

Faith for the Unbeliever

Facilitator's Guide

by Daniel Chesney Kanter and Gretchen Haley

Welcome to the facilitator's guide for the book *Faith for the Unbeliever*. This book offers a framework for spiritual reflection for Unitarian Universalists. It attempts to expand the vocabulary of faith from something strictly owned by committed Christians or other religious people to include UUs in a way that helps them ask important questions of their spiritual lives. The conversation this class can have is not a strictly intellectual one that critiques the book or seeks answers to big theological questions. Rather, it should open a trusting space for participants to talk about their struggles around faith and religious language and where the search they are on is taking them, to explore their own life stories, and to find connections with others.

This class can be led by lay or clergy for a small or large group. It could be used to introduce new UUs to an exercise of discernment in our style of inquiry or as a theological reflection tool with average members and leaders of a congregation. If the class has more than 10 or 12 participants, it will be important to have room for small-group discussion among two to six participants at times during the class. Each class can be an hour to two hours long, depending on the circumstances of the congregation or group. The creators of this guide have found it easier to lead such a class on Sunday afternoons or weekday evenings.

Before teaching this class, you should read the book and spend time reflecting and writing responses to the questions at the end of each chapter to clarify your own positions. Before the first class, it is helpful to offer participants books for purchase or direct them to [inSpirit: The UU Book and Gift Shop](#) to buy the book. It is also helpful for the class to read the chapter of focus for each class before they arrive. This means that for the opening class, you should instruct participants to read the foreword, introduction, and chapter one.



Class 1: Faith and Belief

Length of class: 90 minutes

Materials: chalice, lighter or matches, copy of the Czeslaw Milosz poem "[Faith](#)"

Chalice Lighting and Welcome (3 minutes)

Welcome everyone. For those who haven't yet purchased the book, explain that they can get a copy from [inSpirit: The UU Book and Gift Shop](#).

Light the chalice and read this quote from chapter 1, pages 12–13, of *Faith for the Unbeliever*:

My long journey to reclaim the Unitarian Universalist tradition of my upbringing started with questions about faith. For me, the questions themselves were lanterns in the dark. They asked: Does my faith change my life for the better? What God do I believe in? And: Can I be a person of faith without believing in a supreme being? Life is a miracle. In the end, we might have to carefully balance the poles of faith and doubt and be willing to be grasped by something ultimate. Our job is to do our best to hold gently the strands of certainty and uncertainty, faith and doubt, which pull us in directions we might not expect. The trick is to walk the middle path and not pull too hard on either one so that we can see what is in front of our eyes honestly and confidently. To walk the middle path means to believe in things that are true enough, but to maintain an eternal "maybe, maybe not" as we pass through life's experiences, open to the possibility that we are wrong.

Read the poem "Faith" by Czeslaw Milosz to the group.

Opening Connections (5 minutes)

For groups of 12 or fewer, this can be done around the circle. If the group is larger, break into pairs.



Invite each person to share:

- their name
- what brought them to this series
- a question that's on their minds or hearts as the class begins

If you are working in pairs, ask for any volunteers willing to share questions that are present. Write them down.

Using your own reading of the book and the introductory paragraph in this study guide, explain how this book is a chance to explore what is important to each participant, reclaim language of faith, and converse with each other about their exploration in Unitarian Universalism. Tell the class that it can be helpful to journal about the questions in the book chapters prior to coming to class. Explain to the class that the book is a tool to take back the idea of faith from the paradigm that faith is belief. In this exploration, the idea of "faith" is that it is an orientation to life and one gets there not by accepting a dogmatic position but by exploring one's life for meaning. Explain how the book is a collection of stories that give examples of "faithful" people who live out aspects of this new paradigm. It isn't a full explanation of the idea of faith or an academic attempt to explain it. Rather, it is one framework for serious spiritual exploration or a way to separate out of the big concept of faith some more common understandings of it like trust and loyalty.

Explain faith as a concept as described in the introduction on page xiii. Read the following:

We have been sold a bill of goods when it comes to faith. We have been told we either have it or we don't. After some careful thinking on this, I believe that is completely wrong. We all have faith, but we rarely define it in ways that can help us.

Discuss the quote with the class. Ask them, what does this mean to you?

Explain that the intention of the author is to bring about a new paradigm for the idea of faith. The old paradigm, which we fall into easily because we get tripped up by traditional language or have only been taught that faith is the same as belief, pulls us into a false narrative that says we are unfaithful. The truth is that through some exploration and reflection, we can see that we are faithful to the core. Faith as a belief paradigm is thin and lacks depth for spiritual reflection.

Invite conversation response with these questions: What do you have faith in today? How do you understand it?

Pairs (15 minutes)

Play this National Public Radio [story](#) from the “This I Believe” series by Joel Engardio. Ask the class: What did you hear in the story?

Invite the class to discuss these questions in pairs for 10 minutes:

- What was the faith paradigm of your childhood?
- Has it changed and how?
- What were you taught to believe and has that changed?

Return the class to the large group for discussion on what they heard or found out in those conversations.

Large Group Review (20 minutes)

Explain that this class is an exploration of the themes in chapter 1, particularly the difference the author understands between belief and faith. In your own words, summarize the following concepts for the class:

There is a difference between belief and faith. Everyone has beliefs because they are guideposts for decision-making. For most people, some of their beliefs change every day and some never change. Some people can become rigid or overly certain in their beliefs. We have to ask ourselves if it is possible to believe in nothing. Atheism doesn't mean belief in nothing at all. Belief and faith are not the same thing, but faith statements often start in figuring out what you believe. Do you believe in God? Do you believe in some force that guides you? Do your beliefs sustain you as a spiritual person?

At one time, the word *belief* meant “to hold dear” or “to set your heart upon something.” It has evolved to mean something used in religion to determine whether something is real or not. Belief as a proposition to accept or reject is a fragile thing, but using the original definition of “setting the heart on something” frees us to see belief more like a journey, which does not prevent the heartbreak of a broken belief.

Discussion (10 minutes)

Ask the class to discuss these questions as a whole:

- What in the chapter challenged or intrigued you?
- What in it is confusing to you?
- What do you set your heart upon?

Activity: Certainty/Doubt Spectrum (5 minutes)

Invite the class to do an exercise. This can be done either by physically moving into a line or asking the class to write down a number on a sheet of paper that ranks their responses. If the class can move into a line physically follow these instructions:

You will need a hallway or room where everyone in the group can line up. This exercise is designed to create an opportunity to talk about why participants believe or disbelieve something and why they hold their belief or disbelief with whatever level of certainty they do.

Ask the class to line up on an atheist/theist spectrum. On one end of the line is “absolutely disbelieve in God” and on the other end is “absolutely believe in God.” Ask the class to turn to the person next to them and tell them why they are standing there.

Then ask the class to arrange themselves (maybe shifting their position, maybe not) on a spectrum of certainty, with one end being, “I am absolutely certain of my position on the atheist/theist spectrum,” and the other end being, “I have no idea and I’ll probably change my mind in an hour or less.”

If you are asking them to rank responses on paper follow these directions:

Distribute paper and pens. Ask the class to rank themselves numerically on an atheist/theist spectrum. One being “absolutely disbelieve in God” and on the other end Ten being “absolutely believe in God.” Ask the class to turn to the person next to them and tell them why they are ranked in this way.

Then ask the class to arrange turn the paper over and rank themselves on a spectrum of certainty, with one being, “I am absolutely certain of my position on the atheist/theist spectrum,” and ten being, “I have no idea and I’ll probably change my mind in an hour or less.”

Discuss as a group if and why participants moved to a different position on the spectrum and the process they used to decide.

Describe this process as a simplified way to explore belief.

Closing (3 minutes)

Read the quote from theologian Paul Tillich on page 11 of *Faith for the Unbeliever*.

Extinguish chalice.

Remind the class that the assignment for the next meeting is to read the chapter "Trust" and journal on the questions at the end of the chapter.



Class 2: Trust

Length of Class: 90 minutes

Materials: Chalice, lighter or matches, and one-page [handout](#) (“Sharon Welch and an Ethic of Risk”)

Set-up: For groups of 12 or fewer, chairs are set up in a circle. For larger groups, arrange chairs in a lecture style. There needs to be enough room in the space to move around and to allow the participants to make a line.

Chalice lighting and welcome (3 minutes)

Welcome everyone to the class. Because there may be some newcomers, be sure everyone is familiar with the book and how to get a copy.

Light the chalice and read the poem “First Lesson” by Phillip Booth, on page 17 in *Faith for the Unbeliever*.

Opening Connections (5 minutes)

For groups of 12 or fewer, this can be done around the circle. If the group is larger, break into pairs.

Invite each person to share:

- their name
- something that they’re still sitting with from last week, or from the reading.

If you are working in pairs, ask for volunteers willing to share questions that are present. Write them down.

Large Group Review (5 minutes)

If the prior section was done in pairs, invite the large group to lift up questions that are present in the room.

Remind the class of the kind of “faith” you are discussing. In your own words, say something like the following:



Faith is living through the lens of the four orientations outlined in the book—belief, trust, loyalty, and worldview—and having them be active in our thinking about who we are and how we respond to the world. We traditionally think of faith as a noun, but we can reconceive of it as a verb. It's not something to possess but a process to deepen our responses to the world. The faith window—the design on the cover of the book—illustrates the idea that our faith is composed of these four orientations and that, to see faith clearly for ourselves, we need to explore each dimension of it. This allows us to compose an idea of why we are who we are and what we want to deepen about our spirituality, responses to life, and presence in the world. The task is to do the segmented work of consideration in these four areas and then step back and consider what we see about who we are. Another way to discuss this is to ask the question: Who is the most faithful person in my life? And then to ask: Is this person faithful because of their life orientation, religious conviction, or the way they live, or all of these things?

Optional Activity (10 minutes)

Show the class the video clip "[Leap of Faith](#)" from the movie *Despicable Me*.


Ask the class to think about the following questions after the video:

- What leaps of trust have you made in your life?
- What would you need to make such a jump?

Discussion (15 minutes)

In your own words, describe trust as an ingredient of faith. This is the dimension of faith we're referring to when we say things like "I have faith in you."

Ask the class these key questions on the theme of trust:

- What are the sources of trust in your life?
 - On a scale from one (not trusting at all) to ten (extremely trusting) where are you and why?
 - What challenges your trust?
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Optional discussion points:

It may be important for you to acknowledge that some people have the privilege in life to trust others easily. For example, someone who is a six-foot-tall, straight, white male might live life with a foundation of trust that those who have been marginalized for their race, gender, appearance, or gender identity might not have. On the other hand, if this same person had a traumatic experience that changed the foundation of trust for them, their privilege may not be active.

It may be helpful to remember that there are different forms of trust at work: trust in self, trust in other people, trust in life or a universal sense of time, etc. To illustrate this, you can talk about how trusting a person isn't the same as trusting life as a whole. Talk about how we learn to trust people as a prelude to a deeper trust in our presence and comfort in the world.

Learning Pairs (7 minutes)

Read the following quote from Unitarian Theologian James Luther Adams's essay "A Faith for the Free":

"The first tenet of the free person's faith is that our ultimate dependence for being and freedom is upon a creative power and upon processes not of our own making."

Tell participants that what we do in the circumstances of our lives beyond our own choosing teaches us about the deepest form of trust.

Invite participants to get into pairs and share on the following with their partners, switching after three minutes:

- Is Adams's statement true for you?
- Do you relate to the idea of faith as trust? How are these things the same or different in your mind?
- What questions are you considering?

Remind participants to practice "Step up/Step back," in which individuals are invited to do the opposite of their usual inclination: Those who tend to talk more are invited to make space for others and those who often keep quiet are invited to lean in and share more.

Large Group Review (5 minutes)

When the group concludes the pair conversations, invite the large group to share together about their reflections and insights.

Trust Orientations (7 minutes)

Review with the class the different definitions from *Faith for the Unbeliever* for the following categories:

- Trusting: showing or tending to have a belief in a person's honesty or sincerity; not suspicious
- Skeptical: not easily convinced; having doubts or reservations
- Cynical: believing that people are motivated by self-interest; distrustful of human sincerity or integrity
- Nihilistic: rejecting all religious and moral principles in the belief that life is meaningless

Invite the class to line up according to how they see themselves on a spectrum of these four categories, with trusting on one end and nihilistic on the other. Remind them of the chalice lighting: This is about trust not in a person but in life itself.

Ask each participant to find someone who is on a different place on the trust spectrum, and get into conversation pairs.

Alternatively as in the first session you can ask them to rank themselves numerically with the number one being intrinsically trusting and the number ten being the opposite end of the spectrum. In this way no one has to move from where they are physically in the class.

Conversation Pairs (10 minutes)

Encourage the class to use this format for dyad conversations:

- One person is sharing, one is listening.
- Practice the pause—let the stories sink in, pause before the immediate reaction.
- Notice what you are feeling in your body. Along the way, the listener might gently nudge someone out of abstraction or nonspecific sharing with prompts like:
 - Tell me what you mean when you use that word.

- Put some bones on that idea for me.
- Can you tell a story to illustrate that?
- Can you connect this back to the questions that brought you here?
- When the story is done, the listener reflects on the need the person expressed.

Ask the pairs to take turns answering these prompts:

- Tell about an experience in your life in which you learned a “trust lesson.”
- What was its lasting impact on you?

After five minutes, prompt pairs to switch.

Closing (3 minutes)

Share the information from the [Sharon Welch handout](#) with the class to have them take home as optional additional reading.

Read “First Lesson” again.

Extinguish chalice.



Class 3: Loyalty and Covenant as Faithfulness

Length of Class: 90 minutes to 2 hours, depending on length of conversations

Materials: Chalice, lighter or matches, pen and paper for anyone who may not have brought these with them

Set-up: For groups of 12 or fewer, chairs are set up in a circle. For larger groups, arrange chairs in a lecture style. There should be enough room in the space to move around and to allow the participants to make a line.

Chalice Lighting and Welcome (5 minutes)

Welcome everyone to the class. Light the chalice with these words from Alice Blair Wesley in her Minns Lectures:

We human beings are promising creatures, in more than one sense. We are born with promise, potential, we do not and cannot create, with the promise of intelligence, of appreciation, of creativity, of cooperation—and most importantly—of love.

We human beings are promising creatures, too, in the sense that we can only do great and worthy things—indeed we can only survive—when we make and keep promises of loyalty and faithfulness to the ways of love with others. For distinct and different as we are as individuals, we are also thoroughly social creatures. The options and choices we have as individuals are effected and affected by those of others; our decisions and actions and inaction effect and affect many others. None of us can fulfill our promise as individuals without the faithfulness and loyalty of many others.

We human beings are also promise-breaking creatures. We violate our covenants in petty, small ways and in tragic, disastrous ways. Whether we do so out of sheer forgetfulness or poorly ordered priorities or ignorance or for motives we ourselves cannot admire, ill consequences are real for the whole interdependent web.

We human beings, especially in a culture so complex as ours, are part of many communities. We need one—our freely covenanted church community—in which our purpose is to be reminded of and to take account of the promising character of human beings in the widest possible sense,

that we may answer the summons, the call of all that is holy to live with authenticity and integrity and joy and resolve.

Provide a brief overview of the class and say that it will be exploring faith as loyalty, the practice of covenant, and worldview.

Opening Connections (5 minutes)

Invite the class to form small groups of four to six people and discuss the following:

- What do we promise each other in our congregation?
- What are you promised here?

Large Group Review (8 minutes)

Invite the large group to lift up questions and feelings that are present in the room. Listen to the promises that hold your class and religious community together.

Say something like the following about the concept of faith as loyalty, using your own words:

Faith as loyalty is another dimension of faith and the topic of the third chapter in *Faith for the Unbeliever*. The word *loyalty* conveys an enduring commitment. Faith can be described as loyalty to God, but it doesn't have to be to God. Faith could also simply be a quality of an allegiance, a commitment of the self at the deepest level, or a pledge of heart. But let's consider fidelity to God while avoiding narrow definitions of God. God is a notion of the numinous reality of a mystery beyond our comprehension. Some theologians say God is beyond and within. Treating God as an object is akin to idolatry, which seems like the opposite of faith. Faith can be a way to have fidelity in life itself. Loyalty counterbalances idolatry because it requires us to put attention beyond the things in our lives and instead on the highest purpose we can conceive of. It asks us, What is the highest purpose, the ultimate goal of humanity? Our lives? The congregation we are in? The community we live in?

Quiet Reflection (8 minutes)

Invite participants to spend a few moments in quiet, individual reflection. Hand out a pen and paper to anyone who may not have brought these with them.

Ask participants to take some notes as they consider the following:

- To whom or to what are you loyal? Make a list.
- How are your loyalties shaped by your Unitarian Universalist faith and/or your membership in this congregation? Would you say they would be different without Unitarian Universalism or this community?
- What else influences your loyalties?
- What does loyalty mean to you?

Small Group Conversation (20 minutes)

Invite participants to get into groups of 3 or 4. Read the following, from pages 41–42 of *Faith for the Unbeliever*:

Market forces push us to make our ultimate goals the goals of consumerism or greed. These cloud our decision making about things that will ground our spiritual lives. They prevent us from seeing the importance of other people and long-term goals that transcend wealth and accumulation.... Religions have always been about challenging human beings to live for ultimate loyalties that reflect a “holy” way of life. They usually center on ways to bring about and express love, respect, and justice for all, and rarely focus on personal gain and rank.

Ask the class to discuss their response to this quote one at a time, and share their responses to the reflection questions on page 48 in the book. Encourage them to share without cross-talk.

Once everyone has spoken, pause for a few moments before moving into a conversation around this question: Is this loyalty big enough? If not, what would it take to lift the lens of your loyalties to “ultimately commit”? This is an intentional nudge to ask the class if they think they are committed to things that are too self-serving or have missions that are small and have less than ideal impacts. The language of ‘big enough’ and ‘ultimately committed’ are found in the chapter.

Large Group Conversation (8 minutes)

Return to the large group and invite participants to lift up themes they heard in their conversations, along with any reflections they had about faith as loyalty.

In your own words, talk about the covenants we live by, saying something like the following:

A discussion of covenants is a way to describe loyalty as faith; it is a way to go deeper into our moral obligation toward the establishment of a just and loving community as Unitarian Universalists. In his essays *The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern* (1977), James Luther Adams, talks about covenants and faith.

For Adams there is no such thing as a completely isolated being. Human beings are relational beings and bond together as a natural part of our humanity.

His concept of covenant says that the meaning of life is a process of forming relationships and figuring out our responsibilities to each other in groups and through institutions. That means that we are responsible for the character of our society and responsible for the consequences of our actions.

Adams believed that helps us define our responsibility to each other by promoting mercy and justice, which should serve to balance power and favor the voices of the oppressed. Adams believed that covenant is forged between humans in the face of reality, power dynamics, abuses, hopes, evil, and good. And that a covenant is based in the hope that love and affection prevail over legalism.

Because covenant is an adaptable guide for society it should express the essence of freedom and require critical dissent. It should embody the freedom of choice as a perpetual engagement of the community. Therefore, covenant is the practice of faithfulness because it breathes life into communities and requires a mutual trust and accountability toward an agreed upon ultimate concern. In Adams's conception, a betrayal of a covenant is faithlessness, the failure of faith.

Invite the class to discuss James Luther Adams's free faith and his understanding that a powerful and impactful religious institution (voluntary association), where

the congregation holds the hope for communal resistance, is fueled by fidelity to a larger ideal, which we could call discipleship.

Ask the group to discuss this:

- In our congregation and/or in our faith, what would you say we are faithful to (if anything)?
- What is the operative value that we are committed to in the world? How are we “discipling” each other, and ourselves, to this commitment?

Closing (2 minutes)

Read the following quote in *Faith for the Unbeliever*, page 47:

Whoever you are, you may benefit from exploring what is worth your larger commitment beyond your own care, tribal identity, or family. . . . The essential question is: What are you loyal to, and is it big enough?

Extinguish chalice.



Class 4: Worldview as Faith

Length of Class: 90-100 minutes

Materials: chalice, matches or lighter

Set-up: For groups of 12 or fewer, chairs are set up in a circle. For larger groups, arrange chairs in a lecture style.

Chalice Lighting and Welcome (5 minutes)

Welcome everyone to the class.

Light the chalice and read from *Faith for the Unbeliever*, pages 49–50:

Our worldview is how we compose meaning in the world and respond to it. The vision we have of the world pushes us to be honest with ourselves about how we see our lives, to have a “realistic” view of the world.

Opening Connections (7 minutes)

For groups of 12 or fewer, this can be done around the circle. If the group is larger, break into pairs.

Invite each person to share their name and then complete the following sentence: Of the concepts we’ve explored so far, the one that I’ve been wrestling with/confused by/inspired by the most is:

- faith
- belief
- ultimate concern
- trust
- risk
- surrender
- loyalty
- fidelity
- faithfulness
- discipleship
- other

In your own words, summarize the following:

Worldview is the prescription on the eyeglass lenses we have on the world. That prescription changes but has been forged and formed by experiences, our families, the places where we grew up, the values that were taught to us, the prejudices we were ingrained with, the biases we carry, etc. The trick with “worldview” is observing the observer, ourselves. Can we observe ourselves enough to understand how we see the world? One way to do this is to begin with early influences and work toward new commitments or new awakenings. Worldview is ever changing, but we fool ourselves in thinking we don’t have one. So to know our own worldview, however temporary, is to deepen our ability to live “faithfully.” It is true that in a sense we artificially separated out worldview from the other forms of faith in this book. They bleed together and often overlap, but the artificial separation is a way to see them more clearly.

Invite each person to share the following:

- their name
- what influenced the “lenses” they wear in their lives?
- the early values they were taught that shaped how they see the world?

Large Group Review (5 minutes)

If the prior section was done in pairs, invite the large group to lift up questions that are present in the room.

You can choose to either offer your own answers to the questions, or invite the group to share their perspectives.

Worldview as Faithfulness (20 minutes)

In your own words, summarize how the book describes traditional religious worldviews as composed of three options: The world or universe is essentially evil, indifferent, or life-giving. Say something like the following:

One way that religion, especially Christianity, has described this is to tell stories of God’s creation and answer the question: What is its true nature?



If it's evil, this requires forces of good to counteract evil. We need to fear, and we need to protect ourselves. Often this results in rigid rules and rejection of ambiguous religious statements, favoring concrete ones.

If the universe and its movements are indifferent, there's no goal or purpose to anything. This may prompt us to throw up our hands and accept chaos in the world as inevitable. This can lead to nihilism, the idea that the universe, God, and life have no purpose. But it also could be that an indifferent world needs our attention, that even if the purpose is unclear, we as the consciousness of the world can be clear about our purpose. The belief that human beings give the world purpose and meaning is common among progressive religions.

If the universe is essentially life-giving and filled with grace, then it means that a purpose or plan exists and we have a responsibility to carry it out. In this worldview, we take seriously the stewardship of the world's gifts. When there is a purpose, then we need to discern the plan and our part in the whole.

Invite participants to go around, one at a time, and share their reflections in response to the following questions, without cross-talk. Give each person 5 to 6 minutes of uninterrupted sharing time.

- How do you see the world?
- Is the universe evil, indifferent, or life-giving?
- What in your experiences has influenced this worldview?
- What impact does your worldview have on how you live?

Talk together as a group about these questions: Is it true that no worldview is inherently better than others? How can we work to see each other's worldviews as valid? (And should we?)

Closing (20 minutes)

Read from *Faith for the Unbeliever*, page 68:

The personal faith I could connect with demanded that I look at life earnestly, that I respond to the callings and urgings of the deepest places of my spirit, and that I understand that we each make meaning with the lives we lead, whether we are a twenty-two-year old seeker, a grandmother in a

poor city in Kentucky, or a dentist who commits to his community. Each of us can give back to this needy world just by knowing ourselves a little better.

Ask the class these questions:

- Since being in this class and in this exploration together, how do you know yourself a little better?
- What has changed for you about your definition of faith?
- What has been helpful to you about this exploration?

Offer these closing words from *Faith for the Unbeliever*, page 69:

The world does not ask whether we “have faith” or “don’t have faith.” Such binary perspective is limiting, divisive, and at some level abusive. The question I am asking is: what type of faith is possible?

Extinguish chalice.

