

First Unitarian Universalist Church
Rev. Sandra Fees
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Trust



When studying for Unitarian Universalist ministry, seminarians participate in a comprehensive vocational assessment. Over the course of two days, I completed a battery of tests, including some of which I had never even heard.

The tests measure things like personality, mood, stress management, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, leadership, knowledge and skill sets, IQ, psychopathology, and more.

When I got the results, there was one particular area that stood out for me. And it had to do with the MMPI-2 assessment. This is the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory test which was designed to identify psychiatric problems in individuals. I had what psychologists call an elevation on the test.

The psychologist at my vocational assessment explained the results. He told me I'm too trusting. It turns out I am in good company. Many clergy have elevated scores when it comes to trust.

The psychologist had some recommendations for me. He advised me to have contingency plans as a way to safeguard myself against being blind-sided or burned by situations and people. His suggestion seemed so obvious I wondered why I had not thought of it myself. I have used it on many occasions.

But I also quickly realized that I could not go through life developing back up plans for every situation that might go awry. This seemed like crazy-making. It just isn't practical. There is always the chance that things won't go according to plan. And it did not seem to me that I wanted to get too caught up in worrying about all the times I was going to be disappointed.

I have also learned to compensate in other ways. Having certain policies and procedures, for example, can help. I now use an intake process when meeting with individuals from the local community who ask for financial assistance.

The process helps slow things down and allows me time to make a better, more informed decision about giving financial support. Unfortunately, there are those who will take advantage of others to get what they want. A few simple steps can help make a good choice.

Trust, after all, is a choice. A little bit of information can be enormously helpful. Rather than operating on gut intuition alone, which we all know is sometimes wrong, it helps to also gather information about people and situations, which is mostly partial.

Combined these two types of knowledge can be useful, even if still not foolproof. Even when we marry someone or enter a relationship after knowing a person for a considerable amount of time, things can and do change. I imagine that almost all of us at one time or another in our lives have had a friend or partner who we thought we knew well who turned out to act in ways that we might describe as completely out of character.

Trust (cont'd.)
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Just as there are those of us who give our trust too quickly and need to learn to be more discerning, there are those who are slow to have faith in people or situations. Sometimes this is the result of having trusted too much in the first place and being injured by another person. It's possible to become guarded and even to decide not to place confidence in anyone. Cynicism and suspicion may set in.

Some family situations undermine the development of trust. Some people have been subjected to physical or mental abuse. This can make it very hard to rely on others. The world can be a lonely and dreary place where there is no trust. As Frank Crane, a minister and essayist known for his wisdom sayings, says, "You may be deceived if you trust too much, but you will live in torment if you don't trust enough."

Trust is the basis of living in society. We need confidence in our leaders for society to function well. When our leaders betray us, we become cynical, apathetic, or angry. But a society can not function effectively when the social contract gets broken. And restoring the public trust can take generations.

Trust is needed in the workplace for employees to be happy and productive and for organizations to operate smoothly. Trust is essential in families and intimate relationships.

Similarly, if we can't develop the ability to depend on each other within our religious community, our relationships will remain largely on the surface. They may be polite, kind, and even friendly, but they will not be deep or transformative.

In my role as your minister, I am blessed to be entrusted as your spiritual leader. You entrust me with the spiritual well-being of the community. But on a more intimate level, many of you open your hearts and souls to me, sharing the tender moments and occasions of your lives.

When I meet with individuals who come to me with the pain, disappointments and longings of their lives, I am humbled and grateful for the confidence which is placed in me. It is a sacred trust. Individuals come to me seeking a safe place to share, wanting compassion and respect, and needing someone who will be fully present to who they are.

When you come to talk with me, you want to be able to rely on the promised confidentiality. You want to know that your minister is someone in your life who will listen actively to the stirrings of your soul. You want to know there is someone who will bear witness to your pain as well as your joy.

When you come to me, I also trust you. I trust that you have the capacity to know what you need. Part of what I do is reflect your own experience back to you so you can see it with new eyes. Part of what I do is act as a mirror reflecting back to you what you may not be able to see on your own.

This kind of relationship is what I think we want from each other – to trust and be trusted.

Trust (cont'd.)
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And yet, there is another level of trust ... a deeper level still – the deepest level. In our reading this morning, Sharon Salzberg says that when we discover what we can place our trust in that will endure, then we will know the deepest level of faith. Let me repeat that: when we discover what we can place our trust in that will endure, then we will know the deepest level of faith.

As much as we need and want to have trust in our friends and family, as much as we need leaders we can trust. We don't like to think it, but so much of this is transitory. Life is subject to change. And so we might wonder, what, if anything, endures that we can depend on? Let me offer a few possibilities.

What endures that we can trust is our own authentic experience. Unitarian and Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson urged us to “trust thyself.” This is not about ego or selfishness. It has to do with discovering the deep truths underlying our life's experience. This requires an honest and discerning mind.

Throughout the ages, adherents of our Unitarian Universalist faith have placed their trust in the transforming moments of life's varied experiences. As John Buehrens, former president of our Unitarian Universalist Association, says “Part of all authentic experience is deeply inward – beginning to trust what [William Ellery] Channing called ‘God within.’” ([A Chosen Faith](#))

What also endures that we can trust is the process of life. Things seem to occur in a fairly predictable pattern according to a plan – until they don't. I can't know every experience I will encounter throughout the day or week. I can't anticipate every illness, death, or even a flat tire. I can have AAA for the occasions when I have car trouble, but it still may not get me where I need to be on time.

As Sharon Salzberg says, “We are going along in one direction when an unforeseen obstacle appears and we have to swerve out of the way. Suddenly, stunningly, we are in a different life.”

Last week, I walked the labyrinth at Penn State Berks right before dusk. This ancient spiritual practice emphasizes that life is a journey not a destination. That idea has gotten to be a bit of a cliché, but it's a cliché because there's a core truth to it.

As I walked, I became mindful of a kind of spaciousness. The labyrinth held my concerns and worries, and the world seemed less constrained. I did not need to be concerned about getting lost, which I am prone to do. I did not need a map or directions.

As I walked, I picked up several leaves strewn on the path. When I reached the center, I placed the leaves there as an offering – nature's offering to me, returned back to the earth. Then I made my way back out, out from the center and back into the great and uncertain movement of life.

Unitarian Universalism is a hopeful faith filled with a sense of gratitude and abundance. Yet we openly acknowledge and accept the uncertainties of life – the process that is ever unfolding to us ... the labyrinth of our lives.

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Trusting the process offers no absolutes. Instead it assures us that we are part of the great movement of life. There is no promise everything will turn out alright. But even so life can hold us, even as it keeps turning and shifting.

Finally, what endures that we can trust is the power of love. There is a story the Buddha told about faith and trust. And I would like to end with it this morning.

A herd of cows comes to the bank of a wide stream. The mature cows don't even hesitate. They wade right across it. The Buddha likened these mature cows to fully enlightened beings. They cross the stream of ignorance and suffering.

The younger cows get to the shore and stumble around. They are less mature and quite apprehensive. But eventually, they too cross the stream.

But the calves, the calves are the ones who really struggle. They tremble with fear. Some of them just learned how to stand, forget crossing a stream. Yet even these young calves, so tender, manage to get to the other side of the shore. They are able to cross the stream by following their mothers' voices. They trust their mothers. Hoping to be reunited with their mothers, they follow their mothers' voices. They cross the stream (story excerpted from Salzberg).

The Buddha described this as the power of faith to call us forward. Some of you may call this power Love, or God or Goddess, Spirit or the Holy. By whatever name we know it, this power – something still greater than we are – calls us forward, forward into life, into love, onward on our journey. It calls us forward as part and participant in this great web of life.

May it be so. Amen.