

Faithfulness

*A sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church
of Albuquerque, New Mexico
by the Rev. Ronald A. Hersom
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“Have you ever watched a seed grow? Have you ever noticed how it begins, so small, so still, so quiet, like a gift wanting to be opened . . . and how slowly it wakes up, begins to unfold, growing into something larger . . . and larger . . . and larger.”¹

These are the opening lines of the children’s book *The Everything Seed* by Carole Martignacco. The story tells of the beginning of creation, how, from the vastness of a deep waiting space, the tiniest point—no bigger than a seed—from this point came everything in the whole universe, even you and I. But more amazing, perhaps, than so much coming from this seed is that a part of the Everything Seed in is all things, in each one of us. All of the universe is borne from this seed, and our own futures are borne from that essence of life planted in each one of us as well. What will grow in your life? How can you nurture that Everything Seed?

Jesus, also, used seeds as an image for growth that amazes us with possibilities for a future we cannot envision for ourselves. This morning we heard the parable of the sower. It works as a story about what life can do, about the miracle of nature, but isn’t it also a story about what happens inside us? As we grow, we continue to seek that good soil, that place where we know we can take root and grow and blossom, the place that can nurture and sustain us. In my own life, it has seemed that at times I have tried to plant myself in a place that restricted my possibilities—like the hard dry soil or the rocks in our parable. I tried to plant myself in places, but I could not take root. And so something in me kept searching, digging, reaching for that place where I could grow into myself, where I could feel at home—the ground where my seed could really take root and grow. Welcome to Unitarian Universalism.

This is a path common to all of us, no matter what faith we were born into. We try to become more aware of who we are and who we can become. Some of that work is internal, invisible to others, and some of it has required huge changes in our life circumstances. But the result is that we are all part of the collective journey that this congregation, First Unitarian, is making. Maybe that sounds odd to you, to think of a church or an institution as growing, changing, and moving, but this is the story of faith. One true thing is put forth and takes hold in us, and it changes everything, and grows in unbelievable ways.

¹ *The Everything Seed*, Carole Martignacco, Beaver’s Pond Press, Edina, Minnesota.

What does it mean to be faithful? Having faith or being faithful are concepts that some of us may not be comfortable with, yet we live it. We may not have a faith, yet we live with faith. Faith in what? What is it that lets us live our lives, believing in a future? What motivates you to get up in the morning, or to come to this congregation? Whatever your answer is, that is some of what you have faith in. Each of us has some level of commitment to the covenant of our community here at First Unitarian; that, too, is an expression of faith—in our shared values, in living with integrity, in the essential rightness of spending time with others who reinforce what we believe about nature and human nature.

Recently I was reading a lecture called “Being Faithful as Friends” by a Quaker woman named Deborah Fisch. She had three elements required to live faithfully: first, a desire to do it—to be faithful; second, an ability to participate in a process of discernment, in which we really pay attention to what we experience and reflect on it; and third, action—living consistently and making choices based on our values and our experiences.

Fisch believes that the desire to live faithfully is simply part of who we are as human beings. It is as if this desire is planted in us—a part of who we are as individuals, but something that is shared among all people. Perhaps faith is the Everything Seed, that connection to the deep past and promise for the future that is buried inside each one of us. I relate this to the quest that is our Fourth Principle—the ongoing free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This is such an integral part of who we are as Unitarian Universalists! It is what brings us to worship services ourselves, and of course it is what created congregations in the first place. It is that search for truth, and meaning, and a place to share in the process.

This is what was working in Felix Arnold back in 1949. He wanted to bring liberal religious people together. As an individual, he was faithful to the values he was living, but that was not enough. He wanted a community to support that quest, to share in it or to challenge assumptions. And so he worked with Louise Pembroke and her husband, Ollie, to grow a church that would sustain that search both then and now. They got us started. The birth of our church, First Unitarian here in Albuquerque, is the legacy of faithfulness. They had faith in their own desire and need for a religious community and in their ability to find others who would support such a venture. And that group of faithful people they found almost sixty years ago nurtured faith in us, too. We see what they were able to do; we witness the value they placed on this institution, and we have renewed purpose and renewed gratitude for what we have inherited and what we will pass on. We reap their fruits, and we will plant new seeds.

Deborah Fisch’s second step in living with faith describes the process of discernment as listening to what we hear and experience. In our journeys, we are continuously listening and then evaluating who we are, where we are going. This can be a profoundly uncomfortable experience. It means admitting to ourselves

that we don't always know what we are doing, or why. We have to stop and think about our choices. Is it the kind of not knowing that deadens us to anxiety, that keeps us wearing blinders? Or is it the kind of not knowing that is leading us toward something, that connects our inner lives to the world in a way that enlivens and sustains us? We challenge ourselves as we evolve on our spiritual journey; we question what we think, what we believe, and whether we are being true to the values we espouse.

There is a wonderful story about a man who truly exhibited faithfulness in his life; his commitment to his values created the opportunity for the birth of Universalism here in America. His name was Thomas Potter; he was born in 1689 in Monmouth, New Jersey. The name of the town he lived in—appropriately, as we'll see—was Good Luck, New Jersey (it's now called Lanoka Harbor). He carved out a living from the land farming and also from running a small sawmill on his property. Everything to which Potter put his hands seemed to prosper, though he was a man of no education, not being able to read or write. A deeply religious man, he was familiar with the Bible. Based on his understanding of the Bible, and the people he spoke to about it, he decided that he was a Universalist. He believed—and he told all who would listen—that all human beings will be saved. His neighbors argued with him about this, and they even mocked him.²

He built a chapel by hand, with his own tools. He was seventy-one years old at the time. When his neighbors asked if he wanted any help, he told them thanks, but no; it was a labor of love. After he had finished this labor of love, he told everyone who would listen that he had built the chapel so God would send him a preacher to preach universal salvation.³

But he knew there was no such preacher anywhere near Good Luck, New Jersey. So he waited. He waited *ten years*. Ten years the chapel remained empty. His faithfulness was affirmed when John Murray, an English-born preacher whose ship had gotten stuck on a sand bar, came calling to Thomas Potter's life in September 1770.⁴ The miracle of John Murray's founding Universalism in America would not be the story we have today without the commitment and integrity of Thomas Potter. Thomas Potter planted his seed of understanding and faithfulness that blossomed into Universalism. Do we always know what happens with the seeds that we plant? Do we have to?

Deborah Fisch's third element of faithfulness tells us that we have to act on it, living our life consistent with our values. Felix Arnold, the Pembrokes, and Thomas Potter are all clear examples of living their lives consistent with their values and of how their faithfulness impacted not only themselves but those with whom they interacted. They sowed their seeds and cultivated their lives based upon their values.

² *The Corner Stone: A Brief Life of John Murray*, Irene Carrow Rees, Universalist Publishing House, Boston, 1915, pgs. 83-85.

³ *Hell's Ramparts Fell: Life of John Murray*, pgs. 76-77.

⁴ *Ibid.*

We do not live in a vacuum. What we do and how we are faithful to our core values affects those around us, impacts the lives of those we know, those we do not, and, in the case of our church, the lives of those to come.

Such is the case of the life of a young woman from Bethesda, Maryland, who thought she was to become a musician and finally found her voice as a Unitarian Universalist minister—going to seminary in Boston and eventually settling in as the minister at the fellowship in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1981.

Seven years later, the pathway opened and she became the sixth settled minister at the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque. Her twenty years of ministry here has not always been a smooth road; life rarely is.

In her own words, she writes: “Throughout the ebb and flow of both good and hard times, children have grown up, beloved and contributing members of a church community. People have suffered illness and loss, but they have not been alone. We’ve celebrated births, memorialized deaths, cheered on recoveries, rejoiced at love in all its forms. The doors have been open for the strong and for the lonely, for the able and the disabled, for those who have a great deal they need to give and for those whose greatest accomplishment, this week, has been to stay alive long enough to get to church. There have been several overlapping communities of care and concern to hold those whose hope has faded or whose prospects are bleak, who have burning ideas they want to discuss, or who just need a hand.”

She continues, noting that she has had the privilege of seeing the people of this congregation through a human encyclopedia of hopes, fears, triumphs, disappointments, joys, and griefs.

Rev. Christine Robinson, please join me here next to the pulpit. Last evening we had a wonderful celebration about your faithfulness in the ministry you have given this church for twenty years. We all are reaping the fruits of the seeds of your faithfulness to this community. You received some gifts then, but we have one more we want to give to you this morning.

Part of your ministry and faithfulness is about the seeds you nurture and grow as represented by the children whose lives you have touched for more than one generation. So this morning the children of our church want to give you something that they created themselves. And the hands on this new stole are the hands of the children who created it.

May we all continue to nurture the seeds of the holy in each one of us as we grow, and blossom, and become. Christine, we honor and thank you for your dedication and faithfulness to yourself, to our tradition, and to this community. Blessed be.