



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

In Praise of Settling

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My life at 55 isn't what I expected it to be. It is somehow less and more. Less in that in my young adulthood I clung to the idea that I would be a Great Artist — a painter of insight and incredible nuance. When I was at the very fine, fine arts school in New York City, I'd imagine my work in museums, and that people would know how clever and talented I was. I fantasized a life of great food, interesting companionship, a nice loft in Brooklyn and a studio somewhere in the Florida Keys.

The reality, however, is that all my life I have struggled with painful doubt, low self esteem and anxiety. It's a one-two-three combo that has made it hard for me to put myself out in the world — even just to apply for jobs that actually paid a humane wage. The only jobs I felt truly comfortable in were the low paying ones. And in these low-paying jobs my attitude fluctuated wildly from: Oh god I'm so lucky anybody will hire me, to: This establishment pays me so little, they're lucky I even show up! It's amazing that I managed to stay employed at all.

This was back in the 1990s — the era of affirmational thinking. Many of us grew up with the slogans: "Be all you can be" and, "Think different." Well I spent my 20s and my 30s hurling myself out of one metaphysical plane after another each with the slogan, "just do it" emblazoned on the side. Each time I jumped my parachute was a different color. And as I was shoved out into that great abyss of sky, someone always called out, "Just do what you love! The money will follow!"

And herein lies a real problem for those of us who have come of age in the zeitgeist of *we're all special, and if you can't figure it out, you're just blocked*. If we're all special, then how special is special? Tim Minchin's wry and witty lyrics from the Broadway musical *Matilda* sum up the dilemma:

One can hardly move for beauty and brilliance these days.
It seems that there are millions of these one-in-a-millions these days.
Special-ness seems de rigueur.
Above average is average - go figure.
Is it some modern miracle of calculus,
That such frequent miracles don't render each one un-miraculous?

I look back on the younger me and I smile and cringe at the same time. I smile because I was so earnest, and I cringe because I wanted so desperately to be seen and to feel worthy. But I thought that couldn't possibly happen unless there was something special to recommend me. Surely just me, Denise, standing alone and without an art portfolio, was nothing special.

In his eloquent memoir, *Tattoos on the Heart*, Father Gregory Boyle writes,

Where we stand, in all our mistakes and imperfections, is holy ground. It is where God has chosen to be intimate with us and not in any way but this.

So, here I stand before you in this beautiful sanctuary with all my mistakes and imperfections and I'm here to talk to you about humility, love... and settling.

That's right – settling. Settling into myself. Settling into my own skin. Settling into the reality that is my life. Settling as a choice.

Think about it. We always hear, "Don't settle for less!" Don't settle for anything!" "Never settle!" We're a bit phobic about it, frankly.

Some of you are nodding and smiling and probably thinking, another word – a *nicer* word – is acceptance. No: I mean settling; it's more provocative. Because god forbid if I, an educated, thoughtful, caring woman with a degree in painting – and let's not forget, I have good taste – god forbid that I should somehow settle. God forbid if I were just ordinary. You know, a worker among workers.

So what have I "settled" for? Well, I'm not a working artist, I'm a substitute teacher and a fifty-five year old mom, or as I like to call myself, a F.O.M. Which now stands for Fearless Older Mom. It used to stand for something else: the first time someone saw me with my daughter and asked, "Are you her grandmother?", I thought to myself, *No, I'm her f'ing old mom!* But we're in church, and my outlook has softened.

Now some of you may be thinking, a mother, a teacher, what's the problem?

But you have to understand *I* was an artist. To me, being a teacher was so pedestrian. One time I was working at a school and this very lovely teacher showed up to work wearing a pink sweat suit – you know, matching stretch pants and jacket, with pink sneakers to boot – and I started to hyperventilate, thinking: oh god no! I can't do this! I don't want to be this! I don't want to be a person who...who shows up to work in a *matching sweatpants outfit!*

Yes, I'm learning how to settle; not into a matching sweatpants outfit but into my vanity.

And at fifty-five I'm settling into motherhood. We've had our daughter for a year and a half now. Before us, Mariah had been in the foster care system for four of her seven years. She has seen and endured things that no child should have to live through. But our little girl is beautiful, smart and, funny: really funny. She is also a drama queen and at times full of rage.

What have I settled for? It goes like this:

"Sweetie, are you okay?"

"No, I threw up."

"Um...do you want me to come in?"

"Yes."

(Rats) I go in and sit at the edge of the tub and there is our girl, our whirling dervish, standing over the toilet looking wilted. It's nine o' clock. Mariah's two cousins, who she's only known for a few months, are at our house for a sleepover. My husband has organized a blind root beer tasting. The kids tasted several root beers, with the idea that they could make an ice cream float from whichever they liked best.

Or that was the idea anyway. Mariah explains to me matter of factly that she believes it was the fourth root beer tasting that did her in. She rinses out her mouth and then, to my utter disbelief, is ready to get back in the action. She wants her root beer float.

I tell her that I think a root beer float, after barfing, is a terrible idea. She strides into the dining room and begins arguing strenuously for her right to have one. She starts off with the classic, "It's not fair." But this is just her warm up, like an athlete before their event. To watch Mariah negotiate for something she wants is a thing of wonderment. She's quick witted and thinks really well in a crisis. If you were in a burning building, you would want Mariah by your side. On the other hand if you're arguing over the merits of ice cream after one has barfed, she's a pain in the neck.

I'm exhausted and exasperated but in Mariah's arguments I pick up on something else, a desire not to be excluded. These cousins, this house, this life; we have all been here for years before she showed up. This is her turf and yet she is the new kid on the block. How can it be that her cousins will get ice cream in her house and she won't?

It's not fair. No it's not. So much in Mariah's life hasn't been fair. I'm cogitating on all this when I hear Mike say, "All right!" in his I've-had-enough voice and I think, oh good, he's going to sort this all out. "All right, it's your body. If you want to have a root beer float and barf, that's your choice." Wait! What? NO!

At the time my husband and I have been parents for about six months. But I have been a teacher for 13 years. Sometimes I can see further down the road. So I do something that I've never done in front of Mariah, I contradict him.

"NO!" Basic parenting 101: always present a united front. "Absolutely not!" I say. And now Mike and I are off to the races, arguing in front of the kids. 9:40, bedtime is nowhere in sight.

And we might still be there arguing except that in that moment our kid makes a very reasonable request. "Can I have a juice pop instead?" "You want a frozen apple juice pop instead?" I ask, incredulous at this fortunate turn of events. "Yes," she says. "Absolutely!" I say.

And with this compromise, we settle.

Almost as soon as we took Mariah in, well-meaning people would comment about our choice to adopt an older child. "Ohmygawd, you two are amazing; what you two are doing for this little girl! She has no idea how lucky is. It's just wonderful. Of course *I* couldn't do it; you two are saints!" As if adopting a seven year-old out of the foster care system is tantamount to deciding to go live in a leper colony. We actually started calling it, "The leper colony compliment." We were impatient because children aren't sale items and our daughter is not damaged goods. She brings so much to the table. More to the point, Mike and I aren't saints (or if we are, we are the best possible kind: deeply flawed.)

But here is what I've been struggling so long to communicate with people. When I chose this thing, when I was finally able to make this commitment it wasn't out of altruism. It's taken me a while to figure out what it was: that you don't forge a meaningful relationship with any child just out of compassion. For surely if this was the case all the hurts, the losses and anxiety that burdens my daughter's young heart would have been lifted. But they haven't been. And despite the fact that, like any kid, Mariah will shamelessly campaign for the next new whatever, the truth is what she really wants is your time. And when you spend time with someone, when you really spend the time to get to know them, you establish something more important than compassion. You establish kinship.

My favorite quote in the whole world is also from Father Greg:

You stand with the least likely to succeed until success is succeeded by something more valuable: kinship. You stand with the belligerent, the surly, and the badly behaved until bad behavior is recognized for the language it is: the vocabulary of the deeply wounded and of those whose burdens are more than they can bear.

My daughter is not damaged goods, but she has been deeply wounded. And she does at times behave very badly. Because of that, every day has become a meditation on understanding and acceptance, both of her and myself.

Another night – the table isn't cleared, the 8 p.m. bedtime looms large on the horizon, and I'm wrestling my daughter to the floor. "Help me Dad!" she calls out in rage and despair. "Mom's being an idiot." Okay, just for the record here, I don't think I'm being an idiot right now. I thought I was getting her to clear the table. On the other hand we're on the floor doing a bad imitation of sumo wrestling so maybe the jury's out on the idiot part. How did we end up here?

Well, it turns out I missed her spelling bee this afternoon. For most kids, a parent not showing up to an event can be upsetting, but for Mariah it brought to the surface very deep hurts about being abandoned and rejected by previous moms – wounds that lie so close to her heart that it's hard for her to even think of words to express them. She was heartbroken and enraged, but has no good experience in communicating her feelings. So she deliberately put a dirty piece of garbage in the fresh sour cream, and I hauled her off to bed.

Eventually we get the whole story out of our her and we end the night as we always do, with a chapter from a good book, lullabies and the pillow pet gently illuminating a sea of stars on the ceiling of her bedroom.

A couple of years ago, when an earlier adoptive placement had fallen through, my artist friend Annie had said “Denise, if you’re uncertain about adoption, don’t do it. Children take up so much time and energy. They become your priority. You will have no time to create.” And then she said, “Denise, children will find your weaknesses and your worst qualities and make them dance before your eyes.” This is so true! Having a kid around is like looking in a mirror – and the woman I see is rigid and demanding and I don’t like it. The truth is we have much in common, my daughter and I.

We both want to be in control because we both grew up in chaos. My time was much longer than hers but not nearly as catastrophic. And I had the good fortune to see my parents grow and change. I saw my dad sober up and stay sober. Mariah has had no such luck. And control? My kid has shown me how very seldom I am in control of anything. Usually the best I can do is make a succession of half-educated snap decisions and then, at the end of the day, tally up to see if I made more right than wrong.

So yes, I am settling. Settling into the fact that I’m the heaviest I’ve ever been. My hair’s often in disarray. My eyebrows often go unplucked, and I go to work all the time now without make-up. But in settling I have also found a kind of grace.

Another day, and again we were at it, the girl and I. We’ve ridden home on our bikes and now it’s time to wrap the day up – dinner, shower, bed. But she’s decided that those things no longer apply to her, and tells me so with her fourteen year old sarcasm in the adorable eight year old body. And I, fifty-five, stumpy, in bifocals and a bike helmet, keep thinking to myself, “When the hell did I check off the box for a dismissive, sarcastic child? I mean Mike and I were very open about age, race and gender but I think I would have remembered that box.” But I also know that this fight is probably about something else – some fear that she’s not ready to talk about. She’d rather fight, because, fighting is just easier. When she fights she’s not vulnerable.

Here are the words I wrote to Mariah on the eve of the adoption:

I am not your first mom
And I am not your favorite mom
But I am the mom who will fight for you
I am the mom who will fight with you
I am the mom who will always come after you
I am the mom who will always find you

In this resolve I am ruthless and so I win tonight’s battle, but that means at the end of it I have a naked child sobbing uncontrollably on the bathroom floor as I say repeatedly, “Honey, it’s

time to take your shower. Let's go." In desperation and in fear of losing face, she wails, "I don't want to take a shower by myself! I waaaaant you to coome in with me" "Okay," I say. And I pull off my sneakers and socks and step into the shower fully dressed. I turn and hold out my hands to her. Solemnly she steps in and settles into me as I hold her close.

These moments of my life, like enduring art, are complex. But they are not always elegant. Settling has become my creative practice, my meditation. It takes time and commitment and you have a lot of false starts and you make a lot of bad choices. It's just like Ze Frank says, "no matter how much you plan, you'll still have to do something for the first time. And almost guaranteed the first time you do it, it'll blow."

I blow so much at being a mom. But for the first time in my creative life, I don't get to give up.

I am your wall
I am the wall you beat your head against.
And I am the wall you rest your head on.
And I am the mom who's going to get you over the finish line.
And it is my great honor to be just that.

Bertrand Russell wrote that "The world is full of magical things waiting for our wits to grow sharper."

My wits sharpen slowly. It's taken me my whole adult life to see that, for me, life itself is the canvas. I make art every day just not the way I thought I would. I've spent so long imagining what I might do that it's been hard to see what I've done. I've built a life with a creative and talented man who loves me. At 54 I began an amazing adventure with a little girl who is smarter and funnier and braver than anything I could have imagined. I thought for so many years that what I wanted was to be special and recognized and lauded, but all I really wanted was to feel worthy, and that is a thing that comes not from without but within.

I don't think I'm the only one who has settled for something different from what they dreamed. That picture in our head can block our view of the wonders right before our eyes. We can miss it if we're not careful.

Please stand.

Now take a moment and look around. Not a lot of perfection in this room. But there is beauty, and wonder and magic of the everyday kind. So here we stand in this beautiful sanctuary with all our mistakes and imperfections. This is Holy Ground.

As we leave this place of light and love know each other with compassionate eyes. And then see yourselves the same way. For as Father G has said, "Here is where God has chosen to be intimate with us and not in any way but this."