SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

It seems right to me that as we grow older, as we move along in our lives, that which we believe in changes. When I was a child, I thought like a child. I believed in goodness. I believed in goodness in myself and in others. I expected goodness as something to be relied on.

And then it happened, at around age 12, there was a girl a bit older and bigger than me who began to tease my little sister, to make fun of her. My sister came home crying several times before I walked down the block and rang the doorbell of the big girl’s house…and when she opened the door, I punched her in the face. No words exchanged, just a punch.

And once, years later, when I was, in fact, in seminary and rushing home from Hyde Park to Oak Park in Chicago, hurrying to pick up my kids from the babysitter, I backed up to pull my car out of the parking space and I hit the car behind me, breaking the glass of the car’s headlight….and I didn’t leave a note…didn’t take the time to do the right thing.

Clearly, I couldn’t believe in my goodness anymore.

How many of us have let go of beliefs that we held at an earlier time in our lives? How many of us have given up on belief altogether?

My childhood belief sprang from the dualities I was taught: good and bad, right and wrong, etc. -- my family was big on opposites and on certainty. In addition to family, we learned our beliefs from church and Scouts, and from the diverse culture of our neighborhood.

Belief is something we Unitarian Universalists can get hung up on. We can tell you what we don’t believe, but how much thought do we give to what we do believe? In my sermon last week, I pointed to the problem of our UU God barrier (see my sermon on Revelation Continues on our website).
This week, I invite you to think about what it is you do believe.

If you read the wonderful book of National Public Radio interviews, This I Believe, you know that belief isn’t always a religious question; it can also be a values question.
As a religious question, belief is about the eternal, about the foundational. Is there anything that you believe that is everlasting, something universal and for all time?

In a world of change, what is permanent? What can you put your faith in?


“In the postmodern world, the foundation for universal truths has disappeared. There is no such thing as certain knowledge or ultimate truth.

These things we once thought gave us firm foundations, such as universal human reason or common experience, turn out to be bounded by language and culture and gender.

Everything is relativized. Because of our cultural limitations, all our interpretations are only partial.

There is no larger truth. We are all wandering around on different paths or on different mountains. We each have our own truths and our own knowledge according to our circumstances.

This leaves us with more decisions to make but fewer bases for making them. As sociologist David Lyon says: ‘As less and less can be taken as given, so more and more responsibility is placed on the individual to account for, and act in, the world.’

For those of us without certainty, our responsibility is great indeed.

Part of our task as religious and spiritual beings is to figure out what it is that we believe in. What it is that will sustain us in dark times. What it is that calls to the better angels of our nature. What it is that helps in moments of discernment.

I have struggled to find that something to believe in.

In fact, I find myself regularly surprised by how things are affecting me in my life. I find myself saying, “I can’t believe it!” Whether changes in relationships, the reality of chronic illness in the life of a young person I
love, the horrors laid out in the daily news, the extremes of weather
suddenly considered the norm, the public policies that continue to favor the
have over the have-nots -- cutting out long-term unemployment benefits,
more deaths in Afghanistan -- I can't believe it...I just can't believe it!

And it dawned on me...maybe it's time to figure out what I do believe.

I agree with Christin that Love is strong enough, deep enough to be that
foundational universal truth. But sometimes, even love isn't answer
enough. Sometimes love becomes romanticized, a cultural icon rather than
a deep truth. And of course, often love hurts.

Whatever we put our trust and belief in is not going to be easy. It's not
going to be simple. It's not a simple question of good or evil and it's not
always going to be affirmed as truth by others.

Anne Lamott speaks about the search for our inner truth, the search for
meaning and how it can create distance and even conflict in relationships
based on a romanticized truth or a love that is taken for granted.

She writes:

"Most people in most families aren't going to feel...'Oh, great, Jack has
embarked on a search for meaning. And he's writing a family memoir!
How great.'

To the world, Jack has figured out the correct meaning: he's got a mate, a
house, a job, children. He's got real stuff that he should fully attend to.

At best, his family might think that seeking his own truth is very nice, but
beside the point. At worst, one would worry that he was beginning to
resemble a native Californian.

It is not now and never was in anybody's best interest for you to be a
seeker. It's not convenient for the family. You may end up looking nutty
and unfocused, which does not reflect well on them."

And yet, I am asking you to think about belief and meaning in your life. I'm
asking you to explore deep within yourself. It may be a risk, and it may
take courage. Your family may think you’re beginning to resemble a native Californian…

This spring, we will be designing our canvass pledge drive around story telling…telling the stories of our lives at UUCR.

How has your participation here helped you grow? How has it influenced you? How has it made you a better person? What do you hope for out of your liberal congregation? Have you found courage here?

We will be having a fun-filled Story Fair, so now is a good time to consider what it is you believe, how you will tell your story.

A couple of years ago, someone in the Unitarian Universalist Association came out with a new bumper sticker slogan. At first blush, I really liked it -- “A Religion Beyond Belief.” I still sort of like it, but it’s a bit too clever, I fear, a little too elitist, suggesting that unlike other faiths, we don’t muck around in the lesser regions of belief. We’re beyond that task. We’re made for something better. I don’t know, I am not sure, but I doubt that lack of belief will help me in times of trouble.

I’m encouraging you to think about the trajectory of belief in your life. What did you believe at a former time? Why did you reject a belief? What is working for you now? What will sustain you in difficult times?

As I said, Love is a solid place to hang my belief hat, but there are times when even love doesn’t seem to be working for me. There are times when love somehow doesn’t get through to me, times when I find it really hard to believe that I am loved.

I’ve been struggling with Love as my foundational belief, and I’m trying out a new belief. That’s what’s so great about Unitarian Universalism -- we can try out new beliefs, give them a test run, sort out what kind of meaning they have, whether they go deep enough, have the quality of an eternal-unchanging value.

Anyway, I’ve been trying out, “We are all unfinished works of art.”
It’s a way of saying that I believe in wholeness, that healing is possible for all of us, that there is something whole and beautiful in the soul and that we are on a path toward wholeness.

I believe wholeness is possible for me and for you. I believe, along with Anne Lamott, that our divine restoration depends, at times, on someone not giving up on us.

I believe we are supposed to be people who help call forth wholeness and healing in others. Perhaps this is the greatest form of love -- not giving up on one another.

“We are all unfinished works of art.” And Love is the means of healing, of finishing the painting, the composition, the chalice, the poem, the story of who we already are.

Over the years, I have shared about my niece Laura. An only child, she grew up with parents addicted to serious street drugs; her father had spent time in prison. Both her parents died in mid-life of their addictions.

Laura herself spent three years in her thirties in prison. She is now in her mid-forties and has been out of prison for five years. She has worked hard to regain custody of her youngest son. She has kept her job as a maid in a motel. She has stayed off drugs and moved back in with her ex-husband.

Laura called me over Christmas to thank me. She recently became a grandmother…her middle son and his 19 year old girlfriend have a baby girl. Laura cares for the baby on a regular basis. She called to thank me for not giving up on her over the years. Without my support and the support of her church, she said, she would not be free to share in the life of her granddaughter. She lived to be a part of her granddaughter’s life. Finally, Laura is experiencing true happiness.

I can’t tell you what it means to me to know I made a difference in her life. Think of someone who might feel that kind of debt to you. Think of your own teachers and mentors and aunts or grandparents -- someone who never gave up on you no matter what.

As I reflected on Love as my foundational belief, I remembered one of the Bible verses I grew up with.
“When Jesus was teaching in the temple and was asked by one of the Pharisees, a lawyer, ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?’ And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

So give yourself to love, if love is what you’re after.

Give yourself to loving those in need. Never give up on anyone for they, too, are an unfinished work of art.

Love is the work of your lifetime. Caring for others is the work we share.

May this congregation be a place to find those who will never give up on you. May this congregation be a place to continue working on the masterpiece...which is your true and loving self.

So May It Be/Amen