

“Oneness of Everything”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Several years ago, one of our Unitarian Universalist congregations put together a video for their homecoming Sunday, otherwise known as ingathering Sunday, that went viral.¹

The video showed short clips of church members of all ages walking out of their front doors, skateboarding towards the church building, gardening in the church yard, et cetera. And as they walked, skateboarded, and gardened, there was a voice over of church members singing the R&B/rap song “Coming Home.”

*I'm comin' home, I'm comin' home
Tell the world I'm comin' home
Let the rain wash away
All the pain of yesterday...
I'm back where I belong
I never felt so strong
I'm feelin' like there's nothin' that I can't try
And if you with me put your hands high*

I found the video to be incredibly endearing. Partly because it was fun to see people of all ages and races lipsyncing to an R&B/rap song. But, I also thought, “Yes! Isn’t this what we want it to feel like at church?”

Here in this congregation, we aspire to welcome all - to nurture a sense of belonging that is expansive so that each of our truest selves feels welcomed, accepted, and beloved. And we affirm that each of us is welcomed, accepted, and beloved within all that is, all of life, the universe, the mystery beyond our understanding, the divine wholeness.

We seek to create conditions for belonging for one another within community. A place for each person to share genuinely who they are - the finished and unfinished parts, the certain and questioning parts, the rough edges and gentle core.

At the same time, the path of belonging also involves an inward journey. It involves traveling into that foundational place inside yourself, that place of inner knowing that feels itself connected to something beyond.

¹ <https://youtu.be/vbJ32h-YpQA?feature=shared>

This place inside each of us is where the alchemy of our passions, longings, life experiences, and values forges that sacred part of each of us. And, it is here that we learn and re-learn how to belong to ourselves.

Tapping into this inner belonging can help us feel more grounded as we navigate uncertainty and also provide a stable place from which we can reach out to others.

The Buddhist teacher Kaira Jewel Lingo puts it this way: “A key step that can help us to begin to settle ourselves when we are profoundly unsettled is to come home, to ourselves, in this moment, whatever is happening... When we touch this experience of coming home, it is like we have finally arrived home after a long journey. We experience a sense of peace and even freedom, no matter how confining the outer circumstances. Coming home to ourselves feels like belonging; it is a state that holds us and enables us to hold others.”²

To feel at ease with oneself is at the heart of belonging. Rather than a neatly wrapped package that is handed to us, belonging starts from the inside as we work through the questions and doubts and discover connection. And, we don’t become at ease with ourselves in isolation.

When I was nineteen, I traveled to Nicaragua as part of a study abroad internship program. I was very far from home living with strangers and communicating on a daily basis in a language that I had only recently learned to speak with any degree of fluency.

I was also engaging in farm work on a regular basis something that was also unfamiliar to me as a city girl from birth.

One day feeling quite lonely and questioning my decision to embark on this adventure I stood at the edge of the forest clearing brush with a machete. I was with one of the teenage girls who lives on the farm, and we were hacking away side by side in silence.

All of a sudden, the wind picked up and the branches of the trees above began swaying in the wind. The rustling of the leaves came on so quickly that I instinctively looked up to watch with awe.

And, in that moment, I felt a deep peace. I was reminded of the larger world and the mysterious universe that I, and all of us, are a part of. I felt that I belonged.

² Kaira Jewel Lingo, *We Were Made for These Times: 10 Lessons for Moving through Change, Loss, and Disruption* (Parallax Press, 2021), 8.

I find such comfort in this fact. We are held by something larger than ourselves in times of loneliness and unease and in times of joy and bliss. This connection can be a path to coming home. This connection can strengthen belonging.

Howard Thurman was a Black theologian, teacher, and mystic. Growing up in Dayton, Florida, Thurman often felt more at ease in nature among the trees and huckleberry than with other kids.

In his autobiography he writes: “The quiet, even the danger, of the woods provided my rather lonely spirit with a sense of belonging that did not depend on human relationships.”³

One of his steadiest companions through the ups and downs of his childhood, including the loss of his father when he was a young boy, was the oak tree in the backyard. This tree offered him comfort and intuitive understanding. Leaning against its solid trunk, Thurman felt a deep sense of peace, a feeling of coming home, belonging.

His description of his relationship with this tree is imbued with spirituality and belonging. It is clear from his writing that he had a profound, personal relationship with this tree.

Listen to his words again: “I needed the strength of that tree, and, like it, I wanted to hold my ground. Eventually, I discovered that the oak tree and I had a unique relationship. I could sit, my back against its trunk, and feel the same peace that would come to me in my bed at night. I could reach down in the quiet places of my spirit, take out my bruises and my joys, unfold them, and talk about them. I could talk aloud to the oak tree and know that I was understood. It, too, was a part of my reality, like the woods, the night, and the pounding surf, my earliest companions, giving me space.”⁴

Thurman, as with many of his contemporaries, faced ongoing adversity by way of the injustices of racial discrimination and economic injustice. He lived with his mother, grandmother, and two siblings, and his family was very poor.

It is in this context that I find Thurman’s testimony to his sense of belonging in nature so powerful. This connection clearly gave him strength, a way to come home to himself despite the circumstances - in other words, a way to be resilient.

This church year, we will be exploring what it means to cultivate resilience. That is, how we meet change and adversity in life in ways that lead to peace, health, and happiness.

³ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), chap. 1 “Beginnings,” Kindle.

⁴ Ibid.

As opposed to most mainstream understandings of resilience, we will not focus on resilience as primarily individual perseverance but resilience as a quality found in the collective and cultivated through the care, connection, kindness, and wisdom of community.

The writer and activist Soraya Chemaly makes the distinction this way. She writes, “Our mainstream resilience doesn’t make inclusivity, connection, and collective care over lifetimes a priority. You can, for instance, be resilient in conventional ways and still support white supremacy, mock pacifism, harbor contempt for difference, and believe that conscious capitalism will save us from ourselves. If, on the other hand, you reimagine a resilience in which all of these are unacceptable, then you can envision new worlds and how you can move through them.”⁵

The resilience I propose we cultivate is one that depends upon inclusivity, connection, and collective care. It is a resilience that prioritizes interdependence and honors differences.

Belonging is a necessary component of resilience. Belonging is at the heart of inclusion and connection. And, while belonging can be nurtured in community, it starts within us.

A sense of belonging to something larger than us and beyond us is what spirituality is all about. This spiritual belonging has been shown to be deeply connected to one’s well-being and ability to thrive in the face of change and adversity.

The psychology researcher, Lisa Miller, points to the connection between spirituality and children’s well-being over time. Her research has found that spirituality is the one consistent factor that has made a difference for children’s ability to thrive.

“...[W]hat makes us spiritual,” Miller writes, “is our awareness that our lives, our relationships, and the natural world both seen and unseen are filled with an ultimate presence. It is our awareness of transcendence, in us, around us, through us, and beyond us, that is spiritual.”⁶

Spirituality is not defined by any particular theological belief. In this religious community, spirituality is not defined by a personal relationship to God, or at least not to a God understood to be a supreme being wholly apart from humanity and the materiality of our earthly existence.

Our religious tradition certainly honors a spirituality that is derived from one’s relationship to God understood and experienced in that manner. However, we also recognize and honor

⁵ Soraya Chemaly, *The Resilience Myth: New Thinking on Grit, Strength, and Growth after Trauma* (One Signal, 2024), 207.

⁶ Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (Picador, 2015), 54.

spirituality that comes from a deep sense of connection to nature, to one's family and neighbors, to other church members, to the trees of the forest, to any source through which one experiences a sense of ultimacy.

When we know ourselves to belong in this way, we are more able to nurture a sense of belonging in others, whether that's someone sitting next to you in the pew, someone you sing with or knit with, whether it's a student of yours, your own child or grandchild, or a child you mentor.

As a community here at UCM, you help one another in discovering and deepening that inner sense of belonging to something greater and larger than ourselves. You do this simply by being together. You do this by pointing out sources of awe, joy, and connection. You do this by reveling together in the sacred. Together, we remind ourselves that we belong to something beyond our, at times, small-minded preoccupations, or self-involved pursuits.

As you wash pots and pans together after a community lunch, you belong.

As you sit together in a circle in silence, you belong.

As you support another church member through the next round of cancer treatment, you belong.

As you celebrate the birth of a long-awaited child, you belong.

As you show up after the disaster to clean up and plot the way forward, you belong.

Here, we help each other to find our way home.

To ourselves.

To one another.

To the expansiveness and oneness of life.

Welcome home.