

# Being Faithful Without Being Told Things

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WHEN I WAS A CHILD, my mother read regularly to my siblings and me, and together we paged through all the children's classics. I loved the sound of her voice repeating the familiar words and calling attention to the colorful illustrations that even now I recall vividly. I never bothered to think about what the stories meant; it was enough that they were entertaining and that I read them in the company of people I loved.

In college I enrolled in a children's literature course, where it occurred to me for perhaps the first time that there is more to those loved stories than simple words and illustrations. I reread A. A. Milne's story *The House at Pooh Corner* and became reacquainted with the bear Winnie-the-Pooh and the child Christopher Robin. Toward the end of the book, Christopher Robin begins to grow up and become more distant from his animal friends. Pooh, with his stuffed head, cannot fathom the yearnings of a human brain for knowledge and experience. He feels sad and perplexed by the loss of his companion. Milne reveals that Pooh "wondered if being a Faithful Knight [to Good King Christopher Robin] meant that you just went on being faithful without being told things" (1956, 178). Pooh's faith in his friend overrides his desire to understand why Christopher Robin is leaving him. So, without full understanding, he resigns himself to being faithful to his beloved friend.

I sometimes feel like Pooh. My mortal brain may be made of finer material than the batting in a stuffed animal, but it is not of any fiber that can understand the workings of the universe. So I rely on trying

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to be faithful, even without being told things. I would prefer to understand, but since I cannot, I focus instead on trying to make my works good and my faith productive.

I read in Hebrews 11:1 that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," and in Alma 32:21 that "faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true." These passages assure me that my experience is not unique; faith is intended to be rooted more in confidence than in evidence.

Children can provide the best models of this faith. They may trust the teachings of a parent or instructor according to the affection they feel for that person. A child may sense God's love through prayers and in the circle of a family. These little ones without guile attracted Christ's attention. "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not," he said, "for of such is the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14). I am moved by the beauty of faithful children and Christ's obvious love for them.

But I am no longer a child. I am reminded of that fact as I reread *The House at Pooh Corner* and feel a sadness I do not recall from when my mother first read it to me. I know now what I did not know then: Pooh and Christopher Robin will never be close companions again. Life does not allow us to go back, to become who we once were, to relive choice moments, to reclaim those we have loved and lost. Living transforms us, and our faith must evolve to reflect those changes. For example, I no longer believe, as I once did, that I can accept without question anything a teacher may tell me. I no longer expect God to intervene at my slightest request to prevent pain and bring justice. I no longer assume blithely that to do good automatically is to be happy. I read in the scriptures that "he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (Eccl. 1:18), and I believe.

Through living, people increase both knowledge and sorrow, and most encounter challenges to faith. I find two great threats to faith. The first is suffering. Most humans are never far removed from some suffering, whether personal or vicarious. I question a just and merciful God when I observe and experience suffering. Clearly, God does not spell out a formula for escaping it. I read plainly in Matthew 5:45, "For he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." It would seem that no matter what people do, they are susceptible to suffering. My faith is sometimes stretched by this awareness.

The second great threat to faith is an idea I call the Divine Silence. It is the perception that God does not listen or respond, or perhaps even care. This Divine Silence seems to afflict most people at some

time. In my experience, God keeps his own counsel. I can request or complain or attempt to negotiate, but God eventually does what he wants. Or the universe proceeds as it must. In either case, I have limited influence, and I feel most successful at offering thanks. The powers of the universe are not often available to mortals, and sometimes God's silence is discouraging. As a result, I sometimes feel my faith stretched.

This stretching process can be damaging. It can be like the pie crusts I periodically attempt to make. Usually, I roll out the dough so thin that it rips when I try to transfer it from cutting board to pie plate. It is stretched beyond its capacity to hold together. Faith, too, can be stretched beyond its capacity to hold together by unresolved questions, prolonged pain, unfair accidents. Damaged and weakened like my pie crust, this faith must be kneaded together and rolled out again.

However, the stretching of faith can also be highly beneficial. I am reminded of a recent visit to a girls' camp where I observed a quilt being made. I saw the quilt stretched tightly over the frames so that it could receive the stitches that would make it both beautiful and strong. The quilt could be analogous to faith that is stretched by overcoming an obstacle, maintaining hope in the face of slim odds, or bravely enduring a hardship. Faith stretched in this manner is reinforced. My life has included both the reinforcing and the damaging varieties of experience, and I expect that trend to continue.

I expect those waxing and waning episodes because implicit in my faith are questions for which I have few answers. The gospel offers me some understanding. In this church, members respond to human suffering and the Divine Silence, in part, by ceaselessly scanning the horizon for signs of God's coming and going. The Latter-day Saints claim many miracles. They claim that the heavens are not silent, that God still speaks and gives direction. They believe in healings, visions, and a Comforter. To me, the most miraculous events are the simplest: the dawning of belief, the assurance of peace, the starting again after tragedy. They buoy my faith and give me hope.

I like the description of miracles given by Father LaTour, the main character in Willa Cather's novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. He says, "The Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always" (1955, 50). I believe that faith gives people the capacity to train their eyes and ears to perform these spiritual functions. I can answer many of the challenges to my faith by watching for the hand of

God in my life and by taking my turn providing that hand to others. I can give thanks and acknowledge God.

One of my favorite statements about faith comes from the novel *Cold Sassy Tree*. This story, set in the rural South, includes a description of one grandfather's philosophy as he reflects on his life and faces death. He observes:

Faith ain't no magic wand or money-back gar'ntee, either one. Hit's jest a way a-livin'. Hit means you don't worry th'ew the days. Hit means you go'n be holdin' on to God in good or bad times, and you accept whatever happens. Hit means you respect life like it is—like God made it—even when it ain't what you'd order from the wholesale house. Faith don't mean the Lord is go'n make lions lay down with lambs jest cause you ast him to, or make fire not burn. Some folks, when they pray to git well and don't even git better, they say God ler'm down. But I say thet warn't even what Jesus was a-talkin' bout. When Jesus said ast and you'll git it, He was givin' a gar'ntee a-spiritual healin', not body healin'. He was sayin' thet if'n you git beat down—scairt to death you cain't do what you got to, or scairt you go'n die, or scairt folks won't like you—why, all you got to do is put yore hand in God's and He'll lift you up. . . . Jesus meant us to ast God to hep us stand the pain, not beg Him to take the pain away. We can ast for comfort and hope and patience and courage, and to be gracious when thangs ain't goin' our way, and we'll git what we ast for. They ain't no gar'ntee thet we ain't go'n have no troubles and ain't go'n die. But shore as frogs croak and cows bellow, God'll forgive us if'n we ast Him to. (Burns 1984, 363–64)

This passage describes well the current state of my faith. I seek strength from the Lord. I seek understanding, but without great expectations. I remember Winnie-the-Pooh's stuffed brain and try to be patient with my limited capacity and God's timetable. I like the way this grandfather does not try to coerce God into pacts or bargains. I like his patience with the world and his desire not for power or control or even justification, but merely for graciousness when events disappoint or hurt him. This perspective of the dying often seems elusive to the healthy.

I believe that life is better lived in faith than in bitterness or sorrow. I seek faith and holiness, and often I find them independent of religious ritual: in music, in nature, in literature, in honest talk. They dwell in the unrestrained places of my heart. When I am bogged down by suffering or my perception of a Divine Silence, I try to augment my weakened faith with a few good works. I hope that faith and works function in tandem, like bicycle pedals, to allow me to progress when one is down and the other up. And I place great hope in the grandfather's assurance that "shore as frogs croak and cows bellow, God'll forgive us if'n we ast Him to."