

Chapel Words (December 1, 2011) — Jo-Anne Kingstone

Faith

It occurred to me last Saturday, as we sat together here in this Chapel celebrating the final day of International Week with a multi-faith service, that there are certainly distinctions to be made between matters of religion and matters of faith. And Mr. Holland did a fine job of easing us into an understanding that most religions are based on a certain set of beliefs, at the centre of which we find the same thing: faith.

I am in no way an expert on matters of religion, but through the course of that service, I began to see that there is something decidedly human, something essentially and purely a matter of the heart, when it comes to faith. So despite differences in belief systems or religion, the desire to believe – which comes from here – is a part of our essential humanity. But it is indeed something with which we wrestle.

Let's start with a visual – *Julianne and Haydn perform a fall and catch at the front of the Chapel.*

On a very basic level, faith is about trust – complete trust. Complete trust is hard to come by. Most of us grasp at some kind of conditional trust. For example, Haydn might say to Julianne, "I'll catch you most of the time if you only fall from a chair in the Chapel." He would indicate the frequency ("most of the time") the activity ("only falling from a chair") and the place ("in the Chapel"). Those are his conditions. Or Julianne might say to Haydn, "I'll let you catch me in the Chapel, but I don't think you can catch me in the Ritz or the dining hall, that wouldn't work." She would limit her trust to one place ("the Chapel") and in the limitations, she would imply conditions. This is obviously an exaggeration, but hopefully you get my point. Complete trust – faith – requires a level of commitment that exceeds possible conditions; that's what makes it complete; that's what makes it faith.

Complete trust is not an easy gift to give or to receive. We might ask ourselves why that is.

Each summer, Mr. Kingstone and I take a trip to Maine to visit my aunt and uncle who live in a small community by the ocean. They are in their 70s, but still fit and active; we run the beach, take long walks together and eat plenty of lobster. And we talk. This last summer, my aunt told me this story as we sat in the sun having lunch on the patio of a restaurant overlooking the beach.

She pointed to a spot about a kilometer along the ocean – that's Ferry Beach over there, you remember that, she said. Your mother and I spent a summer there with you kids. One day, you'd all gone off somewhere with your Uncle Joey and it was just the two of us, your mum and me, with Peter, who was about 5 at the time. (Peter is my cousin. This story takes place about 40 years ago; Peter is now close to 50).

"Your mum and I were sitting watching Peter who was playing on a sand bar; water between us and the sandbar; water beyond the sandbar. He had a red ball he was playing with. I remember that very

clearly. He was having fun there on his own. We were talking and I suppose, not paying much attention when I looked up and could see that the wind had pushed the ball away from him into the water and he had swum out to retrieve it. By the time he reached it, he was well into the channel where the fishing boats sailed in and out of the harbor; he was being carried by the current of the incoming tide. In a panic, I stood up, shouting to him. I was suddenly aware then of someone at my right shoulder. I turned and there was a young man standing just there – he put his hand on my arm and said, "You stay right here; don't move; keep your eyes on your son. I will get him. Don't lose sight of him." He went into the waves, swam into the channel and reached Peter. He wrapped his arms around him and brought him to shore with the red ball. I ran to meet them and held Peter to me. I turned to thank the young man, but he was gone. Nowhere to be seen. Vanished."

At this point in the story my aunt pauses just for a moment and I am completely unprepared for what comes next. My aunt is an incredibly practical woman. She spent over 30 years as an emergency operating room nurse – efficient, attentive to details, competent and meticulous; used to giving directions and taking them without question in emergencies, she doesn't indulge much in emotion; she had witnessed too many accident victims, spoken to too many grieving families to spend time with feelings.

"Nowhere to be seen," she repeats. And then she says, "He was an angel. The young man who saved Peter was an angel. He was there and then he was gone; we hadn't seen him before and we never saw him again. An angel. I absolutely believe that."

Beyond "complete trust" faith is also belief based on spiritual apprehension--what we gather and understand here – rather than proof. That is what I saw on my aunt's face as she recounted the story of the angel – there was no proof of what happened, no proof that what she believed was true, no measure, no record. Besides which, angels aren't real; we all know that. Or do we?

There was no denying what my aunt knew to be true and 40 years of living beyond that moment had not shaken that. Her faith in angels was confirmed on that day. But here's the neat thing – looking at her as she told her story last summer, I could not say to her "There was no angel. That was just a boy on the beach" because in her face I saw that it was true. Listening to the story, seeing the amazement of her faith, was powerful. I found I couldn't question her; I just had to believe myself.

I had never heard this story before last summer. Why do I tell it to you now? Well, I'm not quite sure to be honest except that last Saturday I was reminded of that experience – seeing the way someone would give themselves over to faith. Complete trust of the heart without proof. And then understanding how we can give faith to others through our own.

So maybe this is all a bit too philosophical and I really don't mean to be because in fact, there is something quite real about faith – you certainly know it when you see it; you understand it when you feel it.

Julianne and Haydn work together every day. They share ideas, they problem solve, they laugh at themselves and each other, they work through difficult ideas, they have fun, they talk and they listen. They have developed a level of trust that allows Julianne to believe she can fall backwards from a chair in front of everyone here and Haydn will catch her. Haydn, for his part, knows he will in fact not fail to

catch her. Maybe last year, or two years ago, before they knew each other so well, this would not be the case. But they have, over time, practiced believing and trusting each other so they have faith in the fall and the catch.

My aunt, through the ritual of the emergency room, had to practice faith even through the vehicle of science – this set of procedures will save this person even if the last time it did not. Without that faith, she certainly would not have been able to go into a crisis environment every day. She could draw on her faith for courage. On some level, with each new emergency, she had to believe an angel was there waiting at her shoulder.

Today is December 1st and this month marks a season of faith for at least two of the world's religions. It is a season when angels appear, candles are light and we look to each other for hope. My hope is that we can remember what we experienced last week, that we can embrace the celebrations of this coming season and find ways to practice faith in each other, in this world and in ourselves. Demonstrate to others that you have faith in them. Fall and allow someone to catch you. Be an angel. There are things to believe in. Good things. Have faith.