

Faith vs. Reason  
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I am intrigued by the character Jodi Foster plays in the film *Contact*, a woman named Ellie who bases her life and her dreams on reason, on the scientific method. For our purpose of exploring faith and reason today, she will be a helpful character to think about. In the film, Ellie is an astronomer who believes in science before she believes in God, who says as a scientist, she needs empirical evidence in order to believe God exists. Another character in the film, Palmer Joss, represents the other end of the spectrum; he is an Episcopal priest who believes mightily in the 'Almighty.' Ellie asks Palmer, "How do you know we didn't create the idea of God so we wouldn't feel so alone? How do you know you're not deluding yourself? For me, I need proof." Palmer replies with a question about her father, who died when she was eight years old. "Did you love your father?" "Yes, very much," Ellie replies. "Prove it," He says.

Is it possible to prove love exists with empirical evidence? Or is it something we know to exist only in the depth of our hearts? These are just a few of the questions that come up when we explore the limits of faith and reason. Of course, such a topic tends to fall in the camp of philosophy . . .

Now, I didn't take a single philosophy class while in college or seminary, which might be embarrassing to admit if I wasn't trying to catch up and learn some of it now. What I've learned so far is that there was a point in time - about 2300 years ago - when the philosophers in Ancient Greece got tired of trying to prove the existence or non-existence of God, and became more interested in proving what we could see and feel and experience with our senses. Some might say it was a transition of the mystical to the rational, when reason and the scientific method became acceptable and the religious stance of magic and fear lost its power. The dawn of reason was indeed a time of enlightenment for humanity.

The injection of reason into faith was in fact the critical point of conception for American Unitarianism - many centuries later - during the early 1800's in New England. To this day we have the same underlying tenant of theology: that is, we as human beings do not need to rely on God to make appropriate moral decisions, because God endowed human beings with free moral agency, which means we are already equipped - with or without God's help - to lead morally well-informed lives. Of course, our critics might say that it is precisely this line of thinking that has led us into the "Godless state" we are now in. Once we decided we didn't need God, God became increasingly optional, and eventually agnosticism and atheism became acceptable and common. I don't know about you, but I find it a challenge to describe what Unitarian Universalism is to other people when I get to the part about, 'well, you can believe in God if you want, but you don't have to.' This invariably produces a puzzled look.

What I have found helpful to say after this is that we believe there are no easy answers to life's most compelling questions; some of us see that there are limits to faith, while some

see limits to reason. So we allow people to fall on the continuum of faith and reason where they are most comfortable. Essentially, the theologies of religious liberals are given a lot of breathing space, but our core values are much the same. And then I talk about what those core values are, things like honesty, integrity, justice, and service.

Since I'm going to be throwing the words faith and reason around a lot today, it will be helpful if I define them. Let's say by reason, I mean logical, rational, analytic thought. By faith, I'm talking about beliefs we have arrived at without empirical evidence. Let's keep it simple and leave it at that. Now, the reason that faith and reason is such a hot topic for us is because, if you are not new here, you are probably aware that this is not a new debate in our denomination, and it cropped up frequently in both Unitarianism and Universalism well before the two merged in 1961. It's important to think about because it can have a very polarizing effect on congregations. It can actually split a church or even end up getting a minister run out of town. It's definitely one of the most diversifying factors of our churches, that is, whether a UU church tends to be more 'humanist' or more 'theist.'

However, I bring you this topic not to spark a feud, but to see that there is great potential for integration, for re-framing what at first appears to be debate material into dynamic and sensible theology. I will admit to my bias, though - my concern is that, on the continuum of faith and reason, we do lean too much toward reason and have for some time. I fear we miss out on what faith can bring to our lives. The essential aim of this topic is to think about how our beliefs can honor the experiences in our lives that are most sacred to us. Think of faith and reason as tools in the toolbox that help us to live the best lives we can live. Our purpose today is to think about when reason is the best tool and when faith is the best tool to use, and why.

Since I believe we have a faith deficit, I will at once argue the limitations of reason. And here another character is useful to us. I highly recommend the book, *Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel, to anyone. Pi is a young Indian boy who becomes a cast-away on a life-boat with several zoo animals, including a Bengal tiger, after the cargo ship containing his whole family is lost at sea. After 8 months Pi survives his ordeal, but has a hard time getting people to believe his story. They tell him his story is hard to believe. Pi says this to his skeptics: "If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for? Isn't love hard to believe? . . . Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?"

His skeptics reply, "We're just being reasonable." "So am I!" Pi exclaims. "I used my reason at every moment. Reason is excellent for getting food, clothing, and shelter. Reason is the very best tool kit. Nothing beats reason for keeping tigers away. But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater."

I absolutely love that exchange. Have you ever feared that? Or wondered? That by always staying on the safe side of reason, you might be missing something? I know one thing for sure. Everyone in this room has had an experience, and probably more than

one, that no one else has had, that is completely unique to you and the unfolding of your life. Maybe it wasn't as bizarre as getting shipwrecked with some zoo animals, but each of us carry experiences that cannot be repeated, both good and bad ones.

Now, the use of reason is highly associated with the scientific method, as we know. But the two limits of the scientific method are one) you can only work with situations that can be repeated over and over and two) the scientific method has an irritating tendency to DIS-prove. Rather than show and prove what is true, the scientific method tends to make its progress in the negative, by saying, "here's what isn't."

Take a moment to consider here: what are the experiences in your life that are not repeatable? Is reason useful in proving what happened, or how you felt, or what you learned? Or do we have to go on faith that what happened and what you learned about life is absolutely true? Now, our feelings are not always safe to believe, nor are they always true - that's not my point here. My point is that faith allows space for WHAT IS, for that which can't be accounted for or proven. It is often these kinds of experiences that teach us the most about life, about what is possible, and these experiences shape us in ways that reason can't. There is knowledge and wisdom that we gain from our individual experiences that becomes sacred to us because there was no other way to learn it.

What are some of these experiences? Most of us have had some kind of encounter with the divine, or a mystical experience, but it doesn't have to be magical. Maybe it was the first time we fell in love, the birth of a child, or what it was like to lose someone we loved deeply, whether through death or a broken heart. Maybe it was how we convalesced out of a dark time in our lives, and found our way back from depression to joy. Maybe it's the experience of discovering a kind of strength we didn't know we had deep within ourselves.

Ironically though, it is the experiences that CAN be repeated that provide the most stability and contentment. There is reason to this. It has been suggested that the kind of happiness we most seek is that which can be repeated everyday - stuff like the dog waking us up each morning, or getting to come home each night to our families. The ordinary moments that can be repeated on a daily basis often make up the most reliable substance of happiness in our lives. What things happen almost every day in your life that you are most grateful for?

Now I want to make a caveat here for faith. In most of this sermon I am talking up faith, but clearly there are limits to faith. The kind of faith that accepts beliefs blindly in order to conform or pledge allegiance to a strict dogma IS too rigid, especially if this dogma is harmful to others in some way, and often this kind of faith has little to do with what is really true or authentic about our lives. So I want to make it clear that the kind of faith I'm talking about is this: there are things we believe without being able to prove - and it is reasonable to do so. That we're loveable, that to live is a good thing, that sometimes in life we experience what is utterly unexpected which results in unexpected wisdom. It would be unreasonable to demand empirical evidence for these things.

So it appears that faith is a useful tool for opening ourselves to the mysterious in our lives, to possibility, while reason is a more useful tool for an everyday kind of wisdom; reason helps us get that food, clothes, and shelter stuff, which are pretty important and sacred in and of themselves. But what of truth? In the movie *Contact*, Palmer Joss the Episcopal priest says, "though I am bound by a different covenant, our goal is the same, the pursuit of truth." Faith and reason do share a common objective, to seek the truth. Though I am convinced that when seeking the truth, it is not either faith or reason that we must employ, not one or the other, but rather we must allow both to work together, to be integrated. Why? Because to learn the truth, we have to risk being wrong, which demands faith.

I realize this is kind of abstract, but like I said, it's a philosophical argument. We religious liberals have been committed to reason for a long time. Maybe we've been over-committed. What I'm suggesting is that we try to balance it out with some faith, with some ideas about the heart that the head has no business trying to explain.

Another thing Palmer Joss says to Ellie in *Contact* is that, "the one thing people are hungry for, science isn't able to give them." I think that's true. I worry that, like the scientific method which tends to prove what is not, liberal religion falls into the tendency of expressing what we DON'T believe, of what WE are NOT. We don't require that you believe Christ is your savior, or that you have a single-minded devotion to God, or that you pray everyday, or that you are obligated to believe any dogma whatsoever. You're not! But what ARE we, then? What are we obligated to? What IS our faith? What do we have that people are hungry for?

At the beginning of the book, Pi makes another great statement, Pi who is of great faith, and is equally devoted to three religions: Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. He says, "I'll be honest about it. It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while. We must all pass through the garden of Gethsemane. If Christ played with doubt, so must we. If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer, if He burst out from the cross, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' then surely we are also permitted to doubt. But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation."

That's funny, but I'm serious. What I'm really trying to say here is that, ironically, we may still be motivated by fear, despite the Enlightenment. In some way, I think we might *fear* to believe wholly and fully with our hearts - whether that's a belief in God, or a belief in the over-riding goodness of humanity, it doesn't matter. Inherent in all types of faith, is the possibility that we could be wrong, that we really just don't know for sure. I think we religious liberals do have an underlying, deep-seated insecurity about being 'wrong' and so cling to reason which appears more rational and safe. There's nothing wrong with simply being more comfortable with rational explanations of life's most compelling questions. There's nothing wrong with having faith in reason. But I worry that an over-reliance on reason turns into this kind of un-embodied intellectualism which in turn results in an unpalatable elitism that has nothing to do with religion.

Here's a radical suggestion for you. I don't think we really come to UU churches to have our reason strengthened, or renewed. If anything, we come to church each Sunday to have our faith renewed. To find faith in ourselves to make the right decisions, to find faith in a bigger existence that reminds us of how important humility is, to find faith that reassures us we are not alone, that we have many of the same hopes and hurts. *This is about renewing our ability to trust.* We come to church to be reminded that it is okay and good to trust, in spite of our fears. There is a definition of faith that goes like this: faith is trust without expectations. When we trust our loved ones, we do have expectations, as well we should. We believe that human relationships should be just and that we are to be treated well in them. But when we have to put our trust in what is unknown, in what is much bigger, in the great mysterious, in God - if you are comfortable calling it that - then expectations cease to be useful to us. We are simply trusting that our humility and faith are enough.

I find a lot of comfort in that - knowing that I don't run the show and I'm better off not trying to. In the bigger picture of my life, things go better when I don't have rigid expectations. I'm not talking about something as simplistic as believing it's all part of "God's plan" or some milarky like that. I'm talking about the wisdom of recognizing my own limits - my own limits to understand, or to provide everything I need for myself. Alone, I provide myself with very little. I depend on the universe completely. To understand the very limits of my life - how short it is, for example - allows me to see what a gift it is, despite the pains and fears of it, and how the sacred is interwoven in every part of it, how inter-dependent it all is. I have faith in a divine force in the universe, even though I don't understand how it all works. The only empirical evidence I have is what I know in my heart.

By the end of Contact, Ellie has an experience that she cannot account for, and like Pi, very few believe her story. It appears that she space-traveled, and that truths of the universe were revealed to her. But she has no way of proving it. She says to her panel of skeptics:

"I had an experience. I can't prove it, I can't even explain it, but everything that I know as a human being, everything that I am tells me that it was real; I was given something wonderful, something that changed me forever; a vision of the universe that tells us undeniably how tiny and insignificant and how rare and precious we all are; a vision that tells us that we belong to something that is greater than ourselves, that we are not, that none of us are alone."

Doesn't she sound more human, more full, warmer and more real after this experience? You can call it 'just faith' if you like, but if it has made her more of a blessing to herself and others than her isolated 'reason' did, then isn't this empirical proof that her faith improved her life, maybe even 'saved' it? Seems reasonable to say so, doesn't it?

What we see in Ellie's experience is a vision, a possible vision, of faith and reason - or maybe even religion and science - merging into a unity, integrating into one system, each supporting the other.

So where do you fall on the continuum of faith and reason? What are the experiences in your life that cannot be explained but are undeniably real, that have made you not sharper, not more intelligent, but more round, more whole?

Faith really is more dangerous than reason, because it can transform us in ways we can't understand or explain. It can connect us with a sense of reality larger than we'll ever know. Grown-up faith isn't for the faint of heart. Let us grow not into more certainty, but into more fullness. Let us adopt not just any simple faith, but the most dangerous kind, that faith which can open us up to a life so vast that it engulfs us. And holds us, and cherishes us, and will never let us go.

Let it be so.