**The Knights of Faith:
From Abraham and Kierkegaard to a 21st-Century Unitarian**

The word *faith* has as many interpretations as it does people who use the word. There’s the kind of faith that gets you out of bed in the morning, stumbling toward that first cup of coffee. Faith that the guy coming toward you at 60 miles an hour will stay in his lane. Faith that your family will be OK, no matter how bad things may look today. And for some, faith in God.

We all have faith. If we didn’t, we would find it very hard to invest in the future. And by investing, I mean caring, backed by action. Caring enough to do more than just survive. Faith in a better future propels us to love and teach our children, to become active in causes that are greater than ourselves. I have not yet met a person in this church who isn’t concerned about something larger than themselves. And they don’t just talk about it, they act on it.

Today I’d like to talk about faith in *being.* Not faith in *a* being but in our own *beingness.* This faith isn’t subject to investigation—except in retrospect. It requires us to step out on a ledge *before* we can see the view. And this kindof being is of the Shakespearean variety. “To Be or not to Be”—that truly *is* the question. Is it enough to survive—even if it’s in comfort? Or are we obliged to live as fully as possible?

I’ll give you a brief history of how I came to trust this faith in being. For several years now, I’ve had a qi gong practice—it’s a very gentle form of martial arts that incorporates the breath. One morning in 2002, while still living in Denver, I unexpectedly added something at the end of my practice. Standing there, opening my palms, I added a “spoken” vow, though I said it to myself. I said, “I promise to go anywhere, do anything, to reach my highest self and achieve the greatest good.”

I was shocked to hear those words emanating from my own mind. It was more like they were imposed upon me rather than coming from somewhere inside me. I don’t know about you, but I was terrified to make such a vow.

I thought, *“What am I saying?* What if I’m asked to work in a halfway house in the Bronx? Or to walk across the country, like Peace Pilgrim?” Surely *she* must have promised to go anywhere, do anything, too.

And to whom was I making this promise? God? The Universe? Myself?

Faith is often thought of as faith in God or a set of beliefs. But it can also mean fidelity to oneself or one’s promises.

Søren Kierkegaard, the 19th-century Danish philosopher/theologian, thought the best example of faith came from the Bible, from the story of Abraham and Isaac. He calls Abraham the Knight of Faith. Does anyone not know the story? {It’s recorded in Genesis, and tells how God commanded Abraham to make a burnt offering of his *most* beloved son, Isaac.}

Kierkegaard—who’s widely considered the father of existentialism—imagines in his book *Fear and Trembling* four different scenarios in which Abraham follows God’s command. But the outcome of each is the same: Abraham goes—and nearly goes too far, picking up the knife to cut his son’s throat, same as he’d cut the throat of any sacrificial animal, before an angel of God intervenes to stop him.

In the biblical account, God is testing Abraham and finds him worthy. But in life, we each must test our own faith, whether in God or in life itself.

Though Kierkegaard admires Abraham and considers him the exemplar of faith, he falls short of Abraham’s ability to act. Kierkegaard has placed his faith in a doctrine—the Bible—whereas Abraham had a direct relationship with—and faith in—God. Though Kierkegaard swore he had faith in God, he lacked the willingness to act on that faith, and faith without willingness is like a car without wheels. It won’t take us very far.

Kierkegaard eventually resigned his life “to spirit” and “to mind,” which meant he could not live a fully human life, though early on, that was exactly what he wrote in his journals that he wanted to do. As a younger man, he and his contemporary, Regine Olsen, fell in love and were engaged to be married. But Søren broke off their engagement because he was afraid of his bouts of depression—and his refusal became a kind of prison of the mind. He didn’t trust himself or life *or* the god he professed to believe in. He called himself the Knight of Resignation. He rationalized his fear, saying it was enough to surrender to God. But he didn’t surrender to God; he surrendered to fear, a kind of unreasonable, existential fear.

Abraham did not suffer existential angst, even when God asked him to do the unthinkable—to sacrifice the son he and Sarah had waited a lifetime for.

In Genesis—just before he issues the dreadful command—God, calls Abraham’s name, and Abraham responds, “Here I Am.”

*[Pause for a long time]*

I imagine him bent over his work in a field, then standing, looking around for God, maybe cocking an ear—ready to listen. The Torah commentary that accompanies this story says, “the Hebrew term *hineni,* though hard to translate directly, means ‘Here I am,’ and indicates readiness, alertness, attentiveness, receptivity, and responsiveness to instructions.”

These are precisely the qualities we need in order to attune ourselves to life’s invitations. So finely tuned was Abraham to the will of God that he lived as if he *were* God, a state that goes beyond even faith into actualization. He had no use for existentialism—he was pure existence itself. We can become that kind of existence if we say yes to life’s invitations—especially when they put us beyond the edge of our comfort zone.

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So back to my morning in 2002. A funny thing happened after I made that vow. I *was* asked to do a lot of things that *terrified* me. But they were all things that at some secret place, I knew I was capable of doing—and maybe even wanted to do.

Those of you who know me won’t believe this, but as a child and into my teens, I was terribly shy. That is still my fundamental nature. So a month after my promise, when I was asked to serve as the president of my historic neighborhood in Denver, as a private person I didn’t want to get involved in the volatile politics, let alone in a visible role. But I remembered my promise and, *acting on it,* I accepted. Ultimately I found the work of community far more rewarding than the work I was being *paid* to do in my business.

When a client asked me to officiate her wedding, I wanted to say no, *heck no*. My own marriage having failed, I didn’t feel qualified to stand before others to unite two people in matrimony. But I remembered my promise and said yes. Then I struggled to write the ceremony, because I didn’t really believe in marriage and so felt a little like a hypocrite.

But by saying yes, I had acted on my faith, and my faith did not disappoint. *However,* not having written a word of the ceremony—and less than a week to go—I was starting to feel pretty desperate. One morning I awoke, having dreamed at least the contents of the opening invocation. I went downstairs to write it while still fresh in my mind. My computer—an Apple, which almost never crashed—did so three times in a row, just as I finished typing the prayer. Fed up, I walked into the other room and started flipping through a magazine. I happened upon a one-column article by the Buddhist monk Joseph Goldstein on the subject of freedom within commitment, which gave me a point of view I hadn’t even considered. The idea that one can actually have more freedom within a commitment gave me an authentic voice from which to speak—one I *could* believe in. I wrote the entire ceremony within the next hour—in long hand, just to be safe!

A couple of months later, I had an opportunity to run for City Council in the most politically and racially divided district in Denver. I wanted to run away instead of run. But I remembered my promise and ran a campaign that informed the citizens about the malignant influence of lobbyists on their city government. Did I win? No. But that wasn’t the point. The point was to move into that space and achieve as much good as possible.

And that promise also brought me to Taos. One Sunday, again after doing qi gong, I said to God, or to the divine spark I believe is in each of us: “If you think it’s a good idea for me to be a more global citizen, then find a buyer for my house.” My house was not on the market, and I’d not thought of selling it. I was happy in Denver and loved my home, a beautiful three-story Victorian filled with light, angles, and curves.

But two weeks earlier—over the July 4th weekend—I’d had a dream filled with symbols of transportation and growth. The morning after the dream, I quickly typed it up then left for Como, Colorado, an old western town in South Park. A friend had lent me her cottage there so I could recuperate from the exhaustion of running a political campaign. Every symbol from the dream was manifested into my waking life over the next week in Como: a cowboy in a pickup truck … a pilot … a single train engine in the middle of an old Western town, standing water irrigating a field of sagebrush. Obviously I’ve come to see dreams as a sort of conduit to the unconscious mind—or is it to the Divine Mind?

After spending the whole week trying to interpret the dream’s meaning (combined with a lot of introspection and reading Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer,* which isabout, in a word, fertility), I finally realized the dream was showing me that I had lived a productive life, had fulfilled my obligations to the species, my family, my community … and now I could live a more creative life.

That and discussions with a man in Como, who had a satellite dish on his roof, also revealed something I’d not thought of before: I could take my business anywhere in the world as long as I had high-speed internet. I thought, *Gee, it might be interesting to live for six months to a year at a time in places like New York or London or Paris. Maybe I’d do that for the next five or ten years…and then settle down again.*

So just an hour or two after saying those words that Sunday morning and opening to the possibility of selling my house and being a more “global” citizen, my chiropractor called. He said there’d been a fire at his office building the week before, and, knowing that I lived in a row of Victorians occupied for the most part by natural healers, he asked if I might be interested in selling my house. … I couldn’t say no. After all, this was a direct, immediate response—not to a plea but to an idea, to a non-invested willingness.

He came with his fiancée to look at the house that very afternoon. Next day, he asked if I was willing to part with it and I said … YES. He put his house on the market, and it sold the day after that. He made the perfect offer for mine, and I accepted it.

Again I said to — *whomever* — “You did such a great job finding a buyer for my house, I’m not even going to look for a place to live. You tell me where I should go, but make sure there’s no doubt in my mind that’s where I belong.”

Two days later, meeting with friends for cocktails downtown before the Friday-night art walk, I met one of *their* friends—a woman who was visiting from Taos—Kathleen Smith, the pastel artist. I sat down next to her at the table on the patio of the restaurant. After introductions, she turned to me and said, “I have an opportunity to work in Denver for six months, and I’d like to take it. But I don’t want to give up my little Taos adobe.” Immediately remembering my “If you, then I’ll…” bargain, I said, without hesitation, “I’ll take your little Taos adobe.” I took it sight unseen, selling or giving away nine-tenths of my possessions to fit into a 450-square-foot casita.

The whole move—from that first admission of my willingness to act until my standard poodle, Calvin, and I were ensconced on Upper Ranchitos Road in Taos—took just over a month. It was a rural setting just a mile from the center of town. High-speed internet had just been extended that far. In the field next to the casita lived a man with a long beard and three goats. Huge characters incised over one whole side of his metal trailer read: “GOD LIVES.” That late summer was the most gorgeous I’ve seen here, the fields surrounding the casita lavish with yellow daisies and purple asters, accented by the bright-red scarf tied (for some reason) about the billy goat’s horn.

I’m not saying it wasn’t painful leaving Denver. Sitting with my two children in the midst of the move—my youngest having just finished her first year at CU Boulder—and sifting through the contents and memories of our lives—all the drawings they’d made, the cards they’d painted, the papers they’d written—asking for their help in deciding what to keep and what to discard—I asked myself, *Why on Earth did you bring all this hard work on yourself?*

But has that hard work ever been worth it!

Here in Taos, I fell in love for the first time in my life, though I’d previously been married for over 20 years. Here, I finished my long delayed bachelor’s degree at UNM (thanks to my partner, Michael, who suggested I might like Larry Torres’s linguistics class, which I did!) and, two years after that, I received a master’s degree from St. John’s (thanks to my daughter, Ellie, who said, “Mommy, this college is perfect for you.” And to Michael and my friend Bonnie Black. When after a year, I felt overwhelmed by the twice weekly commute to Santa Fe, the huge volume of philosophical reading and writing, the time spent in class, and still meeting my clients’ daily deadlines, Michael and Bonnie added fuel to the fumes of my own faith that it could be done.

I guess the most important part is that I found my gravitational center in Taos—easily dismissing my supposed *need* to be a more “global citizen.”

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I’m not saying that any of these are great accomplishments. They’re not. Far more significant things have been achieved by many in this congregation. And nothing I was asked to do came close to sacrificing my children, as Abraham was commanded to do (although I *did* have to move a state away).

Still, what sets them apart from everyday decision-making is that each step was taken in faith—almost against my will, just as surely as it must have been against Abraham’s will to obey God when commanded to sacrifice his son.

But will and willingness could not be more opposite concepts. Each of the passages that eventually brought me to Taos was the result of fidelity to a vow, the embodiment of a promise I’d made—essentially to myself—that I would go anywhere, do anything, to reach my highest self and achieve the greatest good. Acting on faith, I had learned to trust faith because I’d found it trust-*worthy.*

And finally (at least for now), faith in that promise brought me to this congregation, a place that I feel is truly a spiritual home in a way the Baptist church of my youth never was. (Each time the lay minister says, “All beliefs are welcome here,” you can almost feel us take a collective breath of acceptance.)

It even prompted me to overcome my stage fright to talk to you today about Faith in Being, a subject that may seem almost taboo in a Unitarian Church. Yet this church allows the kind of freedom I’ve been talking about, the freedom to expand into the rafters if that’s what you’re capable of doing—and you are. … We’re all capable of doing it. … We just need faith. And we must be willing to test that faith by acting on it.

Thank you.