

Episode 501: Beyond Faith and Doubt: The F Word

In this episode, Elizabeth takes us on a journey through the term “faith”. We may assume we know what faith is, but most of us have never truly explored its nuance or spectrum of meanings. We often use the term faith to refer to dogma, fundamentalism, doctrine, confidence, devotion, or conviction, just to name a few. In the context of contemporary culture, there are those who suggest that we replace the word “faith” with “spirituality”. But Elizabeth requests us not to write off faith so glibly. Faith carries with it the undeniable tension between our search for security and the limits of our ability to know. Faith keeps us connected to the heart of the human condition.

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Many, many winters past, I tucked myself into a small retreat cabin, nestled on the side of a snowy mountain, my purpose was to complete an elaborate deity practice which I had long prepared for and held in deep affection.

As days and even weeks fell away, I sat at the edge of my bed, looking over a stretch of lonely valley. To my dismay, I felt a painful distance from my meditation practice. My heart was like a dry seed. I yearned for inspiration and connection, but none arose. “Why all the darkness and doubt?” I wondered. “Where is the warmth of my practice?”

Alone with these thoughts and retreat, things got heavier, and a barrage of *shoulds* and *shouldn’ts* dominated my thinking. Frustrated, I chose to divert my attention and opened a book—a collection of Mother Teresa’s personal letters to a trusted colleague. Over a prolonged correspondence, she expressed her struggles, confiding that she could no longer see the face of God. While reading through their intimate exchange, Mother Teresa, whom I always held as an icon of virtue, came alive for me as someone confronting her own limiting notions of *shoulds* and *shouldn’ts*: how God should appear, how she should see him, and how the culmination of her life’s work should look. Of course, it’s all conjecture on my part, but I like to think that this conundrum pushed Mother Teresa beyond her conditional notions of the Divine, and that she arrived at a place of unshakable faith.

As I closed the book, I thanked Mother Teresa for delivering the inspiration I had been missing, and committed then and there to abandoning any pretense of wanting to be a so-called “good practitioner.” I allowed myself to be touched by darkness—which became my retreat companion—however it availed itself to me. I would explore doubt with openness, which, I discovered, requires faith.

Some time later, I shared this experience with my teacher. He paused to consider my story, and with a tenderness that brings tears to my eyes, as I recall it, he explained to me that the darkness and doubt I encountered was none other than the face of the deity.

Yes, this is a story about faith...and doubt...and its place in the human condition.

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Welcome to the fifth season of Open Question: A Call to Inner Brilliance. Our theme for this year is Faith Beyond Belief and Doubt. I'm Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel and this is OQ 501: The F Word.

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We may assume that faith is something we have, or we don't. But I'm inclined to think that whether knowingly or unknowingly, we are faith-ing all the time, and that faith is inexorable to the human condition. When we get out of bed in the morning and place our feet on the ground, we have faith it will support us. Then we head to the bathroom to wash up and have faith that the water will flow from the tap. We have faith in the familiar patterning of the universe—that cause and effect will function more or less predictably, that if we plant an apple seed and nurture it, we will soon see the beginnings of an apple tree push its way through the earth. And if we speak kindly to others, we have faith they will respond in kind. We settle into all of this without a second thought. And yet, on some level, everyone knows “nothing is certain.”

One of the most sensible and thought-provoking descriptions of faith I've encountered came from the late Buddhist teacher, Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, who said: “Cows have faith in grass.” Yes, we can chuckle at the utter simplicity of this, but the implications of this statement run deep. Our dependence upon the world in which we live keeps us living in faith. We are always faith-ing and there's no way around it.

Faith finds relevance as we move about a world we can't secure. The term itself implies there are limits to our understanding and ability to perceive. If we were all-knowing, we wouldn't need faith. We fill our calendar with appointments, but do we ever know exactly how our day will unfold, how circumstances will influence us, or how we will respond? A myriad of contingencies converge in each and every moment. What will happen? It all depends.

Life is indeterminate. Filled with mystery, it defies interpretation. We only ever see a little piece of things, an angle and aspect, an instant. Surely, we can admit, the universe is bigger than “me” and what I think, feel, or see. There's something stunning and humbling about the whole situation. We can appreciate this perspective, choose to live in faith and be in awe of our fathomless universe. Or, we can default to rightness and belief as a way to create the illusion of security.

We will address the term *belief* and its counterpart, doubt, in another episode. But before we go there, let's bring more clarity to our discussion because despite the simplicity and stability genuine faith can bring to our lives, culturally, we have created a tangle of conflicting and conflicted views around the topic of faith. In trying to sort it all out, I have come to see that for the contemporary mind, *faith* is a word in dire need of exploration.

Exploring the meaning and experience of faith has been a central theme for me, and not just privately for my own spiritual path, but also as someone immersed in contemporary culture, I wanted to take a critical look at the meaning of faith. So, many years back, I decided to bring my inquiry out into the world to see what others thought. Not surprisingly, people often met the topic of faith with forceful resistance...hostility even. So instead, I presented my exploration as the *F word*. And suddenly everyone wanted to talk.

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We may assume we know what faith is. But most of us have never truly explored its nuance or spectrum of meaning. Faith means different things at different times in different contexts, as evidenced by what you will find if you pick up a standard English dictionary. Faith has many usages in English: *dogma, religion, fundamentalism, doctrine or indoctrination, confidence, trust, belief, devotion, conviction, and spiritual insight* just to name a few. How remarkable that this single word can have such varied and even contradictory meanings.

For example, fundamentalism is often employed as a synonym for faith. But does it necessarily align as an identical experience? Faith conveys an element of not knowing, whereas fundamentalism characterizes a strict adherence to principles and intolerance to other views, a rejection of complexity, and a sense of rightness. Given that even the dictionary presents a confusing collection of words to define faith, doesn't it instill in you an interest to sort it all out? I bring this all up because there's a lot at stake here. By casually or purposefully dismissing faith by stigmatizing it, or using the term carelessly, we risk bypassing powerful tools to address the human condition. Give that some thought.

In dialogue with others, I heard descriptions of faith expressed from a perspective of doubt and skepticism. Faith, some say, is blind, naïve, and superstitious. Faith results from the failure to examine reality. It requires abdicating intelligence to an authority figure or etiology. Faith is outdated and antiquated, even dangerous. People have done unconscionable things in the name of faith. Such perspectives on faith are not entirely unfounded and often grounded in legitimate experience. But are they informed by an understanding of genuine faith? Or do they confuse faith with its other ambiguous cultural usages?

Then there are those who say faith brings meaning and simplicity to life. They define faith as an unquestioning belief in a God, a Creator, or the Divine. Many view their belief in God, their denomination, or philosophical etiologies as irrefutable truths. We generally think of others as fundamentalists, but if we are to look honestly, we would probably have to concede that we all have our sacred cows, even if it's just our political preferences.

Others describe faith as the deep interest and respect that arises when encountering something of great value, a sense of ease, courage, or confidence in the face of mystery, uncertainty, or that which we know but cannot capture in words.

Listening to these very descriptions of faith deepened my own understanding. And it occurred to me that despite their differences, they all have one thing in common: they all reflect the desire to find ease in a world we can't secure.

Knowing whether something is true or not is very important to the contemporary mind. We tend to assume that what we think, perceive, and feel are factual experiences. And we depend on experts in the fields of science, religion, and technology to supply us with truth about life's most fundamental questions. But does knowing ever truly capture truth? Although we've made some extraordinary discoveries in the fields of physics, biology and chemistry, we still have never arrived at anything resembling truth. Despite countless studies conducted in the areas of modern psychology and neuroscience, we've yet to shed significant light on the nature of consciousness, or the existential question "Who am I?" We will never be able to resolve even the simplest questions in life, such as determining whether the Lakers trump the Celtics as a basketball team, or whether chocolate cake is better than apple pie.

Despite our many assumptions, knowing doesn't refer to our ability to establish absolute truths, but rather to our ability to perceive and discern the world around us and within us. Attaching the notions of true or false to such experiences is utterly extraneous to the nature of knowing. In fact, it may behoove us to consider whether are we better served without our secular and sacred truth—our dogmas? Do we need rightness to make informed choices? Or to respond to life with intelligence? Does rightness actually serve us?

In considering these questions, give yourself a moment to recall what it's like to be around a knower. Or, for that matter, the atmosphere of your own mind when you get righteous. I would wager that most would choose open-mindedness over dogma any day—at least in theory.

Amid all the uncertainty and mystery of life, we humans strive relentlessly to know and describe our universe, which inspires extraordinary innovations in technology, music, art, and philosophy. Inquiry sets us off on our greatest adventures.

Here we are now playfully pushing at the word *faith*, which continues to yield all kinds of information and creative insights. Will we ever arrive at an absolute definition of faith? I don't think so. Life is not something to resolve or figure out; it is something to explore, question, learn from, and marvel at. Both in the Middle Way tradition of the Buddha, and in the context of scientific inquiry. The unconsummated quest for truth guides us forward, protecting us from the extremes of dogma and doubt.

The notable philosopher of science Karl Popper said in his book *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* that "the wrong view of science betrays itself in the craving to be right. For it is not his possession of knowledge, of irrefutable truth, that makes the man of science, but his persistent and recklessly critical quest for truth." I think the Buddha would have loved Karl Popper. The Buddha himself cautioned his followers to examine his teachings as a goldsmith would examine gold. This is the power of an open question in our pursuit of truth, which gives way to the deepest of insights.

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It seems important to acknowledge that there are those who accept the mystery of life naturally, who don't feel as compelled to see life through the lens of true and untrue. Indigenous communities, and older generations from faith-based backgrounds, for instance, may not find much relevance in the conversation we're having here, and may even find it peculiar to express something so obvious.

This struck me during a period of several years when I accompanied a community of practitioners for an annual retreat into Canyon de Chelly, Arizona, which lies within the boundaries of the Navajo or Diné nation. The people of the canyon, our guides with whom we developed a deep friendship over the years, shared with us their love of the canyon: herds of roaming wild mustangs; red earthen sandstone spires; and ancient petroglyphs in sacred power spots. With open hearts, our guides shared their unique understanding of the canyon.

I remember asking one guide about an unusual rock formation. What is the name of this rock? He led me to its northern side and pointed out that it looked like a saddle. This is Saddle Rock, he told me. Then he asked me to stand at the west face of the rock, which he then referred to as Turtle Rock. Acquainting me in this way, I experienced an expansion of what only moments before I perceived as a singular thing.

When the people of the canyon shared stories that had been passed down from elders for generations, I reflected on how, from a contemporary standpoint, they could be dismissed as folklore. And yet, whether these stories were true or not, didn't seem to factor in for this community. They seem to use stories as guiding principles based on a discerning understanding of benefit and harm that encouraged qualities of humility, respect and openness. My time with the people of the canyon reminded me that we too can learn to embrace the mystery and the open dimensionality of our own outer and inner landscapes with humility, appreciation, and awe.

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"...not all experience fits into the binary categories of rational or irrational, and mystery is not merely what fails the test of reason. There is a realm of the mind where the experience of mystery is valid on its own terms. Understanding it may lie beyond the scope of language, but it is not outside the realm of human capacities." This elegant passage from the introduction to Tenzin Priyadarshi's book *Running Towards Mystery* says so much about the imperative to better understand faith.

Yes, faith is a challenging word. And I've heard many scholars and practitioners, including Buddhists, suggest that we replace the word faith with spirituality. But can we afford to do away with faith altogether? Personally, I think that would be way too easy. I'm not saying that spirituality doesn't have its use in the English language. But spirituality can be anything you want it to be. If we're not careful, we might bypass the human dilemma in time merely in the

name of spirituality, along with the experience of that which can be understood, but cannot be captured in words.

So I want to conclude this episode by making a request: let's not write off faith so glibly. Faith carries with it the undeniable tension between our search for security and the limits of our ability to know. Faith keeps our spiritual quest relevant and connected to the heart of the human predicament.

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Thank you for listening to this first episode of the fifth season of Open Question Podcast. I'm also pleased to announce the continuation our Open Question Live Conversation series, where we expand our inquiry through dialogue with esteemed teachers, scholars, and artists. I've always intended Open Question Podcast and Open Question Live as complimentary components of my teaching, so please join me for this year's inquiry: Faith Beyond Belief and Doubt. I trust we're up for the challenge.

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Open Question is produced by Michael Velasco, with original music composed and performed by Chime Mattis.