

## Why We Need Faith

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

I remember when I was fifteen years old, it was winter, a cold night in our neighborhood in Chicago. I had strapped on my new white leather skates and pulled the laces tight. I covered the blades with the rubber guards and set off across the street to the ice rink under the one bright street light. No one was there. The icy wind drew tears from my eyes. I left my jacket unzipped as I began to make slow circles around the flat unadorned circle of ice.

Being out alone after dark was exhilarating. I felt safe in my solitude.

I skated faster and faster and felt myself grow warm and graceful and free.

There were a few visible stars, and porch lights on the porches across from the muddy and abandoned ball field.

I skated faster, trying out some loops and some back skating, I felt amazingly alive. The night had a peaceful quality. As if it was near to Christmas, even though it was mid-February. Music filled my heard and I whirled faster and faster. An hour went by and my ankles were starting to tire. I still had homework to do.

I looked up at the stars with deep gratitude. IN my freedom, in the rhythm of my body, I felt at peace.

The Bible in the book of Hebrews says that faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. But I don't think holiness is all that invisible.

I don't think experiences of merging and giving ourselves over to something inexplicable and full of power and beauty is all that uncommon.

I think we just forget. I think we just aren't paying enough attention.

Faith isn't about some other world place we can't prove. For me, it's about the place where we find ourselves. Looking around this morning, listening to the choir, feeling the presence of love in this room, who could deny the existence of the holy?

Oh, yes, we could argue about it. For we have our doubts.

But faith embraces doubt, without doubt there would be no need of faith. For if we were certain about god or the holy, if we were certain about goodness and mercy, then we would have no need of faith.

You should know of the Baal Shem Tov, an Hasidic Rabbi and teacher, who wandered through Eastern Europe telling stories. Many tales are told of his close connection and conversations with Yaweh. He was seen in many guises and used his many unusual gifts to make his points and to draw a crowd.

The Baal Shem Tov often startled people by turning cartwheels and dancing.

The Baal Shem Tov delighted in life, delighted in the spark within. He believed that one transcendent God made the universe and his presence kindles every speck of it. Each clot of clay conceals a burning coal. A live spark animates all things.

It was told this way..."when you walk across a field with your mind pure and holy, then from all the stones and all growing things and all animals the sparks of their souls come out and cling to you and then they are purified and become a holy fire in you."

I believe in this holy fire, this divine energy that exists within us and among us and holds us all.

Did you know you have a holy fire in you?

I have faith in the spark and holy fire in all of you because I know of the fields you have walked across. I know of the stones and the growing things and the animals and souls you have touched, and I know those soulful sparks are clinging to you this very moment.

You have walked in the fields of good government, of international relationship-building, in the fields of health and human services, in the fields of classrooms and laboratories, you have walked in children's playground and looked over the shoulder of teens playing video games, you've walked in kitchens and laundry rooms and hospital emergency rooms and PTA meetings and civic forums and soup kitchens and libraries.

You have touched elders and animals and babies..and the soul sparks of all you have touched have been purified by your open compassionate hearts and bright intelligent minds.

So, yes, I know that you have a holy fire in you.

But what about evil, you're thinking, what about suffering and pain. Life isn't all sweetness and light.

Of course it isn't, that's why we need faith. Because evil exists and suffering and injustice and death and inequality and car accidents and cancer and loneliness and suicide and war and child hunger and roadside bombs- isn't that why we need faith...why we need to commit to the restoration of the world.

Isn't that why our holy fire is needed?

The material world is a place of both darkness and light, joy and woe ...of life and death. Who can deny it. Certainly not we Unitarian Universalists, we are among those who look reality squarely in the face. We are among those who forsake an unseen world, our faith doesn't require us to turn away from this world, in fact the opposite is true, our faith requires us to pay ever closer attention the evil and suffering in the world.

Many religious writers and poets have addressed this question of evil and faith. Activist minister, Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners Magazine defines the center of faith as "hope in life in the midst of death". The world is incomplete, imperfect, in need of repair and redemption. And many post-enlightenment theologians hold that God needs human hands to bring mercy and wholeness into the world.

God trusts us to complete the work.

I had an older brother whom I loved very much. We shared much of our childhoods, though he never like to ice skate; we rode bikes together all over Chicago. We swam in the lake, we hung out at dances at the high school, we had many friends in common. But he became addicted to street drugs. Something prevented him from receiving the blessings of our small Methodist Church. Something prevented him from seeing the sparks of life that clung to him. He used and sold drugs for many years. He ruined his life and his health.

But there were times when I saw his soul and his love and his light. It was when he played his guitar. He was given one amazing gift. The gift of music, but he never learned to use his gift to bring more light and grace into the world. God did his part in giving him this spark to work with, but he never realized its/his potential. He never rose up and walked.

My brother and I were baptized on the same day at our small church. I was 12 and he was 13. Our mom had waited in order to let us decide. I mention baptism because I think that to see the sparks of holiness that cling to us, we need an initiation or a communion or a conversion and most of us need it more than once.

So if you have trouble seeing your holiness, I suggest you consider creating some ritual for yourself, a blessing that will wake you to your own divine potential.

There is a hiddenness to the holy, but there are moments when it is revealed so don't give up.

Faith is sometimes likened to a journey, a journey home...home to merge and rest and be comforted in something larger than ourselves. I think some of us have come to rest too soon...to rest in our fear, to rest in our doubt...some of us have come to rest in our certainty of what isn't.

I call upon you this morning to stay in the struggle of the journey, rest in moments, but keep walking, keep moving forward through the fields of both joy and woe.

Nothing sure can be known about faith or God or the holy. It is all conjecture. Yet, it matters. And it takes courage to take the journey of faith.

To just keep putting one foot in front of the other. To keep questioning, what shall I put my faith in, What will I give my heart to, What can I do to help restore the world to wholeness.

The debate of the Protestant Reformation was between faith or works.

The Catholics of the time held to works...but there was corruption in the how the works were carried out, so Martin Luther, posited that faith only was enough.

Jim Wallis, asks only, What comes first? Faith or works...for they are inseparable.

I resonate with Wallis' idea...we need both faith and works. I believe in the vision of Isaiah 61...

God, Spirit of Life is upon me, He has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,

To proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners,

To comfort all who mourn,

To give them a garland instead of ashes,

The oil of gladness instead of mourning,

The mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,

And they shall build up ancient ruins,

They shall raise up the former devastations;

They shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Finally, my faith rests in the power of religious and ethical and moral people of all faiths and cultures to act with both faith and works...and thus to build a world of love and justice.

So May It Be/Amen