

# *What Does Faith Mean in a Rational World?*

(Version 2a)

A Sunday service led by the  
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on October 2, 2016, at the  
*Unitarian Church of Harrisburg*, Pennsylvania

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

We are people of reason and people of faith,

Theists and humanists,

Pagans and Buddhists,

Agnostics and seekers,

People of *The Book* and people with many books.

We are people of reason and people of faith,

Seeking to walk together for a time,

On a path lit by the Lamp of Knowledge,

A path that may take us in many directions,

But brings us back together again, week after week.

For this we light our chalice today.

*May it ever be so and blessed be you all!*

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JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

Recently, we added a time of Silent Joys and Sorrows to our services here at Market Street. This is a time in which we can acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether those things be joyful or sad.

If you feel called to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you are invited to come forward and choose a stone from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these stones can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out these colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the darker stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy

or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

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MEDITATION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds.

**[Silence]**

Thank you. Blessed be.

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OFFERING

**[Insert Introduction]**

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is our own **Thanksgiving Basket** program. Each year, members and friends of this church gather food and put together baskets to deliver to many families in Harrisburg, particularly in Allison Hill. Last year, I believe they made 50 such deliveries.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

*What Does Faith Mean in a Rational World?*  
Reverend Michael Walker

What does faith mean in our modern context? In the world as we know it, scientific discoveries regularly amaze us as we slowly, but steadily, seek to understand even the smallest mysteries of life.

To prepare us for what I will talk about today, it is helpful to remember the time in which we live. Indeed, we live in such a time that worldwide communication is now as easy, and as fast, as an electron can travel. Today, I read my sermon on the screen of a computer tablet, and it got there via voice dictation into a bluetooth microphone. Typewriters are mostly gone. This is an

age in which the World Wide Web has brought vast libraries of information – and a lot of junk, as well – to the fingertips of just about anyone with access to a computer or smartphone.

We live in a time in which astronomers, professional and amateur, have discovered over 3500 planets in other solar systems besides ours. We have telescopes and other instruments that have witnessed the birth and death of stars.

We live in a time in which we have remote controlled, military drones flying around various parts of the Earth; but we also have remote control vehicles exploring the surface of Mars. Some believe that Big Brother's eyes see all, and one wonders if we can harness this technology for good and not abuse it.

We live in a time in which scientists have discovered microbial life forms at seemingly unlikely locations, such as around lava vents at the bottom of the ocean, and living in mud at the bottom of a lake far below the ice in Antarctica.

We live in a time in which medical researchers started with the discovery of penicillin in bread-mold, of all things, and continued on to develop many lifesaving antibiotics. And, it seems like almost every month that medical researchers announce that they have developed some new medication or vaccine to address some of the most virulent diseases plaguing life on earth.

We also live in a time in which scientists have been able to break down matter to smaller and smaller components, learning about the building blocks of the

universe. This includes the *Higgs boson*, which has been sensationally dubbed by the media as the *God Particle*. Which brings us to this final observation: We live in a time in which – no matter how hard people of faith try – we have not yet discovered a scientifically verifiable entity that one might call *God*.

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On occasion, I make reference to the *Spirit of Life* or some other name that might be thought of as holy or divine. Some here accept that, because they think that's just what ministers do. Others are always sure to comment on it, because they don't know this *spirit* of which I speak. There are some who say that anything that smacks of the supernatural is irrational and, therefore, unreal. It was the Transcendentalists who

taught us that *spirit*, or what Emerson termed the *Over-Soul*, is actually a part of our nature and not supernatural at all.

But there are scientists who will refer us to the scientific method for a way of analyzing and looking for empirical data, with which we will find no proof regarding spirit, or God, or over-soul, or anything supernatural or magical. And this is very true. There is no verifiable, quantifiable proof.

It is not all that long ago, that some people in certain places in our country got elected to school boards. Their agenda was to debunk... *science*. You thought I was going to say *religion*, didn't you? There are some people who take it on faith that the myriad complexity of the universe and the never-ending variety of life is *proof-*

*positive*, from their point of view, that these things must've been designed by an intelligent entity. They won't always say that that entity is God. They won't always say whether that God is Yahweh, or Jesus, or even Allah. But, they may say that there must be some intelligent designer behind everything that we can perceive. It is helpful for some people to feel as if they are part of something greater than themselves. And I will say more about this later.

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I cannot explain the *spirit* without faith, just as I cannot explain the *body* without science. The body and its mechanisms give us the components which allow us to *live* our lives. But it is our intellect and our faith, and I daresay even our spirits, which give us the *why* and *what*

for. Many proponents of reason and rationalism will call faith irrational – and they are correct. Philosophers like John Locke will posit that *faith* and *tradition* are diametrically opposed to *reason*, as they compete for *wisdom, truth* and *law*. Therefore, faith is irrational. But, so what? Who cares if faith is irrational? *They say that like it's a bad thing!* Being rational has its place; so does being irrational. There is a Middle Way; there is a balance to be found. And, for what it's worth, my elder colleague, the Reverend Tom Owen-Towle, says that we are *transrational*, rather than *irrational*.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, I'd like to read you something that Tom

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<sup>1</sup> Owen-Towle, Tom. *Theology Ablaze: Celebrating the 50th Anniversary Year of Unitarian Universalism*. San Diego: Flaming Chalice Press, 2011. p. 86.

once wrote:<sup>2</sup>

*Being riders of paradoxes is our peculiar niche as liberal religionists. We seem to pitch tent and stoke our flaming chalices in the creases between mysticism and humanism, theism and naturalism, believing and doubting, devotion and skepticism. At our most stout and resourceful, Unitarian Universalists are spiritually ambidextrous, defining ourselves both from below and above. We are a reasonable religion with numinous sensibilities — in short, we are theological crossbreeds. Colleague Francis West puts it sagely: “The humanist and the theist live in me, each sometimes puzzled by the presence of the other, but willing to keep talking. So may it continue.”*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp.85-86.

Tom continues on to say:

*There's a danger in either extreme. Arid humanism can trap us in the mundane and material, making us oblivious to transrational (note I didn't say irrational) nudges. On the other hand, unbridled theism can swallow humans in the supernal ether, when our paramount job is to make this precious earth more beautiful and just.*

*God-fearing or mystical humanism is a principle theological paradox Unitarian Universalists must harness, then ride. Some do it sidesaddle, tentatively; others with both hands to the reins, galloping full-bore ahead. Regardless, it can provide a spirited jaunt.*

In Tom's language of metaphor, we are each a

rider of a horse named... paradox. We are part of a faith tradition – and it is a faith tradition – that operates in this state of creative tension. We certainly have people in our faith who hold vigil on the edges of our faith, upholding a deeply spiritual belief in the holy on one side, and a deeply rational understanding of nature on the other. All the while, the vast majority of Unitarian Universalists land somewhere in between. In general, we mostly believe that we have a duty in life to do all that we can to make life better; and we generally believe that we have this life to live because, by some great miracle, life came-to-be on earth. Most of us do not believe that that miracle occurred over the course of a mere six days, nor do we believe in a selective system of salvation reserved to only the Elect or the spiritual bourgeoisie. Most of us

do not spend a great deal of time thinking about death or the afterlife, because we tend to be far too busy thinking about *this* life and the people who share it with us.

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And there it is... I said that I was coming back to this idea of us having faith in something greater than ourselves. You may have heard me talk about this before. If there is some great lesson that humanism has brought to the faith of Unitarian Universalism, it is a deep and abiding faith in humanity. I want to explore that for a moment.

There are some days when it is challenging to see the greater goodness of the human race on earth, when we hear endless news reports about crime and terrorism, disease and hunger, greed and pollution, imperialism and

war. There is one thing that I believe we can see in all of these events, one thing held in common by them all... It seems to me that all of these war-torn or crime-riddled places around the world are driven by someone's need to try and improve the lives of their people. For example, radical and fundamentalist sects of any religion typically arises in a place of poverty and violence. We can argue that fighting fire with fire is not so effective, but it could be that some people don't know a better way. But when it comes right down to it, what they really want is a better life for their families and friends, in a society the likes of which they only dream of...

If you look back in history, some have described World War I as being a great struggle by the aristocracy to maintain the status quo of their privilege. There is

some truth to that, but another piece that is often forgotten is that it was also a struggle between Muslim peasants in Eastern Europe seeking self-determination from the Christian imperials, with a different culture and a different language, that lived in some capital city many hundreds of miles away. Truth be told, that story sounds vaguely familiar. People want the freedom to live their lives the way they want to live it. No one wants someone else to tell them the best way to live. I don't want that. You don't want that. People in the Middle East, for example, don't want that.

What we do want is the freedom to live our lives according to the dictates of our own consciences, to have food and clean water for ourselves and family, and to have the means to live comfortably, if not lavishly. And

what my faith in humanity tells me is that this is what all people really want. There has been lots of rhetoric about this group of people or that group of people trying to impose their will on someone else. It goes both ways. But I truly believe that if all of us took a step back, took a look around, we would find that what humanity really needs is for humanity to care of itself.

In those areas in which fundamentalist and radical theologies have arisen, if they had food and water and money, if people had equal and civil rights, if people had freedom... then I don't believe those radical theologies would even exist. They are products of their environment, whether you are speaking about the Southern Bible Belt of the US or the Middle East.

I have faith in humanity. I have faith that if we

stepped back and stop fighting wars, and instead focused on feeding people, the world would be a much different place. So, this is our great challenge: To remind humanity of its inherent goodness and our duty to be good stewards of the earth; to remind each other of our mutual responsibility to feed, clothe and medically treat those in need; and to be sure that everyone has equal opportunities, regardless of race, gender, creed or other attributes.

I've said that my personal belief is that each and every one of us is imbued with the *Spirit of Life*, some bit of something *holy*. Not everyone here shares that belief, but hear me out. As each person is imbued with the spirit, the living flame of life, it is a shame if the life of that flame is snuffed out. My faith in humanity calls us

to shelter each flame from the winds of chaos so that each flame can continue to shine. This does not give us a direct response to things happening in certain places, such as Syria. What this faith in humanity gives us is an opportunity to step back and look at the much bigger picture of what humanity needs to **survive** and **thrive**. Terrorism and dictatorships arise in places where humanity is not thriving. Hunger, poverty, and unabated corporate pollution happens in places where humanity is not thriving. Places where humanity is not thriving – this is the real problem. *What does our faith ask us to do, to change that?*

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In closing, I will simply say: I embrace all that is irrational – or *transrational* – in faith. Let *science* and

*faith* stand together in the just cause of caring for the earth, of all life, and especially of a thriving and happy humanity.

***May it ever be so and blessed be you all!***

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BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

In benediction, I will leave you with an adaptation of words by Dorothy Day.<sup>3</sup>

*Some people say what good can one person do? What is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. We can be responsible only for the action of the present moment. But we can beg for an increase of love in our hearts that will vitalize and transform all our individual actions and know that the spirit of life will take them and multiply them, just as an old teacher was said to have multiplied the loaves and fishes.*

**May it ever be so and blessed be you all!**

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<sup>3</sup> Rolenz, Kathleen, ed. *Sources of Our Faith*. Boston: Skinner Hse., 2012. p. 28.