

Living Into Our Faith

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This sermon has three steps on the spiritual path; and five signs of being in beloved community, which is called by many names: humanists might call it utopia, or perhaps simply the way the world is at its best, what Rev. Martha and I have taken to calling Right Relationship, what Jesus often called the Kingdom of God, and what our Junior Choir Introit sang as “To New Jerusalem,” all aspects of being in relationship to experience fullness of being!

The first necessary step on the spiritual journey is to wake up! But this is just the first step in a three step process: 1) waking up or awareness; 2) have good intent; and 3) act to transform our world. To live into our faith we must truly come alive to our lives, seeing our life clearly for the first time, to live into our life more fully, diving into our lives with both feet; loving deeply, learning to be vulnerable with each other; learning daily that which will help us to help the world; and speaking truly, to each other and the powers that be; that together we might leave a sacred legacy of a better world. It is so easy to take life for granted, to fall into a pattern, a routine, which robs us of the joy and passion that our lives deserve. If you are not awake to your life, you are missing it! Trust me!

All three steps are necessary on the spiritual path, none can be safely skipped. If we fail first to wake up to our true condition, we can do considerable harm to ourselves acting on good intentions. If we become awake but move directly to act upon our insights, our lack of discernment can lead us to harm others by foolish acts. And if we only wake ourselves up, and consider our good intent but fail to act on behalf of others, the fruit of our efforts will inevitably wither and die upon the vine. When making one’s way along a powerful spiritual path, it is best to go one step at a time!

Sometimes the entire service can be captured in the opening hymn: “Wake now my senses and hear the earth call; feel the deep power of being in all; keep with the web of creation your vow, giving, receiving as love shows us how.” Wake to creation all around us, but as the lesbian feminist Martha Courtot also reminds us, we must awake in the midst of life’s dangers, and make our way with courage and confidence that if we proceed together with intention we will come through not only safely but joyfully as well. This is why a good intent is so important to navigating our hostile streams. For community is tricky, like crossing a creek, we require a certain serenity of mind, bare feet, and a sure trust that the snake we know slides silently underwater just beyond our vision will choose to ignore the flesh that cuts through its territory. We are involved in picking our way carefully into a new future! Crossing over into life! All crossings are hard and we must believe in the snakes at our feet while we practice believing that we will come through safely. For with good intention we will come through together.

Unitarian Universalist congregations have seven principles that we covenant to affirm and promote in our lives together. Those who have participated in small group ministry this year probably know all seven, or at least have struggled with each one. They are in the front of your hymnals if you want to look them up.

The first two are about right relationship between diverse people.
The next three are about how we relate in community together.
The last two speak of world community and the web of existence.
Seven short phrases to go from the mundane to the metaphysical!

This morning I will focus upon principle #3 and #7. Principle #3 reads: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our community. This is what Rev. Martha and I mean by being in right relationship: to accept one another, to encourage one another, and to respect the boundaries and priorities of right relationship such that we help each other to grow into our best selves. Right relationships help to shape and define all that we do together and they help to transform us into our best selves in the process. What better way is there for us to live into our faith?

This is not just being nice, it is the metaphysics of relationship. When the choir or the congregation sings a hymn, each person is not singing it solely for themselves, but rather for everyone here. If a hymn is not to your taste, sing it for your neighbor, for the person who loves this music, and then they too will sing for you.

The same basic principle applies whether we are talking about what it takes to maintain a healthy marriage, to raise well-adjusted children, or to live and be a vibrant church community. We begin with love and affirmation, and end with community! If we truly love one another, we hold each other accountable. We can only actually live into our faith when we live into our faith together! What sort of a religious community are we, with our focus on each individual's search for truth, with freedom from doctrinal beliefs? One in which walking together in love and right relationship means far more than any doctrinal belief could in becoming community.

We are a community of seekers, with reason, love, and service as the ties that bind us together as we dwell together in community. It is good that when life presents us with great needs, represented by the babies in Anne's story this morning, that we are the sort of community that reaches out and takes these babies into our own homes, raising them as our own. But it is even better when we seem to be faced with an endless stream of new babies that we remember to march upstream to find the source of the problem itself. We are a community of seekers that informs our service on behalf of humankind with reason looking to the roots of problems. Let us care for the problems that come into our midst but also look at the systemic causes that are bringing so many problems our way. This is what it means to be awake to our true condition, to cherish every moment, to be intentional about choosing what we care about and how we will be in the world, and then acting to bring about the world we desire. This is called the beloved community!

There exist five markers for the emergence of this beloved community: Joy, hospitality, integrity, innovation and stewardship. The joy we feel and share together as we celebrate our lives is the joy of deep meaning, of fulfillment, of living community together. By creating an open and accessible community for all who come here to find a home or nourish their souls, through our hospitality we enter into relationship with the stranger who can in turn become a new friend. Today we welcome those new members who have formally joined this congregation over the last several months. With luck we will help to transform them as they help to transform us. By holding ourselves accountable to living and interacting with integrity, we create a community that is worthy of trust; that is a safe place in which we can be vulnerable, and where we care for one another as much as our own wellbeing. Here we have a tradition of being heretics, of choosing the new, the bold, the innovative, over the dead but comforting hand of the past.

We are beginning to develop a culture of stewardship, of financial care and wellbeing for this community, and for the facilities that we have inherited as part of our legacy from those who came before us. This is perhaps the lesson most still to be fully learned and adopted in this community. We are learning to lovingly maintain and develop these assets so that we will be good stewards of this place. We wish to make this place financially solvent and in good health not just for ourselves but for all those who come after us as well. Our living into our faith includes living with joy, reaching forth with hospitality, relating to each other with integrity, opening ourselves up to the innovative and the new, and becoming good stewards of our small place in this world. This is to truly live our faith, for ourselves, for the world, for all beings.

Which leads to principle #7: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,” the relationship principle! Our community emerges and exists in the connections between us. Martin Buber, a 20th Century Jewish theologian, says that God exists, if at all, in this loving connection between us. This emergent community becomes a source of comfort and power between us. Intimacy and power come together to empower us. This emergent divinity, in relationship between us in community, is so very important for our encouragement to spiritual growth. Frederic Henry Hedge, who served this church in the second half of the 19th Century, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the other Transcendentalists thought of *it* as inner divinity, the divinity in all things, a view that was known then as pantheism, an alternative to Christianity. Now most postmodern theologians think of this *it* as Martin Buber does, as the divinity that emerges between us in our relationship, what is now sometimes called panentheism, God existing only in relationship. We exist fully only in relationship. Our very health and wellbeing is largely shaped by the quality of our relationships. To achieve our fullness of being, we experience the love of others, as well as giving to others our love in turn.

We become fully human, fully ourselves, in relationships. We are perpetually being and becoming, lovers and beloved. And God, if you want to use that word, exists in the spaces carved forth by the universe from our relationships with other people. We are connected, and through each other interconnected, with all the unfolding reality that is the universe as we experience it. As we sang in our second hymn, “We celebrate the web of life, its magnitude we sing; for we can see divinity in every living thing.” Together we

can cultivate and celebrate these five signs of a community in right relationship: joy, hospitality, integrity, innovation and stewardship. These are our gifts of the spirit. If we bring our deep awareness, have clear and good intentions, and take action for the good, it brings us back into a sort of dynamic balance. We move through this chaotic world with our own peculiar beauty and grace. So how would we choose to live our lives, how do we choose to live into our faith, here and now?

I have a modest suggestion! As we engage with the universe, living into our faith even as we find our joy, hospitality, integrity, innovation, and stewardship, let it be a dance we do, a dance with the very fabric of the universe, would you like to dance, may I have this dance with you? For therein we learn to live our faith into the beloved community together. Amen.