

“Faith in Coping with Uncertainty”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on March 20, 2022

Almost two years ago, on March 22nd, 2020, this Fellowship held our Sunday service exclusively online for the first time. COVID cases were just beginning to be identified in Montana back then. The virus was spreading rapidly in other parts of the country and we knew the same would occur here in the weeks and months ahead. Back then, we had no idea how many people would contract the virus or die from it. So much was uncertain at that point in time, and the uncertainty remains even today.

Since March 22nd, 2020, the vast majority of our UUFB Sunday services have been entirely online. In the spring and summer of last year, when new COVID case numbers were low, we were able to hold a few in-person services in our building or in local parks. For most of the past two years, however, we have had only limited opportunity to be together in person. Today, a number of UUFB members and friends are in the sanctuary as we resume in-person services for the first time since mid-August of last year. While uncertainty about the virus and the future remains, it is my hope, and quite likely your hope as well, that we will be able to continue to hold in-person services every Sunday from this day onward. As we return to in-person services, we will also continue to simultaneously live-stream each service for those who are unable to be physically present in the building. The COVID virus forced us to learn ways to stay connected when our ability to meet in-person was limited. What we learned about live-streaming services was beneficial to us two years ago and it continues to be beneficial to us today.

Last month, as I was thinking about sermon topics on our theme of renewing faith, I had no idea when we would be resuming in-person services. During the last week of February the new COVID case numbers were dropping, but still too high to meet the guidelines in the UUFB COVID policy. As I think about the sermon title I chose for today, “Faith in Coping with Uncertainty,” I can’t imagine a better title or topic for welcoming people into our sanctuary again. I say that because when we are faced with intense and persistent uncertainty, as we have been these past two years, our faith can be challenged. When I use the word faith here, I am using it specifically to refer to our religious or spiritual faith. Situations where there is intense and persistent uncertainty requires us to renew our faith if we are going to continue to maintain and rely on it.

There are some who might say that if one’s religious or spiritual faith doesn’t hold up in times of uncertainty or challenge, that faith may be outdated, and may not be worthy of maintaining. Maybe it would be best to abandon that faith entirely—abandon it for something new and more dependable. And it is quite possible that some people who don’t hold a religious or spiritual faith would claim that a religious or spiritual faith that doesn’t hold up in uncertain times is a faith based on fiction not fact, superstition not science. While such perspectives are worthy of consideration, there may be good reason for maintaining one’s religious or spiritual faith even if that faith is old and may not be based on provable fact or scientific research. There can be good reason to maintain one’s religious or spiritual faith while at the same time being open to reviewing and revising it in times of uncertainty—and I would say especially during times of uncertainty.

David DeSteno makes the case for having and maintaining one’s religious or spiritual faith in his book *How God Works: The Science Behind the Benefits of Religion* which was published last year. DeSteno is a professor of psychology at Northeastern University and in the book he identifies himself as a “research scientist.” In his work he strives to uncover, and here I quote, “ways to help people become more moral, more compassionate, and more resilient as they walk the road of life.”

The initial part of the title, *How God Works*, really isn’t accurate in describing the content of the book. As the subsequent portion of the title indicates, this book is about religions generally, and religious practices more specifically. DeSteno mentions a wide range of religious traditions. He explores various aspects of a number of faith traditions that include a belief in a God or gods. These include Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Shintoism. He also explores traditions such as Buddhism and Taoism, neither of which requires or encourages a belief in god as that word is generally understood.

Early in the book, DeSteno states that his research indicates that many people get significant benefit from being involved in religious traditions and communities, as well as from engaging in a wide array of religious practices or rituals. And he isn't the only one doing research on the benefits of religious faith and/or religious practices. He cites his own research that indicates, and here I quote, "that even basic parts of many religious rituals...made people feel more connected and committed to one another." He goes on to write: "Other researchers have discovered that religious practices can lessen anxiety, reduce depression, and even increase physical health."

DeSteno suggests that science ought to explore how religion benefits people. In the very first chapter of the book he writes the following.

Given the ubiquity and variety of religious rituals and practices, it's surprising that science hasn't taken up the charge to examine their effects more widely and carefully. One exception over the past decade has been mindfulness. We now know, with ample data to back it up, that meditation offers many benefits. It enhances attention, decreases anxiety and stress, and even increases compassionate behavior toward others. But none of that would be news to spiritual thinkers who developed contemplative techniques centuries ago.

Research has been done, and continues to occur, into the benefits of being involved in religious traditions and communities. DeSteno provides a good deal of information about what has been found. He writes that "the Pew Research Center examined many of the world's largest databases to study the links between religion and wellbeing," and that, "in 2001, the Mayo Clinic conducted a systematic review of hundreds of studies from the past three decades that examined links between religion and health." Both the Pew Research Center and the Mayo Clinic found that "people who regularly took part in religious activities were objectively healthier," "even after controlling for a host of other demographic and economic factors." DeSteno goes on to state "when the Mayo Clinic looked across forty-two studies, which in total examined over 126,000 people, religion provided an unmistakable benefit: those who actively participated had a 29 percent increased survival rate compared to others during the years they were followed." Such findings are impressive and worthy of our attention. An important question to ask is what is required to gain such benefits from religion. Here is a quote from the book that may provide at least a partial answer.

In almost every study I described above, religion only offered sizable benefit to people who actively took part in its practice. Checking a box on a survey to self-identify as Muslim, Jewish, Christian, or Buddhist does nothing to improve your health. These improvements come only from living a faith—regularly engaging in the practices and rituals that help our belief and sense of community grow.

The vast majority of the research mentioned in this book is focused on adults. But DeSteno didn't just look at how being involved in a religious faith tradition could be beneficial to adults. Instead, his approach is to look at the entire lifespan. Between the "Introduction" and the "Epilogue" the book contains seven chapters that cover the entire range of a human life from birth to death. In every chapter, DeSteno explores various religious practices and rituals that significantly affect and benefit a person who is involved in their religious faith tradition. Many of the religious practices and rituals he writes about have not been the focus of specific research. And yet he sites research that is related to some particular aspect of the religious practice or ritual he mentions. A good number of the practices and rituals he mentions involve life transitions, in other words, times of uncertainty. He also mentions that religious practices and rituals are not static or everlasting. Instead, they are modified and transformed over time as circumstances demand. They change in order to provide benefit to those who are involved in the religious tradition. Late in the book Unitarian Universalism is mentioned. Our faith tradition is mentioned for two reasons. First, in Unitarian Universalism there is no requirement or expectation for people to have a belief in God. And second, our tradition has eagerly embraced the idea of adopting and adapting a wide variety of practices and rituals.

While I could go into more details about the contents of DeSteno's book, I want to shift my focus at this point. I want to shift my focus from research and the printed word, to the present moment and how the members and friends of this Fellowship have been, and continue to be, impacted by the uncertainties brought on by the pandemic, as well as other events in the world.

The past two years have required us to modify and adapt our religious practices and rituals significantly. There are numerous examples of modifications and adaptations we have made. Probably the most obvious and possibly most limiting has been the shift from in-person services to doing services exclusively online. Today, I am delighted that we are able to welcome people into the sanctuary again and livestream the service for those who are unable to physically be present in the building.

A second example is that those of us who are present in the building aren't singing the hymns. Not being able to sing together is a real hardship, a very real loss, for me and for many others as well. In time, hopefully very soon, the risks of singing together in our building will drop to the point where we can again breathe deeply and lift our voices as we sing the words to our hymns.

And a third example of a modification that we have made involves how we do Joys and Concerns. Joys and Concerns has been a very important part of our services for many years. Over the period of time we have been unable to meet in person, we have encouraged people to email their joys and concerns to me or to the Lay Leader so that this important practice could be continued, albeit in a significantly different form than prior to the arrival of COVID. Today, we will continue the practice of the minister or the worship leader sharing joys and concerns that have been sent in. And we will also resume a practice from prior to COVID's arrival—the practice of inviting people to come forward to silently place a stone in our joys and concerns bowl.

As I said a moment ago, the past two years have required us to modify and adapt our religious practices and rituals significantly. During this time of incredible uncertainty, we have not abandoned our faith. Instead, we have found ways to revise it in order to continue on. I am certain that we will continue to modify and adapt our religious practices and rituals in the weeks and months ahead. We will modify and adapt them in an effort to provide the highest benefit possible to those who are actively engaged in our faith.

Our practices and rituals may not always be as we would want or expect them to be. They will never be perfect for all of us. I would go even further and say they will never be perfect for any of us. But we will continually seek to make them the best they can be—the best they can be given the circumstances, the challenges and the uncertainties that life presents. This Fellowship seeks to benefit not just those who attend our services. We also seek to support and assist those who are in need in our community, our country and in other parts of the world. We focus our attention on this world during this lifetime. May we seek together to explore and discover ways we can adapt our practices and rituals to benefit us as well as others. On our journey of exploration and discovery together, may we continually remember the covenant we say during our Sunday services each week.

Love is the spirit of this church
And service is its prayer.
This is our covenant with one another
And the Spirit of Life:
To live together in peace,
To seek truth in freedom
And to help one another.

So may it be.