



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Everybody's Got Something

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Everybody's got something. Whether it's our weight we struggle with, an addiction, debilitating shyness, economic hardship, or an illness of our own or a loved one, everybody's got something, and more often than not, that something affects our health and emotional well-being. Last summer I read three great biographies of famous women facing serious illness. The first was Good Morning America's Robin Roberts' book, *Everybody's Got Something*, which gave me the idea for this sermon. She writes, "In Mississippi, where I'm from, there's an understanding that hard times do not discriminate. My mother used to say, 'Everybody's got something.'"

I also read Pat Summitt's *Sum It Up*. She's the winningest NCAA basketball coach in history, men or women's, who had to retire early a few years ago because she had Alzheimer's disease. And Jennifer Esposito, the actress, wrote *Jennifer's Way*, about her 20 year journey of learning she had an acute case of Celiac disease.

You would think I'd have drawn upon these books for the readings earlier, but I didn't because, well, as much as I enjoyed them, they were a little schmaltzy, too. Summitt's and Roberts' books had many references to how faith plays a role in dealing with their illness, but they're faith is rooted in Christianity, so it didn't always speak to me. It made me wonder, what is the Unitarian Universalist take on how our faith can help us face illness or whatever our something is? What do we put our faith in that helps get us through?

I have three points of UU faith to share with you today in this regard, but first, you're probably wondering why I read so many inspiring books about facing illness last summer. Not to worry, I do not have a life-threatening illness. But I do have some health issues that I didn't know I had at this time last year.

I'm going to share what those are with you, but first I feel compelled to point out that I know this is risky. You guys seem to like it when I take risks up here, so here I go again. But I'm reminded of one of the sage points of advice given in our Minister Emeritus Brandy Lovely's fine book, *A Machiavellian View of the Ministry*. He warned against ever telling your congregants you have health problems. They just don't want to hear about them, was the gist of it. People are most at ease when they think their minister is omnipotent, even as that's never the case. I deeply respect all that was Brandy Lovely, but today I'm throwing his advice out the window.

I've learned too much that I think is relevant to faith, to keep it all to myself. Another of Robin Roberts' mother's sayings was that you should "make your mess your message." So here's my mess. In September of 2013, I was diagnosed with skin lupus. This is an auto-immune disorder that, thankfully, is limited to my skin. Systemic lupus would be a much more serious diagnosis, so of course I hope it never becomes systemic. But because it was an autoimmune issue I was encouraged to get tested for underlying issues, such as food sensitivities, and

learned that I had a lot of them. All my life I've had eczema, but never knew that it was a sensitivity to wheat or an allergy to casein, a protein in dairy, that could cause it to flare up.

I got these test results last March, so it's almost been a year of my new normal: a diet absent, as best I can, of all grains, legumes, gluten, and dairy. I miss dairy the most, but as time goes on, I miss it less and less.

When I learned I had skin lupus I also learned that my days of carefree sun exposure were over. Living in So-Cal definitely poses a challenge.

With auto-immune issues, which are becoming more and more common, there are several areas of health you need to pay attention to. The better you are at it, the fewer flare-ups, the less inflammation. These areas include sleep, exercise, obviously diet is a big one, keeping stress under control, and reducing your exposure to toxins.

I wish I could say I've got it all figured out, but I'm still in the process of accepting what my limits are, and learning to live within those limits. I used to think I was the queen of minor health ailments, but now I know all these ailments are related, as part of a constellation of symptoms of one disease. Even though it's a generalized term, I'm comfortable identifying as someone who lives with auto-immune disease.

Like any disease, be it cancer or heart disease or what have you, there's always the question of, how much am I going to let this disease define me? It's only one part of who I am, but like Adam Gerhardtstein, who says his bi-polar disorder plays a role in every major decision he makes, I too need to integrate my health limits into my selfhood, as an integral part of who I am. This is a fancy way to describe acceptance – accepting myself as I am.

Now I'm going to bring up the three points of UU faith that are helping me to deal with “my something.” It's not that there isn't space for faith in God under the UU umbrella of faith, but because there's an abundance of literature out there for faith in God as part of the road to healing, I want to talk about the *humanist* arm of UU faith. When people are facing a serious illness or anything that's really hard, does UU faith offer something potent enough to support us, to get us through? Yes, it does.

Unitarian Universalists are encouraged to put faith in ourselves. We believe human beings are born with a mixed bag of traits, and it's up to each one of us to nurture and empower ourselves toward the good. One of the best traits we can develop in ourselves is emotional intelligence, and as part of that our self-awareness. I love how unequivocally Adam Gerhardtstein puts it, how much personal responsibility he takes for himself. He says, “But the biggest tool in my wellness toolbox is self-awareness. I have been forced to develop an objective view of myself. It is up to me to identify when I am losing control and figure out a way to get it back.”

Our toughest religious questions always come down to love – love is always the best place to start, and when it comes to faith in ourselves it's no different. Religious liberals understand

that you have to love yourself well in order to love others well. We have to love ourselves as we are, whatever piece of work we are. Part of loving myself well is allowing myself to become known.

It's different for everyone, how much privacy we feel we need to shelter our somethings, but I've learned for myself over the years that the act of hiding doesn't work that well for me. It causes too much sadness, and like the woman described in the first reading, I would just rather be myself. It's a form of self-love – to know myself well enough that I can just be myself, and let my own vulnerability and courage be a source of strength, and I hope, a source of inspiration for others.

It's through opening myself that I also allow others a way in. The second point of UU faith that helps support us in tough times is our faith in others. All three ladies of the books I read last summer talk about their "teams" – the people in their lives who they count on for support in a variety of ways, be they medical professionals, friends, or family members. I remember how honored I felt when one of you a couple years ago, recovering from a successful cancer treatment, told me I was part of her team, a member of her community who was helping support her through the process of healing.

I almost used the phrase that's so commonly used, "fighting cancer." A good story I heard recently was when someone with breast cancer told her nurse, "I'm going to fight this cancer," her nurse corrected her. She said, "No, don't fight it. You can't fight and heal at the same time. Let us fight it for you, your doctors and nurses. You focus on healing." That's what having a team allows us to have, a sense that we are not alone in our fight – we can let others fight for us. For as much as we believe in ourselves there's also a need for faith in humility, which allows us to accept our limitations, and understand that we need others in so many different ways – we need others' professional expertise at times, we need others' love and understanding and support.

To surrender in this way can be hard sometimes for Unitarian Universalists. The Emersonian sense of self-reliance runs strong in our blood, as it does as part of the American identity in general. Have you ever noticed how hard it can be to stick to an ideal of self-reliance? There are times we just can't do it anymore. As Pat Summitt says so eloquently in her book, "we all will experience diminishment of our capabilities at some point in our lives." The fact that dealing with our diminishment is a pan-human experience means that there are best practices for how we respond.

Having a strong faith in ourselves, in each other - in our "teams", and having faith in humility is all part of that response. But wait, there's more. So much of our living with grace and fortitude in the face of struggle comes down to our attitudes. Attitudes are a very important way we put our faith, our beliefs, into action. Humility and acceptance are positive attitudes we can nurture – they can have a really powerful effect on our living. However, sometimes we need an inspirational metaphor, to really embrace that acceptance and humility.

For me, the metaphor of living my life “in a form” has been gaining more and more meaning. The “form” can have all kinds of different rules. For example, there are many forms in poetry-writing. The most challenging I’ve come across is the villanelle. The villanelle has a very strict form: it is always six stanzas of three lines each, alternating rhymes of every other line, repeating some lines, and, it’s all in iambic pentameter. I’ve only ever written three or four villanelles, but what I remember about doing them was how it forced you to be very creative within the specific rules, with great results.

A more contemporary example might be the “tweet” on Twitter. There are only so many characters in a Tweet you can work with, so you’re forced to maximize and vivify your language. Another example of a form is the Daily Show with John Stewart – how incredibly successful he’s been with the format he’s described as “very ephemeral.” I know, it’s horrible we have another goodbye to deal with. First we lost the Colbert Report, then we lost Jim Nelson, and now we lose John Stewart! Hopefully that will be it for a while.

The point I’m trying to make about living my life in a form is that it helps me to dig deeper in order to enjoy life with limits. I’m forced to be more creative with how I eat, or how and when I exercise. But mostly it helps me with my attitude. I’m living my life in a form, and I’m going to make it as wonderful as possible, as creative and interesting as I can. In this way, it may not be so much a curse, as it is a gift.

There’s a lot of paradox when it comes to the freedom we enjoy in living our lives. We think the more freedom we have the better, but that’s so often a recipe for loneliness. It’s our commitments to our loved ones and families that limit our freedoms, but then we have those people to count on in our lives. Similarly, when we are committed to the limits that are best for us, paradoxically, the more free we feel because we are doing what’s best for ourselves – we free ourselves of the anxiety about what can go wrong when we don’t live within our limits. It’s reminiscent of an Alcoholics Anonymous saying I remember. The way gets narrower, but your vision gets wider and richer. In other words, there is wisdom to be gained by keeping life simple by staying sober, or however we might define that sobriety we need for ourselves. It’s also reminiscent of a piece of scripture when Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. But the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” That’s from the Book of Matthew.

There are few who find it, I’m pretty sure, because it’s not easy. It takes time to find that narrow gate, and probably even more time to find the courage to enter. But it leads to life. It leads to all the fruits of our faith – faith in ourselves and faith in each other. It gives us the right attitude so we can put our faith into action.

So here are my questions for you. What is your something, and how many people know about it? Is it something that would help if you weren’t so alone with it? Are you still able to have health as defined by “the ability to fully participate in one’s life?”

That's a great question for me to ask myself every day. How can I participate in my life fully, given the parameters? The best piece of God-centered faith I came across in all three of those books came at the very end of Pat Summitt's. She said, "God doesn't take things away to be cruel. He takes things away to make room for other things. He takes things away to lighten us. He takes things away so we can fly."

I believe in what Pat Summitt says, but once God takes something away, I've still got a big role to play. I believe it's up to me, as I believe it's up to all of us, to figure out how we can fly.