

“All of You, All of Us”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Reading

You Are Not Enough by Alexis Engelbrecht, Soul Matters Family Ministry Coordinator

The phrase is everywhere. Though the words may vary, the essence remains: You are enough. You have what it takes. If you just believe, anything is possible. You can do it. May I suggest that you are not enough? I am not enough. Each of us, as individuals, is not enough.

Alone, one can feel overwhelmed and hopeless. Alone, one must fend for oneself. Alone, one is left to only what one’s personal experiences and knowledge.

No – I am not enough... but... when I am with another, my tears can be accompanied by the comfort of companionship. When I am with another, one seemingly impossible challenge is divided by half. When I am with many, the work is shared. Our insights and wisdom multiply with the presence of others at the table.

We cannot be everything at once. Instead, when you are with me, and I am with you – when we are part of this community grounded in Love – we are enough...we are whole.

Sermon

Fred Rogers was brought back into the national limelight last summer with the release of “Won’t You Be My Neighbor,” a documentary which chronicled his television career and the evolution of the PBS show, Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.

I grew up watching Mister Rogers, as I imagine others of you did as well, and I probably have to give him and the show credit for really introducing me as a child to the idea of wholeness, our worship theme this month. From his show, I learned that I have an inner world of feelings that I can relate to and also that it’s important to pay attention to the inner world of others. I learned that we ought to be gentle with one another because we

all have feelings and all of those feelings are important. In many ways, the show illustrated our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Such deep theological learning from a half hour children's program!

One of the things the documentary highlighted was how Fred Rogers went out of his way to include a diversity of people on his show - people from different racial backgrounds, occupations, and also abilities.

A boy named Jeff Erlanger joined Fred Rogers on his show when he was 11 years-old. Jeff was born with a spinal tumor and after the surgery to remove the tumor he became paralyzed from the waist down. He began using a wheelchair at the age of 4. He first met Fred Rogers when he was 5 years-old and then was invited onto the show several years later. Mister Rogers asks Jeff to show him and viewers how his wheelchair works and Jeff maneuvers himself in a circle.

On the show, Mister Rogers asks Jeff to explain how it was that he came to need a wheelchair which Jeff does clearly without any hesitation or embarrassment. They talk about some of the things you do when you're feeling blue. And then, they sing, one of Mister Rogers' signature songs, "It's You I Like."

It's you I like
It's not the things you wear
It's not the way you do your hair
But it's you I like

The way you are right now,
The way down deep inside you
Not the things that hide you
Not your fancy chair¹
That's just beside you

But it's you I like
Every part of you.
Your skin, your eyes, your feelings
Whether old or new.
I hope that you'll remember
Even when you're feeling blue

¹ Original line is "Not your toys." Rogers adapted the line for this episode.

That it's you I like,
It's you yourself
It's you.
It's you I like.²

This song and Fred Rogers' show contains an important message not just for children but for people of all ages. Every part of us is worth liking. Every part of us is sacred. We are already whole.

In case you didn't know, Jeff Erlanger went on to become an advocate and an activist for disability rights until his death at the age of 36.

I believe we all come here to this church with a desire to show up as all of who we are and to know that we are welcome.

The New Member Ceremony is one of the ceremonies that we celebrate in our religious community that I most cherish in part because I believe that when someone chooses to become a member of this community they are affirming that this is true - that they have shown up as all of who they are, that they have been welcomed, and that they have found a place of belonging. The decision to become a member is an affirmation that of all that one has found here and a commitment to be in mutual relationship of receiving and also giving.

Wherever you may be on the path of considering membership - even if you've decided not to become a member of this community at this time - I believe we all come here with the desire to show up as all of who we are and know that we are welcome. When this is true, then we feel like we truly belong and can feel a sense of wholeness.

The very first line of our mission statement, We Welcome All, is really about fostering a sense of belonging for anyone who comes through our doors and nurturing the spiritual wholeness that comes from finding that sense of belonging.

One of the areas of welcoming practice that we continue to try to grow into as a spiritual community is in our accessibility and inclusion. Our Accessibility Committee in particular has taken on this work. And, this work, this ministry is vitally important because when one part of us isn't included or fully embraced, we are less than whole.

² http://www.neighborhoodarchive.com/music/songs/its_you_i_like.html

One of the most apparent ways we address accessibility and inclusion is in making our church building and spaces within it physically accessible. Adding handrails to go up and down steps and door thresholds that make it easier to walk, slide, or roll through doorways so that a person's physical ability and mobility isn't a deterrent to getting around.

But, there are also other disabilities that people live with that can be easier to miss.

The Invisible Disability Project describes it this way: "An 'invisible' or 'non-visible' or 'hidden' or 'non-apparent' disability is any physical or mental or emotional impairment that goes largely unnoticed by the general populous. Invisible disabilities include, but are not limited to: cognitive impairment and brain injury; the autism spectrum and its physical manifestations; chronic illnesses and diseases like MS, chronic fatigue and chronic pain, autoimmune compromise, fibromyalgia; hearing and visual impairments; ADHD; learning disabilities and dyslexia; and emotional / mental challenges like depression, bipolar disorder, and PTSD. We further understand the body as always changing, so disability and chronic illness may be unstable or periodic through one's life."³

In this long, but not exhaustive list, I think many of us would recognize a condition that we have that can at times impair us or make us not fully able to participate. I can think of someone within this community who has every single one of these disabilities and others.

For us as a religious community striving to be fully welcoming and inclusive, it's important then to notice the barriers to participation that may be less apparent in addition to the more visible disabilities present in our community.

Ramon Salove is a member of Unitarian Universalist Church of the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia who has autism and he writes about his church experience this way: "Meeting people, touching people, and general noise levels during and after a worship service can be real problems for me and others with autism. During services, just when things have quieted down and we are getting into the rhythm of the service, our minister asks us to stop and greet each other, shake hands, etc. It then takes the congregation a while to calm down again and get back into the service. I personally find that break disruptive. I really wish we wouldn't do it at all.

³ <https://www.invisibledisabilityproject.org/our-mission/>

It is stressful for me to be in the presence of a large number of people and it is much worse when many conversations are going on at the same time. I sometimes come to church late so that I can avoid all the conversations that occur prior to the service. At the end of the service I usually remain in the seats instead of going to the 'social area.' Sometimes people come to talk to me (which I appreciate very much) and sometimes I just sit alone.

There are lots of people that I know well and care about. I want very much to talk to them. But the atmosphere of the social hour is almost impossible for me. I can't separate the conversation I am in from all of the others that are going on around me. Sometimes I just have to sneak out the back door and I feel bad about it because I know that there are people who want to connect with me. Our church has grown so much over the years that I now have a hard time attending at all.”⁴

I know that others share Ramon's experience of his church community here as well. For any of us who don't experience these aspects of worship or social hour in this way, it can be difficult to understand the challenges that others face. And, in fact, some of what Ramon describes as challenges - the noise and busyness - are real positives for the more extraverted and social among us!

Or, it may be that someone has trouble sitting for long periods in our pews because of chronic pain. Or, it may be that you see someone doodling all throughout the service and it's something they just need to do to concentrate. Or, someone may not want to reciprocate the hug that you are offering them because of sensitivity to touch and personal space.

The beautiful thing about a community whose purpose is personal and social transformation is that we get to practice with one another. We don't practice in the sense that at some point we will reach our peak performance and perfection. We practice in the sense that it is through doing and living that we learn, grow, and change.

Rev. Helen MacFadyen, coordinator of the Accessibility and Inclusion Ministry Program of the Unitarian Universalist Association, says that our efforts “must be grounded in our theology of seeing the inherent worth and beauty and dignity of every being. It's not 'every being who is like me.' It's 'every being,' full stop.”⁵

⁴ <https://www.uua.org/re/blog/preventable-suffering-a-uu-with-autism-confronts-coffee-hour>

⁵ ⁵ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/valuing-neurodiversity>

There's a question that I found in one of our UU religious education curriculum that I think is helpful for us in considering how we can foster belonging and welcome for all of us. The curriculum presents various hypothetical individuals in a church community and asks: How can I be supported in the wholeness of our community?

So, we might think of the person with chronic pain or autism or hearing impairment or social anxiety or any other visible and invisible disability and ask: How can that person - who might be me or the person sitting next to me - be supported in the wholeness of our community?

What would it look like for us as a community to be able to fully support one another in the wholeness of our community?

I know that I still have a lot to learn, and I want to share some practices that I think we can engage in to continue to learn and grow together.

- Don't make assumptions about another person's abilities or disabilities. Also, don't assume that others know about your own abilities and disabilities. There's so much we don't know about one another.
- Be okay with being corrected. Be okay with correcting others.
- Be curious if you encounter a behavior or response that you find unexpected or doesn't fit your idea of "normal."
- Be gentle with yourself and others.

We practice here with one another so that we can be inspired to practice in other realms of our life as well and so we can continue making not just this church community but all places and spaces as welcoming and whole as possible.

Living into our wholeness means recognizing and honoring our full diversity - the gifts and the limitations that are offered in that diversity. This is how we become more human and humane together.

Some of you might be familiar with the name Greta Thunberg. Greta is a 15 yr-old from Sweden. She is credited with launching the student climate strike that took place all around the world on March 15 after having staged weekly sit-ins outside the Swedish Parliament every Friday since last August.

I have to thank Liza Earle-Centers, our Director of Lifespan Spiritual Exploration, for sharing a detail about Greta Thunberg relevant to today's service that I had not previously known and that is that she is autistic.

She speaks about this openly in a Ted Talk she gave in Stockholm this past November.

She describes what happened when she was eight years old and first learned about climate change. "I stopped talking. I stopped eating," she says. "In two months, I lost about ten kilos of weight. Later on I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, OCD, and selective mutism—that basically means I only speak when I think it's necessary."⁶

After a short pause in her talk, she adds, "Now is one of those moments."

"For those of us on the spectrum," Thunberg explains to the audience, "almost everything is black or white. We aren't very good at lying and we usually don't enjoy participating in the social game that the rest of you seem so fond of. I think in many ways that we autistic are the normal ones and the rest of the people are pretty strange—especially when it comes to the sustainability crisis where everyone keeps saying that climate change is an existential threat and the most important issue for all and yet they just keep carrying on like before."

Greta's "black and white" moral perspective has fueled her activism and given her the will to act. What a gift is that. As she says, "...the one thing we need more than hope is action. Once we start to act, hope is everywhere."

I'm sure that despite her recent celebrity, Greta Thunberg, faces many challenges in her life as well that are due to being autistic and living with obsessive compulsive disorder.

To be people of wholeness means accepting and honoring our own gifts and limitations and fully recognizing the gifts and limitations we share in community.

Ultimately, we can never fully know what someone's abilities or disabilities may be, and yet we make room for one another the best we can by stretching our understandings and being willing to adapt and grow in new ways. The wholeness of who we are comes from the fullness of our inclusion and our willingness to be changed by all those who long to belong, which is all of us.

⁶ https://www.ted.com/talks/greta_thunberg_the_disarming_case_to_act_right_now_on_climate?language=en

As Alexis Engelbrecht writes, “Our insights and wisdom multiply with the presence of others at the table. We cannot be everything at once. Instead, when you are with me, and I am with you – when we are part of this community grounded in Love – we are enough...we are whole.”

So may it be.