

Order of Service

What is Faith, and Where Can I Find Some?

Sunday, February 1, 2009



Declaration (unison reading)

Love is the spirit of this fellowship
And service is its law.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek truth in love,
And to help one another.

James Vila Blake

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Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

We gather as family

And this is our home.

Our chalice is heart and hearth of this place,

Warming us with the holiness of love,

Lighting us with sacredness of truth.

And so, once again,

We worship in Fellowship together.

Meditation and Prayer

We feel the joy that each other feels

Because we are at depth one.

We feel the sorrow that each other feels

Because we are at depth one.

We are in a sacred place and a holy time
Where we will let ourselves notice
That we are not alone.
We are not isolated beings.
But we are gathered, in mystery and miracle,
As Beloved Community.

Readings

"Faith," by David Whyte

I want to write about faith,
about the way the moon rises
over cold snow, night after night,

faithful even in its fading from fullness,
slowly becoming that last curving and impossible
slither of light before the final darkness.

But I have no faith myself
I refuse it even the smallest entry.

Let this then, my small poem,
like a new moon, slender and barely open,
be the first prayer that opens me to faith.

"Faith as an Act of Freedom," by Abraham Joshua Heschel

Rabbi Mendel of Kotsk was told of a great saint who lived in his time and who claimed that during the seven days of the Feast of Booths his eyes would see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David come to the booth. Said Rabbi Mendel: I do not see the heavenly guests; I only have faith that they are present in the booth, and to have faith is greater than to see."

This, indeed is the greatness of [humanity]: to be able to have faith. For faith is an act of freedom, of independence of our own limited faculties, whether of reason or sense-perception. It is *an act of spiritual ecstasy, of rising above our own wisdom.*

In this sense, the urge to faith is the reverse of the artistic act in which we try to capture the intangible in the tangible. In faith, we do not seek to decipher, to articulate in our own terms, but to rise above our own wisdom, to think of the world in the terms of God [the Infinite], to live in accord with what is relevant to God [the Infinite.]

To have faith is not to capitulate but to rise to a higher plane of thinking. To have faith is not to defy human reason but rather to share divine wisdom.

...One must rise to a higher plane of thinking in order to see, in order to sense the allusions, the glory, the presence. One must rise to a higher plane of living and learn to sense the urgency of the ultimate question, the supreme relevance of eternity. He who has not arrived at the highest realm, the realm of mystery; he who does not realize he is living at the edge of the mystery; he who has only a sense for the obvious and apparent, will not be able to lift up his eyes, for whatever is apparent is not attached to the highest realm; what is highest is hidden. Faith... is attachment to the highest realm, the realm of the mystery. This is its essence. Our faith is capable of reaching the realm of mystery.

Sermon *What is Faith, and Where Can I Find Some?*

Rev. Bruce Davis (2268)

In 1944, at the age of thirty, Ety Hillesum died in a gas chamber in Auschwitz, Poland.

I bring you her story this morning not because it's unusual or tragic. I bring it to you because it is concentrated. Her life is not so very different from mine or yours, only it all happened so fast. She was a child, then a young woman, then a wise and healing presence in her community, and then gone. We also were children, and we also will come to our years of elderhood and finally our death.

Knowing Etty almost intimately in her journals and letters, we see a youthful role model who shows us how to anchor a life in something deeper than the impermanent joys and profound hardships that are the stepping-stones of our life path.

Etty is less known than others who maintained dignity and humanity amid the horrors of the Holocaust, being Jewish in Nazi-occupied Europe, because her writings were not published until 1982 in the Netherlands, almost forty years after her death. I met her during my seminary days in a book written about her life and letters by Eva Hoffman, called *Etty Hillesum: An Interrupted Life*.

Already in her mid-twenties she had become a bohemian intellectual, well-assimilated into the Dutch culture of arts and letters and steeped in psychology and literature: Jung, Rilke, and Dostoyevski. Living the writer's life, she was confident that in a long life she would make her literary mark. Such is the way of youth, that our days stretch before us like an endless summer, as if we are blessed with immortality. When, finally, she knew her days were numbered, she entrusted her journals to a friend. After her death, no publisher was interested until almost forty years later.

What is remarkable about this young woman are not the hardships that she and her family endured. What began as anti-Semitic prejudice in Amsterdam led to profound restriction to personal freedoms. This was followed by the Westerbork concentration camp in northern Holland and transfer to the death camp of Auschwitz. She died as seven million other Jews died—an inhumanity of man against man that we must never forget.

It is how Etty lived through these years that is the measure of her greatness and that deserves our deepest consideration. The last note that she wrote was dropped from her hand as the death train left Westerbork bound for Poland. On this note were these words: "We left the camp singing."

This last note is testament to her ebullient spirit. It was not false hope because she knew that this journey would be her last. It was not insanity because Etty was acutely sensitive to their situation—especially the suffering of those packed into the boxcar like chattel around her. It's just that Etty's compassion and her desire to help poured forth toward her comrades constantly and tirelessly. In spite of her youth, at Westerbork she played the role of spiritual guide, spending her day tending to the ill, encouraging the despondent, ministering to the dying, and playing with the children. When she could she retreated into the solitude of her meditation and writing, finding renewal to strike out against the face of suffering once more.

She was like an artesian spring that pours healing waters over a dry earth, generated by a force deep under the ground. Etty describes this force many times in her journals. She writes, "I cannot find the right words for that radiant feeling inside me, which encompasses but is untouched by all the suffering and all the violence." In her very last diary entry she writes, "We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds."

Perhaps we would call it mysticism, this certainty of experience that wells up within a person like Etty. She learns to pray, but this is not the praying of a woman to a religious God who can be fathomed or who exists outside her own heart. And yet it is very real for Etty, an intimate act that sustains and comforts her, readying her for further acts of kindness. Etty writes, "And I listen to myself, allow myself to be led, not by anything on the outside, but by what wells up from deep within." Elsewhere she writes, "I repose in myself. And that part of myself, that deepest and richest part in which I repose, is what I call God."

Faith is not about what we believe and disbelieve. Faith is not our intellectual assessment of what is true or untrue in this world. Faith is what Etty finds within her Self, that anchors her to the depth of her life and that overflows as compassion into the lives of others. Nor does Etty always use religious language to describe this interior movement. Faith in this sense is that to which we are most deeply committed. Faith is that upon which we depend when all else fails. Faith is the very ground that we stand upon.

In the Pali language of the original Buddhist texts, the word that is translated as "faith" is the word "saddha," which literally means "to place the heart

upon.” The question of faith is simply this: what have you placed your heart upon or what have you given your heart over to?

In the first book of the Christian Scripture, *Matthew*, Jesus says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be.” Where we place our heart and what we give our heart over to will be that which we treasure most highly. In short, the nature and quality of faith in our lives is determined not by what we believe intellectually to be true but by what it is we find most valuable, most meaningful.

If Etty Hillesum identified an illuminating center point deep within herself as the focus of her faith, many of those who shared her incarceration, and many of us, have not. I am thinking about my physician colleague who started practice about when I did. He’s been working sixty-hour weeks now for more than thirty years, putting in extra shifts when he can. I ask, “What are you going to do with all that money?” and he says, “Spend it,” and I say, “When are you going to spend it,” and he says, “When I retire,” and I say, “When are you going to retire,” and he says, “When I’m seventy or seventy five.”

You can get a sense of where someone has put their heart by watching what they do in the world. Etty balanced her time between meditation and compassionate service in the world. My friend the physician has placed his heart on making money and its power to buy whatever he might want when he retires. Both people have faith. It isn’t that one faith is right and the other faith is wrong. But my friend’s faith foundation may be a house built of straw because all that money he’s been saving just reduced in value by about 30% in the current recession. He also has health conditions that may interrupt his life before he can spend what he does have.

So, we all have faith. The question is, only, what do we have faith in? And if we come to realize that we have put our faith into something impermanent, in a world that the Buddhists assure us is impermanent, how can we shift toward a more substantial faith foundation for our lives?

I think that’s what the religions of the world are trying to tell us, that it is possible to stand on more solid ground. Only what you don’t get from most religions is a blueprint for building that foundation.

There can be no real faith in anything deeper than you have experienced or intuited. If, like Etty, a person feels in the depth of their being a connection with the Universal, then a faith will form that is unassailable by the inevitability of change and loss, because the foundation of that faith is unassailable by change and loss. Even facing certain death, Etty was grounded in, confident in, certain of, the being, the heartfelt presence, that she sensed deep within herself.

The faith that formal religions often struggle to reveal is sometimes realized through spiritual practices that have little to do with dogma and creed. Through her youth Etty Hillesum developed a powerful practice life, and I believe that this is what allowed her faith to flourish even in the face of impossible hardship. Etty describes her four-part spiritual practice in her journals, over several years.

First, there is service. “We should try and be a balm for all wounds,” she wrote on her last day. In the most trying of circumstances Etty lived her life for others, and we can, as well. I think this is the “Spirit of Service” that our new president talked about in his inaugural address. Learning to give first to the community, we begin to realize that we are part of something greater than an individual ego—we realize that we are part of something that will outlive us in the generations of children yet to come.

Second, there is witness. Etty writes, “There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?” Simply observing and reflecting upon what is happening, staying awake to what is, is a powerful practice of presence. Eckhart Tolle suggests that a practice of witnessing awareness will, in time, shift our identity from self as *ego* to self as that very *witness*. Etty remained aware of the most minute details of her captivity, the beauty of a lupin, the love of a friend, and the pain they suffered all together. It is a practice of presence, of living this moment we are in right now, as fully as we are capable.

Third, there is writing. I talked a couple of weeks ago about the power of free-writing as a spiritual practice. In her journaling practice Etty was able to let go of the poison of her situation onto the page, so that she could bring her purity, kindness and tenderness ever more fully into her compassionate service. But

journaling practice was also revelatory for Etty. It was a contemplation through which she could articulate her truth and meaning, both of the head and the heart.

Fourth, there is Meditation itself. No matter how many hours she worked in the camps to provide solace to her comrades, she always found moments to return to her own small corner, to be with herself, and to settle into that silence and stillness within that was her source of renewal. The spiritual practice here is not the meditation alone. It is using oneself up in good service, as fully as one may, and then withdrawing once again into the place of source within. In time, according to meditation teachers like Tolle and Chopra, there comes a shift, when we realize that we are not the personality but that we are deeply and truly that essence or source, in which we rest during meditation.

These are four practices of faith formation that grounded Etty Hillesum amid the worst of human suffering. It is our good fortune that she has shared her wisdom, experience, and practices with us. Because finding deeper faith is not magic. It takes practice, but deeper faith, even deepest faith, is our birth-right.

It doesn't interest me if there is one God or many gods.
I want to know if you belong or feel abandoned.
If you know despair or can see it in others.
I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world
with its harsh need to change you.
If you can look back with firm eyes
saying this is where I stand.
I want to know if you know how to melt that fierce heat of living
falling toward the center of your longing.
I want to know if you are willing to live, day by day,
with the consequence of love
and the bitter unwanted passion of sure defeat.
I have been told, in that fierce embrace,
even the gods speak of God.

Faith is about this. Are we able with firm eyes and steady heart to say, “This is where I stand,” even in the face of our harsh world’s need to change us?

Or shall we once again embark in earnest on that search for truth and meaning that is our fourth Unitarian Universalist principle, embracing those practices and that life that will ensure a faith foundation that will endure?

In our reading today, Abraham Heschel wrote that “faith is an act of freedom” that is independent of our life situation. Being Jewish he was profoundly aware of the holocaust, saying, “We all died in Auschwitz, yet our faith survived. We knew that to repudiate God would be to continue the holocaust.” Though we may not face the harsh shackles that Etty Hillisum wore for those many years, yet we may feel trapped in a life that constrains our every choice. Let us take that first small step toward freedom, to which Heschel invites us.

Once more from David Whyte, “let this small poem, slender and barely open, be the first prayer that opens me to faith.”

And so, let the faith, let the freedom, start as small as it needs to. And then watch how it grows, giving yourself a foundation that is worthy of what it means to be human.

May it be so.