

## **The Truth About Faith**

**by Donne Hayden**

Before we can talk about faith, we have to talk about truth, so we must first of all specify what we mean by “truth.” Do we mean literal, provable facts and only that? Or is there more than one kind of truth? Let’s apply these questions to this short narrative.

This incident allegedly happened during the 1930s in New York City “on one of the coldest days of the year.”

*The world was in the grip of the Great Depression, and all over the city, the poor were close to starvation.*

*It happened that a judge sitting on the bench that day was hearing a complaint against a woman who was charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She pleaded that her daughter was sick, and her grandchildren were starving because their father had abandoned the family. But the shopkeeper, whose loaf had been stolen, refused to drop the charge. He insisted that an example be made of the poor old woman, as a deterrent to others.*

*The judge sighed. He was most reluctant to pass judgment on the woman, yet he had no alternative. “I’m sorry,” he said, turning to her. “But I can’t make any exceptions. The law is the law. I sentence you to a fine of ten dollars, and if you can’t pay I must send you to jail for ten days.”*

*The woman was heartbroken, but even as he was passing sentence, the judge was reaching into his pocket for the money to pay off the ten-dollar fine. He took his hat from the desktop, tossed a ten-dollar bill into it, and then addressed the crowd:*

*“I am also going to impose a fine of fifty cents on every person here present in this courtroom, for living in a town where a person has to steal bread to save her grandchildren from starvation. Please collect the fines, Bailiff, in this hat, and pass them across to the defendant.”*

*And so the accused went home that day from the courtroom with \$47.50—fifty cents of which had been paid by the shamefaced grocery storekeeper who had brought the charge against her. And as she left the courtroom, the gathering of petty criminals and New York policemen gave the judge a standing ovation.*<sup>1</sup>

Is this story *true*? Well, that depends on what you mean by true. Did the events in this story actually happen? Maybe. But what if these events didn't really happen? What if the facts presented in this story are false (facts can be false, you know)—what if there was no judge, no grandmother, no storekeeper, no bailiff. If it didn't really happen, if it is not *literally true*, is this story even worth telling or hearing? If the *facts* are false, is there *no truth* in the story? Can the ideas be true, even if the facts are false?

Let's consider the *ideas* in the story. The grandmother is a good woman who, in desperation, does something she would never do under ordinary circumstances. Is this idea true in any sense? Speaking for myself, in her situation I am pretty sure that I would steal a loaf of bread before I let my grandson die of starvation. Most of us would. In this story, the judge fines everyone in the courtroom for, he says, "living in a town where a person has to steal bread to save her grandchildren from starvation." And then he gives the money to the grandmother. Is there truth in what he does and says? Yes, the underlying truth of what he says is that, especially in hard times, goods are not evenly distributed among us; if each person in the town gave just a little, the woman and her grandchildren would not be driven to desperate acts. Whether or not it really happened, the judge's action reflects simple justice which even the policemen and petty criminals in the courtroom recognize. So though the *facts* may not be true, the ideas in the story express a truth above and beyond fact—a truth about human nature and about how we *ought* to

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<sup>1</sup> Based on an incident reported by James N. McCutcheon, *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*.

treat each other, even if we don't always do it. In this story, we encounter a higher truth than mere facts; its message is true and important, though the facts may be un-true.

Now let's apply the same test of Truth to a story from the Bible, as in this one from the Gospel of Matthew. On the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus has been teaching and healing and speaking to the multitudes that follow him around the countryside. Finally, Jesus

*made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.*

*And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land, beaten by the waves; for the wind was against them.*

*And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea.*

*But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear.*

*But immediately he spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear."*

*And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water."*

*He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me."*

*Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:22-31)*

Is this story true? Did it really happen—did Jesus really walk on water? Did Peter walk on water? Many, if not most of us here in this room doubt this actually happened. Is there nothing to be gleaned from this story, then? Is there no *truth* in it at all? Doesn't the story express essentially the same higher truth about humanity that we read in *The Little Engine That Could*? The tiny engine that climbed tall hills chugging over and over, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." And because he thought he could, he could. So long as Peter thought he could, he walked on water, but when he doubted, he sank .

How do we approach truth? How can we assess the higher truth of something? Four words: doubt, belief, certainty and faith.

If we *doubt* something, this means, of course, that we are skeptical of it, that we question the truth of it. For instance, I *doubt* that this pen will float if I knock it off the lectern. My doubt

is based on my own experience with falling objects plus what I have learned from scientists—authorities I trust—who are experts on the natural law of gravity.

I *believe* if I knock the pen off the lectern, it will fall to the floor. I *believe* something is true for the same reasons I doubt it—that is, from my own experience and/or from what I’ve been told by authorities, experts or others I trust. In fact, I can *doubt* or *believe* something without having personal experience of it, but simply because someone assures me it is true. For instance, say I am a child of two and an adult tells me that if I knock the pen off the lectern, it will fall to the floor. If I trust the adult, I believe that is true; if I’m not too sure about the grownup, I doubt it and will have to try it to prove it to myself.

Now let’s consider certainty. Because I have considerable experience with falling objects, and because scientists and others I trust assure me that the law of gravity exists, I not only *believe* this pen will fall to the floor if I knock it off the lectern, I am *certain* it will—I *know* it. Certainty is a step *beyond* belief. And when we are certain of something, we *cannot* doubt it—so certainty is also *beyond doubt*. Certainty works pretty well for concrete things in the physical and material world. We humans need food and water, we can be injured, we can mate and bear children, we all age and eventually die. Certainty suffers, however, whenever we apply it to human thoughts, emotions, motivations, and perceptions. Beyond the physical facts of our lives, very little about human beings is *certain*. We are full of what Richard Rohr calls “happy contradictions and seeming inconsistencies.” And if I insist on certainty, I may be unable to hear Truth.

Go back to the story about the judge. The facts are all uncertain—did this really happen? Could a judge do what the judge in the story does? Did a grandmother really steal a loaf of bread? None of these details are true for certain. The only certainty in this story occurs at a higher level—that is, during the Depression, many good people went hungry while others had enough. But the truth expressed in this story has little to do with certainty.

In the passage from Matthew, Peter walks on water until he notices the storm and realizes what he is doing. Then he flounders. Notice what Jesus says to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" Once again, the truth is not in the facts of the story, but in what the story tells us about ourselves. In this case, the message is that *faith enables us to do more than doubt does*. For individuals, this is not a question of right or wrong, truth or falsehood, good or bad, and it is not a matter of literal truth—it is a matter of which prevails—faith or doubt? The two always exist within us and our lives reflect the play of inner scales that balance doubt and faith.

We often recognize the "Little-Engine-That-Could" faith in athletes—for instance, my high school history teacher, Coach Brooks Jennings, who stood 5'6" tall, but who was an All-State basketball player in high school and who went to college on a basketball scholarship. Or another instance—a boy born with only stumps for legs, who, with two artificial legs from the thigh down, is a champion marathon runner. In athletics, we may call it determination, grit, discipline, "mind over matter," or something besides faith. But the athlete who lacks *faith* in his or her ability will not accomplish much.

In the young man with no legs, what made him think he could run marathons? Was it because someone told him he could? No—something *inside* him gave him the will to become a runner and faith that he could do so. Can he teach that to someone else? No—he can tell others about it, and if they will they can learn from him, but no one—even with two legs—can run marathons because of someone else's faith. And simply *believing* what someone else tells me is not the same as having faith.

Though evangelists may insist that everything in the Bible is literally true, and even convince some to believe this, they cannot force *faith* on others. When it insists on certainty, religion *abolishes* faith for the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. An atheist is *certain* there's nothing beyond the material world; in the same way, the dogmatic believer is *certain* that God exists and Jesus is the Son of God. Neither the atheist nor the dogmatic believer has

faith—instead, each has certainty. They have more in common with each other than either does with a person of faith.

As Richard Rohr points out in his *This I Believe* essay, “many religious folks insist on *answers* that are *always* true. We love closure, resolution and clarity,” says Rohr, “while thinking that we are people of ‘faith’! How strange that the very word ‘faith’ has come to mean its exact opposite.”

Faith *requires* doubt; faith cannot exist where certainty exists. Instead of talking about religion, let’s keep it simple and go back to the pen. I can’t really say that I “have faith” the pen will fall to the floor if I knock it off the lectern. I am *certain* it will. I know it will. On the other hand, I *may* have faith that this pen will *float* if I knock it off the lectern. This is something I’m not certain of, doubt exists. Yet, if this were a matter of faith for me, something inside tells me this pen *may* float if I knock it off the lectern—something that I can’t explain or support with evidence, or convince anyone else of.

While certainty permits no doubt, faith is *always* accompanied by doubt. In my understanding, faith arises from *within* a person—faith exists without proof, without evidence, without assurance from authorities or other people. Faith usually arises from personal experience that cannot be “proven” or even explained adequately to anyone else. Faith is personal and individual. Faith occurs *in* people; it comes to people, and, I wager, only rarely in church. In visions and dreams, in near-death experiences and encounters with others dying, in feelings of being protected or accompanied by unseen forces—these are often the sources of faith. People who have such experiences often cannot fully communicate them—when they try, their listeners remain unconvinced. One mark of faith is that it *endures*, even in the face of skepticism from others and our own rational minds.

People who have faith recognize it as something within or beyond themselves. Faith cannot be imposed on a person by someone else. Faith is a gift that, if accepted at all, must be

accepted without certainty, without proof, without external authority, and sometimes, against all we know of the material world. The story in Matthew isn't so much about Jesus walking on water as it is about Peter's faith and lack of it. *It doesn't really matter* if Jesus walked on water or not—what matters is a truth we all recognize, and that is, when humans have faith—in themselves or in something greater than themselves—we accomplish more than we do when we are consumed by doubt.