



## **Finding Faith**

**by Ross Bishop**

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It is easy to get tangled up in the differences between faith and belief, so let me offer two simple definitions. First, I will define faith as that which connects one to the divine, to essential Truth. "Divine" can range from your perception of God to a deep connection with the Self. It is the essential spiritual connection.

In contrast, beliefs are a created set of values connected to a particular subject. They are mental constructs. Beliefs can be about God or chicken soup, but they are a product of the mind.

There may be people who are born with a connection to their inner faith. I certainly wasn't and I've never met anyone that was. I believe that inner faith is something that we gain through trial and hardship. It is generally created out of desperation. That's not a bad thing; it's just the way of life.

In many years of guiding people through their emotional and spiritual difficulties, I have observed an almost predictable pattern to the development of faith. The pattern applies to all of us, but you can see it most clearly in alcoholics and addicts. The addict runs their life with a serious "lack" mental structure. Since mental structures are not connected to spirit, they cannot successfully manage a life. Because of this, a major crisis (or series of crises) will be created, and the mental structure, by definition, will be unable to resolve them. This is not accidental. The reason we are here is to learn to transcend the thinking mind. There is an old cliché, "God does not have to think." When your awareness is complete, you just do what needs to be done. End of story.

Addicts can be so attached to their beliefs (especially about themselves) that they will sacrifice everything – jobs, families, homes, friends, and possessions, before they will surrender their beliefs. Sometime during the crisis period, forced into a corner, near the limit of what they think they can endure, the addict is pushed to reach for something greater than their old ways of thinking, or dive back in the

hole, creating even more pain for themselves. It's not a pretty thing to witness. But, it is something that each of does in our own way.

In theory, religious people have a mechanism in place, a crutch if you will, that can help them find faith in difficult times. That's why religions have endured over the centuries. However, William James described modern religion as "faith in somebody else's faith," and that sort of belief isn't going to get us very far in facing our personal demons, except drive us deeper into dependency on religion.

There was a time when we lived lives of experiential spirituality. People had an inner sense that bestowed meaning to life. It is a quality of the deeper psyche that does not come from reason. That faith gave people an anchor through which to address and manage the challenges presented by life. It was also a time of superstition and fear, but at that time, every aspect of existence was crude and primitive. I have had the pleasure to live amongst several tribal societies who had very advanced spiritually based cultures and I must tell you it was a pretty wonderful experience. It is also a very hard life, and so given the opportunity to have things to make life easier, they will often take it, and in the process make the bargain with the devil that seems inherent to our version of materialistic society. Having witnessed what Western industrialism has done to the planet and its people during just my own lifetime, it is clear that we need to make some fundamental changes in the Western paradigm, but then people have been saying that for years.

In our culture, spirituality is no longer an essential part of daily life. Although we are not constrained by our grandparent's rigid religious beliefs, we no longer experience God, either. And when we cease to experience God, we are forced to believe in him. And, as Paul Tillich pointed out, belief is a commodity that is subject to loss.

Thus we begin to see the difference between faith and belief. We have closed our experiential connection to the divine and fear that we will not find our way back or that even worse, that if we do, we may not be welcomed back. This explains in large part, why our culture is dominated by so much individual fear.

Many spiritual seekers go from guru to guru, workshop to workshop, from one belief system to another, looking for answers that will give peace to their beliefs while (although they won't admit this) allowing them to avoid their inner pain. It doesn't work. Pain is an important and essential part of the process. Pain is what leads us to faith because it ultimately forces us to give up our beliefs.

Now, you don't go out looking for pain. That would be masochistic. The spiritual orders that use pain as a ritual of purification totally miss the point of the purpose of pain in life. But you can come to recognize that pain is the most important, powerful and necessary part of our healing process here on earth. You can learn to welcome the lessons it presents and recognize that pain comes from our resistance to change and can be a most beneficial signal so that you can let go of the beliefs that hold you away from the Truth, so that you do not have to keep repeating the

same lessons (now, that's real pain!). I can speak to this from experience, because it is something I have a good bit of experience at.

If you look at a person's existence either from the perspective of this lifetime or from the longer view of their past life experiences, you see a consistent pattern of challenges to one or more ego-based belief issues. Most often, it has to do with learning to love oneself. That was certainly true in my case.