

Faith in God's Absence, with Thanks to Kilgore Trout  
Thomas S. Howard  
The Unitarian Church in Summit  
June 18, 2006

Peter Thurman died in the fall of 1960 when he was struck by a car while crossing Route 69 on a Saturday morning. I was in fifth grade. This was my first encounter with death. I won't say it was my first existentialist encounter — that came later. What I noticed was that my parents and other elders were protective of me. They didn't take me to the memorial service. All I got was the program. That did not feel like enough at the time. I wanted to have some mourning time. Instead, the next day in school, the talk was about who would replace Peter as one of the boys who delivered the milk at lunchtime.

The death of my best friend from fifth grade seems like the logical starting point for the topic of faith in God's absence. Death is what makes faith an issue. Belief in something beyond who and what we are, beyond our own existence, beyond mortality, beyond life. The existential issues. Peter Thurman is my reference point for finding God (God with a capital "G" or any god, goddess or godlet) to be absent when I needed him — although, I admit, none of that existential doubt came to the surface at the time. Ten years of age is when the religious offerings of Sunday school and of faith in life after death began a slow decline. But, throughout my youth, I wanted faith; I wanted to be religious, to accept the traditional view of God and of my relationship to that God. One night, when I was 15 or so, I had a vehement argument with a friend who professed to be an atheist, who denied the existence of God — and I fought back with logical proofs of God's necessity as the Creator, but doing so with the belief that I had to be right even though I remained unconvinced that the necessity of a Creator meant that the Presbyterian God and Son of God had to exist as well.

Eventually, I found that I was without faith. So I spoke with friends who professed to have it, but their words did not help; I read books by authors who claimed the ability to give it, but their promises went unfulfilled; I listened to Sunday TV preachers who insisted upon it, but I changed the channel. Ultimately, I came to the Unitarian Church in Summit because I understood that faith in God was not required — but by being willing to participate, to join in, I obviously was looking for something related to faith.

In fact, many Unitarians frequently refer to faith. We refer to Unitarian Universalism as a "faith." The UUA website refers to our faith in responding to questions about what Unitarians believe. Last week, we effectively voted to retain the word "church" to describe our institution, which to me has something to do with wanting to belong to a religion that is heir to a faith-based tradition of belief in the Christian God (with a capital "G") with a connection to Jesus of Nazareth.

In 1954, our former minister, A. Powell Davies, then serving at All Souls Church in Washington, D.C., addressed this subject in a sermon titled "The Unitarian Faith" in which he described our "faith" as consisting of individual freedom of belief, stating that "freedom itself is the basic precept of the Unitarian faith ... and in reliance upon freedom, Unitarians are united."

He added that “this is a positive faith” that “does not begin by saying what we believe about subjects about which we know the least. It begins where we really are, and with life as it comes to us, life as we may choose to live it.” To similar effect, Buddhist meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg has written: “Faith does not require a belief system, and is not necessarily connected to a deity ... this faith is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience.”

These words reflect a sea change in the meaning of faith, and my first reaction was that none of these references to a faith in something other than God answered my question, which is *What is faith?* Not *What else can we make out of the concept?* or *How can we change it or adapt it to different purposes?*, but *What is this passion that connects a person to a higher power, that brings meaning to life, that imbues one with courage, conviction and confidence?* — like the early Christians (as played by a well-muscled Victor Mature) going to the lions in the Roman Coliseum. That’s my vision of faith; that’s what I want to know about.

So what is faith, and what do I have to do to get some?

The American Heritage Dictionary describes religious faith as “Belief that does not rest on logical proof” and a “secure belief in God and a trusting acceptance of God’s will.” In other words, that there is a God who is interested in our individual lives, to whom we may direct prayers, who loves, cares for and guides us. Like the inspirational tale of a man who dreamed that when he had faith, there were always two pairs of footprints left behind in the sand, one from him and one from God walking beside him, but that in the bad times, there was only one pair, as if God had abandoned him. So he asked God to explain why God had left him, to which God replied that the single pair of footsteps was God’s, when he carried the man through the dark times.

As I said a moment ago, this traditional understanding of faith, this definition, bears essentially no similarity to the “Unitarian faith” described by Reverend Davies. Certainly, as voiced by the American Unitarian Conference (which separated from the UUA in 2000 because it wanted a belief in the one God as church doctrine), such a description of a “faith” bears little resemblance to our general understanding of faith as we encounter it in daily conversation.

Faith requires a form of certainty — not based upon empirical evidence but, as described by Søren Kierkegaard, involving a leap of faith, a non-intellectual jump, a rejection of reason. Otherwise, it is mere belief. As defined in the New Catholic Dictionary: “Divine faith is therefore the holding of some truth as absolutely certain because God, Who can neither deceive nor be deceived, has spoken it. It is not merely a feeling or a suspicion or an opinion, but a firm, unshakeable adherence of the mind to a truth revealed by God.”

This entails certainty about the unknowable. And the leap of faith is in accepting that what someone else told you about God is the real, the absolute, the 100 Percent Truth.

Now, if you do not hold out the cupcake of eternal salvation or its equivalent, why would I, as a reasoning human being, accept such a tale? Why believe this story, whether the story of the early Christians, or of Joseph Smith, or Mohammed, or Mary Baker Eddy, or Siddhartha, or

L. Ron Hubbard, or Zoroaster, or Moses, or any other prophet? Why give complete acceptance to one tale among countless others, thereby rejecting as false all beliefs to the contrary, somehow knowing that Buddha or the Angel Maroni were real, but Zeus, or Jesus, or Shiva were not? Like everything else, it is a choice — a choice to reject everything that is inconsistent with the story underlying the particular faith in return for what the story of that faith offers.

I think that is why sacred texts seem to play such an important part in all religions that I know of. As pointed out by David Pyle, a Deist associated with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Galveston, Texas, the faith is not so much in God, but in the text that describes God, in the story that lays out his attributes, qualities, requirements and peculiarities. The faith that I'm trying to learn about, then, is not in God itself — a higher power beyond our understanding and without form or substance or place of residence — but in the story told about God. As David Pyle has written: "When I became a Deist, I realized that I had kept my belief in God, but had lost my faith in the validity of the bible. I came to realize that when most Christians refer to Faith in God, they do not mean a belief that God will keep the planets in orbit, or that he will help them order their lives, or even a belief that God is good. What they mean is 'Faith that the Bible is true'. And I no longer did."

Put that thought on hold — let me digress a minute about the nature of God because whenever I talk about this omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent God, I always think of Q, a character in "Star Trek: The Next Generation" who appeared whenever the writers were suffering writer's block. He was a sort of *deus ex machina*, a device to explain the inexplicable, thereby allowing the writers to create fantastical challenges for Captain Piccard to solve. If the God that we describe in the sacred literature is as fickle, self-indulgent and powerful as Q, then how can we be so certain that this God is not merely an alien, like Q was, who finds pleasure in toying with the Piccards of this world?

Also, I cannot understand why we keep referring to God as Him, not that we should refer to God as Her or It either. Assuming God is all, or that God is beyond time and mortality, or that God is either immanent or transcendent (i.e., in all things or above all things), how could any such an entity have sex characteristics that seem to exist for the purpose of reproduction? I suggest that the absence of an appropriate pronoun is not coincidental. The use of Him allows us to reduce this God to a human form, giving Him attributes that we can understand, that can allow us to have a personal relationship.

Returning to faith — let me discuss God's absence.

I use "absence" because God no longer seems to appear as he (always referred to that way in the texts) did to the Jews of more than 2,000 years ago. According to the texts, that God was a regular visitor, proving his existence through direct intervention and insisting upon homage and sacrifice, through prophets to whom he spoke and, ultimately, through walking on the earth, disclosing his identity. Such a God was properly called "Lord" because he personally demanded fealty. Either you gave him his due or he destroyed you, your city, your culture, your family. Although many fundamentalists would disagree, it seems that we are no longer in such an age. Many still report personal experiences with God, and we all may have them, but the age

of God's intervention on a global or societal scale, of Sodom and Gomorrah, of the Flood, of the First Coming, is in the past.

But more than that, times have changed. Rather than an activist God, our culture seems to favor an institutional God, known more by historical occurrence and reputation than by current miracles, plagues and appearances. We Unitarians generally act as if God has no direct part in our lives, if God exists; as if he left one day, never to return.

Which is why I acknowledged Kilgore Trout in the title of this sermon. Some of you may recall that Kilgore Trout was a fictional science fiction writer created by Kurt Vonnegut, and appearing in several of his novels, to me, most importantly, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the follow-up to Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and the prequel to Tim O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato* — all fantastical responses to death, all responding to a discovery that traditional faith provided an inadequate explanation for death, destruction and despair.

Kilgore Trout spends all of his time writing, but is unsuccessful, having few, yet loyal, fans because he never gets a decent publisher. His stories are published only in porn magazines as cheap fillers for the space between photos.

In 1974, a writer name Philip Jose Farmer convinced Vonnegut (to Vonnegut's subsequent regret) to let him write a novel as if he were Kilgore Trout. The result was *Venus on the Half Shell*, the story of Simon Wagstaff, the Space Wanderer. Wagstaff is a seeker of truth who escapes a second Great Flood, caused by an alien race that goes around the universe cleaning planets, that destroys Earth when, while engaged in a romantic interlude atop the Egyptian Sphinx, he boards an abandoned Chinese spaceship, the Hwang Ho, that happens to float by, allowing him to become the last surviving human being, a man without peers or planet who embarks on a quest to discover the meaning of life, who gains immortality from an elixir drunk during a sexual interlude with a cat-like alien queen in heat, and who travels throughout the universe with a pet owl, a dog named Anubis and a sexy robot companion, hopping from planet to inhabited planet, experiencing fantastical cultures and species, always asking the ultimate question, "Why did God create man just to suffer and die?"

Eventually, his 3,000-year search takes him to the most ancient planet, where God is believed to exist, where he hopes to ask God the ultimate question. Sure enough, he meets the oldest, wisest and smartest creature in the universe, a billion-year-old giant cockroach, who personally knew the Creator. But he learns that he cannot talk to God. Some time ago, God told the cockroach that It (actually referred to as "Itself") was going out for lunch, and It never came back.

So, thanks to Kilgore Trout, as realized by Philip Jose Farmer, for trying to ask God *Why?* For suggesting that there is no ultimate answer, whether in life or from God. Now, I must confess that I was (and in my mind remain) a fan of science fiction fantasy, of people like Roger Zelazny who created fictional worlds that allowed him to explore faith, and supreme beings, and missing gods. So this type of writing appealed to me, in place of the sacred texts.

*Venus on the Half Shell* is not a great piece of literature, but it came to mind whenever I thought about faith, and particularly about a year ago when I began to think that I would like to give a sermon about faith so that I could explore my faith, or lack thereof. Not that I believe that I had much faith, but I had talked with people who had faith, who could speak of having a personal relationship with God, much like the teller of the footprints-on-the-beach tale. I envied them for this source of comfort, this security, and I wondered at my own thoughts and why I felt a mild unease when others referred to our “faith” or our “religion,” or even to the “sanctuary.” After all, I had come to Unitarianism because it did not require faith in God as a condition of membership (or participation).

My views are different now than when I began, but I do not accept the description of Unitarianism as a religion. For me, by attempting to expand the definition of a religion, we lose the uniqueness of our community. Certainly, Unitarianism as realized by Michael Servetus in Transylvania was a religion, and for many of us, attendance on Sunday is a religious event, but a religious commitment is not required of us. As described by A. Powell Davies in the “Unitarian Faith” sermon:

Instead of people being bound together as a society of those who all believe — or are supposed to believe — the same things, Unitarians are united by their faith in freedom. This is a far larger faith than anything that is defined by dogma. What it means is this: that we can put our trust in freedom, both for ourselves and for one another, believing that we shall come closer to truth if our minds are unfettered. What the churches of authoritarian belief are based upon ... is the fear that if people are allowed to think freely they will arrive at wrong and harmful conclusions, and therefore they must be told what they must believe.

This freedom is what liberates us from faith in God as described in the sacred texts. Such a faith is exclusionary, requiring the conviction that the believer is right and that others are wrong — that one’s faith allows one to know God and God’s purposes. Thus, John Calvin, one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, employed his faith in the Trinity and infant baptism to have Michael Servetus, the founder of Unitarianism and the promoter of acceptance of religious diversity, burned at the stake in Geneva, Switzerland, in October 1553, with his books strapped to his body. He and his followers saw justification in their faith, because they knew that they were fulfilling God’s purposes.

In fact, such faith is a misuse of religion to exterminate life in God’s name. It reflects a presumptuousness that could be seen as proof of God’s absence, for what Supreme Being, what higher power worthy of blind faith and endless love would allow his followers to burn each other over an inability to understand a message that is buried in the obscure, at best?

To quote David Bumbaugh, the minister of this church who introduced me to Unitarian Universalism:

Calvin justified his actions by asserting that a heretic was far more dangerous to a community than a thief or a murderer. A thief only deprived one

of worldly goods. A murderer only threatened a mortal life. A heretic threatened the immortal soul. A responsible government, a Christian government had no alternative but to silence the heretic forever by executing him.

In this argument, Calvin was echoing the conventional wisdom of his day, and most of Christian Europe approved his action in burning Servetus. One man, however, did not. Sebastian Castellio, living in Basel, argued for tolerance and for the value of human life, admonishing Calvin: "To burn a man is not to defend a doctrine. It is to burn a man!" With those words, Castellio entered into the community of Unitarian Universalist saints, for he defined one of the primary assumptions upon which liberal religion is based: that human life is always more important than arcane doctrines and dogmas, and that it is not to be sacrificed, judicially or otherwise, to defend doctrines, be they social or political or theological. We have been suspicious ever since of dogmas and doctrines and policies which ignore the impact they have upon the lives of individual women and men.

As I have experienced it, faith in the Unitarian understanding does not require the presence of a God, whether traditional or otherwise. Rather than relying upon certainty that we have access to the truth, that we can know what God wants us to do, as traditional faith has done, the faith of the modern Unitarian relies upon the certainty that we are uncertain. Not that we each do not have our own beliefs, but we accept, indeed encourage and revel in, the fact that each of us has our own peculiar beliefs about God, life, death and the space between the stars. For me, this describes a spiritual community, not a religion.

But in order to finish this sermon, I must return to the story of Peter Thurman. The fact of his death, and over the next few years of other friends, whether by accident or suicide, dispelled whatever faith I had had in the existence of the God that I had learned of in Presbyterian Sunday school. Life, and death, are too mysterious for me. Either God was not as described, was not involved in our lives, and could not be petitioned with prayer, or God did not exist. I could never decide, and I still cannot. I cannot surrender to an unquestioning faith in a higher power as described in the sacred texts — Peter's horrific death was not God's will. But I can believe in what is left if that God is absent, if that God went out for lunch long ago and never came back. I can believe that this community, and every religious or spiritual community, shares in something that we cannot describe but that is beyond each of us, that our association allows us, on occasion, and for brief periods, to transcend ourselves.

And I believe in serendipity, in occurrences that, viewed retrospectively, seem too unlikely to be ascribed to mere coincidence. Not that this is any form of theology; it is merely a sense that events occur and paths intersect for reasons that we cannot, and will not, ever understand, perhaps because of imperceptible (to us) currents or ripples that move between and among people or causal connections that are too fine for us to appreciate or because we follow a script that none of us will ever see. For me, this is faith — the belief that I am part of something that I can never understand or know.

All we see is the effect — that something has happened that seems too improbable, or wondrous or mysterious. And in this, I have faith; faith that serendipitous moments will occur

again and again as long as I live, and that my responsibility is to recognize and to seize whatever those moments present, that the beauty I perceive today cannot have resulted from mere accident, that I share something with each of you that transcends myself, that transcends this place and this time.