

Karen and I went to the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday part of a good friend the other night which precipitated some deep conversations about this aging thing. At 57, if we can still call ourselves ‘middle-aged’ it’s at the very far end of that middle, edging ever closer to ‘old’ with every breathe. It’s not bad – but it is an adjustment – a different way of thinking about ourselves and who we are in relationship to the rest of the world.

On a whim, Karen googled “Cool older people” and was not a little dismayed when the first hit was “People over 50 that you should know.” Fifty?!?

She kept digging, looking for good role models for aging well and was struck by another aspect of the results. They all focused on physical health or mental acumen, but really didn’t talk about what it meant to be grounded spiritually – to be whole people. We started thinking about it – who are the solid, cool, spiritual older folks out there to look up to?

I googled again and came up with Pope Francis, and Bishop Tutu and the Dali Lama – maybe Eckhart Tolle, Deepak Chopra and a few others – but really the top ten that Google shows you are all men. What about women? I mean – maybe Oprah - Gwyneth Paltrow or Madonna? Nah...

Now - there **are** people out there who want to convince you of the truth they have found – but does that make them truly spiritual people? I suspect that the really, grounded and connected people might live quiet lives that do not involve book tours and large audiences. Maybe I’m wrong.

What do you think a spiritual role model looks like? Someone who has lived long and well and who ages gracefully, both accepting the changes that life brings and yet not surrendering the hard-won lessons they’ve learned. Actually, we have a few really good role models right here in the congregation. I won’t embarrass them by naming them aloud, but if you’ve been here any length of time, you know who I’m talking about.

Today marks the fourth in our series taking a deep dive with one of the seven principles in Unitarian Universalism. This month it’s the 3<sup>rd</sup> principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

I think this is one of our trickier principles. I’m going to file acceptance of one another under the first principle – the one about the worth and dignity of every person. But encouraging one another to grow spiritually means actually wrestling with the idea of spiritual growth. What does that mean? What does it look like? How do we know we’re doing it?

Some UU’s don’t even like the word *spiritual* as they argue that it points to something supernatural. But as we’ve discussed earlier, spiritual in our use means a sense of wholeness and balance. It means becoming aware of the deeper dimensions of our being – of our connection to the whole of life, the inter-connected web in which we live and breathe and have our being.

Many of the most spiritual people I know would never use the word. I remember talking to a church member at my old church who said “bah – spirituality – nonsense.” But I knew he was an amazing woodworker who created beautiful pieces so I nudged and asked how he felt working in his shop. Did he ever lose himself in the process? He saw was getting at and nodded and then even volunteered that he had the same experience sitting in the woods when he went hunting. That sense of flow – of connection – of knowing oneself completely knitted into the moment.

People have been wrestling with what it means to live a good and full life for a very long time. I think it may even be the basis of all religious faith. And wrestling is the key word. Because a full life is both an experience and reflection upon and integration of that experience, there are many different ways to do it well.

Some faith traditions offer a top-down view. Partaking in the seven sacraments of Catholicism will help you lead a good life which offers heaven as a reward. Following the five pillars of Islam will, likewise, lead to a happy afterlife. But other religious traditions offer more leeway.

Our Jewish kin have lists of rules to follow but also follow the deeper commitment is to argue “in defense of heaven.” The second book of Hebraic scripture is the Talmud, which is a collection of oral traditions and reflection – having different and differing opinions by many Rabbis and scholars on the teachings from the Torah. To be a good Jew is not to do exactly the right things proscribed by others in the past; it is to do your own wrestling with the past and present and to figure out what meaning that brings to your own life. The phrase “in defense of heaven” was recently shared with me as a way to remind folks who are arguing on different sides of an issue that they share the same goal. Not to get to heaven per se – but to find our way to a life-giving and affirming time on this earth.

I recently stumbled across our old friend Thandeka. She’s a Unitarian Universalist theologian who led a workshop here a few years back titled “Love Beyond Belief.” Here’s a video she created naming part of the spiritual process.

### [Video](#)

Thandeka’s new book “Love Beyond Belief: Finding the Access Point to Spiritual Awareness” talks about something known as cosmic consciousness. It says that William James coined the term in his 1902 book detailing varieties of religious experience. Cosmic consciousness is coming to a place of not only intellectually knowing our connection to the whole, but viscerally knowing it with all of one’s senses. The book also shared “psychiatrist Richard Maurice Bucke:”s list of descriptors for that experience which include:

- a consciousness of the life and order of the universe
- an intellectual enlightenment that places a person on a new plane of existence as if a member of a new species
- a state of moral exaltation

- an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation, and joyousness greater than the enhanced intellectual power
- a sense of immortality
- a consciousness of ethical life,
- and not a conviction that one shall have all of this, but a conviction that one has it already<sup>3i</sup>

Have you ever had a momentary experience like this? Can you remember what it felt like?

One of my recent experiences happened while I was on retreat this fall in Colorado. We were out on the side of a mountain, left to just **be** in the natural world. I became conscious of the pinion pines surrounding me as if each one were an entity. The silence of the space seemed full – teeming with life – abundant life for a high desert climate. As I stood experiencing that fullness I seemed to dissolve into it without losing any of myself. And maybe the most interesting part of the experience was that I was walking back to the cabin, I could see every detail of the forest floor with a clarity that seemed astonishing. It was as if my sight had actually improved for a short while.

Now you might be saying – that’s never happened to me! But it seems that almost everyone does have some kind of what psychologists call a “mountain top” experience – but since most people don’t have words or understanding to wrap around it, most ignore or suppress the experience and forget it ever happened. Understandable because it can be disconcerting – even frightening – to experience something you don’t understand and can’t explain. But it is a truly human experience in life.

Thandeka explains that stumbling into a moment of cosmic consciousness reminds us of our deep connection to life – and that anyone can stumble. But if we are to mature as a species, if we are to move into a place of living in real sustaining relationship with the world around us, we must find ways to intentionally grow to a place of this type of consciousness – to this love beyond belief. Because she names the experience as love – with love meaning that primordial state of interconnection. It’s beyond belief – not because it is unbelievable – but because it is a primary experience; before we’ve had time to layer our “belief” story on top of it.

Can you imagine how much better everything in life would be if we could remember that we are all connected? That everything we do has consequences not just for ourselves or the people near to us, but goes out in ripples throughout the universe? This is the kind of spiritual growth that we could be encouraging one another to if we were following that Third principle.

Remember, our puritan ancestors began from that very place. They began requiring all members to have had a spiritual awakening experience – a state of apprehending their connection to God – and they formed their ‘new world’ churches so they could live in a place that honored this experience.

But this experiential understanding of church has long fallen by the wayside. Especially in the past few decades, as our Unitarian Universalists churches became centers of humanism and atheism, which live primarily in the head, things of the heart became more suspect.

Many folks in the pews still did believe in an interactive universe – perhaps even a deistic or theistic variety – but they didn't talk about it much. It had become unpopular – even unacceptable – to talk about this deeper experience of life because it strayed too close to the “god-talk” that many felt they had outgrown. In many Unitarian Universalist churches, folks have no idea what their fellow UU's believe because it can be such a tender subject. No one wants to feel shamed or embarrassed by the beliefs they have come to through their lifetime. We've adopted what I've heard termed “Minnesota nice” in our churches. We can talk politics till the cows come home – but it can be scary to talk religion – real, vital religion – in our beautiful, homey little churches.

But I'd argue that this fails our third principle. Our reading today offered a description of a conversation with those folks who go door-to-door sharing their faith. How many have seen them on the porch and ignored the bell? I know I have. But I have also opened the door and had a conversation other times as well.

My Southern Baptist mother-in-law used to love to see them coming. She gave them as good as she got. When you feel grounded in who you are, what you've experienced, and what you have come to believe, it's much easier to share those beliefs with others.

A faith that can't have these conversations become spiritually sterile and offers no space for real growth. It's imperative that we reclaim our ability to talk about the depths of our experiences and beliefs as human beings.

Two dangers in religious communities are: being totally controlled by the group mentality and having inner experience lost under the shadow of conformity, or going your own way so deeply that you lose sight of the larger connection. Some call it naval gazing. The middle way is to trust your own experiences of connection and to be able to bring that to a supportive community which – through discussion, reflection, dialogue – helps each member grow into a deeper understanding of what life is for you. Each of us has wisdom within. Each of us has experienced times which have blown our minds.

The Christian season of advent – the four weeks leading up to Christmas – actually does offer a space for contemplation, for waiting, for wondering in a state of suspended hope. As Unitarian Universalists, who claim heritage in both Judaism and Christianity, it might help us to reclaim the teachings which can help us to a deeper spiritual faith.

For these next few weeks, I invite you to make space in your life for contemplation. Pay attention to your experiences – especially if you can look out a window or go walking in the woods. Approach life with curiosity and see what it might offer you. Then – share that

experience with someone here. Talk about your deepest and most cherished beliefs. Listen your companion into their own personal truth.

We have not gotten our small group ministry off the ground this year but this could be the impetus. Small groups are a place where it is safe to explore, to share, to listen, and to grow spiritually into the person we are called to be. I've placed a couple sign-up sheets in the back on the welcome table – or call the church office to add your name to the list. If you'd like to begin practicing our third principle, sign up and we'll figure out some dates to meet. And – next Saturday (Dec 15, 2018) at 10:30 am – we'll have a discussion here on your own interpretation and experience of this challenging principle. All are welcome to join me in Joshi chapel.

I know my life has moments when it seems interminable – maybe for some of you it's the end of a long sermon! But the reality is, we are only here in this beautiful, surprising, challenging and entrancing reality for a limited time – and it goes by so very quickly.

Try using this season before Christmas to make time to pay attention. Appreciate the lights brightening our neighborhoods – the generosity we observe in our fellow humans – the drift of snow outside a darkened window. In those moments, listen to that small still voice, and then share that truth with the world.

Amen & blessed be.

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<sup>1</sup> Thandeka. Love Beyond Belief: Finding the Access Point to Spiritual Awareness (Kindle Locations 220-230). Polebridge Press. Kindle Edition.