

“Becoming Who We Are”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

February 5, 2017

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.

Reading

selection from Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change by Pema Chödrön

“As human beings we share a tendency to scramble for certainty whenever we realize that everything around us is in flux. In difficult times the stress of trying to find solid ground—something predictable and safe to stand on—seems to intensify. But in truth, the very nature of our existence is forever in flux. Everything keeps changing, whether we’re aware of it or not...Our identity, which seems so reliable, so substantial, is in fact very fluid, very dynamic. There are unlimited possibilities to what we might think, what we might feel, and how we might experience reality. We have what it takes to free ourselves from the suffering of a fixed identity and connect with the fundamental slipperiness and mystery of our being, which has no fixed identity. Your sense of yourself—who you think you are at the relative level—is a very restricted version of who you truly are.” (pp. 3, 20)

Sermon

One of the first meetings I went to in when I started my ministry here was with the 2020 Vision Task Force at the home of Paul and Mary Jane Ohlson. As a warm up activity, task force member, Jo Romano, invited us to find a partner, and to take turns answering a simple question, “Who are you?” But, we didn’t just answer this question once. Our partner was to wait for our response, then ask the question again, and again, and again, for a full minute. At first my responses were pretty superficial - I’m a mom. I’m a minister. I’m a wife. But then, the pauses got longer and the question began to sink in a little deeper. “Who are you?”

The question of who we are, our identity, is simple and complex. The roles that we play in life provide obvious answers to the question. These identities can define much of how we structure our lives and our time and can offer others a simple way to understand us and our place in the world.

Yet, our identities go deeper than just the labels we put on ourselves to claim a place within society's institutions.

“Who are you?”

The question asks us to engage in a deeper reflection. Who are you beyond the roles you play in life? What are the likes, dislikes, and idiosyncrasies that make you who you are?

I have participated in this partner-sharing activity a few times now, and it is interesting to me how my responses each time are different. On the one hand, it's true for any of us that, as Walt Whitman put it, we contain multitudes. In a single minute, it's impossible to name all the multitudinous aspects of our identity. And, it's also true that our identities are constantly in flux. What might feel like an important aspect of my self one day may not the next. Or, we go through bigger changes that shift entire aspects of our identities.

I recall one evening shortly after we had moved to Montpelier. We were in our car driving down Main Street looking for a parking spot. Traffic was moving slowly and there were no open parking spots. Most of you know that I grew up in Chicago and have mostly lived in big cities, so I'm pretty accustomed to much worse traffic than we experience in Montpelier. I was driving, and I grumbled under my breath about the congestion. My husband gave me a sideways glance, “You're complaining about the traffic?” he asked.

Life changes, and identities shift.

As Pema Chödrön writes, “The very nature of our existence is forever in flux. Everything keeps changing, whether we're aware of it or not...Our identity, which seems so reliable, so substantial, is in fact very fluid, very dynamic. There are

unlimited possibilities to what we might think, what we might feel, and how we might experience reality.”

In Buddhist teaching, it is grasping onto a fixed identity, or ego, that causes suffering. We experience pain, frustration, sadness, perhaps even anger, when we cling to a static version of ourselves.

I’m sure most of us experience this at some time or another.

You discover a pair of jeans that you had worn for years and years no longer fits and yet you try as you might over and over again to get them on.

Those of you who are aging may find that as your body changes and the ability to hear or to remember certain events comes and goes this can lead to a profound shift in identity - one which can be difficult to accept.

I have certainly experienced this painful grasping onto a fixed identity in my own life.

I have shared with you before that when I decided to make a shift and leave the nonprofit work I was doing in Washington, DC for graduate school, my first thought was to apply to business schools and I decided to apply to seminary programs later. My initial inclination to explore business programs was a case study in clinging to a fixed identity. The worst part of the experience for me was taking the Graduate Management Admission Test or GMAT, the exam required for all business school applications. Although I had taken only one math course in college, I figured, “I’m good at taking tests, right?” I did pretty poorly on the exam and the test-taking experience itself was miserable. I figured I would study a bit more and take the exam again, which I did and I did nominally better the second time, but again, it was a miserable experience.

In the end, I didn’t get into any business school programs which was all for the better. I am very happy with the vocation I am in now.

But, boy was I clinging to a static notion of my own identity and this clinging caused a lot of pain. When I was finally able to let go, I was more able to open up to who I was and who I was becoming at that moment. In that letting go, I was

more receptive to the truth of my calling and the ways my true self wanted to shine forth.

I believe that life's invitation to us as we change and grow and our identities shift is to remain open to discovery at every stage of life, and, in every moment.

As circumstances change, there is an opportunity for us to let go of who we were certain we were and to allow ourselves to experience a truer sense of who we are.

This morning, as we explore the theme of identity, I also want us to consider the ways the identity of this community, this congregation, is changing and shifting.

Over the course of its now 150+ years of existence, this gathered religious community has experienced many shifts in identity. We are no longer a community covenanted to serve God and follow the ways of Jesus, but, instead we covenant to support one another's free and responsible search for truth celebrating that that truth might include Christian teachings, Jewish wisdom, Buddhist practices, Hindu rituals, earth-based traditions, and humanistic ideals. In this building now, we serve meals to people who struggle to put food on their tables. We provide space for people who are concerned for the sustainability of our planet to gather and organize. We welcome youth of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations to gather in a safe space.

All of these are things I'm sure our church founders could hardly have imagined.

Over the course of its history, the size of the congregation has fluctuated starting with just a dozen or so people gathered and growing into the hundreds in the latter part of the 19th century and then contracting all the way down to just a handful of faithful souls in the 1970s and then expanding again over the last thirty plus years to the couple hundred adults and children we have gathered in this building each Sunday and many others who participate in the life of the congregation on other days of the week as well.

Each time a major transition has occurred in the congregation, whether it was because of a ministerial transition, or a major loss of a member of the congregation, or some other major event, this community has had to grapple with the identity you held of yourself at that time letting go of those perceptions of your fixed identity so that you could become something else.

I believe we're going through one of those transitions right now.

When you were in search, you had discussions about how the minister you called would impact the culture of the congregation. Things would change, you were told. And, a big hope was that calling a young minister with a family would continue the growth you were experiencing in attendance and membership especially of young families. While it's hard to make a direct correlation, we can certainly say that by almost all measures this congregation is growing.

Last year, the congregation took the bold step of creating and adopting a vision statement and a strategic plan for achieving that vision. This was an attempt to more clearly define who the congregation is and how it intends to live into its purpose.

Add into this dynamic mix the fact that the world around us has become more tumultuous and the stakes of our public engagement feel even higher. Together, this church and the world are changing and transforming in interconnected ways.

All of this - a new minister, a renewed sense of vision and mission, and a volatile social and political climate - is a recipe for change and growth. And, right now, we can all see and feel the signs that the Unitarian Church of Montpelier is an incredibly dynamic place.

There are many positives to this. And, this can also pose some challenges.

Take, for example, this statistic. The recent growth study survey conducted by the board revealed that, of the 134 responses we received (representing 285 people), 26% said they have been attending UCM for just up to 1 year, 23% for 2-5 years, 13% for 6-10 years, 18% for 11-20 years, and 19% over 20 years. So, a slight majority have been attending services here for five years or less.

This is an incredible mix of people who have differing histories and, therefore, expectations of the church.

Just reflect for a moment on the experience of finding a place to sit on Sunday morning - something we've been talking about a lot lately. Some people here remember a time when you could walk into the sanctuary and have your pick of where to sit. You could choose your favorite spot and sit there reliably Sunday after Sunday. These days some people come early to be able to claim a seat of their choice or others choose not to come to church for fear of not being able to get a seat at all.

This is just one small example of how different histories and perspectives create a dynamic community. On a deeper level, our unique histories and perspectives can lead to tension as we bring forward diverse ideas and opinions about the direction of the church, or about how a meeting should be run or what social justice issues we should focus on.

Communal identity, who we are as a group, is shaped and influenced by each one of us.

Each of us brings to this community our own unique and ever-changing identity and our own unique perspective on what this community is all about and what it might become.

As Margaret Wheatley writes in the words I shared to open our worship service, "We never know who we are... Until the day just one of us sighs a gentle longing and we all feel the change, one of us calls a name and we all know to be there, one of us tells a dream, and we all breathe life into it, one of us asks "why?" and we all know the answer."

Just like any of us, this place, this community that is the Unitarian Church of Montpelier doesn't have a fixed identity. And, here that identity is shaped by each and every one of us.

Yet, together we strive to live into the truest parts of our identity.

Every Sunday we say together our mission statement, which to me is an identity statement. It is the most concise way we communicate to one another and to the world who we are. It defines why we exist.

Over the course of the church's history, there are some things that have remained constant in our understanding of who we are and what we are called to do. We continue to be a home for the free and responsible quest for truth and meaning. We continue to be a sanctuary of peace. Music continues to be central to our identity and our experience of the sacred. We continue to be a place where children are made to feel safe and where they learn how to live ethically and with compassion. We continue to be a place where we mourn for the dead and where we celebrate new life. We continue to be a community that challenges traditional notions of religion and belief.

The durability of our mission is what allows us to grow and change and for other aspects of our identity - our average Sunday attendance, our average age, the number of families here, where people live, whether we serve herbal tea alongside coffee during coffee hour - these other aspects of our identity can shift while we maintain a sense of our core purpose and calling.

On January 25, 1866, at the dedication of this building, Rev. Frederic Frothingham said: "The only dedication we can make is that which consecrates ourselves to the holy work, through them so auspiciously begun. Begun, I say: "begun" not "finished," is the word for this hour."

We continue to do that "holy work" to which our forebears dedicated themselves and to which we dedicate ourselves every time we gather anew. We dedicate ourselves to the holy work of caring for our souls so that we might transform the world around us with our love.

As we grow and change together, let us accept and even embrace, the fact that our identity is not fixed.

Let us listen to one another.

Let us listen intently and openly enough to hear the sighs of our gentle longings, the call of our name, and the telling of our dreams.

Back in 1866, Frederick Frothingham also told this congregation, "Never was there graver need of noble churches in the land than now." Despite all that has changed since then, I believe that statement is still true today.

As we listen to one another, and as we sing and cry and laugh and praise and lament together, may we become more and more who we know ourselves to be and also who we only dreamed we might become so that we can be the church that we need and that the world needs.