

## *Teaching My Dogs to Journal*

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

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Some years ago, when I was first in the ministry, a member of the congregation I served called for an appointment. She was an active member, a therapist, and someone I thought quite highly of. We spent a few minutes in small talk, and I asked her what was on her mind. She hesitated a bit, then said, 'I'd like you to teach me how to pray.'

So there I was, her minister, her Unitarian Universalist minister, with a PhD in religion and literature, two years training in clinical pastoral education with training in crisis management and family systems, and the variety of emotional and psychological problems people face. I had education units in dealing with substance abuse, and various other addictions; I had a certificate in end of life counseling.

I was ready to talk about depression or infidelity, about issues in parenting, about the fear of death. I was ready to explain to her the Arian Controversy or Hosea Ballou's Doctrine of Atonement, even chat about Emerson's Essay on nature. But prayer? In the back of my mind I must have been saying 'Does she know who I am? I am a Unitarian Universalist! I don't know how to pray. I am not supposed to know how to pray.'

I really do not remember what I finally said, but I have this sense that she finally left, out of sympathy for me, not wholly satisfied. And so, I took it upon myself to learn how to pray. I am still learning.

This sermon is the first of a three-year series of sermons about themes in religion and theology. Each month, Hannah and I will explore a different theme. After three years, we will repeat them – unless of course we UUs are all raptured to – where would we go – maybe Toulome Meadows, or Joshua Tree, or Boston or, Santa Cruz.

Each month, we will also refer to stories from the Bible and world religious traditions and suggest a couple of questions related to that theme. These themes will be used by our Chalice Circles, and will be incorporated into our YRE curricula as well. We are working on getting all of this on our website.

Faith: a central term in religion. I have a little book called 'An Idiot's Guide to Faith' that somehow has never replaced Paul Tillich's book 'The Dynamics of Faith.' The usual understanding of faith is that it has something to do with trust and with truth. I have faith in God suggests both an affirmation of a truth – God exists – and a trust in God. I have faith in this congregation – I trust you, us.

Paul Tillich says that faith is the state of being ultimately concerned. William Sloan Coffin says faith is being grasped by the power of Love [capital 'L']. Martin Buber distinguished between the faith of a community and the faith of the individual [he contrasted Judaism and Christianity by this.] Richard Dawkins says faith is merely [sic] belief without evidence. Sam Harris suggests that faith is akin to mental illness. Rev. William Ellery Channing, the great Unitarian minister in the early 1800s said that Faith is love taking the form of aspiration.

I like that one: love taking the form of aspiration.

In the New Testament, Jesus compares faith to a mustard seed – the smallest of seeds but when sprouted grows into a powerful plant. He suggests that if we have faith as small as a mustard seed, we could move mountains, that if our faith were deep and complete, we could do just about anything. This finds, expression, of course, in the modern theologies of mind over matter, that all our ills are the result of bad thoughts. This infects much of what is called new age thinking. Paul says faith is the acceptance of things unseen.

In the Hebrew Bible, in Genesis, Abraham is called out by God to take his entire family and wander across the wilderness and establish a great nation. His name is changed – from Abram to Abraham, and he sets out, filled with faith, trust, that this wandering will bring about something great. As is often the

case, a name change suggests a profound change in being - a new identity for a new life. He is asked to have faith in his God and in the covenant he makes with God.

Faith – is it trust, is it the same as belief? What do we mean by the word – or what can we mean by it?

Here is a report from my summer, in two parts: the first comes from James Carse's book *The Religious Case Against Belief*, in which he argues that faith and belief are opposed. Belief, he claims, is used to designate something we think is true. I believe in God; I believe the world was created in six days; I believe the Koran was dictated directly to Muhammed. I do not believe humans are responsible for global warming. I believe everyone should be free. I believe Jesus is my savior. Carse says that belief is like knowledge in that it refers to something claimed to be true and factual but arrived at in a different way from knowledge.

Belief, he says, just comes to us. It is not really earned as much as it is received. The classic expression of this is Martin Luther who said 'I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord.' It was a gift; it just came to him. Now I know we can quibble with this but I think Carse is essentially right, and he points to what is a basic difference between science and religion, for example.

I believe it is right to treat others with respect. I am not sure how we can know that, but we certainly do believe that – at least here.

Faith on the other hand is not about what we know or what we believe. It is about what we do not know; faith, Carse says, is ignorance. Not a willful ignorance of knowledge, rather it is, he claims, a higher ignorance, the kind of ignorance that comes from accepting our limitations, the kind of ignorance that encourages exploration. We cannot know whether what we believe is true, and so we explore it with greater diligence. Faith is the attitude of openness. It is the willingness of Abraham to set out into the wilderness. Like prayer, which Simone Weill said is attention, and has more to do with listening than speaking, faith is being open.

This sounds awfully Unitarian Universalist to me.

There will be more on Carse, but let me report on the second part of my summer. It came to be while I was re-reading some Annie Dillard's book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. The title essay is about a neighbor of hers who is attempting to teach a stone to talk – it is a wonderful essay about surprises in the natural world and leads to descriptions of lichens and about the Galapagos.

She writes:

The island where I live is peopled with cranks like myself. In a cedar-shake shack on a cliff – but we all live like this – there is a man in his thirties who lives alone with a stone he is trying to teach to talk.

Wisecracks on this topic abound, as you might expect but they are made as it were perfunctorily, and mostly by the young. For, in fact, almost everyone here respect what Larry is doing, as do, I, which is why I am protecting his [or her] privacy, and confusing you with the details. It could be, for e instance, a pinch of sand he is teaching to talk, or a prolonged northerly, any one of a number of waves. But it is, in fact, I assure you, a stone. It is – for I have seen it – a palm sized oval beach cobble whose dark gray is cut by a band of white which runs around and, presumably, through it; such stones we call 'wishing stones,' for reasons obscure but not, I think, unimaginable.

He keeps it on a shelf. Usually the stone lies protected by a square of untanned leather, like a canary asleep under its cloth. Larry removes the cover for the stone's lessons, or more accurately, I should say, for the ritual or rituals they perform together several times a day.

No one knows what goes on at these sessions, least of all myself, for I know Larry but slightly, and that owing only to a mix-up in our mail. I assume rather like any other meaningful effort, the ritual involves sacrifice, the suppression of self-consciousness, and a certain precise tilt of the will, so that the

will become transparent and hollow, a channel for the work. I wish him well. It is noble work, and beats, from any angle, selling shoes.

Reports differ on precisely he expects or want the stone to say. I do not think he expects the stone to speak as we do and describe for us its long life and many, or few, sensations. I think instead that he is trying to teach it to say a single word, such as 'cup' or 'uncle.'

As I was reading it one day, the thought came to me that perhaps I could teach my dogs to journal. I have, for many years, thought I should keep a regular journal myself, and I do, but not regularly. Weeks, even months will go by with no entry. Discipline is not my strong suit. So this one day, I was watching my dogs – Emma is a 12 year old yellow lab, 70 pounds of wholly dog and a great independent animal, and Daisy, a six year old 40 pound mutt, mostly Dalmatian and some lab, we think pit bull and maybe a little pointer, and all pet and starved for love, with the softest fur ever on a dog – watching them explore our yard.

They do this every day. We feed them first and then open the door and they peel out, to do their business [isn't that the greatest euphemism] but then they sniff through the entire yard. They do this over and over again, each day. Almost as if the world were given to them new every time they wander out.

If they could journal – and they just wouldn't even though I left paper and pencil out for them all the time and showed them, painstakingly how to write – but if they could my guess is that each entry would tell just what was new, even if it was the same thing again and again. They never seemed bored, sniffing here and there, and when done exploring, they lie down and settle in to reflect on what they had learned. I know that is what they are doing.

And, it struck me that maybe that is what Carse meant and what faith is – seeing the world new, being willing to go over and over life again and again to see whether it has changed, to be willing to explore and not just assume everything is the same. My dogs are not dogmatic.

Carse wants to suggest that the essence of religion is the impulse toward faith, and that faith is a response to mystery and an open and active engagement with the world. It is an expectation that surprise is around the corner and that we can always experience something new; it is the realization that our beliefs may not be right. It is an affirmation of that old bumper sticker that to question is indeed the answer. It is to be ready for wonder and for awe. 'We are here,' Annie Dillard says, 'to witness.'

When I was in graduate school at the University of Iowa, we had to take a course called 'The History of Religions' in which we did not study particular religions but religion in general. We attempted to come up with a definition of religion. Every year, the professor said, the class would fail at that. We would struggle to identify some common thread, some belief or practice common to all those things that were called religions, but we could not, and we ended up with more questions than we began with.

And so it seems to me that faith is like that – it is the impulse into mystery, the openness to wonder, the counter to dogma, the will to love – which is open and giving. It is ending up learning more, but also realizing there is more to learn.

Maybe faith is a bit like this room, bounded by walls, it still has windows and doors letting light in and people in and out. Our doors are open; we are a welcoming congregation, yet we invite people into a room, and a room has walls. Maybe faith is the attempt to keep in some balance what is fixed and what is fluid – maybe like love, faith has its objects – the beliefs- but in a dynamic and vital way.

I have been a minister, now, for over twenty-five years, and I am beginning to look to the end of my ministry. In those twenty-five plus years I have witnessed many births and too many deaths. I have celebrated weddings, dedicated babies and youth, mourned those who have died. I have been loved and hated, liked and disliked. I have felt joy and deep sorrow, been elated and depressed; I have succeeded and failed.

In short, I am just like all of you in your lives. I have struggled to keep faith - as they say - in part because all too often it seems as though my beliefs come to naught. The hope for justice and peace and compassion remains so much as hope. The world is so filled with sorrow. I struggle to keep the faith because of my own failings.

But then I walk into this room, and I see all of you, and I sense the spirits of all those who were here before us, and I am held by the boundaries of these walls, held in the arms of love, and sent back out into the world, the horizon of faith and justice and peace still there. I have learned how to pray, imperfectly to be sure, because I was asked by a member over 20 years ago and in doing so have learned something about faith. I have learned what it means to have faith from the members of congregations I have served.

I have learned it sitting with people as they die, and with family members of those who die. I have learned faith from those who have faced tragedy, from those who fall in love, from those who celebrate a birth. I have learned about faith from our same-sex couples this year as they have married, and from all the other couples during the years as they express their aspiration to love.

I have learned about faith from those who stand for justice, who work with their hands, who share their wealth or talents. Faith has appeared in the work of our staff, in the voices of our choir, in the hands of our musicians.

Faith is a journey, an openness, a willingness for wonder and awe. It is a hope that justice and equality are possible. Carse is right – faith points out from us to a horizon, and Channing certainly is right that faith is the aspiration to Love.

Our faith, this liberal faith of ours, our free faith, is, as Carse suggests a journey into mystery, the mystery of wonder and awe of life itself. Like Paul, it is the evidence of things not seen, of the bond that holds us together, of the need for justice. Like Channing, it is the aspiration to love.

I love to watch my dogs do their version of journaling, as they go round our yard sniffing here and there. I see their joy in it, and am impressed at how they take every day as a new adventure. Faith has to do with knowing that we never need be alone, that we are a part of a community stretching towards our beliefs, questioning them, be ready for wonder and awe.

And one day, my rock – wherever it is right now – will speak, and the word will be love.

I love you all. Amen.