



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Acorn and the Daffodil: Perspectives on Faith”

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Centering Thoughts:

Faith sees a beautiful blossom in a bulb, a lovely garden in a seed, and a giant oak in an acorn. - *William Arthur Ward*

Sometimes big trees grow out of acorns - I think I heard that from a squirrel. *Jerry Coleman*

Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe. *Saint Augustine*

Picasso said that no one has to explain a daffodil. Good design is understandable to virtually everybody. You never have to ask why. *Hugh Newell Jacobsen*

Sermon:

My talk today will be about faith and about the acorn and about the daffodil. I have been hoping that this title will make you curious as to how these tie together and I hope you are satisfied when I have finished.

What is faith? Faith is defined as:

Complete trust or confidence in someone or something or

Strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof.

A particular system of religious belief.

The essence of faith is that it is belief that does not require evidence or proof to sustain it. One reason people suggest avoiding arguments about politics or religion is that the basis of each of these is faith, and thus logic, reason or evidence has little power of persuasion on these topics. If a person accepts things on faith, it is exceedingly difficult to convince them otherwise.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. Faith can sustain us in difficult times and can motivate us to become our best selves. Obviously if someone's faithfully held beliefs are very different than your own you may judge them very negatively. But when you make those judgments you do so on the basis of your own faith.

Unitarian Universalism is a faith. John Buehrens and Forrest Church called it “A Chosen Faith” since we choose what we believe instead of depending on a creed which we are taught. But the very basic tenants of our shared beliefs depend on faith.

We accept our 7 Principles on faith. We never ask for proof of the inherent worth and dignity of all persons. We accept this as true as a matter of faith. When we pledge to affirm and promote those 7 Principles we are accepting their truth and value on faith . . . no one needs to demonstrate or prove them to us.

Faith also drives people to actions based on the belief that what we do will have results that we want. It is an act of faith when we love, protect, cherish and educate our children. We have faith that the way we care for them will help them to become the kinds of people that we would like to see them become. Yes, there are those who study child rearing scientifically, but long before any of us had seen a published study we knew that how we treat our children would have powerful effects on their development. This is only one example of the many things we do based on faith. So many of us do things that do not directly benefit ourselves but which we have faith will make the world a better place. It is this faith that our religion can and must nurture.

Planting an acorn or a daffodil bulb is also an act of faith, and I want to take a few moments to reflect on these two kinds of plants and how the planting of each is an example of different kinds of faithful acts.

First, let us consider the acorn and the oak tree that may grow from it. Oaks are among the most revered and important trees in the world.

In November 2004, the United States Congress passed legislation designating the oak as America's National Tree. In addition to the USA, the oak is the national plant of England, France, Germany, Latvia, Poland, and Serbia. And well it should be. It symbolizes strength and endurance. Oaks are strong, beautiful and in some cases truly awe-inspiring specimens of living things. There are over 600 different species of oaks. Most species of oaks live over 200 years. There are certain trees that can survive over a thousand years. An oak tree planted during the reign of King John managed to survive 800 years and the reign of 35 other rulers.

The wood of the oak has been used to build ships since the times of the Vikings. Oak wood makes strong and beautiful furniture and flooring. Oak barrels have been used for centuries, and wine, beer, and spirits are often aged in them. Oak wood burns hotter than most and is often used for smoking meats and other foods.

Oak trees provide shade as well as beauty, and oak forests are important wildlife habitats. The fruit of the oak is a true nut called an acorn, borne in a cup-like structure known as a cupule; each acorn contains one seed (rarely two or three) and takes 6–18 months to mature, depending on their species. A typical oak may produce 2,000 acorns a year but only one in 10,000 will mature into an adult oak tree.

Acorns with their cupules are attractive and have been used as symbols in many contexts. Without the cupule they would be plain brown ovals. The cupule protects the nut while it is growing and after it falls to the ground, but to me it is the perfect decoration, turning a nondescript object into a thing of beauty. Men did not design the acorn. Regardless of what you believe may have shaped it, it is a marvel that so common an object could have developed such an elegant shape.

In addition to being a seed to grow new trees, the acorn is a marvelous food source, even though many animals cannot eat it. Acorns contain large concentrations of tannins which are bitter and toxic substances which can cause intestinal irritation and kidney damage when ingested. Many ruminants, including horses and cattle, not only can be poisoned by acorns but the tannins concentrate in their milk which can poison their offspring. If you have ever bitten into an acorn you probably immediately spat it out because the tannins are so bitter and irritating. Yet mammals such as pigs, bears, and deer consume large amounts of acorns; they may constitute up to 25% of the diet of deer in the autumn. Of course some birds and rodents thrive on acorns. All acorns contain large amounts of protein, carbohydrates and fats, as well as the minerals calcium, phosphorus and potassium, and the vitamin niacin.

Some of the best hams in the world come from pigs in Spain who are fattened on acorns. Acorns are also widely reported to lower bad cholesterol and increase good cholesterol in the pork, and the health benefit is then passed on to the consumer. Pork fattened on acorns is supposed to be more flavorful than that fed corn (for example), and ecologically and economically acorns are better food sources since they are a sustainable and naturally-occurring food that does not require fossil fuels to grow.

Can people also thrive on acorns? Ancient Greeks and Japanese knew how to prepare acorns, and in Korea a jelly made from acorns not only was used as food but also supposedly helped to treat alcoholism. In the South during the Civil War and in Germany during WWII acorns were used as a coffee substitute when war kept the people from getting their favorite beverage.

Acorns were a major food source for several Native American tribes. Many knew which species and varieties of oaks produced “sweet” acorns with little or no tannins. Reportedly there even were wars fought over the possession of certain trees that grew the sweetest nuts.

Many tribes also learned how to extract the tannins from the nuts so they could be consumed. One trick was to crack open the nuts and place bags of the nut meats into flowing streams until the tannins were washed out. Interestingly, you should not try to boil the acorns to purify them. Boiling actually makes changes that cause the tannins to bind to the proteins in the acorns so they will not be removed and also destroys some of the more useful starches in the nuts. Best to soak them in cold water and repeatedly change the water and rinse over several days to make them edible, which is a lot of work, but the reward is a highly nutritious and tasty nut meal or flour.

Ok, all this may be very interesting (at least it is to me) but what does it have to do with faith? Please bear with

me a little longer while I first discuss the daffodil.

The daffodil is so very different from the oak. Firstly every part of the plant is poisonous and cannot be made safe to consume. This makes it a great choice as a decorative flower in places where deer may devour almost everything else you plant. They know it is not safe from them to eat your daffodils.

Daffodils do not have woody stems you can make into furniture or even use as fuel. They are pretty to look at, and, when they rise from the barren ground, sometimes even poking up through some snow, they are often the first lovely harbinger of spring. They multiply underground, and, although one spring you may have one flower, the next you may have many. In Georgia the DOT has planted thousands around highway interchanges, and they brighten up the landscape for weeks each year. My wife and I love them.

But what has that to do with faith? I see the planting of the daffodil bulb as an act of faith. You put a bulb, this apparently lifeless dry-looking thing, into the ground perhaps with a little bone meal, cover it up and walk away. Nothing happens for months. The snow may cover it, but when it melts, the ground looks bare and dead. But then the spring miracle happens as first shoots, then leaves, and at last a bud appears that blossoms into the beautiful spring flower. And when the flower dies, you once more need to have faith. The leaves brown, wither and die, but you leave them alone and by midsummer the ground is once again bare. If you get rid of the dying leaves too soon, you will not allow the underground bulbs to become strong to reward you with the next year's blooms. You should have the faith that the cycle of nature will repeat and give you joy each spring.

Yes, planting a daffodil bulb is an act of faith, but honestly it requires very little faith. Unless the bulb has sat on the shelf too long, most bulbs you plant in the fall will reward you with a flower the next spring, and most bulbs you allow to go through the full life cycle will blossom again the next year. You need to have faith when you plant a bulb, but not a whole lot of faith.

Planting an acorn, on the other hand, is in many ways a huge act of faith. I have mentioned that it may take 18 months for the acorn to mature on the oak. Then they need to dry just enough. Too much and they will not grow and if they are too moist they will rot. The majority of acorns never sprout. It helps if you carefully make a small slice into their shells to help the moisture to penetrate. One should dig and back fill a good hole since their tap root may reach ten feet deep very quickly. Choose the spot you want them to grow carefully as it is very hard to transplant them successfully.

If they actually germinate and produce a young seedling, the small plant is very vulnerable. It needs to be protected so it will not get trampled or dug up. If several acorns all germinate close to each other, one needs to thin them so that the strongest is allowed to grow. The young trees need just enough water and may need fertilizers. They will continue to need care and protection until they reach a good height and strength. They are subject to attack from fungi and insects like oak galls, the oakworm moths, and the acorn weevil which can kill 95% of the acorns on a tree. Native Americans would often burn the undergrowth of an oak forest to kill these pests as well as competing plants.

To get from an acorn to a full-grown mighty oak is a project that will take many years. It takes a lot of faith as well as care, determination, knowledge, and persistence to produce a tree. If you do have the faith to plant acorns, it may be your descendants who benefit, not you.

Many of you (including me) have planted daffodils, but how many have tried to grow an oak? This is an act that requires an entire order of magnitude more of faith.

If we are members of a Unitarian Universalist Congregation, then we either explicitly or implicitly affirm our 7 Principles. Just as a reminder let us quote some of them:

- *"Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations"*
- *"Affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person"*
- *"The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all"*
- *"Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part"*

I have mentioned that we believe these Principles as a matter of faith. Their value is not up for debate or discussion (of course being UUs, the exact wording may be debated but their essence is not). I would say that these principles actually define our faith as a religion.

So I ask you: How much do these define your own personal faith? Are they just words, or do you deeply adhere to what they profess as a central part of who you are? Do you have real faith in these Principles? Whether you do or not, what do you believe in? What are your deep basic core values?

If you have never asked yourself these questions, then I encourage you to do so. I firmly believe that understanding one's own basic moral guideposts will in and of itself make someone a better person.

Then once you are clear about what you believe, I wish that you look at how you put this faith into action. In the Christian Bible (James 2:18 if you are keeping score) it says: "Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works." Indeed what really matters is how your faith is manifest by what you do. This is where one can apply the difference between the faith required to plant a daffodil versus that needed to grow an oak.

It is an act of faith to show up here this Sunday, an act of faith to contribute to the offering, an act of faith to support a political candidate or to give to a charity. In my mind, however, these are acts of "daffodil faith." They are good but fairly easy and do not require a lot out of you.

Devoting your life to the care of a child, which I mentioned earlier, requires a lot more faith and commitment. Planning and strengthening your religious and social institutions requires commitment of your time, energy, intelligence, and talents. It is very important to make and keep your pledge promise to this place and others you support, but joining committees, getting on the Boards of nonprofits, working at various events--these can count as much or more than the money you donate.

Supporting the 7th Principle by reducing your carbon footprint and by ethical eating can also require a serious change in your lifestyle. When your involvement in politics extends to volunteering in the campaign, canvassing, making phone bank calls and registering voters, you are doing a lot more than just lip service to the cause. Careful examination of our unconscious racial biases and actively reaching out to minorities, immigrants, and refugees is not always easy. All of these are actions that can make substantial impact on our world, but they require an oak tree's degree of faith.

I do not mean to belittle the everyday acts of daffodil faith that we all do. They are important and needed in this world, just as the spring garden would not be as joyous without those pretty flowers. But I am asking you whether you have committed to any acts of oak tree faith. If we are true to our faith, whatever it may be, we can best show it by making the efforts needed to make a difference in this world. This is not always simple and easy and may actually require a bit of sacrifice, but the rewards not only for ourselves but also for those who will follow us make it worthwhile.

I hope my words have planted at least a daffodil's worth of faith and commitment in many of you. If one or more of you have been moved to consider planting an acorn to create an oak's worth of change in the world, then I will be totally fulfilled.

Thank you for listening and have faith.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion: