

Birmingham Lecture

Nurturing Our Faith

Not by Ourselves Alone

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When I was younger, in my community, it was popular to end a conversation with: "Keep the faith, baby." I used to sign my letters with those words as a parting greeting: "Keep the faith." And when we said "keep the faith" everybody understood that it as a way of supporting and encouraging each other; a way of suggesting that in spite of the daily struggle for our full humanity to be acknowledged and affirmed, that everything would be all right, if only we keep the faith.

It was a way of saying, Hold on to the knowledge that there is a power greater \than your own, and that you can call on that power, even though you may suffer personal indignities, discrimination, or daily social violence. "Keep the faith"—in yourself, in your Creator, and in your relationships with people who are part of faith-ful communities. And in this sense, we understood it was a reference not to ourselves alone as individuals, but it was a statement of encouragement for the whole community.

It was not always a *religious* statement which presupposed belief in a doctrine of God, but it *was* a faith statement—that things would get better if only we stood tall and didn't let "the man" (translation, systemic oppression) overcome us. It was an affirmation of belief that the universe is on the side of justice, and that we *would* overcome, if only we kept the faith.

I believed in, and had been deeply involved as an activist, in seeking to create "communities of love and justice." I knew that there must be a sustaining power, a presence of justice in the universe, but I had lost faith in the church of my birth because it had severely limited my questing spirit and the possibility that we could work for justice in *this* world rather than the next. And because I was not mature enough at the time to separate "the church" from faith, I announced that I had no faith in God.

In the late 1970's through the mid-1980's, I was living in Washington, D.C. working as a journalist and public television producer. I had chosen a profession in the news media because I wanted people to have the option of a different spin on the news of the corporate monopolies. I wanted to do stories so compelling that people might not only be inspired, but might actually feel compelled to act.

Some of you will recall that the 1980's was a time when carjackings were a regular occurrence in some urban areas, and I was out covering such a story. An African American woman about my age (I was 35 or 36 at the time), was filling up her car with gasoline, and in the flash of an eye, a moment when she had turned away, someone had driven off not only with her car, but with her eight-year old daughter. Now I must tell you that I too had a daughter, so I had a deep identification with this woman.

When I arrived on the scene, there were at least five radio and television stations that had set up their equipment, and four reporters had microphones in her face. I looked around at my camera man, who was

about to join the mob, and I looked at the woman. She was visibly, and understandably upset, speaking in a soft voice; but not all of her sentences were complete or coherent. I made my way closer to her, all the time monitoring the pace of my crew's set-up. As other reporters probed her with questions, I placed my hand in hers. I remember thinking to myself, why don't they leave her alone. And then, there was this sudden awareness that *I* was one of them. They were my fellow reporters.

And yet, I knew that the last thing she needed was not a gang of microphones in her face. In a flash, I remembered the words of one of my professors who, emphasizing that television news had to have pictures maintain its dramatic focus, had said to the class "keep the camera rolling until you make them cry."

What this woman needed was someone to talk to about her troubles; someone to console her; someone with whom she could let out all her fears—without fear of exploitation; someone to tell her "it's gonna be alright." And when she grasped onto my hand for what seemed like dear life, I knew that I couldn't do the story, that I couldn't keep the camera rolling.

I begged my fellow reporters to give her some breathing room, and she must have sensed that I had her interest at heart, because as I quietly guided her away from the crowd and toward my station's van, she did not resist. Eventually, the microphones and the reporters disappeared, audiotape and videotape in-hand for the evening news.

The woman had held back the tears from the cameras, but within moments, she was weeping incessantly. As we sat waiting for a family member to arrive, I tried to comfort her between the tears as she told me bits and pieces of the story—without camera, without microphone. And when we parted, I said to her, "Keep the faith." You *will* see your daughter again. And indeed, she did.

I could not get this woman out of my mind for the rest of the day, and when I went home that evening, it became really clear to me why. My values had gotten confused. I had had a long period of absence from churches, and so at the time, I didn't have the religious language to name what had happened with the woman at the gas station. I didn't realize until much later that I was doing pastoral ministry. The person behind the story had become more important to me than getting the story. And I knew that I could no longer be a reporter, at least not *that kind* of reporter. I knew that I would have to leave the media. I remained one more year at the television station to finish the documentary that I had already begun.

I had been an activist, involved in social justice work. This, along with a deep need, and longing for reconnection with a faith community, I had found my way to All Souls Church in Washington, DC. When I saw an announcement on the church bulletin board of a job opening at the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, there was no doubt in my mind. I had to work in a place where I could align my values with my work. And it wasn't long—perhaps a few months—before I was moving to Boston to live and nurture my faith, and to put my faith into action.

At the Service Committee, and later at the Veatch Program, I began to understand justice work as ministry. But it wasn't until I was in theological school, that I found a definition of faith that made sense to me. It is gaining confidence through relating to others that there is sustaining grace in the universe, a power beyond ourselves that holds us ... and that we experience this power through our relationships with others and they with us. In other words, faith is relational.

I now understood that the work I had done with the woman at the gas station might have been important in nurturing her faith as well as my own. For me, it was a turning point—an experience that helped to clarify my values, test the profession of journalism in a new way, and inform my faith, which was not fully coherent.

I answered the call, and here I am, still nurturing my faith.

Later, I might understand it as a form of pastoral ministry, as I continued to grow in faith.

Just over a month ago, my daughter, Talibah, entered Cornell University Medical Center in New York City for abdominal surgery. The operation had been postponed three times; first because she was anemic, and had to build up her blood count; the second time, because I had an engagement related to ministry that was difficult to cancel; and the third time, because her glucose level was too low.

She would be recovering in another state, and so days before the surgery was scheduled, there were phone calls back and forth to her doctor and the nurses, making various arrangements with friends and family.

Organizing the logistics for Talibah, and trying to finish up projects at the office for a week away had superseded my own self-care. I left Boston for New York on only two or three hours of sleep, driving all night, arriving at my daughter's apartment in Brooklyn at 6:00 a.m., and within a half hour, we were in the car for a 9:30 appointment.

What I did not know is that the World Economic Summit had just begun that day, and traffic was horrendous. I was anxious and tired to the point that I found myself nodding between traffic lights, and it took three-and-a-half hours to get from Brooklyn to the hospital in Manhattan. She had built up her blood count, but now, they would check her glucose level, which would determine whether she would have the surgery.

Now the tension started to build, and I had flashbacks of being the pastoral presence for others, which was difficult enough ... to be with them in their pain without *their* pain breaking *me*. I remembered waiting with families as their loved ones were in surgery ... a mother whose teenage son had been shot, the anxiety of waiting to see if the doctor was able to remove the bullet from his spleen. I remembered how difficult that was, and now I was feeling a similar tension. This was the first time I had faced such a situation in my own family, and felt the need to surround myself with support. Nevertheless, I might have overdone it when I arranged for two nurses and two ministerial colleagues (all of whom are friends) to be at the hospital. When Talibah said to me, "Mom, I don't know if I need *that much* help," I remember saying to her, "The nurses are for you, but the ministers are for me."

As I pulled up into the hospital driveway, my daughter was whisked out of the vehicle and escorted by one colleague to the ninth floor to meet the surgeon. Another colleague had already made a deal with the parking attendant for a prime space where I wouldn't have to worry about getting towed away. These friends and colleagues stayed with me and prayed with me until Talibah was in the recovery room, and it was clear that not only was *she* going to be okay, but *I* was going to be okay.

"We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid," and I will be ever grateful to those colleagues who were there for me at a time of need.

My heart wanted to share this story with you, but my mind kept asking ... but what does this have to do with the topic I've been asked to speak about. And as I went over it in my head, I came to realize that perhaps there is a false dichotomy between pastoral ministry and prophetic ministry, that the two are intimately related to how we view faith and how we do or do not feel nurtured. Everything I have experienced in pastoral care has been interrelated to systemic and cultural systems. And most of the work that I have done in prophetic ministry, in justice-making, has come down to the fact that individuals are hurt, abused, neglected, and often depressed because of something in the social or cultural system that contributes to their dilemma. The tendency to think about such challenges as personal or individual problems rather than systemic problems, may in fact, contribute to faithlessness, to our neglecting the

need to nurture our faith, and the reality that none of us are sufficient unto ourselves, that we need each other to be whole.

We think of challenges like the one with the woman at the gas station, or the one with my daughter as personal and individual matters, and we take the stress on ourselves. But dealing with the media or medical establishment are social issues as well.

If only the journalists who were jockeying to report the story of a carjacking had not also chosen to exploit the woman's pain. If only they had chosen to spend their energies in rallying the community (including law enforcement officials) to find the woman's daughter and the stolen vehicle, or if they had chosen to do an in-depth analysis of how citizens could be proactive in preventing carjacking a form of violence.

If only we had a health care system that did not take its direction from an insurance company that insisted that my daughter be released from the hospital on the fourth day, even though she was still in great pain and had to endure a two hour bumpy ride to Philadelphia. Fortunately, she endured it with grace and was welcomed into the arms of loving grandparents who would be her caretakers for a month-long recovery.

There are so many stresses in the world today. Ready for it or not, sooner or later, we will face a challenge—whether in our personal life or in our ministry—that tests our faith, and we must go into the deepest wells of our being for strength. I didn't learn a lot about faith in seminary; it's not something I came to understand by looking it up in a theological dictionary. Faith comes not through the intellect, but through everyday living. It comes through engagement with others, seeing the spirit of love, and renewal, and hope through people. Faith asks us to be open to life, to participate fully in life as it unfolds before us, even in the midst of uncertainty and turmoil.

When I said to the woman at the gas station, "Keep the faith," I was preaching to myself as much as I was to her, because at that point in my life, I was not part of a congregation or a faith community. I had given up on religion, feeling that it was too limited and too limiting to contain my spirit. And yet, I could see that there was a transforming, loving, a sustaining power at work in the universe, but I did not know it as God.

Once I discovered that I could reconstruct some of what I lost when I could not separate church from faith or religion from theology, there was a new kind of freedom to build and nurture my faith from a different starting point. And when I have found myself most in need of a deep faith, a sustaining faith that would carry me when I could not carry myself, it has been because I relinquished control and depended on something that was more abiding—that transforming power that has no name and has many names.

For me, faith comes through trust that God will see me through, but it also comes in the belief that God works through people; that grace enters our lives through relationships with others, through communities of love and justice. It is not merely that the two colleagues who met me at the hospital were nice people, but through them, I felt that sustaining presence of transforming love.

Faith is a relationship with that which transforms, renews, and creates us. To be faithful is to nurture relationships of trust, to nurture relationship with creation, toward the possibility of re-creation. So faith is relational, it's about being in communities of faithful people. And it is through relationship—a divine presence working through people—that my faith is nurtured. I was tired, and weak, and worn, but the faith of our colleagues carried me, held me close, helped me to make it in a time of uncertainty. Over and over again, I have found faithful colleagues who have been there for me so many times, who help me to nurture my faith. And for this I am grateful.

My daughter returned to work this week, the day I left to come here to Birmingham. I continue to be nurtured by our colleagues, but when I go into many of our congregations, at a cultural level, it often feels like all the healthy juices in my body are being drained out of me.

What continues to challenge my personal faith is wondering whether I will ever see the day when our religious movement moves beyond its Eurocentric norms. We would probably all agree that a life of faith cannot be nurtured in the face of endemic evil. But it's more difficult to see that it is also impossible for many people from non-European heritage to be nurtured by an upper middle class Euro-centric norm blessed by self-satisfaction.

Someday, I'm going to update W.E.B. DuBois' book, "The Ways of White Folks," that will focus on the cost of Euro-centrism and of cultural indifference in a multicultural society.

(It was great to hear jazz in this morning's worship service, but) In our movement, there seems to be a cannon of language that "educated" people are supposed to be familiar with and love. There is a cannon of literature that is presumed to have been read. There is a cannon of music that too often does not allow the spirit to emerge freely.

In most of our congregations that I have been a part of or worked with, structures that create and sustain whiteness are normative. There is presumption from some clergy and some laity that these cannons of music, and literature, and art, and language, and social discourse, rooted in the European experience, are normative. Euro-centrism is seen as logical and rational, and those who express a need for a spirited form of worship or those who use a different language set are somehow made to feel less educated, less than worthy. These presumptions make it extremely difficult for culturally oppressed groups to find a place in our congregations. Speaking personally, while I enjoy and appreciate a wide variety of cultural traditions, when I cannot find myself in a worshipping community, it drains the life of the spirit out of me, and I must go elsewhere to nurture my soul.

If I and other colleagues who are rooted in cultures outside Europe are to be nurtured in our movement, then I must keep the faith that things can be different. Being open to and supporting new possibilities in ministry, different cultural forms in worship, new ways of seeing—these too are important to keeping the faith, to nurturing the spirit. If you will stand with me in solidarity in an expanding circle of culture so that it includes *all of us*, you too will be keeping the faith.

Deep in my heart, I do believe that this too can change. Behold, there is a new spirit among us, expanding our horizons. New forms of culture are breaking out all over. Do you see it? Do you hear it? Do you embrace it? Keep the faith!

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