

Faith is a gift to relax into

The Greek word for faith, *pistis*, isn't about assenting to beliefs. It's about trust.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [July 14, 2021](#) issue



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In a pool she always found to be too cold, our daughter may not have received the full benefit of swim lessons. Still, her purple lips chattered happily every time she jumped into the water. In one of our favorite home videos, this wiry little four-year-old learns how to float on her back—or tries to learn. The teacher puts one hand beneath her spine and the other behind her legs as he coaches her to relax. His promptings for her to stay in a flat position seem to have little effect. Every time he withdraws his arms, her tense little body reverts to a V-shape and sinks in panic.

It's a lot to expect a four-year-old to understand the physics of water enough to know that the human body can float on its surface. Yet for this buoyancy to work, one has to be relaxed enough to trust the capacity of the water to keep one's body mass afloat. This is hard to do when you fear going down. Fear of drowning can cause anyone to tense up and thrash in the water.

As a pastor, I've noticed a lot of people over the years turning an otherwise significant faith life into a mostly panic-driven affair. It happens especially when anxiety is high or some diagnosis has brought one low. But it can happen anytime. The slightest new situation will twist a relaxed disposition of faith into one of mental strain and spiritual expenditure. *If I believe hard enough or plead urgently enough, maybe God will come through.*

We see the naturalness and ease with which this twist occurs when we envision Jesus' disciples acting frantically in a storm-tossed boat one night, or Jairus anxious about his dying daughter, or Mary and Martha distraught over Jesus' delay in visiting their dying brother. A relaxed attitude isn't first instinct in a crisis.

But here's the deal: the Greek word *pistis*, customarily translated as *faith* or *belief*, would serve us better if it were translated more often as *trust*. Trust is the deeper meaning behind the word. *Pistis* is the relaxed attitude of receiving what God has given us in the first place. It's the antidote to panic.

The leading word for faith during the Middle Ages—*fides*, or intellectual assent to certain propositions—was displaced by Martin Luther when he popularized the word *fiducia*, or personal trust. We know its English counterpart well: *fiduciary*. If I deposit my money in a bank and trust company, I trust the owners of that company with my assets. I may believe all kinds of things about their goodness as an organization, and I may smile approvingly at their solvency as an institution, but I don't have a fiduciary relationship with them until I invest my money there.

Faith is investing in or trusting the totality of our lives to God. It's what theologian James Alison refers to as relaxing in the presence of someone whom we're confident is fond of us. More than a superstitious bag of tricks or an achievement born out of desperate flailing, faith is a gift to relax into and receive confidence from.

Our little Rachel eventually learned how to lessen her panic enough to begin floating more easily. It didn't happen because she strained harder. It happened because she loved that strong, friendly guy in the pool and knew that he was fond of her.

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