

**Essay Title:** Faith Reduced to Three Questions

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THEOLOGIAN PAUL TILlich HAS WRITTEN, "There is hardly a word in the religious language—both theological and popular—which is subject to more misunderstandings, distortions, and questionable definitions than the word, faith."

Faith is one of those religious terms that not all UUs can use comfortably in daily discourse. This is unfortunate, because Unitarian Universalism has always used faith language.

One problem is that "faith" is confused with the word, "creed"—a set of specific, often unchanging, even mandatory, beliefs. Faith and creed are not synonyms. Creed comes from the Latin "credo" which does not mean "belief" but means "I set my heart to." It signifies loyalty, allegiance, honor and value.

Another linguistic problem for UUs is the association of faith with belief that defies logic, proof, or evidence, such as a belief in a supernatural power that must be accepted without question. "Blind faith" is a term most of us have heard.

Sharon Parks defines faith as the "activity of making meaning." To theologian Paul Tillich, "Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned." And, wrote religious historian William Cantwell Smith, "Faith at its best has taken the form of a quiet confidence and joy which enables one to feel at home in the universe."

There are three simple questions we can ask ourselves individually and collectively to identify, articulate, and live out our faith.

Those questions are What? So what? and Now what?

The "what" is any new knowledge, input, or stimuli we encounter. The "what" can be a film, a book, a class, a concert, a death, a sunrise.

"So what?" is where we make meaning, judge value, discern what is right and wrong, seek to understand and find purpose. "So what?" is an act of faith development. "So what?" asks, "What do I set my heart to?" We are pretty good at "so what?" We are inquisitive and resourceful. We explore and question and even ponder, and we come together in our religious communities for supportive and challenging companions in our search for truth and meaning.

*Continued*

Page 2 / Faith Reduced to Three Questions

“Now What?” refers to what am I called to do? Given what I know; and what I understand, and what I value, what am I called to *do*? Our own Hosea Ballou wrote: “There is one inevitable criterion of judgment touching religious faith in doctrinal matters and that is, “Can you reduce it to practice? If not, have none of it.” In other words, it is not faith until we act upon it in the world.

“Now what?” is where we take our faith, our principles, and our values, out onto what Jane Addams called “the thronged and common road.” Now what? can require time, commitment, and even courage. “Now what?” challenges us to respond to these words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

Clinton Lee Scott wrote, “Faith is a very simple thing until it gets in the hand of theologians. It is not a mystical, mysterious something belonging only to religion. It is one of the conditions by which we live.”

Our answers to three simple questions can help us live more mindfully, more meaningfully—one might even say, more faithfully.

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