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# faith or non-faith: is that the question?

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## Introduction

Recently I was involved in a conversation where the terms *faith* and *non-faith* were mentioned. For those individuals who found their sense of identity, purpose and belonging within a religious tradition, the term *faith* was ascribed. The term *non-faith* was ascribed for those who did not. Even though the term *non-faith* was in no way used pejoratively, I found myself reacting strongly to it. From such a reaction I heard myself exclaim, "I am a woman of deep faith. My faith simply isn't in a religious tradition!" The reply back to me was something like, "if not the term non-faith, what term would you use?" "I don't know," I replied, "but I will find one!" As a result of that conversation, the question of faith or non-faith became personal for me.

I continued to reflect on that conversation and my strong reaction to the term *non-faith*. I came to realize there is no such thing as non-faith, because in my understanding, faith is an intrinsic human quality. From such an intrinsic quality we are driven and enabled to give meaning to our living. *Meaning* here refers to an individual's experience of identity, purpose and belonging in their world. Therefore, each human being has faith. As a consequence, the question was no longer one of faith or non-faith. Neither was there relevance in sourcing a new term for those individuals who gave meaning to their living beyond a religious framework of understanding. Rather, what was required was a re-visioning of the term *faith*. So, the new question became: "Is there a meaning for the term *faith* that could include and transcend a religious connotation?" That which follows is my exploration of such a question.

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"Is there a meaning for the term *faith* that could include and transcend a religious connotation?"

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## Setting the context

Traditionally, the term *faith* has been equated with religion, however Laurence Freeman<sup>1</sup> states that faith is: "a way of seeing depth and meaning in the ordinary." Such an understanding repositions the nature of faith within the every day. I came across Freeman's definition a number



of years ago and it immediately caught my imagination. Freeman's definition dislodges the dominant western cultural idea that faith relates primarily to: "a strong belief in the doctrines of religion, based on spiritual conviction rather than proof." (Oxford Edictionary)

By way of building on Freeman's repositioning of the term faith within daily life, this article will draw particularly from the writings of James Fowler and Sharon Salzberg. Fowler writes from the context of a western Christian tradition. Salzberg writes from the context of a Buddhist tradition. Even though each author writes from a different context, they both present an understanding of the nature of faith within the everyday, which also includes and transcends a religious connotation.

Fowler's book is entitled: *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (1981). I came across Fowler's work during my theological studies many years ago. Fowler introduces the idea that *faith* is experienced within three dimensions, the first of which is a human universal preconceptual condition. Although writing within a religious context, Fowler's research unlocks the term *faith* from a purely religious connotation. Salzberg's book is entitled: *Faith: trusting your own deepest experience* (2003). I recently come across Salzberg's work. The title of her book caught my attention. The content offered a framework for my current lived experience as, "a woman of deep faith."

### James Fowler

#### *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*

According to Fowler, faith can be understood in three dimensions. He names the first dimension as "generic." This term refers to faith as a "human universal" capacity which sustains and shapes the intrinsic belief that beyond the simple act of living and dying there is meaning.



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beyond the simple act of living and dying there is meaning

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Fowler contends that generic faith is not simply a set of beliefs about life. Rather, generic faith can be described as the "life-force which continuously

engages our knowing, valuing, acting and committing." Even so, sometimes an individual's faith may be crushed by life circumstances. As a result, they may experience a sense of meaninglessness, which, if they cannot grow through, may leave them with a sense of hollowness and despair, possibly leading to suicide.

The first dimension of faith may be subsumed within the second, which consists of that which draws an individual towards transcendent mystery. It is in being drawn by mystery that an individual commences to ask questions and, in response, be open to recognize and receive the gift of God's love. It is this dimension of faith which sustains an individual in the face of suffering and draws them to continue to believe in and live out their authenticity in the hope that suffering is overcome with good. Thus, the second dimension of faith is one of openness to the revelation of God's love, especially in times of suffering. According to Fowler, it is this dimension of faith which constitutes religious experience.



drawing an individual towards transcendent mystery

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The second dimension of faith may then be subsumed within the third, which is personal relationship with God, leading to a communal response. Such a response is named as religious faith. Fowler contends that religious faith draws its impetus from a "living cumulative tradition." If the religious tradition is living, that is, has not fallen into a stagnant set of dogmas, it can "awaken and nurture" religious faith in people. When this occurs, according to John Swinton,<sup>ii</sup> the religious tradition offers a communal framework of understanding which then becomes "foundational to the way in which the [individuals within the faith community] experience themselves and make sense of the world they inhabit." Therefore, human faith is not converted into a different kind of faith. Rather, it is human faith which finds expression in a religious tradition.

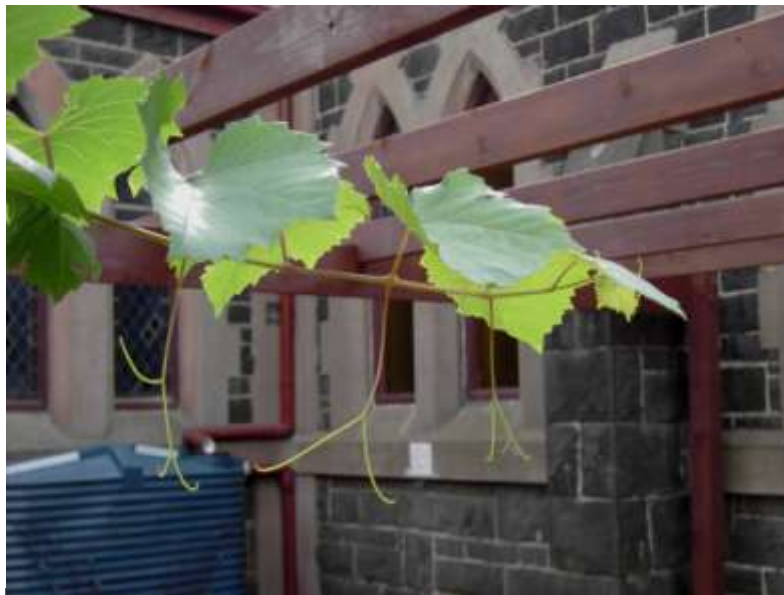
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### Summary of the nature of faith according to Fowler

Fowler argues that faith is not simply a set of beliefs. Rather faith is an intrinsic human quality, experienced within three dimensions. Each dimension may be subsumed by the other, although not necessarily so. The first dimension is experienced as a human universal capacity to seek and discover meaning for our living. Such a capacity is described as the life-force which continuously engages our involvement in daily life in a meaningful way. The second dimension involves being drawn by transcendent mystery to wonder about the *more* of life, and in response, experience God's love. The third dimension is named as religious faith whereby an individual finds belonging within a religious tradition, and the doctrines of that tradition shape their value system.



an individual finds belonging within a religious tradition

photo by Alison Davies

### Sharon Salzberg

*Faith: trusting your own deepest experience*

Salzberg contends: "Faith is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience." She makes the following distinction between faith and beliefs: "beliefs come from the outside and faith comes from within our participation in the process of living." Thus, faith and daily life are intrinsically connected. Faith involves: "trusting ourselves to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely," rather than trusting the unexamined beliefs of a particular tradition, or the unexamined stories we tell ourselves about who we are and how life should be.

Within such a context, faith is known linguistically as a verb, whereby an individual chooses to "give over" their heart to "the inherent potential in life." Such a choice, within the context of the Buddhist understanding of impermanence, means that faith allows an individual: "to be fully involved in and not attached to life." As a result, faith does not involve seeking a spiritual plane where the joys and sorrows of life are not experienced. Rather "faith is an open state that makes us willing to explore" our lives in their entirety.

Salzberg's understanding corresponds somewhat to Freeman's: a way of seeing depth and meaning in the ordinary. Her understanding also corresponds somewhat with that of Fowler's first dimension: a human universal condition . . . foundational to an individual's belief that beyond the simple act of living and dying, there is meaning. Also in line with Fowler, Salzberg argues that faith may be experienced in three particular dimensions.

The first dimension is named as *bright faith*. Bright faith is experienced as a "flicker within" in response to some external experience. Such a flicker is a beginning, whereby an individual surrenders cynicism and apathy, and experiences a "state of love-filled delight and possibilities." Salzberg contends that the "abundant energy [of bright faith] propels us forward into the unknown . . . where we act on our potential to transform our suffering and live in a different way."

Bright faith is distinguished from *blind faith* where an individual offers "unthinking devotion to a teacher or a teaching that is mistakenly seen as the fulfillment of the journey, rather than the first step." Also Salzberg acknowledges that bright faith may remain immature. When this occurs, an individual continues to be influenced by whatever beliefs cross their path in any given moment, "without discrimination."

Whilst bright faith is necessary, Salzberg argues that it is not sufficient in-and-of-itself. Bright faith must be "grounded and refined by very hard work." Therefore, bright faith must be subsumed by the second dimension, which is named as *verifying faith*. Verifying faith is where an individual "claims the right to question" and "to weigh what others tell [them] against [their] own experience of the truth." Therefore each individual is required to test that which they have chosen to believe, and discern<sup>iii</sup> whether or not it holds true to their experience of life.



bright faith



verifying faith



abiding faith

photos by Kaye Twining

The third dimension is named as *abiding faith*. Through abiding faith we have a lived understanding of our belief system. Therefore, abiding faith does not "depend on borrowed understandings." Rather it is experienced as a "magnetic force of bone deep, lived understanding . . . where we come to deeply know the underlying truths of who we are and what our lives are about." So within each individual, abiding faith gives rise to the experience of having discovered the, "deepest truths on which they can rely."

As a consequence, abiding faith unfolds within an individual into an unqualified yes to Life, yes to community, and yes to their own being.

Salzberg states that abiding faith gives rise to our "ultimate concern," that is, the "values to which we are most devoted." In turn, an individual's ultimate concern becomes their "center point" or "touchstone" from which to live within and act upon their world. As such, abiding faith does not simply relate to who we know ourselves-to-be-in-our-world. Abiding faith also relates to our actions. Abiding faith continues to, "draw us to act in accord with what we know to be true."

### Summary of the nature of faith according to Salzberg

Faith is experienced as an inner quality which leads us towards living fully in the here-and-now. Faith is an open state from which we are willing to explore our deepest truths, giving rise to a belief system on which we can rely. Faith is experienced in three dimensions: bright faith, verifying faith, and abiding faith. Bright faith is a beginning: necessary, although insufficient. Through the energetic flicker of bright faith, an individual "recognizes the power of love and compassion" and is open to the possibilities in life. Bright faith then needs to be grounded through verifying faith. Verifying faith is experienced as an openness to explore and test beliefs. As an individual engages in the work of verifying faith, they are able to experience abiding faith. Through abiding faith an individual can live within and act upon their world from the beliefs and values they have found to be true. Within this framework, faith continues to unfold through the three dimensions.



the unfolding nature of faith

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### Reflections on the nature of faith

Drawing on Freeman's, Fowler's and Salzberg's understandings as an entry point, the following insights on the nature of faith come to mind:

- Faith is an intrinsic human quality through which we are enabled to give meaning to our living. For both Fowler and Salzberg, such

meaning includes the experience of being drawn by the mystery of being and engagement with the thread of love woven into Life itself.

- Faith is an open state from which an individual is willing to explore and integrate their deepest truth, which gives rise to a belief system on which they may rely, especially during times of suffering. Therefore, although faith is not a belief system, it does draw an individual towards discovering a meaningful belief system. Such a meaningful belief system gives rise to core values, which are then lived out in daily life. Therefore, faith and actions are interrelated.
- Both Fowler and Salzberg contend that faith may be experienced within three dimensions. They each name the three dimensions differently because they are writing within different contexts, however the underlying idea is similar: faith unfolds within an individual as they continue to engage in their open-ended inner journey of exploration.
- Faith and reason have often been viewed as dualistic opposites within a western Christian cultural worldview. However according to the three authors as presented in this article, faith and reason are no longer dualistic opposites. Faith draws us to embark on the inner journey of discovering an authentic belief system. Reason, that is, our current knowledge and life experience, grounds such a belief system.
- All people have faith. Therefore there is no need for a new term for those individuals and communities who find their place of belonging beyond a religious tradition.



faith is an intrinsic human quality . . . an open state of exploration

photo by Andrew Twining

- Within the Christian context as presented, faith is experienced within the three dimensions of: 1. An inner journey of exploration and integration of: the way an individual gives meaning to their daily lived experience. 2. The religious experience of receiving and responding to God's love. 3. The experience of belonging within that religious tradition, that is, religious faith. In religious faith, human faith is not converted as such. Rather, human faith grounds the experience of religious faith.



- Within the Buddhist context as presented, faith is understood as an inner quality drawing an individual to seek and discover their deepest truth of who they know their self-to-be-in-their-world, and the values that shape their living. Faith unfolds in the three dimensions:
  1. Bright faith is a beginning, a flicker of energetic possibility, which must be grounded by verifying faith.
  2. Verifying faith draws an individual to test their beliefs within their life experience. Verifying faith unfolds into abiding faith.
  3. Abiding faith, which is experienced as a bone deep, lived understanding giving rise to an unqualified yes to life.
- Both the Christian and Buddhist understandings of the term *faith*, in some way, include and transcend a religious connotation. Within the Christian understanding, religious faith is grounded in the truth that faith is a universal human quality. Within the Buddhist understanding, an individual's deepest truth may be lived out through a religious tradition, however not necessarily.
- In the writing of this article, my attention has been caught by the way that both Fowler and Salzberg connect faith with love. One of my deepest truths centres on the teaching in the Christian scriptures: in the end three things remain, faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love. Could it be that faith, hope and love continue to unfold into one another? Does the human experience of faith, hope and love constitute the *mystery* in the mystery of being human?
- Also, in the writing of this article, I have once again returned to the question around faith and community. From prior studies I know that the Buddhist tradition places great emphasis on being part of a Buddhist community. The same goes for the Christian tradition. What does that mean, if anything, for those individuals who are drawn to the inner journey of compassionate self-knowledge and authentic living, whose belief system does not belong within a specific tradition? Is it now time for a new faith community?<sup>iv</sup>

### When faith seems crushed

As Fowler acknowledges, life circumstances may crush an individual's faith, giving rise to an experience of meaninglessness in life. Salzberg also acknowledges that despair may overshadow faith, leaving an individual feeling lost, alone and disconnected. At such times, how may faith be reawakened? As I reflect back over my own life experience, I recognize



reawakening faith through emotional honesty and the practice of conscious grieving

photo by Andrew Twining

two practices which were pivotal for reawakening faith within me. The first was the practice of meditation,<sup>v</sup> which allowed me to see that while I have thoughts and feelings, I am not identified with them. The second, which perhaps appears as a contradiction to the first, but in practice is not, was the ongoing practice of compassionate Self enquiry.<sup>vi</sup> Foundational to such a practice is emotional honesty, within the light of lovingkindness. Compassionate Self enquiry also involves the practice of conscious grieving. While unpleasant to endure, the practice of conscious grieving allowed me to stop fighting against my present reality and gave rise to acceptance. In turn, acceptance gave rise to new possibilities. So for me, the practices of meditation and compassionate Self enquiry are pivotal to both the reawakening and the unfolding of faith.

### Returning to the question: "Is there a meaning for the term *faith* that could include and transcend a religious connotation?"

In light of the above information and personal reflection, it seems to me that the term *non-faith* is redundant. It is redundant in relation to the term *faith*, because all people have faith. It is also redundant in relation to the overshadowing of faith through despair. While an individual's belief system may be crushed and/or broken apart, the life-force which draws them towards a meaningful belief system remains.

The term *faith* needs to be unshackled from its implicit connection with religion. In our time and place in history, *faith* needs to be repositioned primarily within the universal human experience. Such a repositioning acknowledges faith to be a universal human quality from which we continue to engage in the ongoing inner journey of authentic living in any given time and place in history, within the conscious awareness of lovingkindness. A human capacity which draws each of us to discover a belief system which comprises our deepest truths on which we can rely . . . for now. A belief system which gives rise to values from which we live within and act upon our world, with inner freedom and authentic communal responsibility. Such an understanding of the term *faith* is inclusive of all peoples and as such, both includes and transcends a religious connotation.



the term *faith* needs to be repositioned primarily within the universal human experience

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<sup>i</sup> Father Laurence Freeman OSB is a Catholic priest and a Benedictine monk . Strongly committed to inter-religious dialogue and international peace initiatives, between 1998 and 2000 Freeman took part in the historic "Way of Peace" programme - a series of Christian-Buddhist dialogues with the Dalai Lama in India, Italy and Belfast. Wikipedia The quotation in this article is taken from Jesus: Teacher Within (2000)

<sup>ii</sup> John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care* (2001)

<sup>iii</sup> For practices which may be helpful for testing *bright faith*, see [www.treeoflife.org.au/resources/a method for discerning personal truth](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/resources/a%20method%20for%20discerning%20personal%20truth), especially p.7 'The four precepts which form the method.' Also see each of the contemplative practices on that same website. Also, in terms of the practice of discernment Anne Hillman wrote:

"Discernment is not figuring something out intellectually. It uses the powers of the body, heart and mind, together.

It brings the whole body's wisdom to bear on a concern and the body as a whole resolves it. Joan Blackman . . . helped me to clarify the difference: 'Discernment is more contemplative than thinking. It is quiet, reflective. You allow whatever it is you're questioning to work itself through you. You wait . . . And you listen . . . And at some point you feel a sense of completion.' You can actually feel the resolution. There is a subtle shift inside as if something unsettling had settled down - like a billiard ball that had fallen into the right pocket."

<sup>iv</sup> For more on a new faith community see: [www.treeoflife.org.au/resources/a new faith community](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/resources/a%20new%20faith%20community)

<sup>v</sup> For more on meditation see: [www.treeoflife.org.au/contemplative practices/meditation](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/contemplative%20practices/meditation)

<sup>vi</sup> For more on compassionate Self enquiry see: [www.treeoflife.org.au/contemplative practices/compassionate Self enquiry](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/contemplative%20practices/compassionate%20Self%20enquiry)