


BIG QUESTIONS, WORTHY DREAMS

*Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search
for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*

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MEANING AND FAITH

WHEN I WAS INVITED to work with the faculty of a prestigious business school as they began to readdress ethics in the M.B.A. curriculum, a long-time colleague from another field said, with a cynical glint in his eye, "Oh, you get to ask those students what their ethics are!" I responded, "Well, yes, but what I really want to understand is how they make meaning."

Most of us recognize that we human beings may or may not act in a manner that corresponds with what we say our ethics are. But human beings do act in ways that are congruent with what they ultimately trust as dependable and real—what makes sense at the end of the day, what they think they can really count on. We humans act in ways that are congruent with how we make meaning.

As human beings, we all make meaning. We search for a sense of connection, pattern, order, and significance. In our ongoing interaction with all of life, we puzzle about the fitting, truthful relationships among things. We search for ways of understanding our experience that make sense of both the expected and the unexpected in everyday life.

Over time, we can grow in our capacity to make meaning in ways that are trustworthy and dependable because they increasingly align with the currents of life itself. A child may make meaning of his parents' divorce by telling himself, and us, that his parents are divorced because they caught it (like a disease) from another family in the neighborhood that suffered divorce just a few months earlier. We find this bit of heroic meaning-making poignantly charming, fitting for his age—and perhaps not without truth—but we know that in time he will tell the story differently.

But how does this change happen? How do our ways of making meaning become more adequate, dependable, and satisfying? How do we learn to make meaning in ways that orient and sustain a worthy adult life?

These are important questions that invite us to reflect on how adult faith is formed. Most people, however, do not immediately recognize that meaning-making is a central feature of the experience of faith and the ground of our ethics. When I told my cynical colleague that I was interested in the *meaning-making* of M.B.A. students as a way of understanding their ethics, he was intrigued. If I had said I was interested in their *faith*, he might have found it odd or inappropriate in a culturally plural, professional setting, or he might have simply concluded that ethics and faith or religion go together—all important, but somewhat marginal in the "real world."

Points of Departure: What Faith Is and Isn't

Faith is a multifaceted phenomenon, and we perceive it best when we consider it from several angles of vision.

Faith and Religion

Indeed, for many, faith is simply equated with religion. Thus the word *faith* has become problematic in a religiously plural world. This is particularly true within any setting—governmental, educational, or commercial—where the multiple perspectives characteristic of our new global commons are especially evident.

Among some people, personal and cultural ambivalence about matters of religion makes *faith* a charged, negative word, best avoided in any case. For others, it is a strong and positive word with a venerable history that dwells at the core of human life. For yet others, faith has simply become a matter of indifference. If recognized as a part of human life—even an important part—it is nevertheless seen as *only* a part and considered separable from other important elements of life, such as career, relationships, political commitments, economic life, and so on. Those who view faith this way assume it is something one may choose or not choose to incorporate into one's particular lifestyle. From this perspective, faith becomes merely a single element in the complex calculus that is required to negotiate contemporary adult life. Thus many in today's society assume faith to be at most a personal matter, preferably confined to the private sphere.

In contrast, there are those (particularly some who have a strongly defined and intensely held set of religious beliefs) who assert that a particular form of faith (theirs) fully interprets and may be arbitrarily imposed upon all experience (theirs and others'). Common to many understandings

of the word *faith* is the assumption that it is something essentially static. You have it or you don't. When faith is linked with religious dogma, the word is not generally used to connote something dynamic that undergoes change, transformation, and development over time.

Faith and Spirituality

There is, though, some shift when faith is associated with spirituality. Growing numbers of people in professional and other walks of life are apt to say, "I'm not religious, but I am spiritual." In the corporate and educational spheres there is, at least in some quarters, growing comfort with speaking of spirit, spirituality, and soul. In large measure, these words seem to connote a personal rather than a public sensibility, although book titles addressing these dimensions of experience are highly visible in the public square.

This turn to a recognition of spirituality and an acknowledgment of soul is rooted in a longing for ways of speaking of the human experience of depth, meaning, mystery, moral purpose, transcendence, wholeness, intuition, vulnerability, tenderness, courage, the capacity to love, and the apprehension of spirit (or Spirit) as the animating essence at the core of life. As Parker Palmer has articulated so helpfully, it arises from the hunger for authenticity, for correspondence between one's inner and outer lives.¹ In a society and an academy grown weary and restless with hardening definitions of who and what counts in determining what matters—what we will invest our lives in and how we will name that investment—there is a desire to break through into a more spacious and nourishing conception of the common life we all share. In this context, the words *faith* and *faithfulness*, connoting trust, loyalty, and connection, find place and resonance.

Faith: A Human Universal

A reconsideration of the word *faith* assists us in reclaiming an enlarged sense of meaning and purpose and yields ways of understanding the contemporary resistance and attraction to things religious and spiritual. A central conviction of the perspective offered here is that faith is integral to all of human life. It is a human universal; it shapes both personal and corporate behavior. It is related to meaning, trust, and hope. Its expressions in language and ritual, ideology and practice are always particular and finite. Faith is a dynamic phenomenon that undergoes transformation across the whole life span, with the potential for a particularly powerful transformation in the young adult years.

A careful exploration of the word *faith* is more than an exercise in etymology. If we are to recognize the significance of the dynamics of faith in the experience of young adults and the implications for the role of mentors and the institutions that influence the formation of adulthood, faith must be emancipated from its too-easy equation with belief and religion and reconnected with meaning, trust, and truth.

Faith and Belief

In contemporary English usage, *faith* is used primarily as a noun, strongly associated with religion, and frequently used synonymously with *belief*. This has not always been so. The eminent historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith elegantly traced the relationship between the words *faith* and *belief*. He has shown that since in English *faith* was used only as a noun, "to believe" was chosen as the verb. This was appropriate, for in earlier centuries "the Anglo-Saxon-derived word 'believe' meant pretty much what its exact counterpart in German, *belieben*, still means today: namely, 'to hold dear, to prize.' It signified to love, . . . to give allegiance, to be loyal to; to value highly." The Latin *credo*, meaning literally "I set my heart," was translated "I believe," and thus was not a mistranslation.² "To believe" connoted an essential human activity involving the whole person.

In recent times, however, the word *belief* has shifted. Smith traces three important migrations in the use of *believe* that have altered its meaning: first, from the personal to the impersonal—from a relationship with Being to dogma; second, a shift in the subject of the verb, from "I believe" or "believe me" to "he, she, or they believe"; and third, from conveying the linking of the heart with truth to increasingly connoting lack of trust and confidence—"Do you really think that is so?" "Well, I believe so."³

As a result, belief has come to suggest primarily a cognitive enterprise. Further, it connotes mere opinion—or even the dubious or false—rather than matters of truth, reality, and ultimate importance. To wit, when the word *faith* is used synonymously with belief, it takes on these same connotations. Consequently, these impersonal, propositional, and narrowly cognitive connotations separate faith from the personal, affective, visceral, and passionate dimensions of being and knowing. In addition, the association of faith with what is dubious links it with "irrational knowledge" and consigns it to the private, emotional sphere, divorced from both public life and the life of the mind.

These shifts in the meaning of the words *faith* and *belief* have critical significance in contemporary culture. They are a part of the postmodern

reorientation of our relationship to knowledge, affecting our most cherished institutions and assumptions—specifically our assumptions about faith, religion, belief—and what we can trust, imagine, and hope for. Religion itself has had a role in these currents of change. For example, Christianity, the prevailing religion in the Western world, in Smith's view has fallen into the "heresy" of requiring belief as the primary evidence of faith.⁴ Faith, a more fundamental dynamic than belief, has been obscured.

Wherever belief has become mere intellectual assent to abstract propositions, and whenever specific religious propositions have become meaningless, impersonal, or at least dubious to a large number of Western, postmodern people, then by synonymous usage faith has come to be equally meaningless—particularly to the critically aware mind. If faith is discounted, the human landscape becomes arid, and hope and commitment wither; the human spirit grows parched, and not much more than a prickly cynicism can be sustained. Therefore, if we are to recover an adequate understanding of human faith, we must be clear that when we use the word *faith* we are speaking of something quite other than *belief* understood in these ways. Faith is not simply a set of beliefs that religious people have; it is something that all human beings do.

Faith and Truth

This distinction between faith and belief is particularly important when we are concerned with the relationship of faith to truth. Every person, profession, and sector of society has a stake in the adequacy of truth claims. Commitment to truth requires a questioning curiosity and ongoing and rigorous examination of one's most elemental assumptions. In the face of new understanding, one may come to perceive an earlier experience of faith or religious belief—an earlier way of making meaning—as now outgrown or otherwise irrelevant. Indeed, if faith is understood as static, fixed, and inextricably bound to a particular language or worldview, it must be discarded as obsolete if the integrity of intellect and soul is to be maintained in a dynamic world. A richer perception of faith, however, enables us to recognize that fidelity to truth may indeed require changing a particular set of beliefs—and yet be important to the ongoing tasks of finding a more adequate faith.

Faith and Skepticism

Any attempt to recover a generic understanding of the word *faith* in a way that may illuminate essential human capacities and commitments—including the commitment to truth—is bound to encounter skepticism.

Yet skepticism itself may be closely related to faith. For faith to become mature, it must be able to doubt itself. Cynicism functions as a kind of armor against disappointment and despair. Skepticism combines the power to question with an openness to being convinced. Skepticism can be a healthy form of doubt, or it may reflect the loss of a once-shared trust in a universe of meaning, however that was defined. It may also function as a thin veneer of public sophistication, glossing over a private, lonely void that neither the rational mind nor economic success can fill. In our time, we have become at once scientifically informed, philosophically relativistic, and disappointed and disillusioned in many quarters. Yet ironically faith can come alive in an engagement with radical uncertainty.

Faith: A Matter of Meaning

Though faith has become problematic, the importance of meaning has not. William G. Perry Jr., who has contributed so much to our understanding of meaning-making in young adulthood, often remarked that the purpose of an organism is to organize, and what human beings organize is meaning. Meaning-making is the activity of composing a sense of the connections among things: a sense of pattern, order, form, and significance. To be human is to seek coherence and correspondence. To be human is to want to be oriented to one's surroundings. To be human is to desire relationship among the disparate elements of existence.

Patterning, testing, and recomposing activity occurs in every aspect of human life and manifests itself in meaning. The mind does not passively receive the world but rather acts upon every object and every experience to compose it. This composing activity occurs even at the level of basic perception. For example, when we perceive a tree, we compose it, organizing its various parts into a whole—branches, leaves, trunk, roots, textures, colors, height, breadth, and whatever we may know of the intricate systems by which it is nourished or threatened through the seasons of its existence. Though we may all encounter the same tree, each of us composes a different one. Moreover, in interaction with the tree we compose, we each make different meaning of it. Some of us see the subject of a poem; others see a lucrative number of board feet; and still others see a source of shade, shelter, or a threat in a strong wind.

It is much the same with our experience of a handshake. We compose a sense of warmth or sincerity, strength, aloofness, ambivalence, or mere social custom according to how another grips (or fails to grip) our hand. This perception is ordered by our cultural history, our mood in the moment, our knowledge of the person, and a whole host of other elements

in our environment. Though we may shake hands with the same person, each of us composes a different perception.

We compose the discrete elements of our every day, such as trees and handshakes, into an overall pattern that orients us and grounds us. Even to get out of bed in the morning we depend upon some familiar pattern of relationships between coffeepot, shower, and breakfast—whatever constitutes our ritual of initiation into a new day. There is, however, an important distinction to be made. Though there may be times when getting up in the morning is indeed a heroic act, nevertheless the primary concern here is not with meaning-making at the level of only the discrete and mundane. Rather, when we speak of faith, we direct our attention to the desire of human beings to live at more than a mundane level, and to make meaning of the whole of life.

We reserve the word *faith* for meaning-making in its most comprehensive dimensions. In other words, whenever we organize our sense of a particular object, series of activities, or institution, we are also compelled to compose our sense of its place in the whole of existence. We speak of this activity as composing a world. All human beings compose and dwell in some conviction of what is *ultimately* true, real, dependable within the largest frame imaginable. Human beings, either unself-consciously or self-consciously, individually and together, compose a sense of the ultimate character of reality and then stake our lives on that sense of things. It is this act of composing and being composed by meaning that I invite the reader to associate with the word *faith*.

Forms of Faith

Faith has many facets and is manifest in our experience in several forms.

Faith as Primal Force of Promise

The will to find meaning is a primal force that courses through human life as a demand for order, pattern, and relation. William F. Lynch, a Jesuit who reflected deeply on the nature of faith and hope, described faith as “the most elemental force in human nature.”⁵ He invites us to imagine faith as coming into force “as soon as promises begin to be made to it”⁶—that is, at the very dawn of human existence, in the womb. (Although he used this image only as a metaphor, prenatal psychology suggests that it may indeed be more than metaphor.)⁷ We cannot remember, but we can imagine that we first come to consciousness in a rudimentary sense of trustworthy pattern, wholeness, and relation—a sense of an ultimate environment that intends our good.

Then, in the experience we call birth, we undergo what must seem like utter chaos: sound louder than ever before, light, touch, breathing for the first time. The task of the infant is to recompose that which was promised at the dawn of existence, a felt sense of trustworthy pattern and relation. Erik Erikson described an infant's first task as the establishment of “basic trust.”⁸ As I am describing the process, however, the first task of human being is to reestablish basic trust.

In most religious traditions, a ritual occasion marks our entry into a social world of meaning and purpose. In Jewish and Christian tradition, the community gathers around the infant and does an extraordinary thing. The child is addressed as “child of the covenant”—child of the promise. What is most significant about this declaration is that the adult community knows that though the infant may with good care be able to reestablish a trustworthy sense of connection, relation, and wholeness, this task is not accomplished alone, nor is it then accomplished once and for all. Over and over again, life will require the encounter with the unexpected. Again and again, we undergo the loss of our most cherished patterns of meaning and anchors of trust as we discover their insufficiency. In the ups and downs of daily life, human beings experience an ongoing dialogue between fear and trust, hope and hopelessness, power and powerlessness, alienation and belonging. Yet mature faith has learned that through the forms of faith are finite, the promise is kept. It is from this struggled knowing that the adult community addresses the new infant as child of the promise.

Thus, to speak of faith is to point toward the meaning-making that frames, colors, provides tone and texture, and relativizes the activity of the everyday. All human action is conditioned by a felt sense of how life really is (or ought to be), or what has ultimate value.

A Center of Power, Value, and Affection

Powler has described the activity of faith as “intuiting life as a whole”—a wholeness that is felt as a sense of relatedness among self, other, and “a center of power and value” that some would name God.⁹

Up to this point, we have spoken of faith without speaking of God personally. In the dynamic activity of composing meaning, whatever pattern of meaning we ultimately depend upon functions as “God” for us. In other words, whatever serves as the centering, unifying linchpin of our pattern of meaning and holds it all together—that center functions as “God.” As the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr recognized, “To deny the reality of a supernatural being called God is one thing; to live without confidence in some center of value without loyalty to a cause is another.”¹⁰ In this sense,

virtually all human beings may be understood as "theists." From this perspective, a "true atheist" would be one "who loves no one and whom no one loves; who does not care for truth, sees no beauty, strives for no justice; who knows no courage and no joys, finds no meaning, and has lost all hope."¹¹

Many and Lesser Gods

In the times in which we live, many people might best be understood as "polytheists," juggling as it were many gods. They find themselves living fragmented lives, piecing together various scraps of discrete meaning, each with its own center of value, power, and affection, each with its own god. Polytheistic faith is composed by those who may have "intuited life as a whole" but have only been able to compose an assortment of "isolated wholes." For example, many people yearn for a sense of deep integration in their lives but experience even the worlds of home and work as separate, each sphere oriented to differing values, expectations, and loyalties.¹²

On the other hand, there are those who construe a single pattern of meaning and thus dwell in a faith with a single cause or center, such as the success of their career or other ambition. Yet they are unable to relate the center to any larger frame of trustworthy meaning. Niebuhr described this form of faith as "henotheism." Their sense of self, world, and God is cohesive because the boundaries are tightly drawn. The center they rely on to anchor ultimate meaning is, however, inadequate in the face of the variety, complexity, and tragic elements of human experience. Their henotheistic faith is vulnerable to competing centers and to any significant shift in the conditions of personal, professional, or cultural life. This form of faith can also be the "cramping faith of blind and fanatical particularism" or "narrow faith."¹³

Henotheistic faith also may take the forms of devotion to a child or of commitment to artistic achievement, scientific inquiry, a political dream, or a business venture. The question is not whether these are worthy and valuable forms of engagement with life. The question is, Do self, world, and "God" collapse when the child dies, or a permanently injured hand can no longer play a musical instrument, or the funding for the laboratory dries up, or one is defeated in an election, or the business enterprise ends in failure? The challenge that drives the motion toward mature adult faith is grounded in the question, Is there a pattern of meanings, a faith, that can survive the defeat of finite centers of power, value, and affection?

The One Embracing the Many

H. Richard Niebuhr directs our attention beyond polytheism (which depends for its meaning on many centers and gives its partial loyalties to many interests) and henotheism (which centers in a god who is "one among many possible gods"), to "radical monotheism." This is a pattern of meaning, a faith, centered in the "One beyond the many"—a center of power and value adequate to all of the ongoing conditions of the experiences of persons and their communities.¹⁴ This could, however, be expressed as the "One embracing the many."

In a Buddhist sensibility, this ultimacy might be described as *Sunyata*, usually translated as "emptiness." This use of the word is intended to convey a consciousness of the very foundation of the universe, the vast "mystery underlying even darkness—from which the earth itself with its mountains, oceans, buildings, animals, people, and clouds is born."¹⁵

When we speak of faith as the composing of meaning in these most comprehensive dimensions, we mean a sensibility of life that not only transcends (is *beyond* us) but also permeates and undergirds our very existence (is *within, among, and beneath* us). To speak of God as the gift of faith is to seek to name an orienting consciousness that is both transcendent and immanent, both ultimate and intimate.

Faith as Truth and Trust

When the activity of meaning-making is recognized in these comprehensive dimensions, we begin to perceive how both truth and trust are at stake in the composing of faith. A worthy faith must bear the test of lived experience in the real world—our discoveries and disappointments, expectations and betrayals, assumptions and surprises. It is in the ongoing dialogue between self and world, between community and lived reality, that meaning—a faith—takes form.

Yet the meanings human beings compose range from "murky shadows to shimmering points of illumination."¹⁶ If a person composes self and world in a manner that constellates an ultimate sense of mistrust, a conviction of a universe of, say, indifferent or malicious randomness, for her such randomness is what is true and trusted. This is her faith. But interestingly, the word *faith* is most typically used to convey the affirmation of a trustworthy ultimacy, having dependable characteristics in a more conventional sense.

Faith is generally understood as a form of meaning-making that is a quality of human living that at its best grounds capacities for confidence, courage, loyalty, and generosity—and even in the face of catastrophe and confusion

enables one to feel at home in the universe (though one's apprehensions of it may be complex, dynamic, shrouded in mystery, and variously described). But the tension remains. If we understand faith as a human universal, two questions necessarily haunt us: If one composes a faith that is trustworthy, is it true? If one composes an ultimacy that is not trustworthy, is it faith?

This way of perceiving faith may trouble those who take for granted that faith always has to do with God as defined by their religious tradition. For them, to speak of faith in generic terms without necessarily referring to God as previously conceived seems confusing, if not beside the point. It is helpful, therefore, to explore further the intimate relationships among faith, trust, and truth.

To Set One's Heart

The relation of faith to trust and truth is illuminated by Smith's study of the notion of faith across cultures, specifically in his discussion of the Hindu word *śraddha*. The word *śraddha* permeates Hindu literature and is assumed in all religious sensibility. As such it functions as an Indian concept of faith. *Śraddha* "is a compound of two words, *śrad* (or *śrat*), heart, and *dha*, to put." *Śraddha* "means placing one's heart on." This tradition has said that "the religious life, whatever its form, begins . . . with faith; and faith, in its turn, is one's finding within that life (one's being found by) something to which one gives one's heart."¹⁷

Śraddha in itself leaves unspecified the object of faith. It can be recognized, however, that one gives one's heart only to that which one "sees" as adequate, trustworthy, and promising. Indeed, Smith notes the Hindu insight that "in fact, the universe and human beings were created in such a way that faith is the intrinsically appropriate human orientation towards what is true and right and real, its absence or opposite (*asraddha*, unfaith, disinterest) being recognized similarly as the proper human attitude to what is false and awry."¹⁸

"Faithing," then, is putting one's heart upon that which one trusts as true. It is a bedrock trust that the pattern one sees is real. Faithing, in other words, is the ongoing composing of the heart's true resting place. Thus, learning to see in increasingly adequate ways is critical to faith.

The Canopy of Faith

We may think of faith, therefore, as the deep ground, the warp upon which the rest of the particular threads of life's tapestry find their place. Or the activity of faith might be imagined as the weaving of an overarching "canopy of significance" that embraces, orders, and relativizes all of our knowing and being. Both metaphors convey faith as both infinitely

transcendent in character and simultaneously profoundly *immanent*. Faith is an activity that at once reaches infinitely beyond and intimately within the particulars of existence.

The metaphor of the canopy of faith has been made accessible to many cultures through the classic play *Fiddler on the Roof*. When the second daughter chooses to follow her revolutionary lover into Siberia, her father waits with her for the train that will carry her far away from her family home. He acknowledges that they do not know when they will see each other again. Then his daughter gives him a special gift. She responds, "I promise you I will be married under the canopy." This is a gift to her father, for in the Jewish wedding, the canopy represents not only the home that is formed by that union but also the whole household of Israel. She is promising her father that the fabric of meaning into which he has woven his life will be sustained and will transcend both miles and ideology. Later, we watch his canopy of faith stretched to its limits—and perhaps beyond its limits—when his youngest daughter chooses not to be married under the canopy.

Particularly because many in contemporary life find their meaning in forms that are not articulated in religious terms, we are often unaware that we have nevertheless woven a canopy of significance—a faith that we hold and are held by—until people we value do not choose to affirm that upon which we discover our sense of life has ultimately depended. For some, awareness of the patterns that have been deeply woven into our personal and collective life emerges only in the suffering of the unraveling or rending of those weavings that held a personal or public trust.

If our daily living is dependent upon a comprehensive fabric of meaning, the questions of faith are at once both large and intimate, as all those who grieve or otherwise suffer meaninglessness know. "Why should I get out of bed in the morning?" "What is the purpose of my existence and the existence of others?" "Does anything really matter?" "What can I depend upon?" "Are we ultimately alone?" "What and whom can be trusted as real?" "What is the ultimate character of the cosmos in which I dwell?" "What is right and just?" "How, then, shall we live?" Whenever we allow such questions to permeate the fiber of our lives, we discover new depths, and enlarged vistas often catch us by surprise. Our sense of the possible and the impossible is vulnerable to being reordered.

Faith as Act

Faith—one's sense of the ultimate character of existence—not only centers the mind and provides a resting place for the heart. It is also the orienting guide of the hand. Faith determines action. Faith is manifest in act

(and, as we shall see, is paradoxically birthed in action). Faith is intimately related to doing. We human beings act in accordance with what we really trust—in contrast to what we may merely acclaim. We act in alignment with what we finally perceive as real, oriented by our most powerful centers of trust (or mistrust). Thus our acts, powered by a deeper faith, often belie what we say (or even think) we believe. Our faith is revealed in our behavior.

Our actions are consistent with our verbal declarations only if these declarations reflect our actual convictions about ultimate meaning and are not superseded by unspoken commitments, loyalties, and fears oriented to other, more compelling centers of power, value, and affection. Faith makes itself public in everyday acts of decision, obedience, and courage.¹⁹ Faith is the ground of ethics and the moral life. Faith is intimately linked with a sense of vocation—awareness of living one's life aligned with a larger frame of purpose and significance. It is from this perspective that I might have responded to my cynical colleague regarding the ethics of M.B.A. students by saying, "I want to understand their meaning-making at the level of faith—what they ultimately trust will work and count as they act to sort out the fitting relationships between themselves and others—as they make decisions and deals in their crafting of life."

Thus we may recognize faith in many manifestations: as the primal force of promise; as our everyday activity of meaning-making; both ultimate and intimate; and as act. As such, faith is powerful; this is well revealed in faith betrayed.

Through the Valley of the Shadow

Betrayal, loss, fear, and death pose fundamental challenges to faith, yet they may be integral to the life of faith most profoundly understood.

Faith Betrayed

Faith as a primal, elemental force of promise permeating the whole of life is manifest most inescapably and often treacherously in faith betrayed. Lynch refers us to the mythical Medea for an appreciation of the primal, elemental power of faith. Medea has been "terrible" in her fidelity to Jason the Argonaut. She has followed him everywhere and given up everything. When he abandons her for Creusa, the princess of Corinth, Medea says she made a mistake when she "trusted the words of a Greek." She then murders her own children and Creusa, demonstrating the limitless fury that floods the vacuum created by faith's disappearance, thereby

revealing the power of this primal force transformed into one of its fierce forms. Lynch continues:

The furies insert themselves in a terrible way into human affairs precisely where the greatest faith has been violated, where a mighty word has been given but is now betrayed. In every case the Fury attacks the violator of a *word* written out in the most primitive and earthly forms of nature, the form of mother, who is word to her child, the form of wife, the form of friend, the form of father. All these forms are words carried out in the deepest realities of nature itself, making promises without opening the lips and demanding belief for very survival's sake. . . . The energy and power of human faith become visible in the size of this fury. We tend to reduce faith to a sweet pious dimension, weak rival and challenger of knowledge. We know it best through its embodiment in fury. And through its incarceration, without words, in the very deepest structures of human life. Aristotle knew this well in *The Poetics* when he chose these violations of kinship and fidelity as the most tragic forms of tragedy. They are.²⁰

In most societies, there is a legal distinction between crimes of passion and other crimes. Such tragic moments arise when the very fabric and center of one's meaning—one's sense of wholeness, connection, and belonging—is violated, broken, shattered. The promise is broken. Faith erupts into fury. These are the Furies who rage in witness to the world as it "ought to be."

Faith as a Suffering

Any attempt to rethink the category of faith in relation to contemporary life is insufficient without recognizing faith as a "suffering" as well as a virtue of reasoning and willing.²¹ Suffering in its broadest sense means undergoing, and to be totally affected; thus suffering may include not only physical and emotional pain as we may typically think of it but also the kind of betrayal just described, as well as the suffering of doubt, of being overwhelmed, of drifting without moorage or goal, of prolonged struggle, of yearning, and of despair.

Shipwreck, Gladness, and Amusement

During my own graduate study, it happened that the professor I most frequently heard applauded was Richard R. Niebuhr. The reasons were not immediately obvious, since he did not seek to capture the student

imagination either with entertaining anecdotes or with a lecture style designed to dazzle by the aesthetic of its systematic outline. Rather, when he lectured it was as though he was generously allowing others to be present to his own contemplation. As he reflected on the material for the day, he would sometimes, for example, pause and look out the window, waiting for the word to come that would fittingly name what he was learning to see and understand. When the word did come, it did seem to be the right, fitting word. And when applause broke out at the end of class, it was perhaps because we are especially grateful for the naming of intrusions that dwell in the deepest currents of our being.

When Niebuhr reflects on human faith, he does so, in part, with the metaphors of "shipwreck, gladness, and amazement."²² These metaphors connote the subjective, affective, dynamic, often bewildering, and transformative nature of the experience of faith.

Metaphorical shipwreck may occur with the loss of a relationship, violence to one's property, collapse of a career venture, physical illness or injury, defeat of a cause, a fateful choice that irrevocably reorders one's life, betrayal by a community or government, or the discovery that an intellectual construct is inadequate. Sometimes we simply encounter someone, or some new experience or idea, that calls into question things as we have perceived them, or as they were taught to us, or as we had read, heard, or assumed. This kind of experience can suddenly rip into the fabric of life, or it may slowly yet just as surely unravel the meanings that have served as the home of the soul.

To suffer, I have said, means to undergo and be totally affected. If people undergo the break up or unraveling of what has held their world together, inevitably there is some degree of suffering. When we suffer the collapse of our sense of self, world, and "God," we are disoriented—drained of those rich connections that create significance, delight, and purpose.

When I first began to reflect on the experience of young adult faith, a colleague recalled that as a freshman in college his dream was to become a basketball star. He was not very tall, and he had come from a small-town high school. The second week of the season, he was cut from the team. He remembers going to the showers and sobbing for two hours. He suffered the collapse of meaning—his sense of self, world, and "God." To undergo shipwreck is to be threatened in a total and primary way. In shipwreck, what has dependably served as shelter and protection and held and carried one where one wanted to go comes apart. What once promised trustworthiness vanishes.²³

Early in my experience of undergraduate teaching, I was a part of the teaching team for a freshman course in the Jewish and Christian traditions. I became aware that one of the young men in my section seemed less than satisfied with the course, so I invited him to linger for a moment after class for some conversation. I assumed that in general he was adjusting well to college. He was on the football team; his older brother (also an athlete on campus) had paved the way for him. But in our conversation, I began to realize that there were other dissatisfactions beneath the surface. He wasn't entirely sure that he was comfortable with being "just a football player"—feeling that perhaps this identity was forged more by his high school newspaper than by his own sense of self. Then, after telling me briefly about his parents' divorce, he looked directly at me and quietly said, "Do you know what it is like to have lost everything you ever really loved?"

We didn't get around to discussing the course very much that day. But in that moment, I felt some gladness that I could tell him that I did know something about it. My parents were not divorced, but I had undergone other experiences in my mid-twenties that, in retrospect, I realized had quietly devastated assumptions about my self, how the world worked, and even my sense of God.

On the other side of these experiences, if we do survive shipwreck—if we wash up on a new shore, perceiving more adequately how life really is—there is, eventually, gladness. It is gladness that pervades one's whole being; there is a new sense of vitality, be it quiet or exuberant. Usually, however, there is more than relief in this gladness. There is transformation. We discover a new reality beyond the loss. Rarely are we able to replace, to completely recompose, what was before. The loss of earlier meaning is irrevocable and must be grieved and mourned. But gladness arises from the discovery that life continues to unfold with meaning, with connections of significance and delight. We rarely experience this as a matter simply of our own making. As the primal, elemental force of promise stirs again within us, we often experience it as a force acting upon us, beneath us, carrying us—sometimes in spite of our resistance—into new meaning, new consciousness, new faith.

This gladness is experienced, in part, as a new knowing. Though this knowing sometimes comes at the price of real tragedy (which even the new knowing does not necessarily justify), we typically would not wish to return to the ignorance that preceded coming to the new shore. We do not want to live in a less-adequate truth, a less viable sense of reality, an insufficient wisdom. There is deeply felt gladness in an enlarged knowing and being, and in a new capacity to act.

But here we must resist any temptation toward glib piety. To repeat, when we wash up on a new shore of knowing, there may be diminishment as well as enlargement. Something is always lost. This diminishment may potentially lead, however, to a more adequate understanding of how it is that human beings are continuously both enlarged and diminished in the course of ongoing lived experience. Yet surely some tragic outcomes challenge a notion of faith as a dynamic of shipwreck, gladness, and amazement.

My own reflections on this matter in relation to young adulthood continue to be tugged into discipline and mystery by the suicide of a close friend, the husband of one of my college roommates, when we were all twenty-seven years old. When Dan died, another of his friends said of us, "Before Dan died, we were all 'star-spangled.' After he died, we knew that tragedy could strike any of us." In the face of a promising life seemingly unfulfilled, and another (his wife's) forever set upon a path quite different from her choosing, we suffered a kind of shared shipwreck. We were initiated into yet larger dimensions of consciousness and deepened questions of meaning, purpose, and significance. Three decades later, life and faith have been recomposed, but there remains a shared ache, a shared knowing, and a sweetness among us that from time to time render us relevant again before the Mystery we all share.

The questions that suffering and death pose to us are questions of faith: Is there any form of meaning, any faith, that can without delusion embrace both our small and great sufferings? In today's world, not only our own suffering but that of millions of others is made known to us through modern media. The threats to meaning that confront us on the scale of collective experience surely challenge any cursory affirmation of the dynamic described here as faith. Specifically, the task of making meaning on the scale of vast shared suffering has been almost overwhelmingly confounded by the suffering of Jews and others in the Holocaust in Europe, compounded further by the recognition that this Holocaust represents other holocausts in other places and times, including our own. Yet it is Holocaust sufferers themselves who give us some of the most compelling examples of the capacity of the human spirit to reconstitute meaning and faith of the most profound integrity. Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, has written, "But not only creativeness and enjoyment are meaningful. If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering."²⁴

Thus the gladness on the other side of shipwreck arises from an embracing, complex kind of knowing that is experienced as a more trustworthy understanding of reality in both its beauty and terror. It is in this

sense that Richard Niebuhr describes such gladness as an "intellectual affection."²⁵

Such gladness is accompanied by amazement. The power of the experience of shipwreck is located precisely in one's inability to immediately sense the promise of anything beyond the breakup of what has been secure and trustworthy. Until our meaning-making becomes very mature, in the midst of shipwreck there is little or no confidence of meaningful survival. The first time we are self-consciously aware that faith itself has been shattered is, after all, the first time; how could we know that even this might be survived? Even if we accept the dissolution of our self, world, and God with steely and sophisticated courage, we may expect nothing more; the possibility of surviving and going on to more has hitherto not been a part of our experience. Then, when we are met by the surprise of new meaning, we are amazed. Passover is the celebration of amazement. Easter is what happens to us when we look back and say, "I survived that!"²⁶ Faith is recomposed by joy as well as by pain.

The Power and Motion of Faith

As we become more conscious of living in a dynamic reality, our notions of faith necessarily undergo change.

Faith as the Motion of Life

The metaphors of shipwreck, gladness, and amazement point toward the dynamic, transformative nature of faith. They help us recover *faith* as a verb, a powerful activity provisionally distinguished from static notions of religion and belief. Faith is a dynamic, multifaceted activity, an active dialogue with promise.²⁷ The motion of shipwreck, gladness, and amazement describes not only major crises of meaning that punctuate the story of our lives but also the tumbling, rocking, flowing motion of our everyday, as we dwell in a continuous dialectic between fear and trust, hope and hopelessness, power and powerlessness, doubt and confidence, alienation and belonging.

This ongoing, meaning-making motion of faith is named in many traditions as the activity of spirit and Spirit. Across traditions, the word *spirit* is typically rooted in words such as *air*, *breath*, *wind*—the experience of power moving unseen. Faith is formed and transformed through many forms of spirituality. As we are beginning to see, it is the strategy of Spirit to "release our tight hold on the foreground of life and turn toward the vast background"²⁸ over and over again. The ongoing process

of shipwreck, gladness, and amazement shakes us loose from our focus on little loves and puts us in touch with the mystery of the wider force field of our lives. Each time, our souls are stretched and reordered, at least in some small measure. We find that all we love and wrestle with is recast as something closer to a sense of right proportion. We are perpetually invited to participate more consciously in the vast tissue of life, and if we are attuned to the motion of faith, we learn to wonder in a larger frame and are awakened to bigger questions and larger dreams.

Faith as Rational and Passional

The power and motion of faith includes, but is more than, cognitive activity and a reordering of mind narrowly understood. Yes, faith is intimately related to knowledge; yet it is also prior to knowledge in any formal sense. The faith of the infant, for example, is composed by a rudimentary cognition that relies on, discovers, and composes meaning through sensory, affective modes of knowing. Trust (or mistrust) is grounded in an affection that informs cognition. So it is with adults. As Fowler has put it, "in faith the 'rational' and the 'passional' are fused."²⁹ A trustworthy ultimacy is composed by feelings as well as thoughts, by being touched as well as by intellectual persuasion. This is not to say that faith is irrational. It is to say that faith has both affective and cognitive dimensions. As in all knowing and being, affect has an ordering power.

Verb and Noun

To suffer shipwreck, gladness, and amazement on the journey of faith is to relinquish the pattern of ultimacy one has seen, known, felt, and acted upon; it is also to discover a new faith. Therefore, even as the word *faith* is recovered as a verb, it remains also a noun. Faith is a composing and a composition. We journey from faith to faith. Faith is not only the act of setting one's heart; it is also what one sets the heart upon. When we say people have a strong faith, we mean first that they confidently engage in the activity of faith in their ongoing meaning-making, testing, trusting, and acting; and second that they have found the pattern of shipwreck, gladness, and amazement to be true and trustworthy. They hold it dear and believe. They dwell in a consciousness of an intricate, intimate pattern of life that is continuously in motion and yet holds at the level of ultimacy. Their faith is manifest as trust, knowledge, emotion, value, and action, permeating every facet of their existence. Their faith changes—it develops—over time, undergoing transformation and growth toward greater adequacy.

Mature adult faith composes meaning in self-conscious engagement with the repeated dissolution and repatterning of one's perceptions of the fabric of life, in the dynamic reconceiving of the assumed connections among persons, things, ideas, events, symbols, the natural and social order, space, and time. The suffering of adult faith is located in learning how to hold on to, and when to let go of, the perceptions, patterns, and relationships that one experiences as partaking in ultimate value and truth.³⁰ The journey through shipwreck, gladness, and amazement can have particular power in young adult lives, and it can be recognized as one way of describing the deep process by which we become at home in the universe.