



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

The wages of trust is life

Clay Nelson © 18 July 2021

I unashamedly stole the title for my musings from a sermon by Unitarian Universalist Joshua Pawelek. I liked how he played with a verse from Paul's letter to the Romans (6:23): "for the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus."

I agree with Pawelek's implication that Paul is inviting us to trust Jesus if we want to live. Paul understands sin to be disconnection from God. Disconnected we die. Trusting Jesus connects us to our creator giving us not just life but eternal life. This one verse is the doctrinal core of Christianity. It all boils down to whom do you trust? Unitarians have a different view but I will get to that later. Stay tuned.

I am not a fan of Paul, but I can relate to what he famously wrote a little further on in Romans (7:15): "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." This underscores that my real struggle is not with Paul but with the idea of trust.

We throw the word around easily as if we know what it means and as if we share the same understanding of it. Google "trust" and most of the top links are about financial trusts. How to protect that which we can't take with us from the tax man. Most of the other links are to articles on Christian sites about the necessity to trust God in the Pauline sense. A search of YouTube reveals Christians have no difficulty singing about trusting God or Jesus. Search for UU hymns about trust and it is slim pickings.

Trust is like God — hard to define. Most religions do not even try to define what God (or the divine) is. It is a theology called the *via negativa*, the negative way. It asks, can we really say anything positive about who or what God is? No. This theology says the best we can do is say what God is not. This view says we can argue God is infinite — not limited in any way; immutable — un-changing; eternal — not in time; and immaterial — not made of matter. This implies that god cannot be defined, only experienced in God's presence or absence. This

leaves wide open our understanding of the god we believe in or don't believe in. Our answers are wide and varied. Much the same can be said of trust.

We have many shared ideas about what trust isn't. We are pretty clear about mistrust and distrust. They both involve being suspicious or lacking confidence, but the former is often a general sense of unease toward someone or something and the latter is often based on experience or reliable information. A used car salesman evokes mistrust but I might still buy the car. An email from a Nigerian prince offering me millions gets deleted immediately out of clear and present distrust.

Distrust is more concrete because it is tied to our negative experiences. They could go back to poor caregiving in our first 18 months of life. Social rejection during adolescence or traumatic experiences during adulthood. Betrayal or abuse in romantic relationships. Significant loss of financial resources or perceived injustice at the hands of authority figures also cause strong feelings of distrust of institutions or people.

In short, when a person's trust is repeatedly violated, their belief system can be affected profoundly, affecting their capacity to place confidence in people or organisations. This is especially true for those kept on the margins of society. This is clearly tragic. Placing confidence in someone or something other than yourself is social superglue. It is the binding for the deepest love, the strongest friendships, and the world's communities. Modern society is built on trust, and in the absence of trust, fear rules.

Mistrust is more vague, much like how some experience the holy. Someone may only resemble physically an abusive caregiver from our childhood whom we have relegated to our subconscious, but we immediately are on guard for reasons we can't quite explain. A church may have victimised us with a toxic religion, making us suspicious of all faith communities.

Distrust can serve a reasonable purpose in some situations. Maya Angelou once observed, "I don't trust people who don't love themselves and tell me, 'I love you.' ... There is an African saying which is: Be careful when a naked person offers you a shirt."

Mistrust, on the other hand, can become debilitating, disconnecting us from the fullness of life that trust offers freely.

So how do we decide whom to trust? Trust is a set of behaviours, such as acting in ways that depend on another. Trust is a belief in a probability that a person will behave in certain ways. Trust is an abstract mental attitude toward a proposition that someone is dependable. Trust is a feeling of confidence and security that a partner cares. Sounds simple enough.

Unfortunately, that isn't enough. It would be nice if the sociopaths who lurk among us actually looked suspicious, and if the psychopaths wore labels saying "Be afraid — be very afraid." Unfortunately, this is not the case.

In fact research shows that people with narcissistic personalities — who tend to manipulate other people for their own selfish ends — actually present as especially charming and attractive on first impression. They also are more likely to have high-status jobs or possessions. So how do you avoid the con artist or serial seducer? Thanks to evolution our brain's automatic wiring may help.

Researchers from Dartmouth and New York University showed that our brains take just three hundredths of a second, much less time than an eye blink, to decide trustworthiness. In fact, our judgments about trustworthiness are so rapid that we are able to make them even before we know who the person is!

These researchers discovered with MRIs that it is our old reptilian brain, the amygdala, that provides our gut feeling about who to trust. Unfortunately, the amygdala is usually evaluating superficial info about trustworthiness that may not prove true in the long run. So we are still lacking trust in deciding who to trust. Ernest Hemingway had a pragmatic approach, "The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them." Having often been a practitioner of this approach, it is a little like playing emotional Russian roulette. There has to be a better way.

In more doctrinal faiths, people gather around a theological assertion, a commonly-held belief. As such they tend to place their primary trust in God. In this sense, their trust is vertical, extending "up" to God, or to wherever God lives. This does not mean that they don't trust each other or that they don't have agreements about how they are going to treat each other — they do. But they place their primary trust in God.

But our collective Unitarian Universalist trust is horizontal. We place our trust in each other. We don't promise eternal life. Sorry. But we do promise a life worth living. And that matters. A life of community, companionship, partners

for the journey, caring, compassion, support, mutual encouragement, mutual challenge, listening, love.

Because of our cautious trust in reason we are likely to be drawn to psychologist Marsha Linehan's concept of "wise mind" to describe a state of mind that integrates logical thinking with emotional awareness. It is a mindful state in which you make decisions by integrating different ways of knowing and don't cut off parts of your experience. If you feel an instant connection with somebody, take this into account, but don't make it the whole basis of your decision. In our wise mind, we don't ignore emotions, but we also don't get so caught up in them that we see only what we want to see, instead of what is actually there. In brain terms, wise mind means integrating our amygdala's intuitive reactions with the wisdom of past experience and knowledge about the world. Being in a community of Unitarians we find support in sorting that out.

These are the fruits of our trust in each other; and this is why I say, humbly, the wages of trust is life.

Meditation / Conversation starter:

Where do you place your trust?

Why?