

“Faith” as an Intentionally Cultivated Quality of Character

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Wedding Celebration!

Let's explore a concept of “faith” that seems to be missing from most popular discourse. Before we begin, why is this important? For me it's important because when I discuss any idea, I want to fully appreciate the words used to define it. Relying on reflexive cultural vernacular or tropish shorthand to describe a multidimensional experience or concept isn't just sloppy, it's disrespectful to consciousness. Why? Because if we fill our headspace with watery, half-formed pabulum – whether it's the grandiose distortions of combative political rhetoric, the caustic brevity of texted or tweeted communications, the excremental deceptions of commercialistic manipulation, or any particular ideology's hifalutin propaganda – *that is all we will be able to offer back into the world*. We will add nothing but the burden of our consuming and excreting, a regurgitation so shallow it can barely convey self-referential egotism. So why not actively participate in this amazing process called the Universe? Why not give back some paltry morsel of wonder by actually *engaging* our consciousness, nourishing it with nuance and complexity, and holding back those oversimplified regurgitations? Even though I myself all too often violate the principle of meaningful consciousness, I earnestly yearn for a revivification of discourse and language that stimulates greater depth and breadth of understanding – more gritty and wholesome substance to chew through, savor and carefully ingest. This, then, is my attempt to explore the concept of “faith” in just such a manner. My only caveat: as a consequence of honoring consciousness, this post may require a slower, more concentrated read.

Okay...what is “faith?” Here is how Merriam-Webster defines it:

- 1 a : allegiance to duty or a person : loyalty
- b (1) : fidelity to one's promises
- ___(2) : sincerity of intentions
- 2 a (1) : belief and trust in and loyalty to God

___(2) : belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion

b (1) : firm belief in something for which there is no proof

___(2) : complete trust

3: something that is believed especially with strong conviction; especially : a system of religious beliefs

In countless interactions over the years – and ongoing Internet exchanges – “faith” has almost universally been reduced to some sort of belief. Many Christians often seem to explicitly intend definition 2 a (1), “belief and trust in and loyalty to God,” and implicitly definition 2 a (2), “belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion.” For Atheists, “faith” most often seems to mean 2 b, “firm belief in something for which there is no proof.” From perusing debates between Atheists and Christians (on [Quora](#) for example) both parties appear to be exhibiting a similar flavor of “faith,” that of definition 3: “something that is believed especially with strong conviction.” However, in my view, none of these approaches to “faith” are the real deal. In the same way that Tang, Cheez Whiz, Crab Sticks, Wonder Bread, Maple-Flavored Syrup and Chicken Nuggets are unhealthy imitations of food, these popular conceptions that infer belief from faith (or rigidly equate the two) are heavily diluted echoes of the genuine article, full of ideological flavorings and non-thought fillers.

Now before we go any further, it seems pertinent to confess my perspectival bias: I am a big fan of the New Testament, have studied Christian scripture for many years, and love digging into the Greek texts for nuggets of wisdom that English translators may have missed (or understated) over the centuries. I also grew up mainly in the U.S., with a brief sojourn in Germany during my late teens, and so I am understandably mired in Western cultural memes. And although I believe it is possible to break free from the prejudices inculcated through these experiences, they have also provided some useful tools and resources. So I'll be relying on those to explore the meaning of “faith.” If this bias leaves a bitter taste in your mouth, please bear with me...there may still be some paltry morsels to be found.

Clearly a lot has been written about “faith,” and over the centuries. We have Thomas Aquinas artfully describing faith as a virtue of the mind; a *supernatural cognition* that reinforces itself through the knowledge it acquires; a habit of thought “which makes the intellect assent to things that are not apparent.” We have the fideism of Tertullian, Erasmus, Martin Luther, Pascal, Hamann, and possibly Kierkegaard, who actively dissociate faith from reason, insisting that faith can be productively nonrational – or indeed practically superior to theoretical thought – in its passionate convictions. We have William James’ similar exploration of religious belief as a *leap in the dark* that provides access to a “vital good” - a good otherwise inaccessible without taking this pragmatic risk. We have Bertrand Russell’s fervent skepticism and dismissal of all such risk-taking without sufficient evidence, asserting that all “faith” is purely emotionally based. We have the empiricism of Locke, who finds faith complimentary to reason – as long as that faith is proportionate to evidence, and a broad enough variety of evidence is allowed. We have Hegel’s immediate knowledge of the Absolute, the certainty that “my spirit knows itself, it knows its essence,” which develops from the subjective to higher and higher levels of objective knowledge. We have Eric Fromm’s differentiation of rational faith from irrational faith, which we will explore further later on. We have John Hick’s insistence that faith is a contextualization (“interpretation”) of felt realities in a given cultural milieu; a personal experience of God rather than a reaction to propositional evidence. We have James Fowler’s six psychological stages of faith development, which center around the source, shape, scope and stability of one’s evolving convictions over time. We have the modern tug-of-war between Atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christian apologists like John Lennox, where the central knot of inquiry sets *blind trust that defies all evidence against evidence-based belief that has sufficient warrant/credibility*. This is just a smattering, of course, but still, among many of these explorations of faith, the concept of *belief* remains extraordinarily central. And this, I think, is a fatal amplification.

To understand why, let’s start with the Greek. The word most consistently translated to “faith” in the

New Testament is πίστις (pistis), which is derived from πείθω (Peithó), the Greek goddess of persuasion and seduction. Peithó (called Suada in ancient Rome) was an attendant and possibly daughter to Aphrodite, and among ancient Greek authors was consistently associated with the divine force of love – the persuasion by which the human heart is moved, enchanted, transfixed and ultimately won over. In fact, she is described as “the Lady of the bridal chamber,” “handmaiden of marriage” and “friend of marriage” (Nonnus), not because of sexual desire (this would be Pothos’s domain), but because “wise Peithó” holds the keys “to love’s true sanctities” (Pindar) and guides all forms of love – Eros – into fruition (Nonnus). Either despite or because of her wiliness, Peithó deserves “holy reverence” for the sweetness and charm she empowers in speech (Aeschylus). And this last from Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca*:

“And there came running thirsty at midday Aura herself, seeking if anywhere she could find raindrops from Zeus, or some fountain, or the stream of a river pouring from the hills; and Eros cast a mist over her eyelids. But when she saw the deceitful fountain of Bacchos, Peitho dispersed the shadowy cloud from her eyelids, and called out to Aura like a herald of her marriage: ‘Maiden, come this way! Take into your lips the stream of this nuptial fountain, and into your bosom a lover.’ Gladly the maiden saw it, and throwing herself down before the fountain drew in the liquid of Bacchos with open lips. When she had drunk, the girl exclaimed: ‘Naiads, what marvel is this? Whence comes this balmy water? Who made this bubbling drink...Certainly after drinking this I can run no more. No, my feet are heavy, sweet sleep bewitches me, nothing comes from my lips but a soft stammering sound.’ She spoke, and went stumbling on her way. She moved this way and that way with erring motions, her brow shook with throbbing temples, her head leaned and lay on her shoulder, she fell asleep on the ground beside a tall branching tree, and entrusted to the bare earth her maidenhood unguarded.”

To be clear, then, though the goddess Peithó offered the Greeks a doorway into the loves of marriage, her means are not always fair, rational or even truthful. But without submitting to her persuasion and guidance – and indeed the bridal chamber itself – we would never come to understand or even recognize what the many mysteries of love (or the many varieties of Eros) are about. In this context it is important to recognize that it is our love, our understanding, our response to Peithó’s seduction and persuasion that moves us past an initial choice to a deepening fruition. Is *pistis* offering us a similar doorway via similar means? As an interesting correlation, perhaps the Gnostic (Valentinian) scriptures allude to such a process in the Bridal Chamber sacrament: for Gnostics, this was where redemption occurred, perhaps because this is where a unity of spirit, light, love and truth could be *experientially validated*. More abstractly, the sentiment of William James in *The Will to Believe* offers some parallel experiential variables: “He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed;” and later “We cannot escape the issue by remaining skeptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. It is as if a man should hesitate indefinitely to ask a certain woman to marry him because he was not perfectly sure that she would prove an angel after he brought her home. Would he not cut himself off from that particular angel-possibility as decisively as if he went and married someone else?” Here again, marriage is a handy metaphor for James, just as it was for Hafiz (from Daniel Ladinsky’s renderings):

"I want both of us
To start talking about this great love
As if you, I, and the Sun were all married
And living in a tiny room,

Helping each other to cook,
Do the wash,
Weave and sew,
Care for our beautiful
Animals.

We all leave each morning
To labor on the earth's field.
No one does not lift a great pack.

I want both of us to start singing like two
Travelling minstrels
About this extraordinary existence
We share,

As if
You, I, and God were all married
And living in
A tiny
Room."

And of course New Testament itself alludes to the *profound mystery* in Ephesians 5:25-27 (English Standard Version):

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

To introduce a more personal experience into the mix, I would recall my own baptism at age nineteen. The act itself was a sort of emotional catharsis, a relief that I was finally making a decision after nearly two years on the fence exploring Christian scripture and community. And of course I was expecting *something* of spiritual significance to occur – this was after all an invitation for holy spirit to take up residence within me. But, although my senses did seem more heightened during the ceremony, there was no heavenly vision, no doves descending, no infusion of blazing gnosis. I initially accepted this because baptism in the Church of Christ was mainly about contrition, humility and acknowledgement of my separation from God were it not for the gracious sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And I did feel these conditions acutely. Nevertheless, I was just the tiniest bit disappointed.

That is, until I went to change my clothes. My baptismal gown was a simple white robe, easily removed as I reached for a towel. The changing room itself had a large mirror on one wall, and as I finished drying off I looked over at the reflection of my naked body. In that instant, a force of insight as abrupt, thunderous and intense as a symphony erupting in a silent hall made itself known: *this was not me, this was just flesh*; a vessel, but not my primary identity. I felt this truth deeply. I studied the familiar lines, tones and shapes with a mixture of sadness, chagrin and acquiescence. It would be the first of many moments of letting go in my spiritual journey. And then, when my gaze met itself in the mirror, I encountered a hint of something even more alien, harsh and unyielding. I didn't have words for it at that time, but now I would call it a *subsuming suchness*; a constructive negation. I was not ready for that encounter – in fact I would not be able to fully endure or integrate it for twenty more years – and so I suppressed it.

The insights about my temporal flesh I could accept, the possible glimpse of annihilative absolutes I could not, but the vehicle that delivered these conceptions was the same baptismal act. A simple

intentional ceremony immediately manifested unanticipated, potentially far-reaching consequences. This correlation of personal choice and encompassing outcome – of disciplined volition followed by new insight – repeated itself countless times over the years. And those acts have not always had spiritual inspiration. Sometimes an *aha*-evoking moment was prompted by lust; sometimes by physical discipline or routine; sometimes by emotional anguish; sometimes by extreme stress; sometimes by deep depression; sometimes by willfully striving for some end and failing; sometimes by an unexpected surge of compassionate affection. By any measure, it seems to me this pattern of consciousness is endemic to human experience and growth, and that intentionality isn't always predictive. As Rumi (as translated by William C. Chittick) reminds us:

“Intellect is good and desirable to the extent it brings you to the King's door. Once you have reached His door, then divorce the intellect! From this time on, the intellect will be to your loss and a brigand. When you reach Him, entrust yourself to Him! You have no business with the how and the wherefore. Know that the intellect's cleverness all belongs to the vestibule. Even if it possesses the knowledge of Plato, it is still outside of the palace.”

But wait! Such choices that lead to new awareness and deepening understanding are still “leaps in the dark,” aren't they? There can never be adequate preparation or certainty around them, just a hope of outcomes that plots across a continuum of motivations (some rational, some impulsive, some felt, some intuited). And couldn't these “leaps in the dark” simply be inviting all sorts of post-rationalized justifications, rather than stimulating substantive *ahas*? Mightn't all the insight and wisdom we construct be an artificial narrative to help organize our experience? A reflexive *will to meaning*? If so, then any insistence on objectively conclusive causality – as independent from subjective felt experience or various forms of intuition – will likely create an endless, arduous and fruitless tension. In terms of *pistis*, must we then return to a fideism where faith and reason are inherently antagonistic? Well I honestly think this tension only arises *when we restrict our discussion of faith to the impulse of belief*. In fact I think this conflation or association is fundamentally disruptive to comprehending the dynamics of faith's processes. For the sake of brevity and sanity, let's depart from that assumption altogether.

How do we do that? For one thing, we can remind ourselves of other modern definitions of faith, and of other translations and usages of *pistis* over the centuries. Take Merriam-Webster's primary definition, for example: *allegiance to duty or person; fidelity to one's promises; sincerity of intentions*. Setting aside the prescriptive vs. descriptive debates in lexicology, this primary definition of “faith” has nothing to do with belief. Instead, it describes a quality of character, a mode of being and doing, a deliberate intentionality – none of which necessarily needs to be associated with particular beliefs. Erich Fromm touched on this in his writing, describing “rational faith” as “a character trait pervading the whole personality, rather than a specific belief,” insisting also that such faith *does not require a specific object*. Contrasting it with “irrational faith” (which he viewed as an “emotional submission to authority”), Fromm asserted rational faith to be an essential component nonreligious as well as the religious thought, writing in *The Art of Loving*: “at every step from the conception of a rational vision to the formulation of a theory, *faith* is necessary: faith in the vision as a rationally valid aim to pursue, faith in the hypothesis as a likely and plausible proposition, and faith in the final theory, at least until a general consensus about its validity has been reached. This faith is rooted in one's own experience, in the confidence in one's power of thought, observation and judgment.” And when we look into *pistis* in the New Testament and other early literature, we encounter kindred conceptions of faith that are more aspects of character than dependent on belief: faithfulness, trust, trustworthiness, to be entrusted, to put one's trust in, to give credence to, allegiance, loyalty, confidence and so forth. All of these are choices, volitions, responses and relationships with a consistent underlying theme: a stick-to-it-ive flavor of *trust* and *hope*. In fact Christians were described in the early literature as “those who trust” and “those who hope.” But what inspires this quality of hope and trust, if not belief...?



Closing the Circle

This is, I suspect, where the argument quickly breaks down for those who hesitate to look deeper, as it is so easy to fall back on the *faith=belief* misconception. After all, the majority of interpretations of the word “faith” – in modern contexts as well as the New Testament – do involve a kind of wishful thinking about speculative possibilities. Yet even as Christians acknowledge that belief needs to be active rather than passive (recalling the admonition of James 2: “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder!”), what motivates the activity of faith expressed in good works? It is, I think, the same question as before: what inspires hope and trust? The answer has been consistent within the New Testament and across centuries of theology; to summarize it with an oft-used metaphor: how does a child come to trust its parent? In part it is a confidence born of observed reliability and the power dynamics inherent to a parent-child relationship – this is true; *but more than this it is the child’s deeply grokked intuition that they are understood, appreciated and loved.* As a five-year-old, when a parent asks us to trust their judgment and instruction, we do so not because we always discern the rightness of their insights, but because they have demonstrated that a substantial focus of their existence is to care for us, nurture us, encourage us, protect us...love us. Because they have gently held us at our lowest and most desperate moments, we trust them to lift us up. In the same way, the Christian’s initial venture into “trusting God” is a consequence of appreciating the loving, gracious sacrifice of Jesus Christ – we are persuaded by this demonstration of God’s depth of love that we can take the risk. Thus our choice to “leap in the dark” is grounded in a trust and hope inspired by God’s compassionate affection for our well-being – not our fear, not blind obedience, not compulsory acceptance or Fromm’s “irrational faith.” It is a consequence of *agape*, that *divine force of love* that bears copious fruit in the hearts, minds and deeds of “those who trust.” And if this trust isn’t inspired by love...well, then it probably isn’t authentic faith.

For the Greeks, it was Peithó who opened the door to love’s true sanctities; for Christians, it is *pistis* that shepherds forth the many expressions of a charitable character. In both cases, there is a dance of human and divine – a Greek goddess for the former, and holy spirit for the latter. In both cases, a divine intervention and inspiration to love is answered by a human heart, mind and will responding in kind. Beyond the initial persuasion to trust and invite love in, the fruits of that decision – an indwelling “love,

joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” – amplify themselves in word and deed. And this becomes an active, engaged, disciplined response, deliberately and persistently cultivated by “those who have their powers of discernment trained through constant practice,” and love’s expression becomes more effortless. This is the child’s growing up, learning to operate from a love that extends beyond parental dependency to an ever-enlarging sphere of love-consciousness. This is a journey of *persistence, devotion and a single-mindedness of focus*. That stick-to-it-iveness again. And while this may still be a co-creative effort, the emphasis of responsibility and accountability shifts to the faithful as they mature.

In a sense, I believe *pistis* ultimately becomes a stripping away of distractions, a distillation of effort, so that there is nothing else left but the fire – the consciousness of consciousness – which is the highest order of love; the Godhead beyond being-in-itself; the Absolute. And this, in turn, continuously manifests as integrity of mind, heart, spirit, being and will – all working in unison, dancing to the same music, filled and energized by the same flame. For me this is the essence of loving skillfully, of demonstrating coherent faith through compassionate action, of developing spiritual reliability and trustworthiness. The Christian demonstrates their faithfulness by welcoming and maintaining *agape*’s residence at the core of all sincere intentions, all confidence and credence, all allegiances and loyalties, all trust, *and all beliefs*. For any belief (or faith, or trust, or fidelity, or commitment) that does not flow from love is empty and pointless – a gong clanging soundlessly in the void. But with sufficient love...well, we can eventually develop the courage to accept that disconcerting enigma in the mirror, and embrace any absolutes reflecting back at us.

This kind of “faith” has an entirely different sense, flavor and feel than the pabulum vernacular form so prevalent in modern discourse. This faith is grounded in reciprocal affections and trust, clarified intentions and observable actions. Again, a straightforward way of describing and evaluating this construction is *an intentionally cultivated quality of character*. And such faith has distinct benefits as well, because its practice (or praxis, if you will) evokes and reinforces those *ahas* mentioned previously. We might even call these fruits “faith-wisdom” (*Pistis Sophia!*), which is experientially validated and has obvious pragmatic utility, but more importantly harmonizes our thoughts and actions around the very love that inspires and nurtures us. For this and the more commonly asserted benefits (answered prayers, etc.) again mere belief seems insufficient – there must be a deeper conviction-in-action, bound to a deeper connectedness of being; there must be *agape* as the ever-present cofactor, the beacon that draws the angels nigh. For what is Divine *pneuma* if not an expression of purest and highest love?

Lastly, as a useful contrast, I’ll leave you with religious belief that eventually becomes devoid of faith altogether. From Eric Fromm’s *The Art of Loving*:

“It follows that the belief in power (in the sense of domination) and the use of power are the reverse of faith. To believe in power that exists is identical with disbelief in the growth of potentialities which are as yet unrealized. It is a prediction of the future based solely on the manifest present; but it turns out to be a grave miscalculation, profoundly irrational in its oversight of the human potentialities and human growth. There is no rational faith in power. There is submission to it or, on the part of those who have it, the wish to keep it. While to many power seems to be the most real of all things, the history of man has proved it to be the most unstable of all human achievements. Because of the fact that faith and power are mutually exclusive, all religions and political systems which originally are built on rational faith become corrupt and eventually lose what strength they have, if they rely on power or ally themselves with it.”