

Faith in Yourself
UUFM—Rev. Rita Capezzi
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Homily—Faith in Yourself

Our Soul Matters theme for the month of March is “Renewing Faith.” And so, we commence our exploration today, gaining wisdom for our journey from scholars of the Jesus Seminar and the Hebrew Bible, from Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, and from our own experience.

Many of us have been on an airplane with a baby crying inconsolably. In a restaurant. On a bus. At the mall. Somewhere, where a baby cries in the most heart-wrenching way. Or maybe in an irritating way. Maybe that baby is your baby, and then you might feel some shame or embarrassment, too. Wouldn't that be lovely or heart-wrenching or irritating or shameful to have a baby crying now? In any case, it would be noisy and maybe a bit ugly. A crying baby is certainly attention-getting. Maybe even like the sound a baby donkey makes when it is crying for its mother. Do we have faith that those cries will be answered? And what does it mean to have faith?

Marcus Borg is Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University and a member of the Jesus Seminar, as well as a practicing Christian in the Episcopal tradition. Borg investigates the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures as historical sources about early Jewish and Christian communities, rather than as evidence of the divinity of Jesus. It's thinking in line with much that informs Unitarianism, specifically that Jesus was a human man and an exemplar of compassionate living rather than a supernatural god. For Professor Borg, contemporary religious practice is about how historical understandings of religion provide us good ways to live our lives in the here and now.

And Professor Borg provides us an embodied, present-oriented understanding of faith. He tells us that the Hebrew word for faith in the Old Testament is *emoonah*, the sound that a baby donkey makes when it is calling for its mother. “So, if you want to hear the meaning of *emoonah*, you need to say it like braying...” Can you try that with me now? Say *emoonah*. Say it loud and braying if you can. “The point being that faith is like a baby donkey calling out or crying for its mother.” Borg finds this wonderful. He sees perhaps an element of desperation in it. But more, Borg finds a confidence that the cry will be heard. Faith, in other words, is the confidence that a cry of need will be heard. And who will hear such cries?

When you think about that baby, whose cries you can remember on the airplane or in a restaurant, maybe the baby was you. “Don't be such a baby!” “Stop acting like a baby!” “You are such a baby!” We know all these admonitions are insults, don't we? Somehow, those words mean that we are asking for more than we should, that we need to get over ourselves and stop being so emotional. We need to stop being so irritating and embarrassing. Yet when we are crying the ugly cry, when we sound a bit like a baby donkey braying, should we not expect our need to be acknowledged, why else cry out at all? How can we be certain that our cries will be answered, rather than ignored?

Religious language like the word “faith” can be brought into service for living our **daily** lives well, when we cry out in pain and agony, as we all do at some time in our lives, maybe even today. “Faith” does not **necessarily** point to some belief regardless of a lack of evidence. “Faith” does not **necessarily** mean belief in a supernatural god who will somehow answer our prayers and set everything right. Faith has meant those things, but it can mean something else, when we learn something new. Faith begins in the present moment and within an expectation that our pain and sorrow and lamentation—that our crying like a baby—will have meaning and will be heard in the here and now, as we are living our lives in the present moment.

If we are to try out living faithfully in the here and now, if we need our anguish to be heard and valued, let’s consider some helpful ways to describe present reality. Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh provides answers that we might find useful. I certainly do. Thich Nhat Hanh, who I will refer to as Thầy, or Zen Master, described our present moment in this way: “There are two dimensions to reality. One is called the historical dimension, and the other is called the ultimate dimension.” He uses the metaphor of the ocean to explain how these two dimensions relate. “Suppose we are looking at the ocean. On the surface we see waves rising and falling. From the point of view of the waves, there is birth and death, higher and lower, rising and falling. There is a distinction between waves.” (39) This is the historical dimension of our existence, our ordinary perspective, the perspective of lots of activity and movement, fraught experiences, the give and take, the ups and downs of daily living.

The historical dimension, the waves, are our worry about our children, our sadness at the illness or death of loved ones, our stress at getting the kids ready for school, the fear when a job is lost. We are all living in this reality. But we are taught not to cry like a baby. According to Thầy, living in the historical dimension means that “There is pain and suffering in us, and we have tried to get away from it. We turn on the television, we pick up a novel, we make a phone call so we can escape ourselves. We do this every day.” We drink, we eat too much and too much of food that hurts us and the planet. We self-medicate. Thầy says, “We have to change this habit. We have not practiced the true presence that allows us to soothe the suffering that is in us. We have to come back to ourselves so we can take care of the situation.” (56)

We have to come back to ourselves, as we are, full of pleasure and full of pain, so that we take care of this situation. And we take care of the situation when we understand that we live also in another dimension, a truer presence, according to Thầy and the Buddhist practice that defines his living. In his words, in the ocean, the water, “Concepts such as birth and death, higher and lower, rising and falling apply only to the waves, not to the water itself. So the waves represent the historical dimension, and the water represents the ultimate dimension.” (39) The waves move up and down across the top of the water, but they are not the water. They are merely motion of the water. And the water continues to exist as water, as its nature, regardless of all the turbulence on the surface. In Thầy’s words, “When we look deeply at our own nature, we can get in touch with its ultimate reality.” (39)

We can get in touch with ultimate reality, where all the turbulence is mere movement, with no concepts attached to the movement. All that disruption—all that pain and worry—can be quieted and we can

have peace. Again, in Thầy's words: "If the wave realizes that it is water, its fear disappears. It enjoys its rising and falling much more. Rising is so joyful, and falling is, too. There is no birth and there is no death. That is the highest level of teaching." (40)

Thầy says that pain and suffering are normal, and the problem is when we try to ignore it or push it away. He says, "You should look at your pain as though it were an abandoned baby. You should come back to yourself so that you can take care of this suffering baby. Your fear, your depression, your despair—that is the baby in you. It is yourself." (56-57) When we bottle up the crying out, when we are unkind to our hurting selves, when we refuse to bray like a baby donkey, we create more suffering and pain in ourselves. According to Thầy, "When you are dealing with pain, with a moment of irritation, or with a bout of anger, you can learn to treat them [with gentleness, respect, nonviolence, and tenderness]. Embrace them with great tenderness, as though you were embracing a little baby. Your anger is yourself, and you should not be violent toward it. The same thing goes for all of your emotions." (2)

For Buddhists like Thầy, mindfulness, being present in the here and now, this is the path to treating ourselves with the care we all need. In his words, "Developing true presence has two purposes. The first is to make contact with everything that is beautiful, refreshing, and healing. We need that—we need the nourishment of a gorgeous sunset, a child's smile, the song of a bird, the company of a friend. All of these things are precious, and we should be there to touch them." Such beauty and joy is our birthright, part of what it means to live fully in both historical and ultimate dimensions. And, in his words "The second thing that mindfulness does is allow us to come back to ourselves and embrace our pain. Most people are afraid to come back to themselves because that means having to face the pain inside of them. With the practice of mindfulness, the situation changes. We come back to our pain, but now we are well equipped with the energy of mindfulness [. . .]. We use this source of energy to recognize and embrace our pain." (57)

And so, we gain presence to ourselves and to each other, connecting to our whole existence, with faith in our breath—You can say it aloud with me if you like: Breathing in, I am here. Breathing out, I am here. Breathing in, I am here. Breathing out, I am here. Now, you. Breathing in, you are here. Breathing out, you are here. Now, we. Breathing in, we are here. Breathing out, we are here. No struggle. No violence. Present in the moment to myself, to all of you, we to all of us.

Faith is not about belief without evidence. It is not about trust in a supernatural god. Faith is about keeping promises and being worthy of trust, to ourselves and to each other. Faith is about behavior in the here and now. Faith is being present to your own suffering, present to your ugly cry, baby donkey braying need. In the words of Alan Watts, "To have faith is to trust yourself to the water. When you swim you don't grab hold of the water, [. . .]. Instead you relax, and float." Have faith that your suffering and your pain is real. Have faith that when you receive your own cries with love and tenderness, you will be able to make your truth know to others. In our community, to hold each other with tenderness, as we would a crying baby, a flower, in the present moment, this is when we Unitarian Universalists know

that “the world is enough, we are enough, loving the world and each other is the only way, and loving choices create a loving life.”

Reflection—Look Up, Cry Out

Breathing in, we are here. Breathing out, we are here. Faith is not about belief without evidence. It is not about trust in a supernatural god. Faith is about keeping promises and being worthy of trust. Faith is about behavior. “To have faith is to trust yourself to the water, [. . .] to relax, and float.” Faith is being present to your own suffering, present to your ugly cry, baby donkeying braying need. In our community, to hold each other with tenderness, as we would a crying baby, a flower, in the present moment, this is when we know that the world is enough, we are enough, loving the world and each other is the only way, and loving choices create a loving life.”

We all carry a heavy load. Sometimes that load is forced down on our shoulders and our spirits because of oppressive forces in our society—forces that demonize our bodies and our identities. Sometimes that load comes down on our shoulders and our spirits because we just can’t get out of our own way. We carry the weight the world puts on us, we carry the weight we put on ourselves, long after we need to. Perhaps we need not carry any of that weight, socially-imposed or self-imposed. Let us look up from under the burdens, knowing somebody loves us, for that is what community is all about. Let us be as seed, trusting that we might grow to love ourselves as abundantly as we love others. Remember, that the spirit of love is beyond us as well as between us, spirit of life is always greater than us and also in us, calling us to vision and peace, source of our own intuition providing strength and serenity, guiding us to compassion. May you remember you are called, held, and guided toward love and life—from within and from without—as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so. May it be so, and may we say together, “Amen.”

Faith: A Journey of Trust http://www.explorefaith.org/faces/my_faith/borg/faith_by_marcus_borg.php
 “Jesus Seminar” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Seminar

You Are Here: Discovering the Magic in the Present Moment by Thich Nhat Hanh. Ed. Melvin McLeod.
 Trans. from the French Sherab Chödzin Kohn. Bolder, CO: Shambhala, 2009.