

Coming of Age at the End of an Era

Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane

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Meditation

I want open our meditation with a personal reflection.

I remember the moment I realized my mother couldn't fix everything. I was curled up on her lap at the front window of the living room, the dark empty cold street staring blankly at us through the glass. I was twelve. At school, my best friend had made new friends. She didn't want to romp around in the mud anymore, didn't want to write songs for our forthcoming hit album. She kinda... dumped me.

My mom held me, and I could tell that she understood. And that's all she did. She held me, and understood. And it was not enough. It did not make the heartbreak go away. It didn't *do* anything. I was sad, and in my sadness, I was mad. What was the point of this lap if it didn't heal all the hurt? I felt very alone, but of course, I was not alone. Mom was there, holding me.

Later in life, I would be alone during times of heartbreak, no mom in cuddle range. But she would still be there in some way, in spirit, on the phone, in the back of my head, in my nervous system. It wouldn't be enough. But it would make all the difference.

Today we're thinking about Coming of Age, that very real (but hard-to-pin-down) moment of transition. Coming of Age is an experience for adolescents, but that includes us all. We're either going through this wonderful terrible shift into adulthood, or looking forward it, or we've already experienced it, and we have discovered that the journey continues. Because once we "come of age," more transitions present themselves, and we cycle through new kinds of adolescence. Over and over again we realize that things aren't what we thought they were, we don't fit in the same friend groups, or routines, or clothing! that we used to. We come of age, outgrow that age, and come of age again.

For many among us, here in the room and here in our community, celebrations of childhood ring hollow, because childhood was not safe, and growing up was a survival strategy, not a rite of passage. All of us have memories, conscious or visceral, of times when adults were not there for us, and not just because they *couldn't* be; sometimes

they weren't even trying. Injustice touches us personally; children are not immune. The early injustices are really the worst.

And as humanity matures, we are haunted by legacies of trauma and violence that live on in our collective failure to care for the planet and end war. Young people learning of genocide, mass extinction, and our own government's efforts to unsettle democracy here and abroad are rightly enraged. We have inherited a nightmare, the youngest among us the most.

As adults, whether as parents or as stewards of this planet and community, we know we make errors. It is hard to wrap our minds and souls around the worst injustices, but many of us sense that we could be doing more. In our day-to-day lives, we know that we don't always *act* like adults. Even if we are no longer teenagers, the rage at this raw deal -- heartbreak with no one to fix it -- the rage *surfaces* sometimes, and immobilizes us. Or it mobilizes us for unhelpful action. Part of growing up is accepting the terrible correctness of this rage, holding the teenager raging inside, and learning to withstand the accusations of powerlessness. Part of growing up is acknowledging our powerlessness, and calmly finding our power anyway.

[Pause]

Imagine that each of us came to church today accompanied by everyone we once were and everyone we will someday become. This makes it a very crowded sanctuary: standing room only! The person you will be next year, two days from now, is milling about in the Friendship Hall, waiting to Become, chatting with the person you were last year. Your toddler self is running down the aisle squealing, and the wise elder of your future giggles. Let's take this opportunity to gather some collective wisdom from your many selves. Reflect on these questions.

What wisdom does your younger self possess, that helped you get to where you are today?

What reassurance does your younger self need from you?

What reassurance do you need from the person you know you can be?

It is customary at the Jewish New Year to seek and offer forgiveness. Let's bring the spirit of that tradition to the end of the Gregorian calendar year, starting with ourselves.

What mistakes did your younger self make, that you are now, finally, in a position to forgive? Find something small to forgive.

What self-forgiveness do you look forward to, once you have more perspective?

Now, with gratitude to your personal companions for the journey of life, return to your one and only body, the flesh and blood that holds you right here and now. And call to mind all the other flesh-and-blood people that give your life meaning.

In silence, let us ask for the forgiveness of the younger people in our lives, for the ways we haven't held them in their vulnerability. Let us celebrate their tender profound wisdom and bless their leadership now and in the future.

In silence, let us ask for the forgiveness of the older people in our lives, for the ways we haven't respected their wisdom and sacrifice for us. Let us celebrate their uniqueness, their life force, and the way they connect us to our roots.

I invite you to join me in a song. The words were written by UU minister Rob Eller-Isaacs for the Jewish New Year, with a single refrain that goes like this:

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

Try it with me?

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

I will say the words on the screen, and then you are invited to reply in song. After we finish, please sit or stand in silence for a time of meditation.

Please rise in body or spirit.

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference ...

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible ...

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause ...

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others...
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone...
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit...
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For losing sight of our unity...
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness...
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

(Silent meditation)

Homily

It was devastating to realize that my mom couldn't fix everything. But it also resolved a lot of confusion. I've always cared deeply about things being fair, and as a child, I just couldn't figure out why they weren't. Why did bad things happen to good people... people like me? I'd already learned that some bad things weren't all that bad, like when we ran out of cheese in the fridge. It was just unfortunate or inconvenient, not exactly unfair. But then there were some real injustices, like how my dad lived 6 hours away, further distanced by his progressive alcoholism and workaholism. Every time he managed a visit would be much too short, but I would walk on sunshine until he got in his car and left. In tears, I would ask my mom, "Why?" My mother's love was so huge, and it didn't make sense that I could be unhappy inside it. It took a certain level of maturity to understand that even when she was all-loving, my mom wasn't all-powerful. Soon I would learn that she wasn't all-knowing either! This is a basic theological experience of Coming of Age. No adult is all-loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing. Actually, no one is even *one* of those things. And yet here we are, persisting in the fertile cracks of our ideal universe.

We grow from the awareness of the individual unfairnesses (like not having enough of our parents' time) to be able to face societal injustices (like economic insecurity, racism,

and anthropogenic climate change). It's not easy, and there's no one right way to do it. But many Unitarian Universalist congregations offer a Coming of Age program for their youth to help them each find *their* right way. The program was formalized about a decade ago by the UUA, and our Acting Director of Children and Family Ministries, Aria Curtis, is bringing it to us this spring. The main features are regular gatherings for 12- and 13-year-olds, who each have individual mentors, and exercises to help them each write a personal credo, which they can share with the whole congregation at the end of the program. It offers a bit of structure and a lot of freedom for folks going through the tumultuous transition to adolescence, and an amazing opportunity for adult mentors to nurture and grow alongside them. Although it continues to be a shock to us so-called "grown-ups," we have all come through murky transitions and lived to tell the tale. We all have something to offer someone on a similar path, even if it's just a listening ear. And there's nothing like seeing a young person succeed at something we ourselves struggled with! Sometimes younger eyes have insight for *us*. So participating in Coming of Age as an adult mentor may help usher you through your next transition. There's an info session after church on January 20th and I encourage everyone here to come. If too many adults show up, that's fine... we can start an adult program and mentor each other!

Maybe every generation feels this way, but the challenges of coming of age are especially acute right now, with the growing climate catastrophe and imploding governance structures. Twenty-plus years ago, my church didn't have a Coming of Age program, but I was nonetheless steeped in UU values. A few years later, thinking it was probably time to "decide what I wanted to be when I grew up," I decided to tackle our planet's problems head-on and become a climate change economist. It turned out to be waaaay harder than I expected. One day I went to talk to a professor about my struggle to find a meaningful research question, and I broke down crying. Embarrassed, I said, "My mom says it gets easier after 30." He looked at me and said, "Why would you think *that*?" Well, I would think that because my mom told me, and I trusted her, and (perhaps most importantly) it *helped* to think that. When I turned thirty, things *did* get better. I don't think that's necessarily a universal experience, but I always like to tell people in their late 20s, people suffering in ways I remember, or dreading aging, that it gets better. Because it can get better, and part of what makes that possible is *imagining* it to be so, and having trustworthy sources of inspiration and encouragement.

The basic wisdom we need, in order to come of age, is that there are no easy answers to life's persistent questions, but it's ok to keep going anyway. It is an experiential embodied wisdom -- transmitted by parents, teachers, mentors, ministers, even strangers -- a confidence in the journey rather than a detailed description of the

destination. I credit my mom and dad for sharing this wisdom with me, and also the men and women of Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church. There's Keith, who showed up in my life when my mom bought his lawn care services at the church auction. He'd pursued a degree in economics and taught college, but had turned his attention to community organizing and keeping the church weeds in check. And there's Arline, the president of the board when my mom was the treasurer. Arline taught me to put more butter in everything I cook, among other key life lessons. They didn't tell me what to believe, but they gave me a safe and dynamic environment for exploring what I *wanted* to believe. As UUs, their agenda was not to teach me a creed, but to empower me to write my own, and to stay supple enough to rewrite it when the time came.

A few years ago I got in touch with someone I'd known in high school, named David. He was the church board president when I was the youth representative. I was really struggling in my PhD program, and he had recently retired as an economics professor. I don't remember what he said to me as I shared my heartbreak about my career. But there was wisdom in his listening, a reassurance that I could be both a UU and an economist, or I could set economics aside and still be worthy. In the words of Elizabeth Wilhelm, who grew up in this church, I knew I would be welcome home to my community "no matter the nature of that homecoming." David gave me the thread I needed not only to complete the PhD, but to pivot to a new vocation, returning to my roots. Because of his example, I still consider myself an economist, even though my daily activities look rather different than those of my former classmates.

There is amazing potential within our community for more intergenerational connection. As an example, I look to Black Lives UU, an organization with a clear vision and praxis for justice within and beyond Unitarian Universalism. It is led by young people, but has an elders' council to provide knowledge, insight, and guidance. Elders are a crucial connection between BLUU leaders and the spirit of their work to "[hold] and [create] spaces for Black UUs to thrive" (<http://www.blacklivesuu.com/working-agreements/>). Elders tell stories from their own lives and stories that were told to them, stories that hold the wisdom younger generations need to know in order to carry on their efforts.

We *all* have stories to tell. And we all need to hear *your* stories. You may be aware that the way we do the Story for All Ages during worship is changing. Because of copyright restrictions for streaming and recording our services, we can no longer read whole storybooks. This is really disappointing to many of our dedicated storytellers, who love the tradition of sharing books with children and encouraging them to read. I myself have fond memories of sounding out words with my grandma. Perhaps we need to have a core group of story-readers to participate in children's chapel, where this tradition can

continue. But as an all-ages worship leader, *I'm* excited to hear storytellers' own words. Even if it's written down ahead of time, *telling* a story is different from reading a story. It's an older tradition, one that we still engage in probably hundreds of times a week. I've done it several times this morning! It's not always easy, but it's rewarding. As I've said before, when I tell you a story about the world, you get a glimpse from my eyes, and the "us" between us changes. Everyone can learn this art, and anyone is welcome to practice with us, even if you're feeling shy about telling a story for the whole congregation. Aria will be hosting a Storytellers Workshop January 14th, Monday evening.

Now, as you know, there is nothing compulsory about this church. But I want you to suppose that you *had* to choose *which* of these two gatherings to go to. Are you more of a storytelling artist, with a mythical poetic bent, curious how to hold space for people of all ages (especially young ones) during a worship service? Or would you prefer to sit together with a smaller group, sometimes one-on-one, sharing the pearls of wisdom you've accumulated over the years and collecting a few more? Are you more of a Storyteller or a Mentor? Please take a minute to turn to someone you didn't come to church with, and tell them your answer.