

“The Path of Becoming”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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he delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading

“A Letter to Our Better Angels,” by Sean Parker Dennison in *Breaking and Blessing: Meditations*, Skinner House Books (2020)

Sermon

The first time I read the work of William Ellery Channing, who I talked about in the Time for All Ages earlier, was as part of an adult religious education class at the first Unitarian Universalist congregation I attended in Washington, DC.

I had just started attending services at this UU church a few months prior, and I was interested in taking a deep dive into Unitarian Universalist beliefs and theology.

Our small group met in a circle in the sanctuary where we received an introduction to the class, and based on the reading list, I could tell this was going to be a serious undertaking. Listed there was Channing’s 1828 sermon entitled “Likeness to God.”

I struggled at first to make sense of the early 19th century language on the page, but I was soon able to tease out some of Channing’s core beliefs that would make an impression on me.

Here are two short snippets from that sermon: “In proportion as we approach and resemble the mind of God, we are brought into harmony with the creation; for in that proportion we possess the principles from which the universe sprang; we carry within ourselves the perfections of which its beauty, magnificence, order, benevolent adaptations, and boundless purposes are the results and manifestations.”

And, “I would teach that likeness to God is a good so unutterably surpassing all other good that whoever admits it is attainable must acknowledge it to be the chief aim of

life. I would show that the highest and happiest office of religion is to bring the mind into growing accordance with God; and that by the tendency of religious systems to this end their truth and worth are to be chiefly tried.”¹

At the time that I read these words, I was on a journey of unbecoming in regards to my religious identity.

The theologian Albert Schweitzer has said: “The path of awakening is not about becoming who you are. Rather it is about unbecoming who you are not.”

I was beginning to awaken to something other than the Roman Catholic faith in which I had been raised which didn’t satisfy my spiritual longings. I was searching.

Channing’s words spoke to me in that particular moment. Perhaps, I needed reassurance of my own goodness, of the impression of divinity within me.

I had also been taught growing up to always try to do and be my best. My parents had (and still have) high expectations of me and my siblings. These high expectations were also communicated in our Catholic schools, which I attended from kindergarten through high school.

And, I’ll tell you that I must have absorbed this message of self-improvement pretty well, because it turned out that the only award I ever won in my short-lived athletic career was during the years I ran track and field in high school. I won the Most Improved award every year of the four years I was on the team. There was a LOT of improvement to make, apparently!

Sometimes, the encouragement from my elders and those in positions of authority that I was given to strive towards achievement and betterment was accompanied by the message - intentional or not - that I wasn’t measuring up. The message that there was something flawed in what I was doing, or not doing.

More often than not, striving to become better was more about avoiding wrongdoing than it was about living into one’s potential.

¹ William Ellery Channing, “Likeness to God: Discourse at the Ordination of the Rev. F.A. Farley, Providence, RI, 1828.” From William Ellery Channing: Unitarian Christianity and Other Essays, Ed. Irving H. Bartlett (The Liberal Arts Press, New York, 1957), 88-89.

So, fast forward to me sitting with Channing's sermon, "Likeness to God." It was as much an epiphany to me as it probably was to some of Channing's original listeners and readers that one could view human nature with that much optimism.

Now, Channing didn't believe that humans were just naturally good and that was the end of the story. He also wasn't asserting that humans are divinely supernatural. He wasn't equating humans with God.

Channing and other early Unitarians believed that we must continue to cultivate those innate gifts and qualities that make us like divinity itself in our very humanly existence right here on earth.

For me, this was an attractive endeavor at the time. It was liberating to believe that outside of any institution or family unit or even religion, that I could aim towards my own self-improvement in the process of becoming more of the person I wanted to become and that reflected something holy and sacred.

Today, this propensity towards self-improvement and betterment is alive and well in Unitarian Universalism as it is in our broader culture. The self-help, also called personal development, industry makes billions of dollars a year. Social media is filled to the brim with influencers who promise to help you become a better parent, friend, spouse, knitter, gardener, activist — you name it. This drive to be better is strong and dictates much of how we make decisions, what we read or watch, and how we choose to dedicate our time.

I like to think that the religious quest of betterment is qualitatively different from the kind of personal development so often marketed these days. To me, it makes a difference to be part of community when embarking on a journey of becoming better in whatever ways one might hope. And, I would also hope that working to improve one's character and more fully live one's values has the benefit of social good in a way that other kinds of personal development may not.

I believe that the support we provide to one another and to our children here in this congregation to more fully live our values and principles and to become more spiritually whole has benefit beyond each of our individual lives. This spiritually- and community-grounded endeavor does some good for the world at large.

Yet, at the heart of this striving to be better, whether in religious community or otherwise, there can also often be a striving towards perfection and a desire to control every outcome that is not always of benefit.

I have to admit that this is also where I discovered some affinity with Unitarian Universalism early on. I could recognize in myself and also within this faith tradition the sincere desire to get things right and also the striving for a probably unattainable moral perfection and perfection of character. We hear this striving in William Ellery Channing's words written centuries ago.

Sean Parker Dennison makes light of this tendency in our reading. They write the following to "our better angels":

"We are hoping to make arrangements / for an increase in the percentage / of goodness and presence of / admirable qualities in ourselves / and in others (especially in others)...It would also please us if our status / as increasingly good could be noted / in some way. Perhaps a cookie? A badge? / A halo, so long as it's comfortable."

I certainly recognize myself in this tongue-in-cheek reflection of our striving to be good and to be recognized for being good. This striving for perfection, I have found in my own personal experience, can become utterly exhausting over time.

While striving to be better and do better is an important part of our spiritual journeys, this constant effort, paired with the sometimes unrelenting expectation of never failing, can wear you down.

So, how do we bring balance to the striving so often a part of the path of becoming?

Tomorrow begins the holy month of Ramadan for Muslims. This is a time when Muslims practice fasting during the daylight hours and engage in reflection, prayer, and acts of charity and service.

"Islam" is the Arabic word for "surrender." The meaning of surrender in Islam is quite complex, but at the heart of it is the pursuit of peace through acknowledging and honoring the ultimate power outside oneself. For Muslims, of course, this power is God, or Allah.

As I reflect on what is entailed in the human process of becoming, I am aware of the healthy tension between striving and surrendering.

I believe we can benefit from the ease that comes from not always striving, from allowing a state of effortlessness, from surrendering to what is beyond our control, to a greater peace than cannot be attained through our efforts alone.

Becoming entails not only striving for moral and personal betterment but also surrendering to the unfolding journey with all that might be unexpected and surprising.

Certainly, over the last year of the pandemic, each of us has experienced a lack of control over many of our external circumstances. Whether we have welcomed it or not, we have had to surrender control over many aspects of our lives.

The spiritual act of surrendering may now be a familiar one.

I believe we can engage in spiritual practices of surrendering in ways that are also intentional and that allow for releasing into the mystery of life and the universe and for the unclenching of our tight grip on all that we seek to make better or do better, in ourselves and in the world.

This opportunity may emerge for you in a relationship you've been struggling with, or in a community effort you are a part of that is hitting some bumps in the road. Where and how can you loosen and allow some new way forward to become known?

With this practice of release in concert with all of our effort, I believe we can find a wholeness of spirit that can sustain us and open us to more fully discovering who we are becoming on this path.

I'll close with this parable, a wisdom tale from the Sufi tradition. It's called the Tale of the Journeying Stream.

High atop a mountain range, a stream sprang up from its hidden source and made its way down the mountainside. It flowed easily over, across, under any obstacle in its path. It continued along not slowing down until it reached a vast dryness that it could

not comprehend. It tried to move forward, but its strength had lessened. With the sun beating down, it wasn't long until the desert had eaten up all of the spring's new waters.

"The ways of the mountain will not work here," the desert said to the stream.

Yet, the spring was convinced that its destiny was to cross the desert.

And, then it began to notice something. The wind was strong and there was a dune in the distance and some of its sand was being picked up by the wind and swirled into the sky. And, the stream heard a voice, almost a whisper, "...surrender..." The stream was afraid. Pushing forward was the only way it knew.

"Do you trust enough, little stream?" the desert asked. The stream wasn't sure, and then it heard the voice again, "There are lands far across the desert where I will drop you once again, if only you come with me. There you will be a stream once more..."

"But what if I'm not the same stream? How can I be sure?" There was no answer.

The wind was picking up strength and the stream began to feel its vapor rising up above the surface of the sands and into the welcoming arms of the wind. As it did so, a distant memory returned to the stream of a stream it may have once been and a wind that could be trusted.

It gave itself fully to the wind soaring high above the hot white sands, and the wind carried it across releasing it gently atop a distant mountain many miles away, where it once again began to flow.

Here, the stream began to understand what it really was.²

Blessed be.

² adapted from <http://www.wisdompills.com/2016/04/08/story-stream-desert/> and <http://www.wizduum.net/tale-journeying-stream>