

## **A House of Hope**

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“Now is the time to know that all that you do is sacred. Now, why not consider a lasting truce with yourself and God. Now is the time to understand that all your ideas of right and wrong were just a child’s training wheels, to be laid aside when you can finally live with veracity and love ... What is it in that sweet voice inside [your head] that incites you to fear? Now is the time for the world to know that every thought and action is sacred. This is the time for you to deeply compute the impossibility that there is anything but Grace. Now is the season to know that everything you do is sacred.” Over the last two months I have been leading 12 members of our congregation in a Spiritual Autobiography class. I opened our final session with this poem from the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Persian Sufi Master Hafiz.

For thousands of years spiritual seekers have been told that three primary spiritual gifts are faith, hope, and love. As we began our class, people said they weren’t spiritual, or that they hadn’t any spiritual experiences in their lives. Each of our lives is remarkable for the uniqueness of our journey, different joys, different sorrows, different ways of being in the world; and yet, ultimately, we see similar themes weave through all of our lives; we are all human beings and by nature makers of meaning. When we look back upon our individual journeys, faith, hope, and love abide and help us to make meaning of the journey of our lives.

One of the spiritual autobiographers writes: “I have always had a sense of a universal God. I found, saw and felt God’s [spirit] in spoken and written words, in songs, in people, in faces, animals and even in trees. Although I grew up Catholic I think I was Unitarian Universalist before I knew UU’s existed. I remember questioning the nuns how Catholics are saved while others are not. Unfortunately, challenging and asking unorthodox questions often lead to corporal punishments. My knuckles got to know the ruler very well; however, my spirit was never tamed. While many Haitians have ambiguous feelings toward their African ancestral religion, AKA Vodou, I always felt it was one of many ways of serving God... For me, it was about respecting our ancestors, living in harmony with nature, and respecting and connecting with our own spirits.”

For me, as your minister, this self-discovery is the reason we do Spiritual Autobiography in this community every year.

John Buehrens is former president of the UUA, the senior minister at First Parish in Needham, one of our leading living UU theologians, and my ministerial mentor. He told me some time ago that he was writing a book with Rebecca Parker on UU theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Rev. Rebecca Parker is president of UU Starr King School for the ministry and another leading living UU theologian. In her earlier work she did much to help UU’s redefine our relationship with Christianity. So I have eagerly been awaiting their book *A House of Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*, which arrived just as our class was reading

their own Spiritual Autobiographies to each other. Much to my delight their house of hope is large enough to encompass all of our spiritual journeys.

In their introduction, they say: “Unitarian Universalism ... embraces multi-religious life and learning found at the intersections of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and other sources of spirituality ... We affirm religious pluralism, collaboration, and interchange while simultaneously being grounded in our particular heritages of faith and practice. We seek to extend the welcome and the resources of progressive theology to people who are searching for a religious home that can support their aspirations for a just and sustainable world. At the same time, we are grateful for the opportunity to be guests at the tables of religious fellowship with others and to join with them in mutual learning.”

This is why *Neighboring Faiths* is such an important RE curriculum for us, and why it, along with OWL and Challenge, are our UU processes for helping our teenagers to come of age.

In her opening chapter, Rebecca Parker says, “Progressive eschatology, [ultimate concerns] comes in three major forms”: working for justice, universal love, and caring for the world just as it is here and now. Working for justice, which Walter Rauschenbusch, 19<sup>th</sup> Century progressive Baptist minister, called the Social Gospel, has a long history in Unitarian, United Church of Christ and Baptist theologies. We work for justice, abundance and peace. This is why UUs flocked to support Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as he articulated and worked for beloved community of peace and justice. Universalists, whether Christian or not, believe that love transcends all differences and transforms our world. We are transformed by love. As we spiritually mature we learn to care for those who most need our care, sometimes for those who can be quite difficult to care for, but for many our spiritual path is loving and caring for the world just as it is today.

Another spiritual autobiographer discovered that caring for other people was an important path. Parker and Buehrens call this discovery “*responsive* hope, hope grounded in respect for what is here, now.” They describe coming together in a community, living in right relationship, as rediscovering paradise. They say: “We come to know this world is paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth. Generosity and mutual care are the pathways into knowing that paradise is here and now.”

Being an adoptive parent, especially of an older child, is not easy. However, responding to the deep needs of such a child can be a path of connection and discovery, leading one inevitably back into the captivating power of true love.

By following our own personal stories, along our own particular spiritual paths, we discover that we are each a unique unfolding of the universe on this planet earth. How cool is that! I mentioned to the class that you can trace theories of human development through Maslow, Freud, Piaget, Erickson, Kohlberg, Gilligan, and Fowler, and many of their reflections upon our spiritual journey can be helpful, but we can also read these same human developments in the patterns of our own life stories.

James Fowler gives us six stages of faith, which he says are applicable to all religious traditions. Fowler says the first three stages of faith, which he labels projective, literal, and conventional, are the most commonly found. Stage 1, which projects onto reality the stories told them by parents and others, can be highly imaginative, and is common in children under the age of seven. Stage 2 accepts religious stories literally rather than symbolically, and is not uncommon in older children and many adults. Stage 3 individuals, Fowler says, accept conventional beliefs with little or no reflection or examination of those beliefs or their own lives. Fowler says most people never move beyond a conventional approach to their faith.

Fowler calls stage 4 individuation and reflective faith, and says people begin at this stage to compare their religious beliefs to their actual lived reality. From examination they form beliefs, values and relationships that are more important to their self-fulfillment as individuals living in community. Fowler calls stage 5 conjunctive faith, where an individual integrates paradox and metaphor into their sense of self, and how they engage with the larger world. Fowler says people at this stage become less preoccupied with their own beliefs and increasingly capable of empathy and understanding for the beliefs of others. Fowler notes few people reach this stage before mid-life, even fewer will trust their intuition and self-discoveries enough to precede beyond this fifth stage of faith at all. Fowler reserves his sixth stage for a universalizing faith, those adults who have so selflessly lived their decades of life that they can embrace unconditional love and justice. For these few, life is deeply loved and cherished, and also held loosely, making them both admirable and dangerous. Fowler cites Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. as examples of spiritual leaders who grew into stage 6 before they were killed by others. I think all UU's are encouraged to journey beyond stage 3, and to follow our hearts as far as our loving intuition takes us.

Rebecca Parker contends we should never attempt to undertake this journey except in our faith community. She says, "There is no life apart from life together." She reminds us that "in many Buddhist traditions, taking refuge in the *sangha* (the spiritual community) is necessary for enlightenment." As in Christian traditions, "There is no salvation outside the Church." So she says, "These may be startling claims if you have been steeped in the dominant U.S. culture of individualism, which suggests that looking out for number one is the only way to survive. But life is relational through and through. Everything exists in interaction and inter-dependence with everything else. The question is not whether we are social, connected beings. That is a given. The question is *how* we shape our modes of being with one another and with the sources that uphold and sustain life."

That is the core of our spiritual journeys.

In any faith community we will have individuals at different stages of faith development. In this community we have many individuals at Fowler's stages 1, 2, or 3, and they are much loved and cherished. We also have many individuals at Fowler's stages 4 or 5, so many of our adult programs including *UU Bible Study*, *Building Your Own Theology*, *Spiritual Autobiography*, etc., are designed to help us on our spiritual journeys. We are in community together and work to provide opportunities for everyone no matter where they are on their spiritual journey. We are a faith community covenanted to accepting one another and to encouraging each other in spiritual growth. We take all this very seriously.

In talking about our life together as a faith community, Rebecca Parker contrasts our approach with the broader society. She says: “Much in our dominant culture can lull people into numbness, complacency, or compliance. Staying awake, becoming active rather than passive in the world, requires something more of us – something we cannot do alone. Religious communities can enable people to claim and deepen the values that the dominant culture is ignoring or denying. They can convert us from lifestyles that disregard the earth and are heedless of the environmental damage and danger we are courting, to lifestyles of reverence and gratitude that enables us to be less materialistic and more attentive to the goodness of life’s intangibles.” Nurturing our spiritual journeys and working for social justice, for our neighbors, our planet, and ourselves, are not separate and distinct activities, but rather we often discover who we are as a people in our activities on behalf of making the world more just.

As author Annie Dillard wrote, “We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other’s beautiful face and complex nature, so that [the unfolding of] creation need not play to an empty house.”

We have entered together into a spiritual journey of discovery which allows us to engage and participate in the emergent phenomena that is life on this planet earth. In the course of our time together we learn something about what it means to be human, what it means to be in right relationship with each other and with the divine (however we may know or come to know it), and what it means to love and to be loved. We are invited to be artists of our lives, bringing forth our faith, hope, and love within our families and our communities, such that we grow together into our own fullness of being. May it always be so for all who join with us in membership. Let this be a house of hope! I love you all dearly. Amen and Blessed Be.