

The better part of faith

It's possible to stop believing, but we can't live without trust.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue



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There are two kinds of faith. They sound the same but turn out to be very different. The first is the desire to attain a level of certainty, conviction, and passion that somehow carries us over the chasm of doubt, distress, and despair. It's like psyching ourselves up before a game, exam, or difficult conversation so that we can be transported into a different realm of consciousness and achieve things beyond our normal powers.

This is what I sense is communicated by the word *belief*. The notion of belief is that we bind ourselves to certain extraordinary commitments, rituals, and ideas about reality that may seem bizarre to outsiders or locked in an ancient thought world but that give us access to the secret workings of the true power at large in the universe. We can't expect to know the logic or understand the purposes of that power, but beliefs connect us to it as successfully as is possible in this existence. To keep the magic at work, we surround ourselves with people who hold these convictions more ardently than we do and cultivate experiences that take us to a rarefied form of feeling, so we're lifted out of our mundane lives where everything feels so fragile and vulnerable.

The interesting thing about this notion of belief is that it seems to be understood in a similar way by adherents and outsiders alike. It's common for journalists or courts to refer to a person's beliefs, thereby speaking of something beyond the rational, steeped in obscurity, fiercely held, impossible to argue with, and central to identity. Think of parents refusing medical assistance for their child when doctors are eager to intervene: we're told it's because of their beliefs. But it's also common for a person to defend their own beliefs as profoundly personal and of great comfort, as things that shouldn't be a reason for discrimination, even if another person finds them offensive.

What these different understandings have in common is the assumption that belief is fundamentally a form of escape. It's a magic carpet that lifts you out of the ordinariness and jeopardy of your life and transports you to a realm of miracle, mystery, and cosmic purpose. The more you can get yourself into a holy reverie to match this grand drama, the more you can be free of your own limitations and the threats of others and thus find something called salvation.

It would be easy to think that what I've described as belief is the only kind of faith there is. But there is another kind, one that isn't based on escape.

Imagine a man who develops a life-limiting condition. His wrist starts to swell. The next day his knee can't bend. Within days he's in the hospital with autoimmune arthritis: his immune system is attacking his joint tissue. After a month his condition stabilizes, and he starts to build his life again. He needs rehab and physical therapy. He has to learn to walk again. He develops strategies, depends on others, learns to accept help, does a routine of daily exercises. It's a complete transformation.

His infant daughter is learning to walk at the same time as he is. He thought his job was to teach her, but now she's teaching him. It's humiliating but beautiful. He appreciates the tiniest gifts of life. He cherishes the people that care for him. He says, "Thank you for walking with me," and he means it literally. He's gradually making progress. But faster than he relearns to walk, he's becoming a better person.

If there's one word that sums up the journey I've described, it's *trust*. Trust doesn't assume life is about overcoming limitations. It's about finding truth, beauty, and friendship in the midst of those limitations. Trust doesn't think that if you wave a magic wand, things will change overnight. It finds companionship among the community of the waiting. Trust doesn't pretend that if you hold tight to the right things, nothing will ever go wrong. It inhabits the exercises and patience required to rebuild after matters have been strained or broken. Trust doesn't use people as a means of getting things but places all its energies in making relationships that transcend adverse and depleting circumstances. Trust, rather than belief, is the better part of faith.

And it is possible to eradicate belief from your life. You can say you're not going to commit to anything that isn't scientifically provable. But you can't live without trust. When we've been hurt or betrayed, our ability to trust inevitably suffers, but so does the abundance of our life. The question isn't whether we should trust; it's who and what to trust. In the face of death, the question is what can we trust that will last forever.

There are two kinds of faith, belief and trust. And here's the irony: God's faith in us is belief. It's irrational, far-fetched, and mysterious. There's no good reason for it, but everything depends on it. Our faith in God is trust. It's saying, "There are going to be setbacks, misunderstandings, and patient rebuilding. But I only want to be with you."

When we think faith is all about belief, we beat ourselves up for not being able to hold together all the mysteries and contradictions and far-fetched ideas. But that's not what Christianity is really about. The Christian faith is really about trust. It's not about Jesus the magician whisking us away on a magic carpet of happiness and glory. It's about facing the unknown and seeing Jesus turn around, offer us his hand, and say, "We're going to walk across the unknown together."