

Faith: A Lenten Journey

Excerpted Reflections by Pilgrim Church Members Age 14-93

An Introduction

Every year at Pilgrim Church, our confirmation class concludes their time of study by writing faith statements. 14 and 15 years olds answer the question, 'What is my faith?'

In the Spring of 2016 our minister realized this would be a worthy exercise for every Pilgrim. Are you a person of faith? What is faith for you? Where is God in your life? Who is Jesus? These were the kinds of questions folks explored in the essays you are about to read.

Dozens of people wrote faith statements. Some of them are brief. Others were long. Some could have been written by many Christians. Others are so deeply personal we could not share all of the words: they are between the person and God.

Our intent is for the 40 days of Lent—that's every day from Ash Wednesday until Holy Saturday not counting Sundays—that you will read that day's words. We hope they will help you on your journey. As Jesus spent 40 days in the desert preparing for his ministry, we hope these statements will help you prepare for Easter.

If you haven't written your faith statement, it is never too late. If we get enough statements we will redraft this book again for next year.

Welcome to the inner life of Pilgrims just like you. Welcome to their faith. May it inspire, challenge, and move you. However you use these 40 gifts of faith, may your Lenten learning be graced.

Day 1

My faith begins with the phrase my college chaplain underlined in my bible: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen."

I believe that everyone is worth loving. We have souls. With enough intention, we can see the God in each of us. I believe faith is like a bucket in which one drop of love falls and suddenly it is full. The more I tire at the mischief and maladies of the created world, the more I am driven to look for spark of God in it. I believe, however, like St. Augustine that if you think you understand God, it is not God.

God is not solely in our heads. Our faith cannot be an intellectual exercise alone. God is not a mystery to be solved, but a mystery to be embraced. It is in the powerful combination of our stories, our seeking, and silence that we experience what is always in and around us. God is. Love is. We can no longer depend on the Bible or church or pastors or priests to set us free, though we need the old ways too.

We need faith so alive that it sings in our heads each moment. We need a love so generous and eternal that the truly minor trouble and travels teach us rather than disabling us. We need a faith so ordinary and every day, so vital and unexpected that what gnaws at us always can be flipped into grace.

Day 2

Faith brings me peace.

My faith is in knowing that God seeks a relationship with each and every one of us, and uses environments and situations to attract us toward Him. When I am in an environment that is all natural, for example, I am moved to thank God for providing this gift.

Nature allows me to not only enjoy the beauty—beaches, trails in the woods, kayaking on the river, snowshoeing, the sounds of birds, the scent of gardens, but I am brought to joy and even momentary bliss, knowing that this is God's creation, which He shares with us. My thanks turn into a prayer hoping that I am worthy of His blessings and grace.

Day 3

Through my faith, I have no doubt that God has created each of us with a certain talent or useful trait, as well as a purpose. Our task is to find that purpose, and look to Him to do so. When we realize what we were meant to do, we just know it, deep down in our core, and it brings us a focus and a contentment. We are wise to pray for His guidance to find this purpose, as it will bring us a much more fulfilling life.

By having a relationship with God, our Holy Father, we can also lift up to him all of our troubles. We can be very certain that there will be troubles in our lives, and my faith assures me that God uses any and all situations for the ultimate good.

Knowing that "with God, all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26), my faith brings me peace. I know that God hears our prayers. His answers may not be what we expect; He may call for us to be patient; He may very well say "no". He may also choose to resolve the trouble in a way that we would never, in a million years, anticipate! But by including Him in our daily lives, we can remove worry. And not having to worry brings a great blanket of peace.

Day 4

At this stage in my faith journey, the only thing that I feel certain about is what I don't believe. Guess my tag name, "Doubting Thomas," has been rather accurate. Strangely however, this long term questioning and doubting which has characterized my path, has led me to a newer deep place of faith; a place not of dogma but of connectedness; a place where I sense something so pervasive, so loving and so expansive that I can only feel it, but not adequately describe it. I have come to experience God as a living, constantly changing, moving, creative and perceiving force flowing around and in all of us, linking us all and life together.

Particularly powerful for me has been my attempts to understand the sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gnostic Gospel, The Gospel of Thomas. What feels right to me is that, here, Jesus is the messenger who encourages all to focus on the inner journey and to attend to this spirit within. In this Gospel, Jesus relates that we should not stop seeking, that we should expect to be disturbed, but through this we shall come to see the "Father's rule" inside and outside of us. The process goes through and beyond Jesus.

In essence, the awareness of "the all" begins inside you then extends outside of you to others. It takes work, patience, prayer and meditation and interaction with communities and nature, which surround us, to grow in this awareness. It is a journey that continuously changes and one that never ends.

Day 5

What does faith mean to me: love, support, chain links, strong bonds with a brother, connectedness, talking with another person and sharing thoughts and concerns. I think God works through people. I believe it!

Reaching out to others telling them you care about them. Sensitivity and compassion. Your faith gets tested through life and one can appreciate the greatness after pain. Pain can be a great reflection. A great Wow! A turn of events that changes pain into a comfortable new way or approach toward life. You have to work at it though.

Prayer helps me think about others and makes me less self-centered. Prayer is part of my faith because gratitude is a big part of my success today. I talk about my children, my dog, my wife. I pray through silence and I pray through my actions. I pray to say thank you to my creator or God and appreciate the life I have.

Acceptance is vital. Accept your life and work it to the best of your ability. Again, my faith is strong because I experienced pain and it hurt and it took a lot of time before I got better. I love my creator because I have had four wonderful years raising my daughter and caring for my boys. My creator allowed me to see my daughter born, and that gave me all I needed to work at living.

Thank you, my creator!

Day 6

My faith continues to evolve. My faith has a lot to do with being grateful! Most of all I appreciate and thank God for what I have. Gratefulness is seeing that what you have is beautiful and perfect. I try to think positively and send that message to others.

I've been through some pretty tough family situations lately that made me question my values and even wonder where God was in all of it. So many people appeared in my life at just the exact moment when I needed support. I finally realized it had to be God putting them in my path. It just couldn't be a coincidence. It happened too many times.

A counselor with just the right words; someone who asked, "How are you?" and then sat back to listen; a phone call from my Brother, out of the blue!

The hugs!! The very worst day I had, I was at the dump! I opened my door and as I stepped out my best friend was standing close enough to just reach out and hug me. It was amazing support! Earlier in that most difficult day I ran into an acquaintance and he gave me a hug right out of the blue! How often does that happen to you?

My husband's car was in a very bad accident recently. As I stood with all the Firemen and Police shaking their heads I felt it and he did too. His presence. It was real and it made an impression on us both. God is real and in our lives. God is protecting us.

Day 7

I believe in God, not as an eye in the sky God, but existing in all of us with heaven being here on earth and not some kind of reward for after life. I think that was what Jesus was telling us.

I believe Jesus was a great preacher and teacher but I don't believe he was God incarnate. I believe Jesus was crucified, but I don't believe he rose from the dead. I believe that encounters with Jesus by the disciples and Paul after his death were not with a skin and bones Jesus, but with his spirit and the God within Jesus and all of them.

I believe that my role in this life is to love everyone I can. Love is indistinguishable from heaven on earth. My particular ministry is with high school kids but that is just an example of loving my fellow man – love God and love each other.

I don't know if there is some kind of life after death. I think it is impossible to know. All I can do is the best I can while I am alive. If I just turn to dust after I am dead, it won't matter as I will have done my best with this life.

Day 8

I believe in a force that binds us. There is something greater than me telling me to love and care for the people around me, from my closest family and friends, to that stranger that I will see one time in my life yet feel compelled to hold the door open for them and smile just to say, "Hi." You can make a real connection with anyone. I have faith that others want to work towards the greater good, not because it will be best for them as individuals, but because it will optimize life for all. We don't smash and grab to take all around us in self preservation. We share.

The binding force manifests itself as a knowledgeable and powerful God. As Christians, we relate the concept of God into recognizable parts in our Human mind: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and The Holy Spirit. The Bible is the best collection of stories we have to share these concepts.

I don't know the answer to what happens after Life and how we integrate into this binding force. If God came to me today and explained everything, I would not comprehend it. However, I am open and willing to prepare myself for the day I am ready for that explanation. In the meantime, I will continue to build upon and enjoy the connections we have as people and with the world around us.

Day 9

I believe that God is always working to help us each be the best we are supposed to be. He is working in ways I don't understand to grow us, teach us, make us aware, open us to our unique potential by placing us in special situations, giving us joys and challenges, experiencing pain and grief, having specific and not so specific exposures, placing people on our course.

I believe it all happens for a reason. It is my job to remain faithful to God and to trust and to pray. To stay alert for the small messages, look for beauty and joy, hear and see God during the good times and the bad and make choices that line up with what I hold in my heart.

I do not believe God will do everything I need for me nor will he give all I ask. I don't presume to know all that I need and that is always my prayer. For God to give me, those who I love, and all others what it is God thinks we need because he is working for our individual good. It is my job to believe and then do everything else in my power to live in a way that is true to myself, helps others, shows love, and compassion.

Day 10

Here is where I am now, not where I was, or probably where I'm going to be in the future. This is pretty much what I wrote down a couple of weeks ago but I waited to send it because I thought there would be more that I wanted to add - but I don't think there is.

My faith is in a God that is within me that connects me to all people and to the natural world. I experience God when I love and am loved. I'm at a loss to put this into words because language is too limiting. That is why I have a problem with praying verbally - I use imagery to connect me to God and to pray for others.

This "God" does not come from out there somewhere and intervene in earthly affairs, but speaks from within. I am a Christian by heritage more than conviction I guess, as I do not feel a personal connection with Jesus. I don't believe that he is the son of God and died for my sins, or that he is the only path to God, but do view him as a powerful teacher. I suspect my views are most closely aligned with UU doctrine (or lackthereof!) but feel very comfortable in "my home" at Pilgrim Church where I feel part of a community that may not believe exactly as I do, but that is there for me.

Day 11

My Faith is:

- * Strength when I am weak
- * Hope when I feel doubt
- * Company when I feel alone
- * Joy when I am down
- * Guidance when I am lost
- * Courage in the face of danger
- * Listening when someone needs an ear
- * Being silent to connect to the holy spirit
- * Being accepting of God's will
- * Trying again when I have failed
- * Helping those who are in need
- * Being present each day to the beauty that it brings
- * Praying to understand God at a deeper level
- * Living each day with Love, Respect and Honor
- * Learning to recognize God's work in my life

My faith is the expression of Love that god calls me to share. May I always remember to live my faith each day.

Day 12

My faith has grown, through the years, in waves through the ocean of my experiences, ebbing and rushing, at times very important and at others times less so. My mother had a strong faith, although not always a church-going one. And I have recently realized that I believe because she believed.

My earliest memory of formal religion was going with my Dad to a large Universalist Church in Worcester and sitting in the pew looking up at the beautiful stained glass window, hearing the choir singing, and having the minister, who I remember was named Mr. Beech, take my hand and speak to me on the way out. I remember telling my Dad that the choir sang so loud that I couldn't understand their words. He seemed amused at that and told people what I had said. I liked that. And I liked Mr. Beech (even though he didn't have any hair!) I was about four or five at that time. We went occasionally and, after that first experience, I went to Sunday School which had less of an impact on me. What impressed me, then, was more the beauty of the old brick church than the content of the Sunday School experience. But from about fourth grade up I went to Sunday School and, from seventh grade on, belonged to a youth group, where I remember a well-loved minister and his wife we kids called Uncle Bill and Aunt Jo. They touched me. If faith was important to them, then it was to me, and I would keep trying to figure it out through the rest of my life...off and on.

Day 13

My God has always been the Holy Spirit. Jesus I loved, but in my twenties I questioned whether he was the Son of God. It just didn't compute. Everything he said made a lot of sense to me and was surely God-inspired. But really? A virgin birth? I believed he was crucified, but the Resurrection? The Trinity? Not so likely. So for a long time I was busy with becoming a teacher, going to California, returning to New England, getting married, having babies. Jesus didn't have much to offer me that seemed useful at the time. Then I had a four-year-old daughter. That's when my Dad had taken me to church. It seemed time for me to do that with her. At the time, I was teaching nursery school in a Lutheran Church with the Pastor's wife. They were a fantastic family of faith, and were worried that our family seemed not connected to God. So my daughter and I went to Sunday School and church, respectively. And I searched and asked questions and, eventually, believed it all...sort of.

Where am I now at age 75? When I was studying psychology and came to Carl Jung, something clicked. It felt right to think about the "Universal Unconscious." I stored that away because it "felt right" to me. It just rang true like a bell in my heart. And now we are reading James Williams' *The Death of the Mythic God*, and it again rings that bell inside. Of course. We have evolved on this earth and are all inter-related and inter-dependent on each other and on the God that we can find in ourselves and others, and we know this by how it feels when we touch that Universal Unconscious. The stories and parables of the new testament are true, probably not in concrete fact, but in what they teach us about the gifts of this life we are living, here on this planet, in this universe. We just have to open our hearts and listen to what is inside each of us and listen to what is inside others whose lives touch ours. That is where I look for God these days, in the ocean of faces and hands and beauty around me... and in me. I thank the universe for my life. And there is always more love to discover.

Day 14

I have been asked what faith is throughout this year, though each time I try to explain, I learn that every answer I give is correct. I believe that God made everyone unique and with each choice we make, there will be a new opportunity that we can either follow or ignore.

In defining my faith, a bike trail seems to be the best comparison. Normally people don't think about their faith while riding a bike, but on many bike trails there are rocks that can get in the way, like bumps in life that can prevent me from getting to where I want to be. Of course not everything in life will go our way and may be painful both mentally and physically, but when I veer off the trail, I believe my faith in God will help me find my way back in order to keep going.

I experienced a real biking accident in my life about six years ago that sent me to the emergency room. It hurt like most biking accidents, but when I healed, I knew that it wouldn't keep me from ever biking again. Instead, it taught me that I will always be helped and cared for through the most agonizing or stressful parts in life.

Our lives are based on the options and decisions we make and when we are lost or brought down, there will always be new possibilities that God will have to create new possibilities. I have been worried about being right or wrong sometimes. I don't need to though because of my faith. I like to believe that if I fall off my bike trail, I will get up and a new trail will be created for me.

Day 15

Faith is like a tree. Both are tall and stand strong and always there to protect you in times of need. Your faith starts small, like a seed, and as you encounter new experiences and new struggles it grows bigger.

Like a tree grows with water and sunlight and grows taller and more powerful, faith grows when we give it the right nutrients. A tree can grow tall and strong with many limbs coming off, but the real strength is in the roots. Throughout storms trees get broken down and hurt, but the roots keep them in place, always providing a stable foundation for it to re-grow.

Even when someone goes to cut down the tree, they can take off the whole top but the roots and base will still be there, the basis from which it all started. The roots grow out bigger and stronger to keep the tree in place to get through all the hardships.

My faith is much like this because over the years I have had to face new struggles in my life causing my faith to grow. Like a storm coming and knocking down a tree, when my faith is called into question there is always the foundation that keeps it in place. Like the roots of a tree, my faith keeps me from ever completely falling. My faith is strong and might take a few hits sometimes, but is permanently a part of my life, like a tree that refuses to fall.

Day 16

In thinking about defining my faith I have been able to find God all around me. My faith is in the mountains. I believe that God is with me when I do what I love the most, whether it is snowboarding or hanging out with my friends.

I believe when I am learning new tricks God is with me and can help me through the hard times and definitely when I am having fun. On days that I am competing God is with me as well. He can help me when I am warming up in practice trying to get my run down. As it gets closer and closer for my time to drop, God can help me with getting mentally ready. This is equally as important because I need to be ready to go at that very moment. Although God can help me with a lot of things to prepare for my run I have to be the deciding factor of whether I land it or not.

As long as I can have faith in myself I know that God will be with me while I'm trying all my snowboarding tricks. God can also help me mentally on things like math tests or writing my faith statement. I also think God can be anywhere and everywhere.

If you need love, God can be there for you in many different forms. God has been there for me when I was feeling homesick, when I first went away to school. God has also helped me make the right choices when faced with tough situations with my peers. God is really important to my life because he has helped me a lot so far and can continue to be a part of whatever I do.

Day 17

I believe in one God who loves everyone in the whole wide world. We worship God in different ways, understand God differently, and call God by different names. That is a manifestation of the different parts of the world we come from, the different cultures, families and climates, and the different messengers and their followers. I wish that everyone could find ways to be interested in our differences and not fight over our differences.

I believe God has sent a number of people to earth to help teach his word of love, compassion and understanding, including, but not limited to Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Mother Teresa, Moses, and Martin Luther King.

I believe that God is unknowable and is the ground of all being. I believe God is out there and in each and every person. I believe that the god we humans talk about is an archetypal image and there are many of those: the God of the Old Testament, the God of the New Testament, Allah, Brahma, and Vishnu and Shiva, for example.

Sadly, I think the arguments are at this archetypal image level, where there are differences and not enough attention is paid to the lower unknowable level where we are all connected and there is commonality. I believe everyone is loved and everyone is loveable. I believe that we need to love ourselves to share our love with others.

Day 18

When I was a little girl, I used to lie in bed at night and close my eyes and rub them until I could see a million different sparkles in all different colors. I would watch them until they faded away into darkness - and then nothing. One night, as the sparkles disappeared I panicked as I contemplated nothingness, no people, no Earth, no Universe, no Heaven and no God. The possibility of this brought total fear and of course made me cry.

The God of my youth loved me, but was just waiting for me to step out of line to punish me. I knew deep inside that the worst punishment of all would be far beyond not getting into heaven, but nothingness – an eternal darkness of no existence whatsoever. Those are pretty scary thoughts for a little girl, and it was those fearful thoughts that kept me from the real God and what I truly believed. But hope can come even in the darkest hours of our lives. The choice that you own your faith can be a powerful concept and the strength that comes from that ownership can be liberating.

As time went on, and life brought its wonderful ups and horrible downs I learned some very important things: Faith is a choice. God is love. Jesus is the perfect example of God's love. I had made the choice to believe there is no nothingness and God is not a stern father figure for whom I can do no right. God is an indefinable presence of goodness, love, guidance, and wisdom. Jesus' inspiring life and ministry is so simple to understand, yet so hard to live out; but at its core, it is love and understanding.

Of course the wisest teachers of all are our children. One day, when we were talking about how nothing really lasts forever my daughter said this: "But Mummy, love lasts forever." And then I had this thought. My Great Aunt Alice was born in 1896. She lived to be 103. When no one wanted to read me a story when I was little I knew I could go to her and she would always put me on her lap and read to me, even if it was the same story 20 times in a row. The kindness, love, and patience she showed me then is now in me. My children who were born over 100 years later are experiencing that same love through me, and their children will experience that love through them and so on.

So if God is love, and love is the connecting factor to all of us, there is no nothingness. There will always be love. There will always be God. And now my fear that kept me from God all those years ago is gone – dissolved by my faith.

Day 19

God is the strength to be ok and the strength to fall apart.

God is knowing when to hold on and when to let go.

God is finding your voice and the space to listen.

God is selflessness and loving yourself.

God is regaining hope, losing it and discovering it again.

God is in the loved and the unloved.

God is seeing the right in the wrong.

God is caring enough to get angry and show compassion.

God is free will and having no choice.

God is accepting there is not always a reason.

God is uncovering peace without closure.

God is taking responsibility.

God is embracing your fears and purpose.

God is connecting through art, humor, words, music, dance, the stars, the breeze and waves.

God is what makes us different and the same.

Day 20

God is the ultimate power in the universe. God gives us choice. Because God gives us choice, some very good and very bad things happen. But God will not break the rules for us. Instead, in the face of trouble, God offers us the greatest gift: Choice.

Day 21

Is there a God? Is He just one God, or many gods working together? Is what we call “God” just “the universe” or “the fates” or “destiny”? If there is a God, and He is all-powerful, how does He allow all of humanity’s ills – sickness, sadness, fear, anger, destruction, murder, rape, pillage, war, hate, disease, deformity?

Like many people, I’ve had some unpleasant times. I crawled off the top of the basement staircase when I was 8 months old. I burned my feet to the second degree at 22 months. I didn’t speak until I was almost three. My father, an alcoholic work-aholic who was likely bi-polar, left when I was seven. My mother, beaten down emotionally, did her best and gave what she could, but felt too guilty to discipline me. I had an overbearing older sister whom I resented. I suffered various levels of emotional abuse from my father, from witnessing his rages, to being ignored and berated by him, to being in the car while he drove drunk. We moved 700 miles, and I had to leave everything I knew behind. I became depressed at age 19. My father died when I was 23, and the depression grew worse. In my 30s, I had numerous health problems that could not be diagnosed. At 35 I had a miscarriage, and at 36 I had an ectopic pregnancy rupture.

So where was God during all this? Hiding? Inattentive? Sulking? Non-existent?

The ectopic rupture taught me how to handle intense pain. The miscarriage taught me how much I wanted a child. The health problems taught me to learn how to take care of myself. The depression taught me how to forgive myself. My father’s death taught me how to be free. The move taught me how to adapt to change. My father’s abuse taught me not to harm others. My overbearing sister taught me how to read, how to ride a bike, how to throw, how to make popcorn, how to care for another person. My mother taught me so many things, but mostly how to be kind. My father’s illness taught me how to forgive others. My muteness taught me how to communicate. My burns taught me to overlook physical imperfections. And the dangerous tumble down the stairs? It took a long time for me to understand.

It took watching my father-in-law creep away from us and towards dementia. As he withered, and I witnessed my husband’s pain, I reached for God for the first time in 25 years - *please take him, let him be with his parents, his beloved, his unborn children*. A week later, he passed, and after the funeral, I was overcome with chills, realizing in a flash of eerie insight that my prayer had been answered.

God may send me, or any of us, helpless, down a hard, gray, wooden staircase. Our overbearing sister may watch from the top in horror, unable to assist, but God must do this to teach us the things we need to learn, to shape us into the

people we need to be for this world. The beauty in this is, for all that pain and heartache we suffer, He will make sure we stop before we hit the cement of the basement floor. Whether or not we understand it at the time, we are all in His care. So yes, there is definitely a God, and He has my back.

Day 22

“God never gives you more than you can handle.” I am not sure who this quote should be attributed to, but my mother always said it to me. I recite this phrase throughout my life. When I am feeling overwhelmed, I know that either I can change my path forward or I can reach out to those around me for support.

When opportunities for change arise unexpectedly, I think, is this a path I was meant to take? My risk adverse, rational personality often kicks in, immediately halting the course redirection. However, when I stop to consider if this opportunity has been selected for me through karma or divine guidance, I think, “why wouldn’t I take on the challenge?” This is my version of prayer and faith realized.

I have not lived an arduous life. I hope that if I had I would have the strength and compassion to live it with unwavering faith. Knowing that I have a blessed life, I try to enjoy every moment that comes my way. Love provides wonderful things and I am blessed to have unlimited examples. I try to be thankful for each one, smiling as a silent prayer of thanks for the blessing.

I believe the force of love contests the law of entropy, transferring energy to be used for growth. This supports the thought that love never ends. What are the negative energies? That I believe is entropy challenging back. Faith is concluding that love is stronger and will always conquer.

Day 23

As we have learned in confirmation class, Faith is The assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen. When I first walked into confirmation class, I knew nothing of my faith or my beliefs, But after an hour of time every other Sunday for the past six months I have learned how faith affects me, and what my faith is.

I want to explore my faith with the Trinity. In truth, I don't really believe in a physical "God", or the superhuman Jesus. Instead I believe in the idea of them: their message. I believe in love and forgiveness and helping the less fortunate. I believe the Father and the son are ideas that we allow to influence and guide our lives through the messages in the Bible. They are ever changing. They guide us and they teach us by our perception of them. And then there's the holy ghost. To me, the holy ghost is that stomach pain you get before you swan dive into that spring off a high rock, that feeling you get when you know something's wrong. To me, The holy ghost is nature, and it's in us; It is us. It's our instincts and our belief in God telling us right from wrong and proving our faith. Then we communicate back. Not to a being, but to our Faith, and usually we don't get a reply, but continue to try in whatever way we know how to express ourselves: music, dance, meditation, or just casual remarks.

All that matters, however, is that we can feel something there guiding us, and we can learn from the bible and God's message.

Day 24

My faith is to live my life as if the world isn't broken, rather full of Love. My faith is each person recognizes the love in each other and strides to build heaven on earth.

My belief is people, as individuals, are loving, caring, sacrificing, and living representations of God. As we listen and connect, we are able to see Love more clearly through each other. I do believe mankind as a whole is corrupt and self-serving, but through Jesus we have a living example of what we can be and how we can build heaven on earth.

Day 25

My struggle with faith and what exactly my faith is comes from my need for concrete evidence. My stubborn belief in “seeing is believing” has only grown as I’ve gotten older, and it stems from my disbelief that an invisible “hand”, so to speak, is creating us and the earth and guiding us and somehow has a hold on everything that is happening.

My debate over this was never welcomed at my catholic high school. This is not saying, however, that I don’t believe in a God, or more so a possibly higher power/energy. I prefer energy. I understand that when everything seems to be going wrong or there is so much bad happening in the community, whatever the scale, that people need to hold onto something. An explanation or a hope or something to give them peace; and I know that that is part of faith.

I have found those things in concrete areas of my life that I turn to because I am comforted by the concrete. I do not have the textbook religious faith in regards to the living world—that random meetings between strangers or that the joy a puppy brings was the work of a Being. Where I do have faith, though, whether it’s textbook or not, is in the unknowns of the afterlife. Contrary to what the previous 200 words might imply, death and its realm does not scare me; it does not give me anxiety. I find death fascinating because it will forever be the ultimate unknown.

So here is my faith: I do not believe that we only have one life on this beautiful, amazing, sometimes scary, life-filled planet. I do not believe in the classic interpretations of heaven and hell. I believe that when we die, we are greeted into a brief heaven where our souls are weighed of the good and the bad sown in our life. Then, our souls are recycled and pieces are put back onto this earth in different ways. It’s a custom view of reincarnation in a way, I know. The more I experience the world and the more I push my boundaries, the more my faith changes as I think it does for everyone. It can change drastically or marginally over the years. But your faith changes along with you as a person. Mine certainly has in 10 years.

Day 26

God is love. Faith keeps me refocusing my life toward love.

Day 27

I'm still not completely sold on God. At 45, I've been part of Pilgrim Church from birth. I've gone through the Sunday School program and I've been part of the Youth Group. I've wandered away from the church and come back hesitantly, only to find myself engaged in more ways than I ever expected, moving from Pre-K teacher to Christian Ed chair, to being an honest-to-God Deacon.

And through it all, I've never been in it for the whole "God and Jesus thing." My belief doesn't lie in an all-powerful, invisible space Father, but in his imperfect creations. I remain a part of this church not for the Christianity, but for the community. I'm here because I believe in the people.

Or maybe it's more honest to say it's because I believe in people, period. I believe that we are selfish and self-absorbed, but we're also hard-wired for love, honesty and an ability to put others needs ahead of our own. I believe that deep down, we all want to do the right thing. To be kind. To lift each other up in ways both subtle and life-changing. To be superheroes.

If there's one thing that actually makes me believe in a higher power, it's that we all have that spark inside us, driving us to do better, to be better. Whether we do it because we believe in God, or because we believe in each other, what matters is that we never stop trying.

Day 28

I used wonder if I believed because of the promise of an afterlife. I don't want to think that this life on earth is all there is. As I've gotten older, I want to believe that this is only one phase of my journey. I want to believe that there is a life after this one which will be eternal.

In order to believe that, I must go back to Jesus. Despite his short time on this earth, he has had an influence on people for over 2000 years. His message to me is of love, and the belief that there is a paradise waiting for us all.

I also now believe that God is a cosmic force, rather than the "all-knowing being" that I was taught as a child. God permeates every living thing. Jesus came from this cosmic force in human form, to show other human beings the way to live in harmony with each other. What we do with these lessons is up to each individual.

To me, the word "faith" means to have trust in. There can be examples that will magnify my faith, but until the end (at least of this earthly life), I have no way of knowing for sure.

Day 29

Do you know why this engineer believes in God? We live in a unique world. The environment of our world is perfect. So many conditions are essential to life on earth that they could not exist in proper relationship by chance. These conditions are the design of a Supreme Being.

The earth rotates on its axis at about 1000 miles per hour. If it turned at the rate of 100 miles per hour, our days and nights would be 10 times as long. The summer sun would burn up our vegetation every day, and each sprout would freeze in such a long night. The sun with a surface temperature of 12,000 degrees Fahrenheit is just far enough away that it warms us just enough but not too much. The earth is tilted on its axis at an angle of 23 degrees that gives us our four seasons. If it had not been tilted, the poles would be in eternal twilight and eventually would be contents of ice and leave a desert at the equator. The moon is 240,000 miles away and the tides are a gentle reminder of its presence. If our moon was 50,000 miles away, the continents would be washed away and the entire planet would be covered by a mile and a half of water. Life and vegetation, as we know it, could not exist.

I do not toss and turn at night trying to figure out how we got here. A supreme intelligence, who we call God, put us here. I find it difficult to believe and accept many stories in the Bible. I do believe that a wonderful man named Jesus waked this earth 2000 years ago preaching love and kindness. I believe he was crucified, but I have difficulty believing in the resurrection. If I'm wrong, I hope that a Supreme Being will forgive me.

Day 30

Had I been charged years ago to define what is my faith, I would not have had the words nor resources to speak of it. Because of my life experiences and growing self-awareness, I can now explore what it is I truly believe. I believe that God guides me as I develop my own inner resources. God is my inner resource.

My faith is a belief in knowing who I am, trusting my instincts, and knowing that I am continuously evolving. Knowing that the stillness of God is within me calms and comforts me and gives me solace. My faith also lies within the human connection and knowing that within every relationship there is a transference of souls.

We become one with God. The dearest people in my life manifest God for me. I hold them close. I am blessed to be part of a loving and supportive community where I can become who I am meant to be. When I am still and quiet I know that God is with me and that He lives within everyone I meet, then I must live according to his love and grace.

I believe that God has always been present in my life and that I need to get out of my own way, always turning to God for sustenance and guidance. I have begun to have an overriding assurance of God's presence. There have been moments in my life when I "know." I have a sense of knowing, but not what it is I know. Assurance? Who knows, but it's a great feeling of calm and gratitude. God is an indefinable presence of love, goodness, wisdom, compassion, patience, acceptance, all qualities to which we humans can aspire.

Day 31

I grew up going to church every Sunday. I've always believed and prayed when things were tough. But now I know that God is ACTUALLY in MY life. And he LOVES ME!! Wow, and I just said that out loud!

Another part of my faith is learning to reach out to others. It's not easy for me, especially with strangers. But I am trying and I read this statement every day!

“Extend to each person, no matter how trivial the contact, all the care and kindness and understanding and love that you can muster, and do it with no thought of any reward. Your life will never be the same again.” ~Og Mandino

Day 32

My faith statement came to me in a dream. Before sleep I was deep in thought about what my statement should be.

I arrived at my father's marina consisting of a maze-like, convoluted arrangement of docks. In truth, my father does not have a marina, a dock, or even a boat. I was going to be meeting friends who were to join me for a fishing trip on my boat. They were already there upon my arrival and waited patiently as I readied my fishing gear.

My tackle box contained an array of lures in all shapes, colors and sizes, giving me lots to choose from. My line was a different story. It was in a twisted spool and was not going to unravel. I took my knife and cut the wad of line. Needing more line and knowing I was keeping my friends waiting, I ran frantically along the docks to search for more.

As I stepped up onto a long thin stretch of dock, I found myself catching up to a man walking in front of me. The closer I approached him, the more unstable the dock became, pitching me back and forth, bouncing me about like I was on a trampoline to a point that I had to get down on my hands and knees so not to be thrown off. Suddenly a more stable parallel dock appeared to my lower left. I quickly jumped down onto it and was able to make my way in a peaceful fashion.

As I proceeded, my father came up from behind me and said, "Scott, you need to take better care of your dock space and boat. You need to keep your boat polished, especially the underside and keep your lines in order. As it is now you have not properly secured your boat, and it is starting to drift."

From my location I could see my boat just starting to move away from the dock. I quickly ran over to it and was just able to retrieve it, nearly falling into the water. As I looked around, I realized that my father had built his marina with a sure and defined plan, in such a way that the docks would actually contain any loose boat. Although my boat might get away from me, I was assured that it would not go adrift out to sea.

In trying to interpret this dream, I am sure it directly relates to my faith. We often find we have many choices (the many lures, the various docks). None are so simple. As on the unsteady dock, man can make our paths more difficult with his influences, but we can choose to jump to a more stable dock or path. My faith is in my father, who I realized had a trusting plan so that I would not lose my boat. My boat is my haven for navigating through the seas of worldly difficulties,

enabling me to search for the truth (fish) with various well-maintained tools (lures and line) and the help of patient friends (Pastor Jon, who has been waiting for us all to submit our faith statements).

Faith cannot be taken for granted, it has to be maintained and kept close at hand. God is there to help.

Day 33

I believe that there is an ultimate power which has fashioned the Universe and our world. This power we call God.

In this world where I belong right now, I experience a connection with other human beings as well as with everything that is alive, including animals, plants, and rocks. I am here to learn and love and feel what it means to be alive. I believe that animals, plants, and rocks have souls like we do and while we are here we have to learn how to live in harmony together. I also believe that music and all other knowledge already exists in the Universe.

Love and compassion also exists around us; we just have to reach for it and receive it, but most Important is to give it to others freely and unconditionally.

Jesus was a unique human being who was able to connect with God at a level that I can't even imagine. He gave us the ultimate gift, which is love.

I believe that there is another life after we die, which we do not understand. I am very sad and I miss my husband, but I have faith that we will meet again somewhere, whether it is in this world again, or in the one beyond. As he told me before he died, we can not be separated.

Day 34

I am glad that I have been asked to write about my faith. The request has caused me to think more precisely than I previously have on what and why I believe in God. I think my consciousness of God has been wonderfully sharpened by the need to describe it.

I realize that the magnificence of the world, in all its aspects is an exciting and unbelievable ongoing expression of God and his mighty spirit and creative power. I look at the tree outside my window and watch its wonderful leaf cycle, it's beautiful habitat for the birds. I see the miracle of the birds with their knowledge of how to live, build nests, hatch eggs, feed the babies and then send them off for their own lives.

Every species knows what it must do to survive. The cycle of life that enables animals and all beings to adapt to life from the very beginning is built into them. I don't expect to understand God any more than an ant or a mosquito can understand man, but I know that this mighty spirit and creator is the originator of our universe.

What fun it is to love the mighty Being and to try to keep in mind the great message that are richly described in the Bible and other books which deal with God. The code for happy living is laid out for all beings. God is synonymous with Love. Without God there would be no love and a world without love is beyond imagination. Thank God for God!

Day 35

Life is a constant challenge. Now that I am approaching the final phase, I find myself digging deeper into my soul to find the faith needed: I am gearing up my inner self to be ready for what comes next.

Two things are my teachers in this quest: Jean Roetter and Pilgrim Church. They give me constant examples of how life should be lived. Jean is a wonder. She is always positive. Even as she has suffered tremendous physical challenges, she continues to smile and maintain a cheerful outlook.

Pilgrim Church has had my back for over 50 years. It gives me peace and reflection for my soul. Music has played a large part in the comfort I feel.

As I age, I see more clearly God's hand in everything I do and see. The sunsets from my deck. The nature all around. The people I meet.

And so I will continue to remember that "Today is the first day of the rest of my life." One foot moves in front of the other, always moving forward. May God bless this church and everyone in it.

Day 36

My faith began well before I could even define the world. I know it was faith when I was bored in church at eight years old and I read in the Bible, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." I got it then. I knew I believed.

My faith was always love. That love for me took the form of curiosity. I was endlessly curious about people and the world. I could feel the string that connects all of humanity. I could feel the pull to love those who are in need, those who are broken. I could recognize my own brokenness and my own need for love.

Faith to me is a belief in something so big and so benevolent it can love us all, all at once, regardless of anything else.

As I have gotten older and experienced life, I have had a pull and a call from God. I have watched what faith has done for others. I have watched how it gives people the ability to 'be okay.' They are okay no matter what the circumstances when they have faith.

Faith has also allowed me to let go of attachment. It reminds me to always re-center on God. We are all love and worth loving and faith pushes me forward to embody that love in the world. All of us are interconnected and all of us are loved. Faith gives me the vision and the strength to do God's work.

Day 37

In the first place, I have "Blind Faith" to follow my Minister in that he/she will interpret the bible to teach me the lessons of God and Jesus. I have seen and received faith in this church from God, Jesus, friendship, fellowship and the Outreach we provide.

To be honest, faith is something that comes into and out of in my life. We all seem to lose it at times but I always find myself coming back to it. Having faith settles my thoughts and leaves me in a calmer state of being.

I never thought much about faith in my early youth. Faith seems to come to us all as we grow older. I see faith through my Mom who always has had strong faith in all her children. Come to think of it, the best one word definition of faith is...MOM.

Life is simple if you have faith. I am believing more.

Day 38

My faith is like an avocado. It is rough on the outside. I have a thick skin and can take all the trouble life throws at me. On the inside, I am filled with good stuff. Most importantly, the kernel of my faith is big. The meat of my faith is rich. What grows out of my spiritual life is the kind of stuff that gets better with each new harvest.

My faith is like a Laffy Taffy. You never know what flavor your going to get but it is always delicious.

My faith is like the ocean. It is deep. So much of it is unexplored, but I look forward to diving deep and discovering the mysteries of God.

Day 39

How can we imagine the possibility of an existence beyond the confines of time? How do we comprehend a 'time line' with no beginning and no end? But what if we bend that line into a circle and erase the point of connection beyond our recognition. Perhaps this is how best to contemplate this ultimate energy, intelligence, and creative source we call God, a perfect circle with no apparent beginning or end. Could it be that the "Big Bang" (thought to have occurred about 13.7 billion years ago) was an attempt by God to create a possible environment compatible with a viable and renewable life force? ("Intelligent Desire", not "Intelligent Design") If that be true, what a "Eureka Moment" it must have been for God, when there first appeared something definable as a living vs. inanimate form. (Can you hear the opening music in the movie, 2001 – A Space Odyssey? – the 1st movement of Thus Spoke Zarathustra – R. Strauss)

So began the Darwinian criteria of survival of the fittest that would brilliantly ensure the ever-onward march of ever more complicated life forms in an amazing variety of plants and animals. Was the purpose of all this violent and seemingly chaotic expenditure of energy over these billions of years just to get us to our present prominence at the 'top of the food chain'? Or was it the desire and intention of God that we be enabled to make the manifestation of "God is love" on Earth a reality? And might it be that God's purpose was to be in a relationship of love and trust with us—for us to be able to appreciate and share the wonders of His creation, and to fulfill the building of the Kingdom on Earth through the exercise of compassion and justice for all?

So where does this Odyssey end for each of us? Is it all, "sound and fury, signifying nothing," as the Bard once wrote? What, if anything, lies beyond this earthly experience? I'm hoping to turn in this 'spacesuit' we call our body, which has allowed all of us to live quite adequately in our planet's atmosphere, and have my spirit (a.k.a. soul) soar in the realm of God, even beyond the limitations of time and space. What this might be like, I have no idea, but I have a few thoughts on what I hope to experience.

Day 40

“To Infinity and Beyond” – Buzz Lightyear, *A Toy Story*

I have always wondered why should the God of creation care one whit about our individual lives, our trials and tribulations, joys and sorrows, successes and failures. It is through the words of Jesus that we are reassured that, fortunately for us, God does care about our welfare, and does indeed want to be in a relationship that involves us in a journey of transformation. It is the way that leads to life—the way less traveled—away from the self-centered and self-preoccupied, toward the God centered religious life of peace and trust, as a deepening connection with the Spirit of God.

It is appropriate that Easter should always be a time of individual reflection on the life and death of Jesus, and the meaning of an existence beyond the grave. To be in a state of unity with God, to participate in a personal union with God, and to share the love as expressed by and through Jesus, is my dream of heaven. Will we retain an identity awareness of ourselves and those we have known or known about? While most of us would probably hope so, Jesus would imply (Mark 12: 24-25) that the afterlife will be very different. Whatever this existence after death might be, we must finally admit that we are very limited in our understanding and knowledge.

Now we have come from creation to eternity, from Alpha to Omega, and beyond. It's a challenging and hopefully rewarding exercise to think once in a while on these ultimate questions of our existence. But the real meaning of all this mostly unprovable and unanswerable inquiry is that our relationship with God in the present is what is most important. It is what we have done and will do with what we have been given, and whether we leave our world a better place, that we and others will know our lives have been worth living. And should it turn out, as Peggy Lee once sang, “Is This All There Is?” then at least we can be grateful that we have been the recipients of this marvelous gift of life and have left behind a legacy of a life well lived. God will expect nothing more from us.

Postlude

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen (Hebrews 11:1). This is the original faith statement in the New Testament. It is the core of our belief in a God we can't see, but whose love is always visible. Do you have this kind of faith? What do you hope for this year? Are you clear about the love you want in the world?

As Easter is upon us, may you know that God made broken things so the world could be put back together, resurrected daily, in an immaculate form. You are not your sins; you are what you do with the learning from your suffering. You are not ever done; you are the power of your belief in eternal life, in new life, multiplied by the risks you take to make our world more faithful.

He is risen and he asks us to rise again and again!