



FAITH

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

In July 1974, in the midst of the Watergate crisis and calls to impeach the president, Rep. Barbara Jordan (D-Texas) made a stirring statement to the House Judiciary Committee. “My faith in the Constitution is whole,” she said, “it is complete; it is total.” For Jordan, faith meant trust in something she viewed as unshakable, powerful, and enduring. Jordan trusted that the Constitution would be a strong enough foundation to save the nation from corruption. Many of us pray this is true.

Jordan’s rhetoric linked faith to a deep sense of trust. Linguistically, this connection makes sense. The English word “faith” derives from the Latin word *fides*, which means fidelity or loyalty. In Pali, the language of original Buddhist texts, the word for faith is *saddha*, which can also mean trust, confidence, clarity, and even devotion. We all have faith in something, whether we name it as faith or call it something else. Harry Potter had faith in Dumbledore. Dobby the house-elf had faith in Harry. And whether we realized it in the first book or the seventh, we all needed to have faith in Hermione. Faith holds us steady, clarifies our intentions, binds us to each other.

Yet faith is neither fixed nor constant. Jordan had faith in the Constitution even though, as an African American woman, she had not originally been included in its vision of “we the people.” Her trust depended on hard work, both her own and the gradual transformation of the Constitution through a process of amendment and interpretation. The Constitution was faith in formation.

Faith is often represented as a journey, one that has fits and starts, dead ends and lost places. Sometimes we lose our way; our faith gets shaken and remade as we walk the path to becoming fully ourselves. A journey of faith isn’t about having a determined big picture with an

outcome in mind. Almost always, there is no “end,” no final, right answer. But faith helps us see beyond the immediate moment, offers flashes of insight that give us the courage to keep going, the ability to leap into the unknown. Sometimes, having faith means letting go and believing in a power beyond our own.

For some of us, the word faith brings up challenging memories—harsh expectations about following credal rules, of having faith in “the right way” with no space for questions or empirical tests. So often faith has been wielded as a cudgel, as a way to silence opposition even in the face of facts. We sometimes recoil from the language of faith because it has been used to wound our minds, souls, and bodies.

In his 1841 essay *The Oversoul*, Unitarian poet Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed that “the faith that stands on authority is not faith.” Instead, he argued, faith required constant, individual practice, with frank attention to one’s own experiences and the revelation of one’s own truth. Emerson believed that “God will not make himself manifest to cowards,” those who substitute established religion for their own spiritual understanding. And Buddhist author Sharon Salzberg urges us to remember that “questioning means longing to know the truth deeply and insisting that we can.” Faith implies movement, a “going towards” something that sustains and animates us.

However it is understood, faith takes time, constant practice, and a steadfastness to values and principles, even when we cannot see the results of our efforts. A feeling of impotence and powerlessness in the face of today’s injustice and ignorance, even cluelessness about how to create change: none of these are a reason for despair or disillusionment. Instead, faith asks us to join hands with risk-takers from the past and the present in order to set pathways of possibility for

future generations. Faith is something we do, every day.

“Stand by this faith,” Universalist minister Olympia Brown proclaimed from the pulpit. “Work for it and sacrifice for it.” Brown promised that “there is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals, which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost.”

Stand by this faith. That is a hard charge from the first female Universalist minister, but it is a journey we can take slowly, knowing we will be living out our faith in a community of love.

Hallman Ministerial Intern

Kathryn Jay with this month's theme team: Rob Eller-Isaacs, Ken Ford, Lisa Friedman, KP Hong, and Ruth Palmer

FAITH THEME RESOURCES

BOOKS

The Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (reprinted, 1995)

An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith by Barbara Brown Taylor (2010)

Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation by Parker Palmer (1999)

Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience by Sharon Salzberg (2003)

MOVIES

The Martian (2015)

Selma (2014)

ONLINE

On Being: The Meaning of Faith (2004) <https://onbeing.org>