

# Living FAITH: Belief + Care + Trust

(c) 2019 Rev. Ted Tollefson

**Faith is like a 3 legged stool.** It's a funny thing about faith. The more I look the more complex it becomes. I'm going to share 3 ideas about Faith today, not just one. Faith is like a 3 legged stool with 3 distinct but connected parts.

1. **Faith as Belief**, is a cognitive structure of ideas that maps our self and community world-view, and our experience of the dimensions of the sacred.
2. **Faith as Care, Concern, and Commitment**, is the lively connection between emotion and actions. This dimension of faith ties together: what we feel deeply about, and what we do about it.
3. **Faith as Trust**, is multi-dimensional. It includes how we face the unknown and live in the midst of unknowns. Trust also involves "letting go" (Chinese: wu wei) . We acknowledge a "larger life" or "interdependent web" of which we are part.

There's a practical consequence of this 3-fold understanding of Faith. *Just changing our beliefs won't do it.* Just discarding our childhood beliefs and replacing them with more grown-up beliefs **cannot create a "living faith" that can sustain us in tough times.** Why? Because you can't replace a 3 legged with a 1 legged stool.

- **Without care**, our beliefs lack emotional vitality.
- **Without commitment** our beliefs have no consequences for our life and our world.
- **Without trust** in ourselves and others it becomes very difficult to form and maintain relationships, and to share our hopes and dreams and growing edges with others.
- **Without a set of integrated beliefs** we can have multiple commitments and a list of those people or organizations we trust but our lives may lack coherence and focus. We just skip from one good cause or good person to another.

If you doubt the usefulness and necessity of all 3 legs, just go back to the image of a **3 legged stool**. Two 2 legs are quite wobbly unless you're an acrobat. And 1 leg is not much good at all unless you compensate by using your own 2 legs for balance like the old-fashioned 1 legged milking stool. We're going to explore each of these dimensions of Faith and after I talk for awhile, there will be a chance for you to delve a deeper into your own matrix of **faith as belief, care and trust**.

# I. FAITH = Belief

Focusing on Faith as Belief is a natural place to begin. We UU's have often emphasized the cognitive dimension of faith. UU's from Isaac Newton to Charles Darwin from Emerson and Thoreau to Thomas Jefferson and John Adams have created lots of intellectual furniture to help us understand and imagine our selves, our community and the universe in which we live

We have noticed for almost 200 years that the beliefs of childhood rarely suffice to meet the challenges and changes of adulthood. We have provided congregational settings for people to set aside the beliefs of childhood and to craft something more worthy of what we know about human nature, culture and the world around us.

**Our cognitive faith**, can help us map self-community-world & its sacred dimensions. One way to delve deeper into our beliefs is to explore 3 different dimensions of belief:

- what we believe
- what we don't believe or no longer believe
- and what we sometimes make-believe.

Many UU's have a critical relationship with the religious beliefs of our childhood. Some of us are here because the beliefs that we recited as children no longer suffice for the complexities of our adult life. Do you remember the theological statements that you recited on Sunday morning or Saturday morning in the church or temple of your childhood?

## **An invitation to explore your beliefs:**

Pick up the pencil near-by and make some quick notes:

### *1. What do you no longer believe in?*

It might be secular.

It might be sacred.

Write down a few ideas that you have outgrown.

Another cognitive dimension of faith as belief is **make-believe**.

### *2. What are the things you make-believe in?*

Under special circumstances;

Or for a specific purpose.

A third and for many the most difficult aspect of belief is **what we believe in**.

### *3. Ask yourself what do you feel compelled to say "Yes" ? or "No" to?*

*What do you need to forcefully affirm or resist?*

These 3 elements---**belief, unbelief and make-believe** -- constitute the cognitive structure of our faith. They are the triangular structure that helps us to build a stable home in this world, knowing that our bodies will die; hoping that a larger life will continue after our death.

## II. FAITH = Care, Concern, Commitment

The second leg on the stool of faith is composed of the 3 C's : Care, Concern, Commitment. The word "e-motive" stands for the motivating power for our values and social actions that often comes from "e-motion". It is strong e-motion that often moves the mountains of habit, prejudice and indifference.

**The Role of Values:** Besides emotional vitality, the affective dimension of faith leaves a trail of "core values" which translate faith into action, change & organizations.

1. **Compassion or Care:** Sometimes faith is guided by compassion or care. We see the plight of people who are prevented from voting or kept away from jobs and housing and we vow to make it better. We see thousands of immigrant children kept in cages and they are all become Baby Jesus.
2. **Concern:** Sometimes faith is sparked by concern. Like the joys and concerns we share each Sunday this active attention to what's not right can prompt action to make it right.
3. **Commitment:** Sometimes faith is animated by commitment. We pool our care and concerns and out of that arise actions and organizations to make life better in this world. Unitarians and Universalists have been actively involved in the founding of the American Red Cross, humane institutions for the mentally ill, better access to resources for the disabled, the NAACP, the American Civil Liberties Union, and a host of other effective organizations that have changed the world for the better.

**To get a handle on your own care-concern-committment, ask yourself one of these questions and "just write" for 1 minute:**

1. *What is activating your active care and compassion?*
2. *Who or what are you most concerned about?*
3. *What are you committed to changing in the new year?*

## III. FAITH = Trust

The most elusive dimension of faith is "trust". Have you heard the story "You just have to have faith"? *A UU woman was climbing in the high Sierras. She felt her feet slipping and she began to slide towards the edge of a cliff. She managed to catch herself by grabbing a small tree. She looked down to see hundreds of feet of empty space below her. She looked up at the clouds over her head. Having nothing to lose, she called out: "God in heaven can you help me?" Nothing happened. She cried out again: MERCIFUL God in heaven, can you help me?" Soon the clouds parted and God-rays shot through. A voice like thunder said: "YOU JUST HAVE TO HAVE FAITH.....AND LET GO!" The women looked again at the empty space below here. Then she looked up and said: "Is there anybody else up there I can talk to?"*

**Our faith embraces doubt** especially when faith seems to require life threatening actions. Our faith is not always satisfied with the things we read in the Bible. As the song says from P & B: *"The things that you're liable to read in the Bible they ain't necessarily so."*

When the God of Abraham and Jesus seems to demand human sacrifice we are inclined to ask for a second opinion, or seek another source of guidance. And yet sometime faith seems to require that we **let go of common sense** and open ourselves to something beyond our present knowledge. Remember when Joseph the Carpenter was told by Angels that yes, his fiancée was pregnant but no, that did not mean she was unfaithful to him. Remember when Thomas Jefferson sensed an opportunity to double the size of the United States by a quick deal with the French? He had a vision of what could be which has proved quite useful, hasn't it?

Sometimes faith seems to require that we let go of what we think we know to imagine something radically new and not yet known. In the creative process, in talk therapy and in mindfulness meditation this “letting go” or “turning loose” or “suspending disbelief” often proceeds dramatic break-through into something new and better. Our lives are surrounded with unknowns. We don't know tonight's dream. Tomorrow's head-line or our own expiration date. Trust in something beyond what we know for sure **can help us live with dignified uncertainty.**

**Trust is necessary for human relationships.** Every day we have dealings with people we don't know yet or we encounter a surprising and not welcome side of ourselves or others. If we are to persist with the business of living in a world filled with people we don't know some kind of trust that transcends what we know is necessary. I hope that we will return to our national tradition of welcoming new immigrants remembering that our own ancestors came here from somewhere else and someone welcomed them and helped them learn our language and our ways.

**To get in deeper touch with your faith as trust ask yourself one of these questions and “just write” for a minute:**

- 1. What helps you open yourself to the unknown?*
- 2. What encourages you to reach out and welcome strangers or little known parts of yourself?*
- 3. How do you “let go” of what you think you know to discover or create something radically new?*

## **IV. The Seat of FAITH**

Do you remember way back at the beginning of this talk when I spoke of what turns 3 legs into a stool? Physically of course it is **a seat** with 3 holes drilled at the correct angles that turns 3 legs into a functioning stool and gives us a place to sit stably in the midst of a changing world. But what is it *metaphorically* that unites the three dimensions of faith:

1. Faith as belief, disbelief and make-belief
2. Faith as care, concern and commitment
3. Faith as trust as a willingness to let go and face the unknown and to reach out and welcome strangers as guests?

As you might imagine, there are many answers to this question in our denomination that values the “Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning” (Principle #4).

The introverted part of me would say that it’s **“Imagination”** that unites faith as belief, care and trust into a cohesive world view and allows us to live, move and act in the ever-changing seas of sensations, thoughts, feelings, etc. The extroverted part of me has a different view, thank goodness. It says that is **religious community** like this one, that unite faith as belief, care and trust and give us a safe place to **test** our our beliefs **translate** our care and commitment in action and organizations and **open** ourselves to the unknown.

Without **imagination and community**

our faith is pure potential  
an unlived life  
an unkept promise.

Cross over, if you choose, to **let your faith grow both roots and wings**. If you do not have a spiritual and ethical home I invite you to consider this congregation as a possible place **to test the wings of your religious imagination and put down roots in this spiritual & ethical community**.

One former member of All Souls Church suggested “critical thinking” as a third necessary element to bind together the seat of faith’s 3 legged stool. On reflection, I agree. The importance of critical thinking or reason in faith-formation is one factor that distinguishes many UU congregations from many of the “churches across the road”. As St. Paul says: *“Question all things. Hold on to what is Good”* (Thessolians 5).

**If Imagination, Reason and Community** are process oriented values, toward what end state do they point? For me:

- Imagination is how we discover and create **Beauty**.
- Reason is how we discover and create **Truth**.
- Community is created and sustained by the power of **Love**.

The sustaining core values of my seat of faith are **Truth, Love and Beauty**. If I were to interpret these values theologically, I would say that Truth, Love and Beauty are the mind, heart and body of the Great Mystery which some call “God” and others “Tao”, “Brahman” or Buddha Nature. Or that Truth, Love and Beauty are the meeting place of Human Potential and Divine Being. As my mentor the Sufi poem Rumi says:

*“ Let the beauty that we love be what we do.  
There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the earth”.*

