Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church

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Lit From Within

Rev. Hannah Petrie, Associate Minister

October 5, 2014

So who's ready to find out who our next Senior Minister is going to be? Are we ready? I'm ready! I've had the privilege of getting to talk or meet with the final three candidates, and I'm so happy to report that they are all talented, impressive, and personable, so no matter what choice is made, we have much to look forward to – the search committee has done an outstanding job and we owe them much gratitude. We are in the homestretch of not knowing who it's going to be, and even though you have both Jim and I reassuring you, it still represents a tender time in the life of the church - this not knowing, this uncertainty.

I know you've heard Jim reflect about his impending departure, and as you might imagine, it's a big deal for me, too - saying goodbye to one boss, and welcoming another. It's also a big deal for the staff, and most importantly, it's a big deal for you, the members and friends of this flagship UU church, the largest UU church in California. Especially for those of you who have known and loved Jim a long time, those for whom the church is a big part of your life, this changing of the guard is a rite of passage in the family system of the church.

In my first sermon here seven years ago, I delved into family system theory, because I had just gotten married, and wanted to talk about how a rite of passage such as a marriage or funeral represents both peril and opportunity in the life of a family. This beloved community we know as Neighborhood UU Church is a family system too – when there's significant change in a family system, it may invite peril as people react with difficulty to that change, or opportunity as people reflect on what growth change can make possible. The nature of this change can be personal, relational, or institutional.

I feel extremely fortunate to serve a community where its emotional intelligence is such that we are more likely to embrace opportunity. Let me offer my own reflections about opportunities for growth as we move through this senior ministerial transition, this rite of passage.

These reflections are of the personal variety, but represent some big spiritual concepts that are sermon-topic worthy. When it comes to spiritual, personal, or professional growth, we're never really done. It's up to each of us how much we want to challenge ourselves to deeper wisdom, knowledge, or skills. For me, the transition brings to the forefront of my attention all the ways I'm ready to look at this kind of stuff – it's given me courage to see where I'm static and in need of change and growth.

It takes courage because so often we have to learn the hard way. I'm so glad for Sara LaWall who just passed the Ministerial Fellowshipping Committee a few weeks ago. I had quite a different journey for my credentialing process. Not only did I have to visit the big committee twice, I had to visit the committee before the big committee twice, and I had to do the psychological evaluation that came before that twice, too! I did everything twice, and while at the time it was painful to fail each time, I learned so much in the process of making my return, of trying again, that it's a journey I'm not ashamed of. I'm proud of my crooked path to success. I never once considered giving up, and it strengthened my call to ministry. When in your life have you had to learn important lessons the hard way, and in retrospect, are so glad

you were put through that trial? Because it changed you profoundly? It is wisdom to understand that our hardest learning is the most important learning we will do.

So here I am now, a called and settled Associate Minister of six years, and I've been so busy enjoying the ministry I do, I've not ventured that much into the territory of hard learning. But with change afoot in the church I serve, I am called upon to change, too.

I've always suffered from an unexplained deficit of self-confidence, and I'm finally ready to get to the bottom of it. From reading Brené Brown's work, I see that it likely has to do with matters around shame. Shame is an unexplored but hugely pervasive force in our culture, and we are living in hopeful times when we have sociologists such as Brené Brown illuminating how we can change the destructive effect of shame in our lives, families, and communities.

I could go on and on about what Brené Brown says, but you can watch the TED talks or read her books. She has many exercises that could comprise a wonderful adult religious education class at some point, because it's work that has great efficacy in a group setting. Let me know if you'd be interested in that – it will encourage me to make sure it happens.

There's one piece of Brené Brown's work that I'd like to especially home in on for this sermon. Shame is a universally experienced emotion – none of us is immune to it. Brown contends that the more we think shame does not play a role in our lives, the more power it actually has over us. So check that out if you think shame is something you don't identify with. For those who are aware that they are particularly shame-prone the idea is that we can work through the difficulty of shame more quickly if we develop what's called *shame resilience*. I am definitely one of those people who needs to learn some shame resilience and it's not easy. My first stumbling block has to do with empathy and compassion.

What alleviates shame is empathy – when we can talk to another person about our experiences, and feel seen and heard, as was illustrated in Brené Brown's cookie story. So when we are in shame, it's important that we tell someone we feel safe with about it, rather than let shame fester and grow in secrecy and isolation. That all makes sense to me, but what I'm caught on or struck by is how we can't have empathy for others unless we can have it for ourselves. Both Brené Brown and Pema Chodron say this: "Without loving-kindness for ourselves, it is difficult, if not impossible, to genuinely feel it for others."

That's a bold assertion, and while I know I certainly am capable of empathy for others, it's nevertheless a worthwhile challenge to consider – there are so many reasons to be better at empathy, which Brené Brown identifies as a skill, something we learn.

This is really important because – maybe I'm projecting – but I think suffering from a lack of self-confidence or self-compassion is not uncommon in our culture. We can be really hard on ourselves. For a lot of us it's reflexive and we don't even know we're doing it. For many families, the necessity of achievement, status, and the correct image has been passed down generation to generation in parenting. To not have these things threatens our self-worth. Our culture uses shame to try to sell us stuff every day. It's often easier to forgive others than it is to forgive ourselves.

If we can't as effectively give empathy and compassion to others unless we know how to give it to ourselves, it's no wonder that empathy, compassion, and kindness are increasingly in short supply. I heard about a study over the summer that showed more parents nowadays than not are teaching their kids that achievement and getting ahead are more important than learning kindness and compassion.

And Brené Brown is very clear that we can't give to our kids what we don't have for ourselves. As a mother of a three and five year old, this is a huge personal wake-up call for myself. I have got to make sure I know how to have compassion and empathy for myself if I want my children to have it for themselves and others. Nothing strikes me as more emotionally or spiritually relevant in my life right now than this.

So I'm working through the Brené Brown book and I've signed up for some parenting classes this month, too. And I've been asking people who I know have had similar struggles, how do you learn self-compassion and empathy?

I so wish I could give you a neat and tidy answer to that question, but it's not only difficult to undo our old ways of thinking, what needs to be learned is also different for each of us. I've concluded that the way it's going to happen is the same way anything happens that I feel called to do: I prioritize it, I am mindful of how each moment is another opportunity to learn and move forward. Most importantly, I am kind to myself as I flounder and learn from my mistakes, learning the hard way. I don't give up.

I am inspired by the fact that Pema Chodron's work corroborates Brené Brown's. It is a deeply spiritual problem how caught up in conditional worthiness we are. I'll be worthy when . . . I'm a good parent, when my house is tidy, when I make time to write, when I'm no longer faking self-confidence. The list goes on. What does your "I'll be worthy when . . ." list include?

I am waking up to some really good news – the ground of my spiritual work is myself as I am, with all my fears, flaws, and vulnerability. My only job, as Pema Chodron says, is to come to know myself with tremendous curiosity and interest. This is how I'm going to learn self-compassion and stronger empathy for others. As she says, "When you come to have this kind of honesty, gentleness, and good-heartedness, combined with clarity about yourself, there's no obstacle to feeling loving-kindness for others as well."

Is anyone feeling uncomfortable with how vulnerable I must be feeling up here? This is the job of the preacher - it's a very weird job – to demonstrate, and thereby give permission to experience the gifts of vulnerability. We've been blessed to have a preacher like Jim Nelson who's done it for us many, many times. Like I said, not knowing who our next Senior Minister is going to be is a vulnerable-feeling time for the church, and I'm feeling it, too. But I'm so excited because the change in the air is creating change in me, too, good change. It's hard, but it feels good to work hard at what I know is most important in my life.

So what opportunities to grow does change in the air bring up for you? In what ways do you long to be seen and heard, just as you are? In what ways do you seek forgiveness?

I am jealous of the Jewish tradition that has such functional high holy days to tangibly honor this process. In consulting with my rabbi friend Mark Shapiro, I learned that the Sukkah should be built with a natural roof, to allow one to see the stars at night, and similarly, to let the rain in. I like how this suggests a paradox – that exposing ourselves to the elements also draws us closer to the truth and sacredness of our vulnerability, and with everyone – family and guests -crammed into the sukkah together, it is emphasized that we should never feel alone in our vulnerability, that we are all in this together, each of us doing our best.

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Elisabeth Kubler-Ross said, "People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within."

If people are like stained glass windows, I believe that light from within is our self-compassion and our courage to be vulnerable, to let ourselves be seen and heard. All our lights together reflect the beauty and brilliance of our shared humanity – none of us alone, all of us yearning to hold up the mirror for each other, that we may show - affirm and encourage - how each of us are lit from within.

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