense. Maybe it is a good thing to have, as Mark Twain wrote, a conscience that takes up more room than all the rest of our insides. But guilt can be overdone. I never believed in hell and damnation ever, but I sure felt guilty. Scandinavian guilt is as common as coffee and pastries and as hard to shake a habit as

either of those. Does guilt really remove or reduce calories? If I feel guilty eating this chocolate cake maybe it won't count against me. Who says we don't believe in magic?

It is easy to feel helpless because there are so many injustices in this world and so much pain that we cannot help. Ministry, or any other helping profession, will always be inadequate to the task. As a colleague of mine said, the only real adequate thing to do, when you are faced with a tragic loss, would be to bring that person back to life. We cannot stop suffering nor can we preach away the ills. But doing something, almost anything, to lessen suffering is what matters.

Oh, I can understand despair. I have done my own desperate dances with inner darkness. At 17 I stood alone on a steep hillside and wanted to end it all. The sudden appearance of a rabbit saved me. Grace, I was saved by cute hopping grace, with floppy ears and a wiggly nose. If it wasn't for that rabbit my son would not have been born and my granddaughter would not have come into this world. I would never have met my husband Bruce. Oh, so much joy, and just imagine all the good books, I would have missed.

On that hillside I had no faith. All I felt was despair and anger. I was ready to kill myself. My childhood God was long gone and I had no one, nothing to replace him with. It was an empty cold Universe and in that moment it seemed to have no meaning. But I lived.

And fell in love with a handsome Iraqi veterinarian and moved to Baghdad. God there had no face and no human will. God was the silence of the empty space and the sound of call to prayer. God was not human. I could understand the awe and I saw how faith helped others. I saw human goodness in my new family and though I could not name it at the time that was God in action, the Universalist God as love, working in the heart and hands of human beings.

In my next country, now my native country, the US, I was simply astonished by the many flavors of religion. There was a Baskin Robbins ice cream store in Ames Iowa, and they had 36 flavors. I do believe we had nearly that many different churches ring our doorbell to invite us to come to their services. I was equally amazed by how important and alive religion seemed to be over here. And also annoyed, even offended, by the zeal with which some true believers wanted to convert me. My father died and I mourned deeply. A friend stopped by and wanted to save me for Jesus so I could join my earthly father in God's heaven. Oh, I was angry. My father had told me that heaven and hell were found inside us. So if my father was anywhere at all it would not be in this man's odd idea of heaven. I could imagine my father, a boy again, cutting willow branches to make a flute, a shepherd boy in a spring meadow. Or out somewhere among the stars. They told me that he yelled loudly, roared really, as he died and I imagined him as an ancient warrior giving his last battle cry. But he would want no easy comfort, just the truth as he saw it, no more and no less. I got that same uncompromising honesty from him.

I do not know where we go when we die. I have seen enough people die to know that death itself is not to be feared. It can be a hard journey but we have learned how to ease the physical pain. But where do we go? I believe we join that same spirit that is in all living things, that I call God. But Spirit of Life will do just as well. How, I do not know. But no energy is ever wasted in this Universe. I would find it great, a wonderful surprise if I met long lost relatives and friends. But I do not know. My faith challenge is to trust the mystery.

A touchstone for me has always been beauty. I love the Ralph Waldo Emerson' quote: beauty is God's handwriting. I plan to spend the rest of my life learning how to decipher it. And I also resonate with the idea that God or the Universe does not like to play to an empty house. We are the audience for every sunset, every sound and every single movement of wings across the sky.

Art, with a capital A, was for years my pathway to the spirit, my road to meaning and my purpose in life. I painted my way to my own idea of salvation. I was saved by Cobalt blue and Crimson red, tubes of color so delicious I could almost taste them. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and how can one honor the creator better than by creating? I played at being God on the blank canvass, creating something out of nothing. But I had no community to pray in and with and really no religious home. Always, when I tried to become part of a congregation, I was asked to profess a faith I did not have.

Then the wanderer came home. I found the Unitarian Church in Baton Rouge and knew I belonged. We UU's are the wanderers, the questioners and the doers of this world who want the freedom to question and yet we know that we need each other. But a faith journey taken alone gets lonely and can lead us astray. We have no one with whom to argue our point, no one to lean on when we are in trouble, and no one to test our ideas against to see if they will hold water. I jumped right in. In 13 years as a layperson I did just about everything you could possibly do. I taught, I did services and finally went into the ministry because I felt so strongly that I could do nothing better with the rest of my life than to help create such a caring and sacred community of equals.

I still believe that at our very best we offer a real hope for this divided and war torn world.

This hope and the love I have for this faith tradition keeps me going when I am tired and discouraged and wonder if it is all worthwhile. Ministry offers no immunity against either human failings or loss of faith. On the contrary, it brings you face to face with all the ultimate questions. It also brings you a strong dose of humility.

In Seminary I came face to face with my own deepest fears. On my very first day on the job, as Chaplain in training, my assignment was to wrap a dead baby in a blanket and carry her to the grieving parents. That pretty much set the tone for that summer. It was a big hospital and it was teaching by immersion. I learned much about grief that

summer. Love and sadness intermingled and words were not important. To be present was.

Humor helps. One night I locked myself out of the on call room, by mistake, dressed only in my night gown. I had to go down seven floors in the elevator in my nightgown, cross one busy city street to get to the main building and then try to convince security that I really had not escaped from the psych ward. It was funny in retrospect. Laughter I find is healing, especially if it is at your own expense.

How do you keep compassion in the face of suffering? Without losing it yourself or becoming so detached that you can no longer be present? This is a constant balancing act. It is never easy. Human relationships are by their very nature messy and when you add tragedy the mix becomes unpredictable. If I were a traditional religious person I would say: give it to God. But I am not. So I give it to God anyhow. As I understand her. Help me out here, I say. I'm having a hard time here. Help me do what is right and do no harm. Help me see the hurt behind the anger. Make my heart open.

In my years in ministry the Universe has convinced me, over and over again, that I am very human and quite imperfect. But what I have come to believe is that this is as it should be. The inherent worth and dignity of every human being applies to me too. God, the Universalists would say, loves me anyhow.

We Unitarian Universalists live within a paradox: we are born questioners and yet we must trust. We must trust the mystery of our own existence and take on faith that it has meaning and purpose beyond our narrow selves and a limited pursuit of happiness that over time loses its flavor.

So what do I have faith in? Here is my short list. God as love, working in the heart and hands of human beings, the spark of goodness in people, compassion, education, beauty, nature, earth, my family, this congregation and Unitarian Universalism. This I believe. How about you?

