

Human Faith

Faith is a capacity unique to human beings. While it is true that animals can be “faithful” pets and can seemingly establish trusting relationships, the faith of humans is uniquely characterized by a depth of personal commitment and loving response that is beyond the potential of animals. In this chapter we are going to explore human faith as a response of all the many facets of the person, and also as a relational commitment that is both personal and communal. Then we will distinguish between faith and beliefs and discuss how both faith and beliefs can change, develop, and be nurtured. We will close by examining how human faith can bring us to the experience of limits as well as to ultimate questions.

The Faith of the Whole Person

Human faith is personal, in that it can be a commitment on many levels: intellectual, emotional, volitional, and even physical, imaginative, and aesthetic. Human faith involves not only knowledge, but also feelings, decisions, and actions. Faith is a “walking with,” an “intimacy toward,” a basis for our hopes and dreams.

Indeed, faith is the energy that drives us toward all that is inspiring and beautiful.¹

Faith and the Mind

Humans are unique in that they are driven to search for meaning. We want to make sense of things, find purpose, and plan. We desire to understand the “why” of tragedies, the “how” of happenings. Faith is in one sense the human capacity to believe that the truth of the matter is somewhere out there to be discovered. Scientists explore the microcosm as well as the macrocosm, believing in the reality that they examine, in the theories that have been proven up to now, and trusting that it is possible to keep advancing in our understanding of things. If one reads the writings of astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, it is clear that he has been able to overcome enormous physical disabilities (he has motor neuron disease) and continue his work because of his belief that it is worthwhile to attempt to unlock the mysteries of the universe. Hawking is an amazing genius who places great faith in the work of the scientists who have gone before him, and yet still believes that there is much more to learn. He writes: “We find ourselves in a bewildering world. We want to make sense of what we see around us and to ask: What is the nature of the universe? What is our place in it and where did it and we come from? Why is it the way it is?”²

Faith drives us to get at the root of things. Many of us spend long years in school because we believe there is much to learn and that there is value in gaining broader knowledge and deeper understanding. New ideas can be exciting and can take us in new directions. Most people in one way or another continue to explore life, believing that meaning can be found, purpose can be discovered, and valuable things can be accomplished. We begin our lives asking simple questions about life. We generally end our lives doing the same. It is faith in life that keeps us moving in this quest for meaning.

Knowledge Precedes Commitment

Faith in someone implies knowledge of that person. We would

be ill-advised to put our faith in a stranger whom we have just met. Moreover, the degree of commitment we make to a person is often proportionate to the amount of faith we have in that person. A college student might agree to go out with someone, simply knowing that he or she is in the same dorm and seems to be a nice person. But before making a commitment to be married, the student would be wise to be much more certain that this person is the right one with whom to share life, someone who will be faithful to love and the marriage vows.

Our faith in a person is based on perceptions, experiences, a history of events that have built up our confidence in that person. Faith in parents is based on knowing that over the years they have been there for us in good times as well as in bad. It is based on knowing that they show up when we need them and are committed to us. Faith in a teacher develops as we observe that teacher's knowledge, competency in teaching, and dedication to students. The teachers that are unique in our lives are those who believe in us, and we in them. As H. Richard Niebuhr once wrote, "When student and teacher are related to each other as mature beings who trust each other and keep faith with each other, they are at the same time acknowledging each other as selves who are bound to serve a cause that transcends both."³

Similarly, faith in a friend progresses as we come to learn that he or she is loyal, keeps confidences, and truly cares. All such faith deepens as more and more events and examples convince us that the person in question is "trustworthy" and "faithful." In other words, faith requires a certain degree of evidence that the other person can be relied upon. At the same time, faith can never be certain, and there is always a kind of leap that we make, leaving ourselves vulnerable to infidelity and betrayal. Faith is always a calculated risk.

Faith Is Seldom Certain

No matter how calculated our decision to believe in something or someone, we seldom have absolute certainty. Faith, in a sense, is always "without seeing." On a starry night there might be no sign of the moon, and yet we believe that it is out there some-

where. A woman carrying a child within her believes that she is carrying a healthy baby, but she has no clear proof of this beyond her doctor's opinion. Much of what the ordinary person knows about science is accepted without much evidence. One might believe in evolution, but how much concrete evidence could the average person produce to convince someone else? Long ago Aristotle pointed out that we cannot even be completely certain that our parents are really our parents, and yet we go on trusting that they are. Indeed when we wake up each morning and begin our day, we are not certain that we will be alive tomorrow. But we get up in faith that our lives will go on. Even a couple deeply in love and resolved to share their lives in marriage cannot be certain that their marriage will work out. Yet they go on in faith that their marriage will be a good and lasting one. Nothing is for certain, but faith keeps us going. In the midst of doubt, mystery, and futures that are clouded, faith offers us a sense of conviction, a place to stand.

There are many events that can challenge our faith, sometimes strengthening it, at other times weakening it. At times, doubts about fundamental beliefs can invade us. Scary questions can arise: Am I really worthwhile? Is there reason to keep going on with school? Should I just run away and start over? Maybe all this stuff about good morality is just old folks' tales. Why not just do what I want and get what I can while it is available?

Doubts are a normal part of life. In fact doubts can be a sign that human faith is alive. But there are two kinds of doubts: constructive and destructive. Constructive doubt searches sincerely for a deeper understanding, is open to new data, and seriously open to other points of view. Here the statement "I don't know" is sincere and open.

Conversely, destructive doubt is cynical and even rebellious, rejecting authority and having little respect for the beliefs in question. Here the intent is to get rid of beliefs rather than to gain new understanding of them, to destroy rather than to discover. The statement here is often, "I don't know, and so what?" Former beliefs are irresponsibly tossed overboard with little effort to evaluate or come to a better understanding of them. This approach can

tend to be more of a search and destroy mission, rather than an honest search for new insight.

Insidious Doubts

There are those who even challenge certain beliefs to further their own cause. Some challenge the facts of science so that they can carry on with their own pseudo-scientific explanations. Others deny that the environment is in any danger so that they can carry on with their profiteering on resources or with the pollution connected with their industry. Those who belong to so-called militias in this country propose preposterous theories about international and governmental plots to take over the lives of American citizens, while some militia members play war games and pose as military heroes.

There is today a movement to deny that the Holocaust ever happened during the time of the Nazi rule in Germany. In spite of the countless witnesses who have come forth, the allied troops' testimony, the pictures, the vast documents of proof, and an extensive Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C., there are those that say that the Holocaust was a fiction made up by the Jews. This is an example of the most dangerous kind of denial, the most insidious doubt that can be planted in the minds of people. Such a twisted theory is generally a shield for hatred, prejudice, and the desire for such a horror to be repeated. If the horrors of concentration camps did not happen, then the perpetrators become exonerated. The indignation and resolve to prevent such an event from ever happening again disappears. And the way is opened for such atrocities to be repeated. Here doubt is but a shield for those who wish to continue the evils of the past.

Faith and the Heart

As human beings, we want to love and be loved, so we seek out others whom we can trust to receive our love and offer love in return. Faith, then, is based on more than knowledge; it is also a matter of the heart and includes a whole range of feelings. When we are with someone in whom we believe, there are a number of feelings that might be experienced: feelings of trust, confidence,

security, safety, love, being cared for, peace, calm, pleasure, joy, hope. Faith is resting in the closeness of another. Faith in another generally leads to love of the person, as well as hope that our relationship will continue. Faith is a “knowing in our hearts” that our friends or loved ones will be faithful to us.

Faith Builds on Trust

Human faith is based on trust, which is our ability to have reliance on something or someone. Trust is our willingness to have confidence in the reliability of a thing, or of the truthfulness and integrity of a person. Such trust is quite basic to human living. Without a degree of trust in ourselves, we would be reluctant to make decisions, reach out in friendship, or make plans for the future. Without trust in other people, we would no doubt be afraid to even leave our homes, associate with others, or be open to relationships. If we were not able to put trust in people, it is unlikely that we would be willing to reveal ourselves to others or open our lives to others in any way.

Erik Erikson, one of the great psychologists of our time, tells us that the first task of human development is to achieve a certain degree of trust. For instance, as infants, the kinds of responses we receive to our cries will shape our awareness of whether or not we can count on others. We seem to know early on whether or not there are others who will love us and take care of us. We know whether we are secure or abandoned.

There is a touching story about the need for trust that comes out of a hospital in Boston. It seems that an infant who had apparently been severely beaten and left in a dumpster was brought into the hospital in critical condition. The doctors were able to stabilize him, but they could not get him to uncoil from the fetal position or respond in any way. The staff tried every medical approach they could think of, but it looked as though he wasn't going to make it.

Then one of the nurses suggested that the infant be given the name Kevin, and that he be placed at the entrance of the nurses' station, where he would get lots of attention. The doctors and nurses would greet Kevin and even pick him up and cuddle him.

For days there was no response, and then suddenly one morning, as one of the nurses held Kevin, he opened his eyes, uncurled his arms and legs, and gave the nurse a little smile. At last Kevin had gained trust in someone and could start his life. He began taking nourishment, and in just months left the hospital as a healthy baby. The hospital staff, through their care and attention, had given Kevin the gift of trust.

Trust in Ourselves

Somewhere inside little Kevin a voice said, "You are OK! You are lovable and capable, and so it is all right to open your life to others." Trust in the self is basic to a happy life. Most of us have had someone who loved and cared for us enough to give us the confidence in ourselves to step out and take risks, even the risk of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to others, and allowing them to love us. Madeleine L'Engle puts it this way: "To be fully human means to be alive and that means to be vulnerable. To be vulnerable means I'm capable of being hurt. The more people I love, the more I am open to being hurt. To get married is a vulnerable act. To have children or to have friends is part of the risk-taking we have to do if we're to be creative...."⁴

We all have our scars: incidents where we were mistreated, betrayed in some way, or even abandoned or abused. Most of us encounter defeat and failure somewhere in our lives. Inside many of us there is sometimes the nagging feeling that we are not acceptable, not capable, or even that we won't make it. A sustained trust in ourselves is what can carry us through these times and enable us to keep going forward with our lives, our hopes, and our dreams. Therefore, faith in ourselves is essential if we are going to succeed. Such trust gives us a place to stand, a lifeline to hold on to, a hold on something that is secure.

Trust in Others

Trust is a two-way street. We need to trust in ourselves (and be trustworthy), and we also need to be able to trust in others. Yet trusting others has its challenges also. On the one hand, it is not wise to be gullible and to believe everything we hear. We would

all be in big trouble if we believed all the stories in the tabloids on display at checkout counters, or the tall tales we hear on the talk shows. Placing trust in others should be done cautiously, with discernment and care. Otherwise we leave ourselves open to con-artists, deceivers, and others who may wish to do us harm.⁵

While naivete is one extreme of trust, at the other extreme are skepticism, cynicism, or excessive fear of others. There are some who have no trust whatsoever in the government. Think, for instance, of those who blew up the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April, 1995, apparently as a sign of their hatred of the U.S. government. Others have lost trust in their churches because of some offense they have received or because of the behavior or teachings of church authorities. Some have lost confidence in the media, in organized sports, in health care, or even in their own families. Often some incident or some individual has brought these people to shut down any possibility of trusting in an entire group or institution.

Healthy trust in others is always risky, but there comes a point after listening and relating when we are prepared to place ourselves in the hands of another. There are "reasons of the heart" that tell us that it is all right to have confidence in this friend, doctor, lawyer, salesperson, or teacher. In the case of intimate relationships, where there is a lot more at risk, the "track record" of the person and the relationship gives us more and more confidence each day. There can be a great sense of peace and comfort knowing that we have such a "faithful" partner. Indeed marriage experts tell us that happy marriages often are those where the couples have a successful history of settling conflicts and surviving crises.

The Power of Fidelity

As we were discussing in class the feelings attached to fidelity, Marguerita, a student whose parents fled with her from Cuba several years ago, shared an amazing story. About ten years ago in Cuba a bright young pilot named Orestes was sent by Castro to Russia to be trained as a jet pilot. While in Russia, Orestes became disillusioned with Communism and decided that when he returned

to Cuba he would plan to go to the United States with his wife, Gloria, and their three children. Orestes knew that it would be too difficult for all of them to go at once, so he figured that if he could make it to Miami himself, his family would be allowed to follow. Orestes figured wrongly, for once he got out, the Cuban government made it clear that his family could not follow. In addition, government officials kept coming to Gloria and the children with stories that Orestes was a traitor and had another woman in Florida. When Orestes complained, Cuban officials challenged him to try to come back and get his family.

Well, Orestes decided to take up the challenge. He spent months training with a small plane that friends had given him, and then early one morning he flew under Cuban radar and landed on a highway near his house. His wife and children had been tipped off about his plan and were there to meet him when he landed. Orestes gathered them all quickly into the plane, and off they went to freedom.

It is difficult to even imagine all the feelings that Orestes and his family must have had during this ordeal. Gloria's faith in her husband never wavered, even when the government lied to her about his infidelity. Nor did she have any doubt that he would show up on the highway that morning to sweep her and the children up in his plane. Orestes also had to have faith that Gloria would hold up under the pressure, and that she and the children would be there when he arrived. They shared a bond of faith, a joining of hearts that was ultimately stronger than even a government's concerted efforts to deceive and separate them.

Infidelity Can Wound and Destroy

Once we decide to have faith in someone and "give our hearts" to that person, infidelity hurts us deeply. If a close friend talks behind our back to others, or betrays a confidence, we usually become extremely upset. If someone we love leaves us for another, we can feel devastated. And we know how lives can be shattered when spouses are unfaithful. Sexual infidelity can destroy marriages, devastate families, and even result in physical violence. And think of the many employees today who have been

cast aside by their companies after years of service. One day they are faithfully doing their job, and the next they are given a pink slip and told that they are no longer needed. All such betrayal can wound us deeply and make it difficult for us to trust once again. When we discover that someone is dealing with us in "bad faith," we feel betrayed.

In recent history we have seen tragic examples of people's faith being taken advantage of and manipulated. Jim Jones persuaded many people to put faith in him and his Peoples' Temple. In 1978 over 900 of his followers eventually were forced by him to commit suicide when the authorities began to close in on Jones' perverse and fraudulent operations. In one of the documentaries made about this tragic event, there is the moving scene of a father finding his daughter face-down among the victims. She was a graduate of Vassar, a dedicated social worker, and joined Jones so she could work with the many disadvantaged children in his group. More recently, in 1993, David Koresh drew people from all over the world to join his Branch Davidians. During a standoff with agents from the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, many of Koresh's followers, including a number of children, were incinerated when he gave orders for the Branch Davidian compound to be soaked with fuel and torched. These are only a few examples of the dark side of "faith."

Faith and the Will

We choose wherein we place our faith. Faith is a commitment, a pledge or promise to carry out certain responsibilities. When we enter a friendship, join a club or activity, or start studies in an institute of higher learning, we are deciding to connect ourselves with others and take on new responsibilities. Faith involves decisions, choices, actions. Faith generally involves an intention to somehow alter our lives and go in new directions. Faith commitments can often change the course of our lives and move us toward new horizons.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, a well-known theologian and teacher, sees faith as making a conscious choice to live an authentic way of living. She writes:

Faith is a way of living justly and lovingly. It's a total life style. That essentially is the way I want to perform everything I do. If I'm engaged in teaching, I'm trying to give the most authentic account of what this truth is about and really encourage students to recognize the difference between theory and practice.⁶

We expect faith to be translated into action. If an employer says she has faith in us, we want to see that concretized by giving us things to do where we can demonstrate our competence. If a coach expresses confidence in us, but we never get sent into the game, we have serious doubts about the coach's confidence. In marriage, fidelity translates not only into being sexually faithful, but into "being there" when the spouse is in need. In other words, if faith remains only in words it is empty and unconvincing.

Free to be Faithful

Freedom is an important dimension of faith. No one should force us to have faith, whether it be in a thing, another person, a group, or a set of religious beliefs. Authentic faith needs to be freely given because it involves promises that only we can decide to keep, relationships that we want to decide to make, contracts that we agree to keep. Just as we cannot force another to love us or accept our love, neither can authentic faith be forced. A faith that is gained through fear or force will generally be cast aside once the threat is removed. A child forced to believe in overly strict moral values will usually abandon those values if they become unacceptable in adulthood.

We need a degree of freedom in order to be truly faithful to ourselves and to others. Perhaps that is why Paul Tillich, a well-known Lutheran theologian, liked to refer to faith as "the courage to be." Faith in ourselves and others can give us a resolve to overcome personal limitations as well as obstacles that others place in our way. Faith can free us to be our true selves, to use our full potential, and to write our own futures as much as possible. Karl Rahner, one of the finest Catholic theologians of this century, once described freedom as "the courage to risk the unforeseeable future."⁷ Freedom is a step-

ping out in faith that we can be and do in spite of our disabilities, in spite of efforts others might make to stop us. In many ways, freedom and faith are identical.

Freedom within Limits

The choices we make both to extend faith and receive the fidelity of others are always subject to certain limitations. Bernard Lonergan, a Catholic theologian who deeply affected contemporary philosophical and theological thinking, distinguished between essential freedom and effective freedom. Essential freedom is the radical ability of all human beings to choose among many courses or actions. As the founding fathers of the United States wrote, all people "are created equal." It is a different story, however, when it comes to effective freedom, or how each of us can actually exercise freedom. The choices we make can be limited by many factors: personal capacity, race, gender, social background, laws, political conditions, to name only a few.

Limits to our freedom affect our faith commitments. It is often more difficult for a child of the ghetto to have faith in self and faith in others. An indigenous peasant in Guatemala might find it more difficult to have faith in government than does a person who lives in a free and open society. An inmate in a prison who is constantly subjected to abuse from other inmates as well as from those in charge will no doubt find it difficult to sustain faith in his fellow human beings. Much as we might want to extend our trust to people or institutions, many of these are simply not "trustworthy." Our faith commitments always have limited boundaries.

Other Personal Dimensions of Faith

So far we have seen that human faith can involve the mind, the heart, and the will. There are other human dimensions that can pertain to faith. We can express our trust and commitments to others physically, through affection or sexual actions. Our bodies are manifestations of who we are, and physical actions express the degree of love and commitment we have toward others. A hug can say "Hi," to a friend, whereas sexual union speaks of serious and permanent commitment.

Even our imaginations can enter our faith commitments. Lovers fantasize about each other, tribes tell tales and myths of their past, and nations express their history in songs and epics. It is in our imaginations that we hold dreams and hopes about our future, about goals that we want to achieve, and about places we want to go. So much of our efforts in life are to make these dreams into reality. If our dreams are realistic, they can be powerful means to keep us moving toward them. Listen to Anna, who is hearing impaired, and is working for her doctorate in psychology: "When I was young I seemed to be always on the sidelines, because I could not hear what the others were saying. School was almost impossible, and I had a very difficult time making friends. My parents never gave up on me, though. They spent most of their savings on hearing devices and on sending me to programs where I could learn to overcome my disability. Eventually I was able to master lip-reading, sign language, and a number of computer devices. Now I have the capacity of helping all kinds of people that the people with normal hearing can't get through to. That is why I am now working to get the credentials I need to be a therapist. I could never have done all this had it not been for my parents and many others who gave me dreams and helped me keep them alive."

Finally, human faith can involve the aesthetic sense, or the ability to appreciate beauty in nature, art, music, literature, dance, athletics, and other areas. Aesthetic experience can raise us up beyond the humdrum and the mundane and motivate us to higher goals and commitments. For instance, more people today are coming to better appreciate the beauty of nature, and are therefore moved to work for a better environment. Athletics are providing many underprivileged and disabled youth with means of gaining confidence, making friends, gaining an education, and building a career. Music can often be an international language that can bring peoples of different cultures together and help them celebrate common goals.

So far we have seen how human faith can be an expression of the whole person. We can reach out in faith and confidence with our minds, our hearts, our wills, indeed our entire selves. In this

next section, we will be looking at the relational dimensions of faith.

The Social Aspect of Faith

Humans are social by nature, and thus there is a relational dimension to faith. Faith generally involves a commitment to another individual or to a group or community. One can place faith in a friend, a spouse, a teacher, or in such groups as family, school, team, or nation. We have a need to belong, and we are often willing to invest in faith as a way of saying that we want to relate to someone or be part of a group. There is a mutuality about faith, an exchange of agreements, promises, or even vows.

Faith in Individuals

We saw earlier that once trust, confidence, and commitment are exchanged between two individuals, whether they be friends, colleagues, teammates, or spouses, strong bonds begin to develop. Faith has enormous power to link people together and to set them in new directions as partners.

There is a story out of the revolutionary days in El Salvador that demonstrates the power that a faith bond can generate. It involves two of four American missionaries who were abducted in 1980 at the national airport, beaten, robbed, and murdered by the Salvadoran military. The bodies had been taken to the mountain village where the women served, and preparations were made for a funeral. On the morning of the funeral, the military surrounded the church with armed vehicles in order to discourage attendance. Still, many of the people who loved and worked with the two women came, walked through the armed soldiers, and entered the church. Fr. José, a priest who had worked closely with the women for years, was missing, but no one was surprised because there was a reward out for his capture dead or alive. It would have been extremely dangerous for him to come. The Mass proceeded, and, at the offertory, an old man with long gray hair and beard came through the sacristy door, took out a guitar, and sang a new and beautiful song honoring the women. Some were able to recognize the old man, but did not let on. It was Fr. José in disguise! He had

come down out of the mountains, quietly walked through all the soldiers, and risked his life to sing a song that he had written for the slain women. Later that day, many of his friends laughed and cried all at once at Father José's daring. These two women from America had been his friends. His faith in them gave him the power to risk his own life in order to pay honor to his friends.

Faith in Social Groups

Faith can also be directed at groups, whether they be families, schools, organizations, companies, or any other institutions. One of the reasons why many people select a college or university with such care is that the education and degree to be gained there will help determine the direction of their lives. In attending an institution of higher learning, one is counting on that institution to provide an education, values, social experience, and personal contacts that will be carried into the future. Similarly, if we join a company for work, we want to be able to trust that the company will provide us with a fair wage, benefits, and decent working conditions.

Faith, as we have said before, is a two-way street. While we have certain expectations of the groups we join, these groups likewise want reciprocal responses from us. If one trusts a college or university to provide a good education and a valuable degree, in turn the institution can expect dedication to studies. Join any organization and there are certain traditions and beliefs that go along with belonging, specific rules and policies to be followed, and commitments that are expected to be kept. To belong to a nation is to believe in its constitutions and principles. Many have even been called to sacrifice their lives to defend the freedoms and values of this country.

This latter reference to patriotism always generates heated discussion in class, because some young people today seem to be disillusioned with their government. Listen to Julie, a junior political science major, whose father fought in Vietnam: "My father bought into all this patriotism talk and went off to Vietnam for a tour of duty that changed his whole life. He saw many of his friends killed there and was depressed for years after his return, thinking that perhaps if he had fought harder he could have saved some of

them. He gave a lot to this war, and then he heard former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara declare that the war in Vietnam was a big mistake. Can you imagine how angry and frustrated he was when he heard this? My father doesn't talk much about patriotism anymore, and doesn't want me to ever get involved with the military."

Julie's father has obviously lost much of the faith that he had in his country. He trusted his country, even to the point that he was willing to risk his life for its principles. Now he discovers that some think that the war his country put him in was really a mistake. Disillusionment, a feeling of betrayal, and resentment are often the products of a faith that has been abused.

Faith as Distinct from Beliefs

Faith and beliefs are closely related, but at the same time they are distinct. Faith is our trusting commitment to a relationship; whereas beliefs are the ideas, the truths, the cognitive content that are integral to our commitments. When beliefs change, the faith relationship can be altered.

There are occasions when change in belief can negatively affect a relationship. For example, Jack, a student in one of my classes, told a story about a favorite uncle, who told him that he played professional baseball years ago. Jack said that he really looked up to his uncle as a hero, and always listened carefully when his uncle told him the amazing stories about the games in which he played. Then one day Jack discovered that his uncle never played baseball at all. He had simply made up all those stories. Jack's beliefs about his uncle's baseball past certainly changed, as did his respect for his uncle.

There are other instances when change in beliefs might deepen a relationship. One might believe that a friend is uncaring and selfish, only to find out that she has been regularly helping in a soup kitchen. At that point a belief about the person changes and, as a result, the friendship might be deepened. The beauty about a good friendship is that both friends are constantly learning more about each other, and, as they learn, their respect and love for each other increases.

Ways of Coming to Believe

H. Richard Niebuhr, an expert on the structure of faith, proposed that there are five ways in which we arrive at our beliefs. First, we may believe something simply because we have always believed it. Such are the beliefs that we take for granted: the sun will rise in the east and set in the west; putting one's hand on a hot stove will burn.

Second, we come to beliefs on the authority of others. Some believe that eating vegetables is good for their health because that is what their parents taught them. Others believe that it is safer to wear a seat belt when driving because this is what their driving instructor taught them. Many believe what they hear on the evening news because it is told them by a reliable station and by someone they respect. People in official positions or experts provide us with many things to believe.

Third, we come to believe some things because they are self-evident or obvious. For instance, going to school quickly teaches us that study is necessary in order to do well in a difficult exam. Experience quickly teaches us that constant overeating will put on weight.

Fourth, we come to beliefs through persuasive means such as advertising. The ads may convince us that one beer is fresher than another, or that Brand X of deodorant is more dependable than Brand Y.

Finally, we come to beliefs through reasoning. A professor might present a convincing case for what were the leading causes of the Civil War. An article might provide us with ample evidence that the ozone layer around the earth has been seriously damaged through the use of chlorofluorocarbons.

We can see that beliefs come to us from all directions and on many levels. The thinking person, then, carefully considers the source of the beliefs being proposed and then cautiously discerns whether or not the belief is acceptable. One can easily see why it is necessary today to be a critical thinker and a careful discerner of the truth.

It is not easy today to steer a course between gullible and cynical. Yet humans have a hunger for truth and will normally keep searching and listening. Desmond Tutu, the courageous South

African Archbishop, puts it this way: "I'm a traditionalist. Yet I'm also quite awe-struck when I hear new ideas from brilliant theologians and scientists that help clarify my framework of truth. Truth has a self-authenticating quality about it. When someone resonates truth, we respond. In the end, you discover truth has a certain ring about it."⁸

Beliefs Seem to Change Constantly

Accepting new beliefs and putting aside beliefs that no longer seem acceptable is an ongoing process. Not too long ago, AIDS was thought to be a minor threat, contracted only through gay sexual activity. Now AIDS is believed by many to be a dangerous killer disease that can attack any person who has contact with blood or other body fluids contaminated with the disease. Fifty years ago, many believed that it was impossible for humans to go to the moon or to link up space vehicles. Now belief in space travel is broadly accepted and often taken for granted. Not long ago smoking was accepted as part of the American way of life. Now smoking is believed by many in this country to be harmful to health, and it is more and more prohibited in many public places. Most of us get impatient with the many "scientific studies" that one day say something is bad for our health, and then later present contradictory findings. For many, Coleridge's old "suspension of disbelief" has become "suspension of belief," and one often hears people say, "I'm not sure what to believe anymore."

The Development of Faith

Human faith can mature and develop, and such growth usually parallels our normal psychological development. Most children have a simple faith, trusting most of what they hear from the adults close to them. Tragically, however, there are many children who are subjected to abuse and witness such horrors that they don't have the opportunity to enjoy the simple and trusting world of the child.

For adolescents, human faith can suddenly become complicated. The simple and literal world of the child recedes, and the teenager begins to work things out amidst much physical and per-

sonal change. Trust often shifts to peers or teachers, and a time for experimenting with new beliefs about self, others, and life in general begins.

The young adult continues the exploration of new beliefs, but usually with more calmness and stability than the adolescent. New understanding about intimacy and sexuality develops, new dreams for the future are formulated, and many of the beliefs about life are brought before the tribunal of critical thinking. As adults settle into their lives (and today this often is happening later in life than it did in the past), beliefs often stabilize for awhile. At the same time, new horizons can open as one begins a career, a family, or both. For many, middle age is a time to once again reevaluate beliefs and commitments, and possibly set off in new directions. And, finally, during the later aging period, many shifts in beliefs and relationships take place, especially as life winds down toward the end.

Even though there are the standard stages of personal and faith development, each person experiences these stages somewhat differently. Each person is unique. In addition, human development is always contextualized. Race, gender, family, class, ethnic and national background, culture, as well as events particular to one's own life are just some of the factors that enter into the personal growth of faith and beliefs. A young African woman from the rural area of Tanzania, whose marriage was just arranged by her family, will no doubt embrace different beliefs and commitments than an older man who fought in the Second World War and now lives on a small pension in a village in Lithuania. A boy who witnessed his parents hacked to death in Rwanda will most certainly have a different faith structure than a girl growing up in the northern suburbs of Chicago. Suffice it to say, for now, that the development of human faith is relative and complex. We will postpone further discussion of the stages of development until Chapter Three, where we will look at these stages in more detail.

Human Faith Needs to Be Nurtured

Just like all other aspects of our lives, human faith needs to be attended to and nurtured, lest it wither into cynicism or even into

despair. In the midst of so many breakdowns in values, so much “bad news” coming to us in the media, it takes effort to sustain trust and belief in self, in others, in life, and in the future. Elsa, a senior marketing major, has shared with the class the tragic story of her classmate Alie, who last year committed suicide. “Alie was a good friend,” said Elsa. “She came from money, and yet she was not spoiled. She shared her things freely with her friends. Alie struggled in school, changing her major several times, always hoping to be as successful as her father. She was a good athlete, and was a regular on the soccer team. In her junior year, Alie’s world began to fall apart. Her parents split up, she broke up with her boyfriend, and her marks started to go down. Alie’s friends tried to boost her up, but she got more and more depressed and withdrew from everyone. One night Alie’s roommate came home late and found her hanging in the basement. I will never forget that funeral. She was so young, had so much going for her; and yet somehow she lost hope and took her own life. You read about these things, but when it is someone you love, it really tears you apart.”

Somewhere along the line Alie had lost faith in herself, in her friends, in life itself. We will never know all the details or whether she somehow could have been saved from taking her life, but her tragic story certainly taught many of her friends about the need to keep our faith alive.

Ongoing Learning

Since faith is in part an intellectual commitment, it can be nurtured by more accurate information, clarification, and evaluation. Instruction by well-informed and wise mentors and friends is most helpful in shaping our beliefs. Good reading, discussing things with friends and relatives whom we respect, and traveling can all help us reinterpret, better understand, and apply our beliefs about life and living. Quiet time set aside for reflection can also be useful in helping us work through confusion or doubt. A walk in the woods, a hike in the mountains, or a stroll on a beach can often give us occasion to deepen our beliefs and renew our commitments.

Being Engaged with Life

Romano Guardini, a brilliant teacher back in the 1950s and 60s, once wrote about the distinction between what he called “full faith” and “empty faith.” He said that full faith is characteristic of those who have a lively and intense awareness of what they believe and are committed to. He said that such people need not be pious or profound, but they do have the gift of being “sensitive to what is alive in everything that they encounter. Things, ideas, events all speak to them.”⁹ Guardini was convinced that people with full faith are moved by things they see, learn, and experience. Their lives seem to have a warmth and richness about them.

In contrast, people with an empty faith tend to be cold and indifferent to the things and ideas they encounter, closed to the meaning of events, as well as to deep relationships. They recognize values, but don’t live them out. They define goals, make decisions, even get in motion, but there is no real engagement with these goals. For them truth is simply words. Guardini says that such people have “spiritual anaemia.” They remain cold and unresponsive to whatever and whomever comes along in their lives. As a result, these people often sense that there is a void in their lives, a vacuum that somehow must be filled.¹⁰

From what Guardini says, it is clear that full faith requires openness to learning and life, a willingness to search and explore, an eagerness to make firm decisions, a dynamic energy to reach for goals. Faith is in part an engagement of the heart and needs to be fed if it is to be kept alive and growing. Bloodless living and fainthearted commitment won’t do. To be really alive, human faith must be constantly examining, questioning, reaching out, and actively immersed in what is going on at any given moment.

Translating Beliefs into Action

An authentic faith does not remain theoretical or emotional, but translates into action, into a way of life. Beliefs are of dubious value unless they become the driving force behind a pattern of living. Usually we are not impressed with people who are simply “all talk and no action,” people who don’t “walk the talk.” Jacob, a senior who wants to be a marine biologist, tells us about someone who has

influenced his life, Jacques Cousteau: "I first read of Cousteau when I was given a copy of his *Calypso* magazine for my twelfth birthday. I was immediately fascinated by him and his sons and all the exciting trips they were making around the world. I still read his articles and am amazed at the vibrancy and love of all living things that he still has, and he must be near 80! Cousteau's life really convinced me that I wanted to go on in marine biology. Recently Cousteau wrote that in life there is a difference between joy and pleasure. He said pleasure is easy to get by eating, drinking, or any of the comforts available to us. But he said that joy is harder to find, and he finds it only when he gives himself for others. If you are looking for an example of a living faith, there it is."

Keeping Our Sense of Humor

Faith can also be nurtured if there is room left for humor, for having fun in life. Humor enables us to laugh at our own foibles, at the incongruities of life, at the things that just don't seem to go right for us. Someone has called laughter "inner jogging," in that it shakes us up inside and keeps our spirits in shape. Every once in awhile someone has a way of coming along and reminding us all that we are taking things a bit too seriously. Think back, for example to the years of the Cold War, when Russia had thousands of radar operators intently sitting at their screens waiting to intercept any fleet of American planes coming in with nuclear weapons. America at the same time was poised with tens of thousands of nuclear warheads, ready for instant retaliation if Russia should strike. America also intently watched with its own hi-tech devices and was also developing additional "Star Wars" technology for protection. In the midst of all this a young German flew his little Piper Cub into the Kremlin and landed in Red Square. So much for all the sophisticated protection against nuclear weapons! One young man had some fun with the world and single-handedly challenged some of the beliefs of the world powers about the value of the arms race.

Deepening Commitments

Human faith is social and is the basis for our personal and communal relationships. Good relationships have to be cared for in

order to be sustained. Friendships need time for communication and sharing. Letters, phone calls, times together are necessary to keep friendships alive. There is an old saying: "To gain a friend, be a friend." Doing for others, being thoughtful, showing up when others are in need will generally come back to us. We express our faithfulness to others when we are willing to overlook the faults in our friends and family members, have the ability to forgive them for offenses, and are willing to be there for them.

Investing in the groups to which we belong also strengthens the bonds that we have with these groups. Giving our best to a team, actively participating in a class, showing up for meetings of organizations, or working hard at our jobs are usually effective ways of strengthening our commitments to such groups.

Facing Limits

We have seen that human faith is in part intellectual, and it accepts things that seem to be reasonable or trustworthy. We have discussed how as humans we are searchers, questioners, constantly looking for truth, meaning, and purpose. Yet our search seems to be unending. We never seem to be satisfied with what we know, and the "information explosion" continues on as countless books, articles, and other materials keep appearing. We even have designed an "information highway" so that we can better exchange ideas. We have a World Wide Web through which data on nearly every topic can be obtained.

Yet, with all this explosion of information, many still wonder, "Where is the real truth?" It often seems as though our search for meaning can never be completely fulfilled. Could it be that our almost infinite appetite for truth points to the existence of some ultimate Truth?

Human faith is also an outreach of the heart. We have feelings toward so many things, and our most satisfying is the feeling of love toward others. Yet no one person can completely satisfy our hunger to love and be loved. Moreover, each person whom we love will eventually be separated from us. Some might ask, "Is there someone or something that can completely satisfy my need to love and be loved? Is there such a thing as eternal Love?"

Limit questions can also arise out of our experience of free moral choices. Most of us try to live good lives, and yet many questions can easily linger in the back of our minds, questions like: why should I be a good person? why not cheat and lie and scratch my way to the top? why not just get what I can now and be as happy as I can? or, why should I bother doing good for others? We might wonder if there is Someone or something toward which we are answerable; Someone who is the ultimate source of law and obligation.¹¹

Similar questions can arise with regard to other areas of human faith. Tradition tells me that sex belongs in marriage, and that marriage requires fidelity and permanence. Some wonder if their bodies and life itself actually come from some ultimate creative power. Is there reason to think that our bodies and the bodies of others are somehow sacred? Why indeed should we be faithful to some one person, when there are so many other attractive and pleasurable people available? For some, the answer is clear: "It is my body, and I'll do what I want with it."

Even our need to have dreams for the future can raise questions. Some might ask, "Is there a future beyond my dreams and hopes? Might I rightly hope to live forever and be with my loved ones who have passed away?" Likewise, our appreciation for beauty in nature and art can raise questions about the very source of creation and beauty. Participation in sports often can lead us to questions about life's goals, as well as about the frailty and limitations of our bodies. Humans seem to have such drives to achieve perfection and to win. Could it be that some ultimate perfection, some ultimate goal is actually out there somewhere?

As Karl Rahner put it, we are questioners. Many of us ask if there is some higher power that somehow guides and nurtures the world. Is there some ultimate reality to which we can relate and in which we can put our trust? Where do all the amazing things in this world come from? And where is it all going? What is the purpose of my life? Is there something that I am called to do? Why did this failure, loss, or tragedy have to happen to me? There are always many questions, and the answers to such questions do not come easily.

Many religious thinkers have said that we would not be asking all these questions if there were not some ultimate answers. There would not be a searching unless there is an ultimate goal that is achievable. In the next chapter we will discuss religious faith, in particular Christian faith. We will look at how religious faith builds upon the foundations of human faith and attempts to provide answers to our many ultimate questions.

Summary

Faith does seem to be a uniquely human power. Human faith seems to be best expressed holistically through the mind, the heart, the will; indeed through all personal capacities. Human faith is both personal and social. Faith is distinct from beliefs; and there are many ways to come to believe. Beliefs do change and develop; they need to be nurtured through learning and living. A healthy faith translates into action and commitments. Human faith moves us to questions about limits, questions about ultimates.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Name some people in whom you trust. How did these individuals earn your trust?
2. List some things in which you believe but cannot see. Why is it that you believe in these things?
3. Do you think that some kind of doubt is always a part of faith? When is it healthy to have doubts?
4. Why do you suppose Paul Tillich calls faith “the courage to be”?
5. Discuss Niebuhr’s five ways to come to belief and give your own examples.
6. Why is it important to translate faith into action?

SUGGESTED READINGS

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