



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

We've Come This Far by Faith

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That is one of my all-time favorite gospel songs and yet, "faith" hasn't always been an easy thing for me. On the first day of my last semester of college at St. Edward's University, as I was wrapping up my seminary applications, I sat in my History of Christian Theology II course and listened to my professor give us St. Anselm's definition of theology, "Faith seeking understanding." Everything he said after that didn't matter because I was stuck on that definition. I had always believed that the word "faith" was about unquestioning belief and, as a young Unitarian Universalist, I understood that it was not only ok to question, but encouraged. I had always valued my doubts and assumed that meant that faith was just something I didn't possess.

So, I raised my hand and asked, "I'm an agnostic and don't have a firm faith in God's existence. Does this mean I can't be a theologian? Can't I seek understanding without that faith?" He answered, a little confused, "No, you can't. Theology is an insider's job. It has to have faith in God as the starting point." It turns out, that professor and I were operating under the same false understanding of faith: faith as belief and not as trust. Well, needless to say, I didn't buy it. I knew I *could* do theology. I began to wonder, "I must have faith in *something*! What is it?" I have since redefined the word "faith" for myself, as well as the word "God". Very simply put: my faith includes a trust in the power of love over hate and that a community of justice-seekers, operating through that source of love, can make a positive difference in the world. My understanding of God is that "God" is a word used to describe or personify that love, so that the great mystery of its power is easier for us clumsy humans, with our limited language, to talk about.

We often refer to ourselves as a community of faith, but what do we have faith *in*? In *what* do we place our trust? What keeps us going? What keeps us hoping?

Four years later, on my graduation day from Union Theological Seminary in New York, I was made to remember the long and difficult journey that had brought me to that day in a surprising way. As is tradition at Union, I was making my way around the seminary's two city blocks as part of the graduating procession, when all of the city noises and the sounds of the procession's drummers began to fade away and the gospel song "We've Come This Far By Faith" entered my head. It grew louder and I began to quietly sing it to myself... "...Can't turn around now! We've come this far by faith." Something sacred was moving in me, calling me to reflect on my journey, to count my blessings, and to recognize my faith. I had come a long way from rejecting the idea of myself as a faithful person. I had also grown to understand what St. Anselm was actually talking about: theology *is* faith seeking understanding. In our case, our lived faith is our commitment to learning how to be part of a loving community and trusting that we can create a better world. UU theology seeks to understand our faith, to search for an understanding of the solid ground onto which we build that faith, and to reflect on the strength of that foundation during times in our lives that challenge our faith.

A year ago this week, on election night, the same song that had entered my mind on graduation day, "We've Come This Far By Faith" returned to my mind once again. Everyone remembers where they were, what they were doing, and the emotions felt on that night. It did not matter which candidate we voted for, we all stood proud to be citizens of a nation that could go from slavery to a black president in under two centuries. I thought, "We *have* come this far by faith, perhaps a different kind of faith than is in the song, maybe not for all of us a faith that is "leaning on the Lord" or "trusting in his holy word", but we all lean on something, trust in something, when our faith is challenged. We have faith that, as Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, "the arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice".

Sometimes we take a step forward as a nation just to take several back, as we witnessed in the temporary equalization of marriage for same gender couples and its all-too-rapid repeal in the passage of Proposition 8. For those who love justice, the revelry of election night was soon melded with the grief of knowing that the citizens of California and several other states had voted to maintain a second-class citizen status for so many loving families, sadly, just as Maine's electorate did this week. It is hard to have faith in times of grief. What does it mean to have faith that equality

will one day arrive when basic human rights are denied? Does it mean patience? If so, until when and why should we be patient? If the arc of history truly is long, is our task as Unitarian Universalists to have faith that it will *someday* be bent toward justice?

A favorite image among UU people of color is the mythical West African Sankofa bird, which looks backward to the past while continuing to fly forward into the future. Faith calls us to do just that, to look back and take stock; to see how far we've come and to sing "can't turn around now!" This brand of faith is not passive. It does not wait for justice to magically appear one day. The faith that reminds us that we "can't turn around now" for "we've come this far" is an active faith. It is a faith that calls us to continued action, to continued discomfort, to continued dissatisfaction with confusing semantics and claims of separate but equal. This faith does not let us forget the ridiculousness of injustice and the impact that inequality has on people's lives. This faith reminds us that the "in due time" argument was and is still, at times, used to pacify women and people of color when they demanded equal rights.

It has been said that "justice delayed is justice denied" and many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender activists in particular have interpreted President Obama's admitted delay of addressing all of the campaign promises to this constituency as a denial of justice. Saturday Night Live has even satirized Obama for his lack of accomplishing, in his first year, all that he promised on the campaign trail. Others, such as Joe Solmonese of the Human Rights Campaign, have stated recognition that Obama has shown more support and stated more commitment to ending GLBT discrimination than any other president in history. In truth, Obama has come out of the closet as a GLBT ally, affirming that we "... will see a time in which we as a nation finally recognize relationships between two men or two women as just as real and admirable as relationships between a man and a woman."

But, in the grief and revelry of last year's election, my faith was both confirmed and tried. As wrong as it was to ever place civil rights on the ballot for popular vote, I was in awe of how close the results were for Prop. 8. I was pleasantly surprised at how huge chunks of the nation, voting blocks sometimes made up of mostly white voters of the segregation generations, voted for Obama. I caught a glimpse of the Beloved Community. On the flip side, bigotry in all of its forms is like a cockroach: it doesn't die easily. The rhetoric before and after the election, steeped in racism and homophobia, felt so deflating. Hatred that had simmered below the surface bubbled up to join the chorus of the more radical mainstays, while lies were told about "separate but equal" couples and a "post-racial" America. My faith was shaken.

Yet, when I think back over the year since election night, once again, I can hear a choir in my heart singing, "We've Come This Far By Faith". Why? From the way that some of the reporting immediately after Prop 8's passage was carried out, one would think that conservative Black Christian churches were nearly solely to blame, when in reality they comprised only 7% of the voting population in that election. This example illustrates both the myth that bigotry is dead and buried, for the finger pointing was motivated by racism, and the myth that we need not engage with those with opposing views. I wonder what the outcome would have been had liberal religious activists engaged more with conservative Christian hearts of all races and levels of church leadership, but especially in communities of color, which are all too often rendered invisible until there is the need for blame to be placed.

Well, the good news and the bad news is: the fight is far from over. We have ample opportunity to learn from one another yet! I have often wondered, when listening to the amount of faith, hope, and determination present in freedom songs and gospel music, how can a people who endured the horrors of the middle passage and slavery, followed by reconstruction, segregation, Jim Crow, and continued systematic oppression- a history in this country that makes Guantanamo Bay look like Disneyland- sing "we've come this far by faith... trusting in the Lord, He's never failed me yet"? A dignified survival necessitates living in faithful community. There is so much to learn from one another! It will take many to bend the arc of history in the direction of ultimate justice.

Earlier I mentioned that this understanding, this faith, requires in us both patience and constant action. Well, that doesn't seem to make much sense, does it? Those sound like opposing stances. It is holding these two in tension, the patient assurance and the never sitting still or keeping quiet, which gives us faith. This tension is called "struggle" and we are blessed to be in the struggle together. As a lesbian and a Latina and a UU, my communities are each a source of love and affirmation as well as oppression. It is so painful to struggle alone, and for those among us who have been

struggling for long, it becomes tiresome. Neighborhood has a great history of faithfully struggling in community, especially this past year. My prayer is that this church family continues, all of us, to grow and struggle, grounded in our faith and seeking a deeper understanding of that faith.

So, here we sit, a year later. Like a flock of Sankofa birds, looking backward to the past while continuing to fly forward in faith into the future, we are aware of both the trials and the blessings of the year since Election Day as we remind ourselves that we, “can’t turn around now! We’ve come this far by faith!” and there is work yet to be done!