

“Got Faith?”

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There’s a story about six blind men in a village in India. One day they hear that there’s an elephant in the village. They have no idea what an elephant is, so they decide that they should go and explore it with their hands. They all go over to the elephant and touch it.

"Hey, the elephant is like a pillar," says the first man who touches his leg.

"No! It’s like a rope," says the second man who touches the tail.

"No! It’s like a thick branch of a tree," says the third man who touches the trunk of the elephant.

"It’s like a big fan," says the fourth man who touches the ear of the elephant.

"It’s like a huge wall," says the fifth man who touches the belly of the elephant.

"It’s like a solid pipe," says the sixth man who touches the tusk of the elephant.

They start to argue about the elephant and each one insists that he is right. A wise man comes along and he sees the blind men. He says, "What’s the matter?"

They say, "We can’t agree about what the elephant is like." And they each tell him what they think the elephant is.

The wise man says, "You are all right. Every one of you is telling it differently because you touched different parts of the elephant. Actually, the elephant has all of those the features."

"Oh!" everyone says. Now they’re happy because they are all right.

I think that trying to understand faith is kind of like being a blind person feeling a little bit of the elephant. It’s easier to talk about faith, to give examples, it’s like this and it’s like this and it’s like this, than it is to define exactly what faith is.

I've been thinking long and hard about what I believe faith is. I looked for help in the writings of Paul Tillich, who is often called the most important theologian of the twentieth century. It's a theologian's job to define terms like faith. He says that faith is the state of being ultimately concerned. It is concern about that which is experienced as ultimate. What do I believe is ultimate? Is it my faith in life, that whatever happens in this life, I will be able to handle it? That's part of it. Is it my faith in love, that it is to love and be loved that saves us from despair? That's part of it. Is it my faith that the "arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice?" I think so. Do I believe that that good will ultimately triumph over evil? Well, it depends on what day you ask.

Over the past few days, I read an autobiography about slavery in the US. I read a story about children in Switzerland who were taken from their families and forced to work in factories and on farms. I read stories about survivors of the Holocaust. And I had to ask myself some hard questions. If I were a slave, or a child laborer, or his mother, or a Jew in a forced labor camp, would my faith carry me through? What if I were in a war zone, or starving, or beaten every day? Would my faith keep me from utter despair?

Faith is easy when life is easy. In the face of extremely challenging circumstances, we know that many people lose faith. But we also know that some people are able to retain, or even strengthen, their faith.

David Weiss Halivini was a teenage boy in Romania who hoped to become a rabbi, when Germany invaded in 1942. He and his family were sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp. David was sent to another camp to cut stones for a tunnel. It was heavy, strenuous work. He tried to keep up his faith in God, but it was difficult. One day, he spotted a guard eating a sandwich wrapped in a bletl, a page from the most authoritative book of Jewish law. He begged for it excitedly and the guard reached for his gun, but then he shrugged and gave David the greasy wrapper.

The page contained instructions for Passover. As Halivini wrote later, that page became for the inmates "a visible symbol of a connection between the camp and the activities of Jews throughout history."

They studied it every day and held secret services, because it helped them to feel closer to God. It also kept them from withdrawing into isolation and despair. As more and more people died and disappeared, he was asked if he still believed there was a God. He replied, "Without God, it is even more cruel. God gave man power and God gave man his free will." He used that power and free will to not only keep his faith, but to strengthen it.

Viktor Frankl, also a Holocaust survivor, wrote that in his experience, in spite of the enforced primitiveness of life in the concentration camp, it was possible for some people to retreat into their interior world and to deepen their spiritual lives.

Another story comes to mind. This is one about a Baha'i woman –I'll call her Anna. She was in Arizona, part of a Baha'i gathering, and she had just finished giving a workshop. The place was a retreat center, in a beautiful but isolated area. Her friends offered to give her a ride to the place where they would be spending the night. She said, "No, that's OK, I'd really like to walk."

So they left and she stayed for a little while, gathering up her things. When she was ready, she set out on the path, which was a more direct route than the road, about three miles. The trail was narrow and pretty smooth, but it was so rocky on either side that there was no choice but to stick to the trail. Which was fine for a while.

About halfway to her destination, she came to the top of a slope and saw a man up ahead. Anna was an intuitive person and she said she knew without a doubt that he meant her harm. It was too late to go back and take the road –it was a long distance and it would have been very late by the time she got to town. But she feared for her life. She had to figure out something quickly.

Then, in a flash, she knew what she had to do. She filled herself with all the love and compassion she could muster. As she walked quickly toward the man, she breathed in love, and she breathed out love. Over and over. As she and the man came close to each other, she stepped to her right and...he stepped aside. She passed by him, and just kept emanating all the love she could. She didn't dare look back, and she just kept going at the same fast pace. Finally, she reached her destination safely.

It has been said that fear and faith cannot dwell in the same house together. I think that's a helpful idea to remember. I also think that faith does not necessarily mean the absence of fear. Anna was not unafraid. Faith does mean having the courage to "feel the fear and do it anyway." Faith means not allowing fear to paralyze us. It means not allowing despair to permanently crumble our spirits.

It doesn't mean we never have doubts. True faith can't exist without doubt, as surely as there would be no such thing as joy if we didn't also know sorrow. If there is nothing to ever challenge our faith, what is faith worth? It becomes like a fake smile. True faith requires a constant questioning, "This is happening. Can I have faith now?" "How about now?" "Will my faith withstand this test?"

There are many religious institutions which require a person to accept a creed that excludes the possibility of doubt. Tillich says that if doubt is unacceptable, then faith becomes static. It becomes a non-questioning surrender to the ultimate, but it also becomes a surrender to the infallibility of the statements and even to the religious authorities themselves. Any questioning becomes a threat to their faith. That is not what I would call a living faith.

Every act of faith involves risk. Is my faith strong enough to carry me through? We can't really know unless our faith is tested. We know that many Jews rejected their God after the Holocaust. They could not reconcile their understanding of a just God with the horrors they experienced. Their faith was in a God who would not allow such terrible things to happen.

Now, none of us can predict how our faith would fare in any situation which we have not yet experienced. But I believe that the strongest faith is dynamic. It's in the acts of testing that it can become stronger. It's in having to face pain and difficulty that we have to grapple with our doubts, which can lead to new and deeper understandings of faith. This kind of faith is a living faith.

The Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg writes about a time when she entered a realm of suffering that left her without faith for a time. When she was nine, she had witnessed her mother's death. She thought that she had tucked her pain safely away. But one day in meditation, it came pouring out, into her consciousness.

For days, she was overwhelmed by grief and pain. She says that she was unable to access her faith. She sat, doubled over, with despair lodged in the pit of her stomach. She knew that trying to escape from her pain would only make it worse, yet to face it felt like more than she could handle.

Thinking about the courage and faith of one of her mentors, who had experienced a lot of suffering and loss, enabled Saltzberg to rely on this woman's faith when her own had dried up. It gave her the courage she needed to "explore the ball of suffering" in her stomach. As she did so, she felt her armor of despair begin to soften. She eventually had a breakthrough and she says, "I knew with sudden conviction that no matter how deep my despair, life is always there and its essence is this inclusiveness I felt as love; it is big enough to contain whatever sorrow or brokenness might arise...I was rocked by faith in that enormous sense of life.

She says that doubt, in her experience, "is an intrinsic part of genuine faith." In the time between falling from womb to tomb, from one blackness and toward another, it may be that the place in which we find faith is in the present moment. Because that is all we ever have. Sometimes there is nothing else to rely on and nowhere else to go. Moment by moment, we become open to possibilities; we gain patience, strength and courage. (Saltzberg) We become willing, however timidly, to "place our hands within the hole which opens at the center of the column of truth." (Stephen King) When you think about it, really, we have faith, one moment at a time.