

COMING OF AGE, AGAIN
Sermon by Rev. Tracy Sprowls
Sunday, August 19, 2018
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City

This morning's sermon is in three parts. After each part, we will pause for a moment of silence.

Coming of Age: A Poem about Belief

When I was a child I believed in Santa, the tooth fairy,
characters such as these,
and aliens from outer space
As I collected more years, I had to let these beliefs go
I couldn't carry them all
Well, maybe except for the space aliens

In my twenties, I believed that
everyone had access to money
the world was fair
I could do and be anything
my father was an invincible superhero
people wanted the best for me
love would not hurt
sheer will could make things happen
we would live on the moon in my life time
that my body would never betray me

In my middle years, I now know that
People are complicated, walking contradictions
Justice and love are the circle in which to live
and the goal is to expand the circle wider
Things change all the time whether we want them to or not
All people have inherent worth and dignity
but not all people live into their birthright

My older years are still ahead of me, if wishes come true
And I know that there are beliefs to hold for a lifetime:
act justly, love mercy, walk humbly
Listen deeply: it enables and empowers others to be human
Not to grasp tightly, but to hold gently
Let your heart lead, the rest will follow
Dance even if you look silly, even if you fall

From this side of aged, I know some beliefs will change (they always do) and that my heart will
be broken a few more times (very nearly inevitably)
And my mother loved me the best she knew how to do (and may my son learn this, too)

When my days dwindle down to none
And the sun sets on this well-used life
And my eyes are shut more than open

May I carry one belief to my grave, that mine was the missing piece in someone else's heart.

A moment of silence.

It may sound cliché to some but being a cliché does not take anything away from the truth of the statement, which is, that we are all on a journey. This journey is a journey of discovery because, ultimately, we all are looking for meaning in our lives, trying to understand our place in the world, seeking the Truth as we know it, attempting to live with dignity and integrity through heartache and joy, yearning for full lives and yet fearing the inevitable conclusion of it. The journey is to discover purpose, learn how best to live it in the world, and hopefully in some way make the world a little bit better.

As Unitarian Universalists, we know that our faith requires work from us individually and as a community. It challenges us because it is not about accepting a particular dogma or creed. It really is about the journey. Unitarian Universalism gives space to those who acknowledge this journey that we all share and an opportunity to do the exploring. And although our words we use to describe this journey may be different it is the same quest, the same center of wholeness for which we are seeking.

And, so the journey we all have embarked upon since we first asked the question *why* will ask us to explore all kinds of ideas and theologies. It will demand of us to ask questions and to seek the answers in a variety of ways and places. It asks of us to do the work of creating dialogue, going deeper in seeking clarity or even in allowing for confusion, and sometimes living in the pain and awe of not knowing. After all, we know the journey is not about arriving in some otherworldly place, but to create a home in this one.

Now, more and more these days, there are those who argue that religion is dying and that it has no place in a modern world where science explains everything and where community can be found almost anywhere. There are those who will suggest that religion is actually the source of many, if not most, of our problems and that the world would be better off if it just faded away. Yet, I go back to the journey, the quest, and I can't help but think that religion still has a role to play in our lives today

As modern, adult people there might be this sense that we have it all together. But when we are open to the journey and all that that entails, we may come to suspect that we need help to discover our place or to be at home in this world. And not the help that reading a book or gathering information off of the internet will resolve. We need something to make us think, to challenge us in our choices, and to offer consolation in our losses and failures and set-backs.

While a lecture gives us information, a sermon has a different quality. It too conveys information but it can also actually change a life- through offering morality, guidance and consolation. And here is something else, a sermon hits upon the great truths over and over again rather than offering something new all the time. While we may crave the new and therefore exciting, what we need is to be reminded over and over again of the great truths- about Love, compassion, sacrifice, humility, radical hospitality and justice.

Sermons and therefore religion, through ritual and repetition, invites us to honor feelings and sacred moments that draw us out of ourselves and reminds of our connections to others. And religion reminds us that we are more than our brains but also hearts and bodies.

What is Coming of Age? Traditionally, it has been a time for our 9th graders to explore their theology and beliefs and then share them during a service in May. Like the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, it is a time to be recognized as an adult in the faith community. But, did you know that only about 12% of adults in our congregations grew up Unitarian Universalist? Doesn't it make sense, then, that adults in the congregation could learn more about Unitarian Universalism? Isn't time for this church to embrace coming of age, again?

One responsibility of the Church is to help people who come here go deeper in processing their beliefs so that each of us knows where we stand, so that each of us can say this is what Unitarian Universalism means. If we can't do that we will slowly but surely disappear.

A moment of silence

Here is what I would say in my Coming of Age statement:

Rev. Vanessa Southern said some years back in her fantastic sermon about Unitarian Universalism:

Emerson told us not to take any second-hand truths, but generation after generation we take two truths as our own, and these two give the living tradition its continuity. First, is a commitment to a Love that refuses to honor false and constructed boundaries between us. This is the love that banished hell from religious imagination, then put us to work banishing it everywhere else. The expanse of this Love's embrace will, in the end, be the best judge of the worth of our living.

Second, and related, is the Unity we affirm beyond all divisions real or imagined. Interdependent web of all existence, injustice anywhere as a threat to justice everywhere, all creation woven into one garment of destiny. Ecologically, theologically, politically, economically, this is the reality we seek not to forget. That we are one. Remembering it breaks us wide open generation after generation to both deep pain and great joy and wisdom. Love and Unity. These are our enduring mission.¹

What I have discovered is that my religious journey is about this Love and Unity through relationships. It is about opening the door to a new and ever wider relationship to that mystery beyond myself, to my family and friends and others I know and to those not in my direct circle of being. My religious journey is about coming to some understanding of my true relationship to the universe. And I believe my role, as a minister, is to help you come to your own understanding about your relationship to the universe and to the purpose that you have in it. As the faith formation minister, my purpose is to help you too (not just children) hear the whispered words that are spoken only for us, that give us all the clues we need to answer the call we were created for.

All aspects of creation are in profound relationship to each other. We are called to nurture the relationships in our lives: the relationships between that which is beyond us, between nature and us, and between humanity and us. Let us begin to listen to the calling that awaits us and invites to discover our truth on this journey called life. May we dare to become what we have been called to be. *Amen and Blessed be.*

¹ Vanessa Rush Southern, Service of the Living Tradition. General Assembly, 2013. Louisville, Kentucky.