“Becoming a Spiritual Grown Up”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

April 25, 2021

Readings

Selection from The Diary of Anaïs Nin

“We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another, unevenly. We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present. We are made of layers, cells, constellations.”

Selection from “On Becoming a Grown Up: Spiritual Maturity With and Without God,” Keynote Address to the Mountain Desert District (2017) by Kendyl Gibbons

"Just as we grow and mature physically, and keep ourselves healthy with regular exercise; just as we grow and mature mentally, and develop our minds through learning; just as we grow and mature emotionally, and deepen our relationships by intentionally sharing ourselves with others; just as we grow and mature ethically, and build moral character from the values to which we are loyal - so I am persuaded that we also grow and mature spiritually, as well…Religious community exists to hold out the possibility, and the importance, of that inner ripening; to suggest that our humanity is most fully realized as we become more spiritually mature.”

Sermon

The title of today’s sermon is “Becoming a Spiritual Grown Up,” and I admit that it was crafted with a bit of irony. This sermon’s title is intentionally tongue-in-cheek and not an entirely sincere claim on our developmental progress as spiritual beings.

Just as the term “adulting” has become a humorous take on the trials and tribulations of the millennial generation’s entrance into adulthood, the idea of becoming a spiritual grown up, for me, speaks somewhat humorously to both the promise and the challenges of such an endeavor.

A meme I saw recently illustrates this well. It’s a photo of three Little Owls on a branch. Two of the owls have their claws securely clamped onto the branch and they are

looking out calmly and confidently. They are labeled “Real adults.” The third owl is at the very end of the branch. It has a precarious grip on the branch with just one claw and the other is flailing around. This Little Owl is labeled, “Me trying my best.”

There are times when I feel very solidly like the “real adult” owls and other times when I feel more like that Little Owl at the end of the branch, clinging and flailing at the same time. Perhaps you can relate.

“Growing up is hard to do” as the old adage goes. Yet, developmental maturation of all kinds is a part of our human existence.

Whole courses of study and theories have been dedicated to mapping human development from the earliest moments of childhood to the latest stages of adulthood.

We are developmental creatures who grow and change, and as creatures capable of self reflection, we seek to define and understand our own development.

As the reading from Rev. Kendyl Gibbons points to, we grow and mature physically, mentally, emotionally, and ethically, and we can also recognize that the spiritual part of the self has the potential to develop and mature, too.

Of all of these aspects of growing and becoming, spiritual maturity may be the most difficult to define.

There are clear benchmarks and markers for physical growth from infancy up to adulthood. Not everyone develops along the exact same trajectories, which is just fine, but we make good efforts to establish quantifiable metrics of physical growth.

We have similarly approached mental and intellectual development as another aspect of human growth with clear benchmarks, and it is generally understand that one advances in this area of development by mastering concepts that grows one’s capacities. How we measure these capacities and assign value to them is a worthy debate.

Emotional development and ethical development can also be defined and measured to some degree with benchmarks for empathy and relating to others and making decisions that take into account the needs of others.

Defining progress when it comes to spiritual growth and development does present some challenges given the relative intangibility of this aspect of human "becoming." For many of us, words are inadequate to describe what a faith or spiritual life even entails.

Despite these challenges, I do believe that spiritual maturity is possible. Rev. Kendyl Gibbons, whose words I shared earlier, says that spiritual maturity happens when we begin to reflect on the existential realities of our lives and the meaning we make of these realities. We grow into maturity as we "reach out of our embeddednes toward a larger perspective and a new self-understanding."

I believe that spiritual maturity can bring greater fulfillment, meaning, and happiness, and that when realized on a grand scale, spiritual maturity can also lead us towards collective flourishing, liberation, and peace.

I recently had a chance to hear Brian McLaren speak at the Revolutionary Love conference, an annual conference hosted by Middle Collegiate Church in New York City. Brian McLaren is an author and public theologian whose religious career began when he founded and then pastored a large, nondenominational Christian congregation in the Washington, DC area. He has since become one of the leading voices on the religious left working with progressive clergy of many religious backgrounds to bring justice-centered faith to the public square.

McLaren has written about his faith and spiritual journey in many books, and his latest entitled, *Faith After Doubt*[1], presents what I find to be an intriguing and helpful framework for approaching the process of becoming that is faith and spiritual development.

As with other models of human development, McLaren conceives of this process in stages. I tend to be skeptical of any process that is depicted as entirely linear, so if you are, too, I assure you that this isn't the case in McLaren's model. McLaren invites the reader to imagine the growth of a tree. With a tree trunk, each new stage of growth creates a ring around the other. And, in McLaren's model, the same kind of growth happens as a person moves from one stage of faith development to the next.

---

[1] Brian D. McLaren. *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What To Do About It*. New York: St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2021.

There are four stages that he describes: Stage One is dubbed “Simplicity.” Stage Two, “Complexity.” Stage Three, “Perplexity.” And, Stage Four, “Harmony.”

In Stage One, we see things in a dualistic fashion. Good and bad. Right and wrong. We look to authority figures to help us learn what and who falls into these categories.

In Stage Two, we see things pragmatically. We are motivated to achieve and be successful. From a faith or spiritual standpoint, we seek coaching and support to learn the right answers and adopt the successful practices of being a good …fill in the blank - Christian, Muslim, Jew, or in our case, Unitarian Universalist.

In Stage Three, we become more critical. This stage is marked by skepticism and deconstruction. You are encouraged in this stage to question and challenge the status quo which is a hallmark of this stage.

And, in Stage Four, you see things in an integral and holistic way. Key values of this stage are being compassionate and seeking the common good. We are motivated to find connection, see things whole, and make contributions. In this stage, life is received as a mysterious gift and God, if that is part of one’s faith, is known through experience and metaphor as a loving presence and creative wisdom rather than a supreme being.

Moving the spiritual seeker along from one stage to the next is Doubt. According to McLaren, as one begins to ask questions that cannot be answered or addressed by the values and orientation of the current stage, one opens up to the next and the possibilities for growth that lie therein. These stages are also iterative, meaning, one returns repeatedly to each stage throughout one’s life, growing and changing and adding ever more layers of understanding and meaning.

This is a much simplified version of the model McLaren puts forward, but I hope it gives you a sense of it, and perhaps you can even see your own path reflected in these stages in some way.

Now, the kind of faith and spiritual development that McLaren presents and that I wish to invite you to this morning isn’t a course to be completed with exams along the way that will tell you whether you’ve mastered one level or another. No, that would be an entirely Stage Two approach!

Instead, I want to affirm you wherever you may be in your process of becoming spiritually mature and invite you to reflect on your own process of becoming. You may be thinking, huh, I've never really given this much thought! You may be full of all kinds of doubt right in this moment. You may be enjoying blissful harmony and a sense of gratitude for all you've learned and the ways you've extended that learning into loving action in the world.

I invite you to notice, accept, and appreciate wherever you are on your journey.

Here, at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier, we seek to support one another in becoming more aware and intentional in this spiritual "growing up." We assert in our mission statement that one key reason we exist is to "nurture each person's spiritual journey." And so, we come together wherever we are on our individual paths to affirm and support one another in community and covenant. I know that this kind of support is being given and received each Sunday morning in Children's Chapel, in our Small Group Ministry, Soul Matters circles, Seasoned Souls groups, Owning Your Religious Past, in our racial justice and climate groups, and beyond.

As we welcome 8 new members this morning, I want to affirm the ways that becoming an official member of this community is a marker on one's spiritual journey. When someone chooses to become a member of this congregation, it is usually done with thought and care about what it means to belong and to commit to a community like ours.

I believe that any time we weigh our commitments and set our hearts upon engaging actively with others for a greater purpose of common good, we are engaging in a process of spiritual maturation. We are growing and becoming more fully human.

Brian McLaren's framework for faith and spiritual development can be understood not only for the individual but also for a community-at-large. Religious communities as a whole might find themselves in Simplicity, Complexity, Perplexity, or Harmony, or might even embody and offer aspects of all four stages. According to McLaren, a religious community at Stage Four: Harmony has grown and developed to become a community of faith expressing itself in love. A community of faith expressing itself in love.

I believe that our calling as the Unitarian Church of Montpelier is to be such a community. A place where our faith - a faith without dogma or doctrine - is expressed

in Love and where we nurture belonging, meaning, and purpose so that each of us can practice, embody, and proclaim this Love.

Through the uncertainty and challenge in our midst, in the face of injustice and environmental instability, with a faith expressed in love, let us continue grow and become into Harmony, together.

So may it be.