

Have Faith (aka: Don't Bite the Mailman)
October 23, 2022
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday October 23rd and the title of this morning's reflection is Have Faith (aka: Don't Bite the Mailman). The title comes from a song by the Dave Matthews Band called What Would You Say?

Up and down the puppies' hair
Fleas and ticks jump everywhere because of original sin
Down the hill fell Jack and Jill
And you came tumbling after because of original sin

The song asks, "What would you say...if you were a monkey on a string? ...if you were a doggie on a chain?" It's a good song.

The second chorus pushes further. If you were a monkey on a string, don't cut the lifeline and if you were a doggie on a chain...don't bite the mailman. Good advice, I think and mail carriers everywhere are greatly relieved.

For years, I loved this song but I also thought it was ridiculous...until that last line made good sense to me. I could relate. I still think that the song is ridiculous because it so casually mentions original sin (which has nothing to do with fleas and ticks and puppies, by the way...nothing to do with Jack and Jill) but it's catchy. I'll give you that.

I'm not drawn to this song theologically. I'm drawn because of the strangely compelling idea of biting the mailman. I've had many days this. Have you? I'm not trying to be cute. I'm trying to be real about the power of this faith.

Unitarian Universalism is dangerous when it is at its best. It requires a lot from us. When it's mediocre (and most faiths are mediocre every now and then), UUism tends to get a little weird. Sometimes, we reduce deep meaning into catch phrases and colloquialisms. Sometimes, we dull grace down until it fits on a bumper sticker.

Don't get me started. I can be bitter about this. My friends and colleagues challenge me when I get in this mood. They say, "If defining our faith was yours to do, how would you do it? What would you say?"

I tell them that Unitarian Universalism asks us to experience life directly, to think critically and for ourselves and to question everything. This faith turns common religious understanding on its head most of the time. Instead of a holy trinity, we imagine a sacred oneness—a unity, thus, the word Unitarian...as opposed to Trinitarian. Instead of "original sin," we've reimagined an "original blessing." At our best, we find what Ralph Waldo Emerson called an "original relationship" with the universe, departing from the dry bones of the past. And at our worst, we're elitist, judgmental and fussy...and I love us either way...even when healthy skepticism dissolves into mistrust...even when we bite the mailman. In other

words, I love us even when we misplace our fear and our anxiety, even we lose touch with grace and true compassion.

I like my answer but by the time I finish saying it, my friends are usually no longer listening...and I'm rarely even listening to myself. We've been through this many times and we know we already agree. I'm much like them and they're much like me. We ourselves in one another. Maybe that's our faith right there. I don't know for sure. I'd have to ask my teachers.

You know, good teachers make you do the darnedest things. They have methods that look like madness but they always deliver the wisdom. Years ago, I participated in a leadership school outside of Cherokee in western North Carolina. There's a retreat center there in the Smokies, a center that they call The Mountain. It's beautiful. I was sent there by my church at the time—the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Durham.

I was sent to leadership school and I went there with an attitude. I attended a four-day retreat for adults who are assuming positions of leadership in UU churches. I was happy to attend but, like I said, I went with an attitude. I tried to hide it but I did not succeed. I failed miserably. I failed immediately and I am so very glad that I did. It was awesome. I think I've shared the story before, but let me just share it again quickly.

I showed up at leadership school right on time, during the orientation period. Rev. Helen Bishop was checking everybody in. To register, we all had to take this tiny, little, mini Myers-Briggs test. I really didn't want to do it. I was suspicious of personality tests. I took it anyway. I took the test in good faith. I wanted to see where it were going. I didn't want to stand in the way too much...maybe just a little.

Rev. Helen gave me the test. I filled it out and gave it back to her. She tabulated the results while I was standing there in line. She gave me a four-letters code that I didn't understand—ENFP. I didn't know what to do with that.

The Myers-Briggs test evaluates us along four polarities. Are we introverted or extroverted? Are we sensing or intuitive? ...thinking or feeling? ...judging or perceiving? At that time, I was extroverted, intuitive, feeling and perceiving. I wasn't introverted, although I am now. I wasn't sensing, thinking and judging.

Now, at that time (and still today), I was skeptical of personality tests. I didn't tell Rev. Helen that. I just went along with things. Helen instructed me to put my Myers-Briggs result on my name tag. She wanted me to put "ENFP" on my name tag for everyone to see. I objected to that. So, in protest, I took snarky action. I revolted. I did not write "ENFP" on my name tag as instructed. In protest, I wrote "ESPN" on my name tag. "ESPN" is not a Myers-Briggs result. It's a sports channel on cable TV. I thought it would be funny. I thought that it would make me seem shiny and impressive.

As I was writing these letters down on my name tag, Rev. Helen noticed that something wasn't right. She asked, "What are you doing there?" Her face was very serious.

I quickly realized my attempt at child-like humor was going to fail. I said, "Helen, I was being obnoxious and I was trying to make a joke. It didn't work. I

apologize.” Then, I turned my name tag over and, this time, started filling it out properly.

Once again, Helen asked, “What are you doing?” Her face was very serious.

I said, “Obviously, my joke wasn’t funny. It was folly. It was childish. I’m correcting my mistake. I’m filling out the name tag the right way this time.”

“Oh, no you won’t!” she said and I was pretty surprised. She said, “You’re gonna wear your obnoxious, little joke for four days, all weekend long.” And I did just that...and proudly. Helen was my teacher that day...and good spiritual teachers make you do the darnedest things. And their great methods look like madness. They are designed to help us find ourselves, to help us know ourselves in deeper ways.

Do you know what I koan is? It’s a paradoxical question that doesn’t really have an answer. It’s a Japanese riddle, a Zen joke without a punch line. ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’ ‘If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make any noise?’ A koan can be a short story...

Seeing his master on the other side of a raging torrent, a student waved his arms and shouted out, "Master, master, how do I get to the other side?"

The master smiled and said, "You are on the other side."

Koans defy common understanding. They defeat, they destroy common understanding...in an effort to reveal an uncommon truth.

Sometimes, it’s impossible to overcome the power of the foolish mind. We are a stubborn lot. Sometimes, it is possible, however, to overcome the power of its habits. A koan can help us to escape.

So, the method of teaching used by these great Eastern teachers is to make fools persist in their folly, but very vigorously and very consistently and very hard.

Persist until the folly becomes visible. Then, make the choice that best serves the soul.

We can persist in folly or one can take the deepening journey of faith. It all comes down to what one chooses in life. My hope, of course...my prayer is that we take the deepening journey of faith.

Have faith. Wear it proudly. Put it on like a leather jacket, like hiking boots, like a brand new suit or a pretty dress. Wear it proudly. Reverend John Cummins from Minneapolis used to ask a lovely question. He’d ask, “How do we clothe in truth and beauty the moments that make up our lives?” I always believed that he was drawing on that passage from the gospels of Luke and of Matthew...

“Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, oh faithless ones!

When Reverend Cummins asked ‘How do we clothe in truth and beauty the moments that make up our lives?’, perhaps this was what he had in mind.

“Have faith,” I heard him say. “It can guide you when you are lost at sea.” I get lost in folly all of the time—many of us do—and I don’t even know I’m lost until something happens and I discover that I have know idea what is going on inside of me. Ric Masten wrote a poem about this moment of discovery. I’ve shared it before with you. It’s called Encounter. He wrote,

it was just that i was
very touchy that day
and really that’s
all i can say
to explain why
while walking through
the sears & roebuck department store
i happened to get into
a fist fight with a mannequin

This is what it means to bite the mailman.

Sometimes, we misplace our feelings. We falsely project our fears and our anxieties on others. We mindlessly deliver them to ourselves. Don’t get me wrong. There’s nothing wrong with biting the mailman if the mailman bites you first but if the mailman’s just doing the job, you might want to think twice about it. If you find yourself mixing it up with mailman and mannequin, you might want to take a moment or two to reassess.

Have faith. Pay for it if you have to, cash on the barrelhead. [] Wouldn’t it be brilliant if faith were on the commercial market? ...if it came in different sizes like coffee at Starbucks? Demi, short, tall, grande, venti and trenta size faiths, meaning 3, 8, 12, 16, 20 and 30 ounces respectively. I wonder what that would be like, if we could measure faith that way. We could order faith appropriately—not too much and not too little. Like spiritual Goldilocks, we could search for just the right amount. But we would be wrong to do so...and maybe, a little offensive to others on the journey of faith.

Faith orders us. It’s not the other way around. Faith is humble. It doesn’t “order us” in the sense that it ‘orders us around’ like a leashless authoritarian. Faith orders us. It clarifies and sorts us out. It helps us to make good sense of life...especially when life gets out of hand...and life does just that sometimes. Faith organizes spiritual energy. It helps us to put things where they belong...so we don’t get lost in the mix and do things that are less than helpful...like biting the mailman...like fighting with the mannequin.

A lot of times, I chose to bite and fight in quiet, little ways. It happened just last Friday, on a sunny day, on Route 89. It happened for while, between Exit 2 in Vermont Exit 11 in New Hampshire. My own lack of faith took 43 miles to reveal itself to me.

Unexpectedly, a window opened in my schedule and I was able to arrange a meeting just south of Boston. I met with Rev. Elizabeth Carrier-Ladd from First Parish Dorchester. We’re working together on North Chapel’s Brave Light Youth Exchange Initiative, the youth leadership project that we raised grant money for but had to shut down last year because of COVID.

The chance to meet became possible mid-morning. By the time I got on the road, it was just after 11:00. I stopped at the old general store in Sharon for gas and coffee. I also bought two slices of pizza and put some free air in my tires. When it gets cold, my tires lose a little pressure sometimes.

Well, things didn't go as planned. I didn't notice until I was on the highway but the dashboard warning light still indicated that the pressure in my tires was low. The free air hadn't made any difference at all. No biggie. I took a deep breath, decided to put this disappointment aside and reached over for the first of my two slices of lunch. I opened up the pizza box and there was only one slice inside!

I got angry. I didn't have faith. I started looking for a mailman to bite but I got a hold of myself...sort of. I took a different route. Instead of asking faith to help me reorder my life, to help me clarify and sort things out, I started bartering. I started trading on the markets of mood and money. I pretended that was being faithful but I really wasn't. Not at all.

Instead of having faith, I was making deals. I figured that if I could enjoy the one piece of pizza that I had twice as much as the two pieces of pizza that I'd ordered and purchased, I would be somehow spiritually reconciled. That didn't work. So, what did I do? I kept going. I persevered. I doubled down. I tried even harder.

I can't say that I was doing any of this consciously. I was not. These thoughts were in the back of my mind. They weren't biting my leg just yet. They were only nibbling at me like mild hunger. I wasn't conscious of them. The conscious thoughts that I was having were all about the pressure in my tires. I made a plan to address this issue at Exit 11 in New Hampshire, at King Hill Road in New London. There are two gas stations there and it was likely that at least would be working.

So, I pulled off of the highway, went under the bridge there and tried the compressor at the first station. It was broken. So, I tried at the second station. To my great delight, the second compressor was working. On the downside, unlike the air compressor at the old general store in Sharon, this air has to be purchased—\$2.50 for five minutes. On the upside, however, someone had just used the air compression and there was still some time left on the pump.

So, I hopped right to it. I filled all four tires and I finished just in time! I was happy. It was like a kind of gift, this free air I got from the air compressor that you had to pay for. It was a gift and I felt happy, almost reconciled. Almost...but not quite.

The pizza I bought in Sharon cost me \$2.95 a slice. I ate one. I lost one. I was down \$2.95. The free air that I got in New London would have cost me \$2.50. I was still down \$0.45. I was consciously thinking this now. The thoughts weren't nibbling anymore. They were biting me.

Just then, I remembered that the battery in my cell phone was running low. So, I bought a power cord so I could recharge the phone in my car on the way to Boston. The power cord that was most compatible with my phone was the most expensive one. It cost \$21.99. I bought it and I kept the receipt, just in case the cord didn't work on my phone. It did not. I had to return it.

I had paid for the cord with a card but I got cash money back—\$22 even. I made a penny on the deal. So, for some reason, I was happy again. Or, at least, I thought I was...until I realized that I was masking a deeper emptiness that I was feeling inside.

I didn't notice this empty feeling until I was back on the highway. My thoughts were persevering, going round and round in circles. I was totally obsessed with stupid math. I was utterly unable to let things go. My inner conversation went like this: "OK. So, you lost \$2.95 in Sharon with the pizza but you picked up \$2.50 in New London with the air. AND you made a penny on the power cord return. So, things are getting better."

So, what did I do? Did I choose the spiritual path? No, of course, I didn't. I kept going. I persevered. I doubled down. I started looking around for a mailman.

When I doubled down, I said this to myself. I said, "All you have to do now, Leon, is buy-and-return that power cord 44 more times and you'll be all set. Right as rain. Even Steven. Good to go."

When we're doing math as superficial as this, very often we are deeply upset, deeply upset about things we cannot name—like the whole Herchel Walker deal, like the political environment in general, the state of our democracy since January 6.

I can't always name what I feel in the moment. I get upset and I don't know why. So, I don't persevere. I perseverate. I go round and round in circles. Do you do this as well?

When I'm lucky, I stop the spinning, I take a breath and settle down. I settle deeply enough to accept fear and my anxiety. I refrain from imposing them on others. In other words, I stop biting the mailman. I settle down deeply enough to laugh at myself when I'm pinching spiritual pennies. I settle deeply enough to treasure all that is our lives (even times as petty and as vain as these). I settle deeply enough to have faith...knowing that the miracle of grace is entailed in every moment that we live and breathe. Every moment, not just the shiny, impressive ones. Faith depends on everything. It all matters. It's all precious. And so are we. May it be so. Blessed be and amen.