

Session Ten

What Do I Take on Faith?

The objectives of this session are:

- to understand the concept of faith as the belief in something without proof
- to explore the conflict between faith and science
- to consider the implications of the Fourth Principle, “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning”

Materials and supplies you will need:

- DVD (or videotape) of the movie, *Contact*
- DVD player or VCR and TV monitor
- several copies of the UU hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*
- copy of the statements in Resource 10-A
- heavy cardstock
- double-sided tape or other adhesive to hang strips of cardstock
- a sheet or large piece of posterboard (optional, if you cannot post the cardstock directly on the wall)
- copy of the cards in Resource 10-B

Things to do ahead of time:

- locate the DVD or videotape and rent it from the library or video store if necessary
- Using the DVD menu, select scene #19 “Decoding Message” or cue the videotape to approximately one hour and four minutes into the movie
- watch the movie in its entirety (even if you have seen it before)
- make a copy of the statements in Resource 10-A, cut them apart and adhere to cardstock to make long strips
- create two additional narrow strips labeled “Faith” and “Fact”

- post the “Faith” and “Fact” strips on a wall using double sided tape or other adhesive
- make a copy of the cards in Resource 10-B on heavy cardstock
- if you do not have a meeting space with a great deal of floor space, arrange to meet in an alternate location or to travel to a different place just for the Rising Action activity

Session Outline

Entering Activity: Faith or Fact? (5 min)

Premiere: Watching an excerpt of the movie *Contact*. (30 min)

Rising Action: Leaps of Faith. (10 min)

Plot Point: Our Own Leaps of Faith. (5 min)

Wrap Up: Popcorn, Closing Words. (10 min)

Entering Activity

As participants arrive, invite them to look over the statements on the strips of paper you have copied from Resource 10-A. Encourage them to place them on the wall under either “Faith” (if believing in this statement requires a person to take it on faith alone) or “Fact” (if believing in this statement relies upon provable scientific facts).

After everyone has arrived and had some chance to look over what the group is/has been doing, invite reflection. Was it easy to categorize all of the statements? Why or why not?

Note: If you cannot hang the cardstock strips directly on the wall, use a large sheet or piece of posterboard to post the headings and the statements on.

Premiere

Watching Contact.

Introduce the video by telling the group you will be watching an excerpt from the movie *Contact*. Ask if anyone has already seen it. If anyone has, ask them if they would be willing to share the premise of the film with the group. If not, introduce the tape yourself by saying something like:

This movie explores what might happen if and when the discovery is made that intelligent life does in fact exist outside of our planet Earth. As a team of scientists struggle to decipher the digital code which has been sent to Earth by the alien intelligence, questions are raised by some religious factions as to whether this is ethical and by the military arm of the United States government as to whether this is safe in terms of national security. Meanwhile, Dr. Ellie Arroway has to deal with the National Science Director who has been a rival of hers for many years and who had been trying to eliminate the funding for her project until she made this incredible discovery.

Begin the video and watch scene #19 (Decoding Message) followed by scene #20 (Facing the Crowd), scene #21 (Requiring Proof), #22 (Who Gets to Go?), #23 (The Candidates) and #24 (Worth a Human Life).

In this sequence, Ellie meets with Hayden who explains to her that the message sent from the alien intelligence must be read in three dimensions which is why their scientists haven't been able to decipher it. Then she takes this information to a meeting of important people at the White House. Drumlin tries to steal her thunder by explaining the documents are schematics for a machine.

The national security advisor is concerned that the machine might be some sort of weapon or even a "Trojan Horse" which would allow the aliens to transport to the Earth and attack them. Religious leaders are concerned about the theological implications of the communication and

why scientists should be the ones in charge of this. Ellie wants to know what religion has to do with this debate.

Then, the late arrival of theologian and spiritual author Palmer Joss is a surprise to Ellie – not only because of their history of being lovers – but also because he says in effect they did indeed receive a voice from the sky so the religious implications are valid.

That night Ellie arrives at a reception and has to walk past a large group of religious protestors. She is dismayed by their protesting and their reaction to this scientific discovery.

When Ellie runs into Palmer at the reception, they discuss his book and she quotes from it by saying, "the one thing people are hungry for is meaning, and that's the one thing that science can't give them." She tells him that it's as if he is saying science killed God, but then asks: "What if science proved he never existed?"

She insists on continuing the conversation by asking him if he is familiar with the concept of "Achems Razor." When he doesn't appear to understand what that means, she explains that it is "the theory that all things being equal, the simplest answer is most likely." She wonders what is most likely – that a God created the universe and then provided no proof or that people created God in order to explain the mysteries they did not understand?

Palmer says that he couldn't imagine living in a world where God didn't exist, but Ellie says she would need proof. Then Palmer asks if she loved her father, to which she answers "yes." To this he answers, "Prove it."

Ellie is thrown off because of course she can't prove that she loved her father – not really in measurable scientific terms like she was requiring he offer up in regard to his belief in God. However, she is prevented from having to answer because both of their beepers go off.

Both Ellie and Palmer learn that the schematics for the machine are for a transport which can be used to carry a human being through space to meet the extraterrestrial intelligent life which sent the digital images to

Earth. Soon it is revealed that the United States government will build the machine and has put together a selection committee to decide who will get to go on the transport. Ellie discovers that Palmer is on the selection committee and that her rival Drumlin is a fellow candidate like her.

A series of new reports follows in the next sequence. Larry King asks the question “On what basis do you choose a person to represent humanity?” Later, in an interview with Bryant Gumbel as Palmer watches, Ellie is asked whether she thinks it is a dangerous mission. She answers that she “has to believe that an intelligence that far advanced knows what it is doing.” She adds that all it requires is a little ...” However, when she pauses, Gumbel adds “faith?” She replies that she was going to say “a sense of adventure.”

Then after the top candidate drops out because his family does not want him to go, Ellie becomes the top choice. Palmer asks her to meet with him. He asks her about the physics of the machine and how a person can get back after traveling across the universe. Ellie says that she understands the risks and that she might not come back. He wants to know why she is willing to risk dying for this mission. She explains that as long as she can remember she has been searching for meaning about why we are here.

If you will not be watching the entire movie, stop the video after Ellie and Palmer embrace and kiss. Begin a discussion by asking for first impressions of the sequence just watched. Then invite further discussion by asking the participants questions such as:

What might happen were we to discover intelligent life somewhere else in the universe?

Would there be a conflict between religion and this scientific discovery? Why?

Why are some people willing to accept things on faith, while others require proof?

If you will not be watching the entire movie, let the participants know that Ellie is eventually selected to go after an initial mishap and although

she travels across the galaxy, when she returns she has no proof of her experience. Since everyone else perceived her as never having left and the only passage of time was a few seconds, she is placed in the difficult situation of asking them to believe what she experienced on faith alone. Then further the discussion by asking questions like:

Have you ever been in a position where you felt the need to explain to a person why you believed something on faith alone?

What does it mean to have to take a “leap of faith?” Have you ever taken one?

Rising Action

Leap of Faith.

Note: For this activity, you will need a large open space. If your group does not normally meet in a room which will accommodate this activity, then you may need to find another space for this. This activity may also need to be adapted if you have anyone with mobility concerns. One way to do this is to have everyone scoot on chairs through the activity or ask for a volunteer to do the “leaping” while the rest of the group gathers around in a circle deciding together whether the person goes forward, backward, or stays in the same place.

Start this activity with everyone in the center of a large, open space (either standing or sitting as you have predetermined). Explain to the participants that you will read some situations off to them and in response they will move forward if they believe in the statement which requires a “leap of faith,” or move backward if they feel they would need scientific proof to believe it. Then read through the situations from the cards in Resource 10-B one by one, giving them time to think about the situation and make a move. Continue as long as time allows, then take a few minutes to invite comments on the locations of some of the participants. Who has

moved the farthest? In which direction? Who moved the least? Why? What might have made them move differently?

Plot Point

Our Own Leaps of Faith.

As Unitarian Universalists, what are the leaps of faith which we take? Do we require proof of all that we believe? How might our “leaps of faith” be different from those of other religious traditions? How might our faith leaps be different from other Unitarian Universalists? How does our Fourth Principle “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning” affect our notion of faith?

Wrap Up

Popcorn.

Invite the participants to gather in a circle to engage in the usual closing activity, “Popcorn.” For this activity, a person pops up (either a hand or full body as they are able or choose to do) and says aloud a short statement (one sentence or less) about something they believe on faith.

After the first “popper” has finished his or her statement, then everyone who agrees with this statement should also “pop” up (a hand or body as desired). One of the people already “popped” can then choose to share something of their own to which the rest of the group can then “pop.” If no one already “popped” has a comment to add, then someone else can feel free to “pop up” with a comment of their own. This “popping” can continue as long as time allows.

Closing Words.

Invite a participant to extinguish the chalice while you or another participant says these closing words:

Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.

(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

End the session with a unison reading of Reading #654 “Impassioned Clay” from *Singing the Living Tradition*.

Taking It One Step Further:

If your group will be watching the entire movie rather than just an excerpt, here are some additional discussion ideas:

Why did it matter to the selection committee whether Ellie believed in God? Have you ever been in a situation where your beliefs were called into question? Did this change the behavior of others toward you?

It is clear at the end of the movie that Josh believes what Ellie experienced is true. Do you think that she is also more able to understand why he has such faith in God's existence?

How might the early loss of both her parents contribute to Ellie's beliefs about faith and scientific fact? What moments in your life have shaped your ideas about faith?

Resource 10-A

Faith or Fact?

Human nature is basically good.

There is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe.

God created the Heavens and the Earth.

The universe was created by a Big Bang.

The universe is expanding at a steady rate.

Humans evolved from a common ancestor of apes and chimpanzees.

World Peace is possible for us to achieve.

There is something greater than we are, a divine presence who may or may not govern human affairs.

The Grand Canyon was created through erosion.

Dinosaurs and humans did not live on the Earth at the same time.

Matter is composed of atoms which are smaller than the naked eye can see.

Resource 10-B

Leap of Faith

Which of these statements requiring a leap of faith do you believe in?

<p>I believe there is intelligent life somewhere else in the universe.</p>	<p>I believe those things we do in life come back to us through a sense of grand universal justice.</p>
<p>I believe its possible to have peace on Earth.</p>	<p>I believe love can change the world and make it a better place.</p>
<p>Matter is composed of atoms which are smaller than the naked eye can see.</p>	<p>There is a reason I am here on this Earth.</p>
<p>We have an obligation to work for peace and justice in the world.</p>	<p>I believe the world is constantly evolving and so are we.</p>
<p>I believe medical advances will someday extend the duration of human life.</p>	<p>I believe technological advances in the next century will change the basic way we live.</p>
<p>I believe there is something greater than us, a divine presence in the world.</p>	<p>I believe in the power of people to do what's right and good.</p>