

Welcome Morning by Anne Sexton

There is joy in all:
in the hair I brush each morning,
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,
that I rub my body with each morning,
in the chapel of eggs I cook
each morning,
in the outcry from the kettle
that heats my coffee
each morning,
in the spoon and the chair
that cry “hello there, Anne”
each morning,
in the godhead of the table
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon
each morning.

All this is God,
right here in my pea-green house
each morning
and I mean,
though often forget,
to give thanks,
to faint down by the kitchen table
in a prayer of rejoicing
as the holy birds at the kitchen window
peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,
let me paint a thank-you on my palm
for this God, this laughter of the morning,
lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard, dies young.

In her poem, *Welcome Morning*, Anne Sexton reflects how I'd really feel about each morning—if I paused to give it much thought. Instead, I let it go unspoken, not recognizing the joy that is latent in each breakfast I prepare for my family, in each walk I take with our dogs. Yet mingled in that disregard I know that, for me, each morning is a statement of faith. Each day when I put my feet on the floor and greet the day with such casual disregard, I'm committing an act of faith, a faith that continues to develop as I look out on struggle, doubt, and joy through the window of my life.

Why do you decide to get out of bed each morning? We can say that we have to, but we don't. And if you choose to get out of bed each day—and to come here on Sundays—it means you, too, are looking for a window on why you make that choice or are trying to find the words to paint that thank-you on your palm. We're all seeking to understand and solidify the faith that gets us through our days so that the joy we've found doesn't die young. That's an act of faith.

This is not the understanding of faith that I grew up with. Back then, my faith was more like a test. Trust and obey. There was a significant moment when I realized that I just didn't have faith in the teachings I'd grown up with. Eventually, I came to see it wasn't that I didn't have any faith—just that my faith was different, based on something other than what I'd thought it was. Then began the ongoing process of building my faith.

This faith journey hasn't been a linear one. Yet it has led to a firmer foundation built on experiences of and in the world, on words and deeds of those smarter and holier than me, and on a sense of love and acceptance that defies logic. My understanding of this journey gained some structure last summer, when I had the chance to spend the day with Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg. She described the journey of faith as having three interlocking stages: bright faith, verifying faith, and abiding faith.

My bright faith burst forth while practicing Zen and when my partner and I found our first Unitarian Universalist church. In both experiences, I saw possibilities I'd never dreamed of. As I followed the lights that shone for me, I found a path that made sense and experienced a joyous connection that was mind-blowing. These were heady experiences, sitting across from my Zen teacher, thinking, "Man, this guy has got it together! If only I could be so wise." There were moments in our Wayzata church when I'd think, "Why can't the whole world be like this?" But if I'd stopped there, the faith wouldn't have sustained me. As events soon showed, faith had to rest on something deeper than just a teacher or even a community.

At the church by the lake in Minnesota, I experienced board meetings that dragged until midnight, infighting, and pettiness that I'd never thought would emerge in a faith community. I discovered that people are always people, that sometimes the passion of faith causes emotions to run higher and arguments to become more personal. But I knew that the church community was still struggling to find how best to live this faith, and it and I were both bound to make mistakes. I also learned that those mistakes didn't cause them or me to abandon one another.

Bright faith is an exciting time, and it can also be a dangerous time. It's the pitfalls of bright faith that lead so many of us to develop negative attitudes toward faith. Too often during that rush of excitement, while that openness to this heady emotion is paired with vulnerability and innocence, people are taken advantage of. My Zen teacher, this person whom I greatly respected, who really taught me the meaning of the Buddhist practice that's been central to my faith, took advantage of his position with a student. He initially denied accusations of having an inappropriate sexual relationship with a member of the Buddhist community. When confronted, he finally admitted his wrongdoing and resigned from his position as teacher. His actions had great ramifications in his own life and within his family, as well as in the faith community that he had founded.

Many people, disillusioned with the actions of their teacher, left the sangha; many may have left Buddhism altogether. That can happen when faith is rooted in a teacher or scripture rather than in the practice itself. The Buddha understood this issue. That's why he said, "Don't cling to what I say; see whether it works in your life. If it does, then follow those teachings; if it doesn't, then throw it out." I think the Buddha would be dismayed to see how many followers have made him into a god.

Some of the stories told of Sufi teacher Nasrudin help us realize that teachers aren't meant to be put on pedestals. One such story tells of a student who saw Nasrudin dropping bread crumbs around his garden. He asked his teacher why he was doing that, and Nasrudin replied, "to keep away the tigers." "But master, there aren't any tigers within a hundred miles of here." Nasrudin replied, "Effective, isn't it?"

Bright faith can become blind faith when we are too attached and don't question. When the teacher or book or experience runs into a moment in reality that it hadn't anticipated or prepared us for, then the attachment is either dogmatically reasserted (ignoring reality and bowing to authority), or it is destroyed. When the attachment is destroyed, the bright light of faith is extinguished, and that faith is gone. Authority is an important component of faith. But all sources of authority are fallible and open to abuse. None deserves absolute, unquestioning, unfailing loyalty; if a source demands it, then it's really time to ask questions.

This is why Salzberg encourages the continuation along the path of faith to her second stage, verifying faith. Verifying faith is the practice of deepening faith. We engage our brains and our own experiences as faith moves from out there to inside us, as authority moves from something external to something inside. Part of this practice is defining and refining what our faith means. At this stage, everything is open for questions. The teacher, the text, the experience are all subject to reflection and deeper discernment. Faith is less an experience and more a practice, an effort to enlarge our understanding and deepen our personal connections.

Salzberg likens faith to looking at the world through a straw. During the bright faith stage, we peer through a narrow straw. When events in the world happen outside of our little straw, we don't know how to deal with them. As we test our faith during the verifying stage, we're forced to enlarge that straw, allowing more of the world in. This means being willing to let other views into our worldviews and being willing to listen and learn. We grow our faith through questioning what we're told and exploring what we don't know. My Hebrew Bible teacher in seminary, Carolyn Pressler, said knowledge is like the air inside a balloon: The more you know, the bigger the balloon gets. But the air outside the balloon is all the things we don't know. So as our balloon gets bigger and touches more of that air, we begin to understand how little we really know. During this process of verifying, we gain a sense of humility.

If an article of faith can't stand up to reason, then doubt needs to guide us to deeper inspection of that belief. Does our faith help us deal with real suffering in the world? Does it help us in such a way that we aren't externalizing or demonizing or ignoring most of the world in order to make sense of how things are? Does it help us to, if not understand, at least come to some peace with our own mortality and the death of those we love? From sitting at the bedside of those who were dying, I know there are many paths to finding acceptance with death.

Life after death, rebirth/reincarnation, even death as the final stage—all can provide comfort in the face of the unknown, as well as an imperative to act ethically in this life. Whether my rebirth is affected by my current actions or whether my current acts must stand on their own merits, there remains an imperative to take seriously what we do in the here and now. My personal theology rests most comfortably with the belief that, upon my death, my animating energy and material reality will merge back into the cosmos from which I came, to be recycled by the planet that gave my molecules birth millions of years ago. For me, that's enough. In this faith, I feel the certainty of my connection to something greater. This is a part of faith verified for me; I don't claim it is reality, but I claim it as my faith.

During the verification stage, we discover experiences that have deeply affected our faith, even if we weren't aware of that impact. For instance, sometimes our own suffering connects us to others. During my work as a chaplain at St. Joseph's hospital in St. Paul, my supervisor noted that I seemed to relate very well to patients dealing with long-term illnesses. He asked where that ability came from. I had no idea; I told him I'd never had any traumatic incidents in my life. He leveled his piercing stare, his unmoving eyes that seemed to look deep inside me. After wracking my brain for some answer that would deflect his gaze to another direction, I came up with something. "Well," I began tentatively, "I did have mono for six months in college. I had to drop out because of it—twice when I had a relapse." Diverting his gaze hadn't worked; he looked at me even more intensely. "You don't think that was traumatic? It sounds pretty traumatic to me." I realized that the compassion at the center of my faith had its roots in my life.

Just as those meditation experiences and times in my church in Wayzata didn't really have meaning until I'd explored the depths of the connections they created, neither did this until I could really understand that my way of being in the world is faithful because of these experiences. When we grow, through verification, to trust our own experiences, then we understand abiding faith.

In abiding faith, Salzberg says, we orient our lives around what Paul Tillich calls our "ultimate concern." It's our touchstone, our place of meaning, the force that gets us out of bed in the morning. Naming it may be difficult; it may be easier to relate those experiences of knowing we're in alignment with it. What we do in our daily lives becomes an expression of this growing awareness of our interconnections and deepening compassion. Abiding faith is born out of our lives; we can trust it because it's ours. We don't rely on borrowed concepts but the bone-deep knowledge of our lived understanding as embodied. A passage Salzberg wrote about seeing a rainbow after her teacher died was an experience of breaking through the pain to a deeper sense of faith, a deeper connection to all of her teachers, and the knowledge that she was now her own Buddha. Salzberg says our suffering doesn't occur for our edification, but it happens nonetheless, and we can react by deepening our faith or sinking into despair.

Despair is the opposite of faith. It's despair that can keep us from getting out of bed in the morning. Her pain wasn't gone; it was transformed. The loss of her teacher wasn't diminished. But, by letting go of her attachment to him, her compassion replaced despair as the depth of her faith connected her to joy in the ephemeral qualities of life and the beauty that that rainbow represented. Abiding faith, Salzberg says, is when we trust in ourselves that we have a faith strong enough to hold the joy and sorrow of the entire world in our hearts and survive.

Salzberg's favorite example of abiding faith is the Dalai Lama. She notes how unaffected he is by fame and prestige, how utterly compassionate he is in a room full of people and how able to accept people where they are. People who appear to me to strongly embody their faith are comfortable with doubt and ambiguity.

In a recent *Newsweek* interview, evangelical preacher Billy Graham described how his suffering as he's aged has changed his faith. He said some of the certainty he once held is no longer important to him, adding, "There are many things that I don't understand." He doesn't believe Christians must take every verse of the Bible literally, saying instead that it's OK to disagree about details of scripture and theology.

He says, "As time went on, I began to realize the love of God was for everybody, all over the world." Graham's sense that God's love is for everyone, not just those who share his faith, shows an embodiment of compassion. His foundational beliefs in God and Jesus Christ haven't changed, yet his process of verification borne out in his own suffering has led him to a faith in love for all and a greater tolerance for ambiguity.

Who would have thought that I'd seat Billy Graham, the Dalai Lama, Sharon Salzberg and Anne Sexton all around the same breakfast table? It shows me that faith isn't the problem in our world today. Living a blind, shallow faith is. Such faith exists in every religion and philosophy, as do testaments to abiding faith. Unverified, disembodied, shallow faith allows despots to rule through fear and promises based on fantasies. It allows nations to wage war, calling all doubt disloyalty. Faith isn't the issue; the problem is blind faith being manipulated by people with power. We need a deep, abiding faith to get us out of bed in the morning and to live compassionate, connected lives so that we can lead the blind not to our truth but to their own. "Faith," said Mahatma Gandhi, "is not something to grasp; it is a state to grow into." May we allow bright faith to seduce us but not trap us, verified faith to encourage our doubt but not fuel our cynicism. And may we arrive at an abiding faith that brings comfort to our lives, compassion to our actions, and justice in our hearts.

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