



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

To Bring Forth What Is Within

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Even though this is Mothers' Day and it's a Mothers' Day sermon, I'm very cognizant of the fact that you are not all parents. We are more united and I can be more inclusive with my message when I focus mainly on the fact that we all have or have had mothers and parents – though not everyone has had a good relationship with their mother, I want to acknowledge. We also all have some number of those horizontal identities that, in all likelihood, our parents had some difficulty accepting. For example, if you chose a different religion than the one your parents reared you in, that's a horizontal identity.

My grandmother wasn't thrilled when my dad changed his mind about ministry, and then further changed his mind about Methodism altogether, and became a Unitarian. She wasn't thrilled when he instilled what's known in our family as "the five state rule," which means you live at least five states away from your parents. It turned him into Yankee, yet another horizontal identity for my grandma to accept.

We all have family stories like this, don't we? Differentiation from our parents is a significant developmental leap toward our self-actualization, toward our emotional and spiritual maturity. So it's generally a good thing, but it's tough on our parents. Maybe when you call your mother today for Mothers' Day, if you're blessed to still have a living mom, you can make a point of thanking her for coming to accept and appreciate your horizontal identities, or if she never did come to accept them, thank her for the vertical ones, for the values she passed down to you that you revere through living them out. This kind of maternal gratitude is worth more than a new bathrobe, a dozen roses, or any Hallmark card.

Isn't it one big reason we become parents? So that one day we might be thanked?

The mother of an autistic child will likely never be thanked by that child, and it's just one of the many ways that parenting children of special needs is so hard. Nevertheless, the horizontal identity of autism must be accepted and embraced by the parents shortly after diagnosis, so that child can get the kind of early intervention treatment she or he needs.

Andrew Solomon, the author of *Far From the Tree*, says that he decided to have children himself in the midst of researching his book. His friends asked him, "How can you consider having children when you are studying everything that can go wrong?" He said, "I'm not studying everything that can go wrong, I'm studying how much love there can be when it appears everything is going wrong."

In this way, the parents of children of special needs are role models for all parents – while they must accept their children's horizontal identities out of necessity, the less medically relevant horizontal identities are just as important to accept, because their rejection of such can be as destructive of the emotional and spiritual well-being of the child. Andrew Solomon explains in the first chapter that he wrote the book in part to better understand why his parents couldn't accept his gay identity, which became the root of decades of severe depression.

Could such depression have been avoided if his parents had embraced, even rejoiced, in this horizontal identity when it had presented itself? It seems likely. And how many other horizontal identities are out there, whose rejection causes some of the deepest pain of our world?

As you heard me read earlier, Solomon quotes the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, when Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what is within you will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what is within you will destroy you."

This is a universal piece of wisdom worthy of our focus today. The original thought I want to serve as an augmentation here is that such work of bringing forth what is within us is not always a solitary endeavor, as it may sound in the way Jesus is quoted. It's through relationship that we self-actualize; it's through the help of others that we bring forth what is within us. While some critical juncture of the onus is on us, we nevertheless are quite hesitant to bring forth what is within us unless there's some sense of safety in our human environment, and ideally, some invitation.

At its best, this is what Unitarian Universalism does – it invites what is within us to emerge, to not only save ourselves, but also to bless the world. That's the invitation – within healthy boundaries, not only will your unique identity be accepted here, it will be celebrated, it will be seen as a vehicle of blessing. It reminds me of the quotation by Marianne Williamson that Nelson Mandela made famous. To the effect of, "Who are you *not* to be fabulous? Your playing small doesn't serve the world. Be fabulous because then you invite others to be fabulous, too." It's a great mission for a UU church to have – to invite and bring forth ourselves' and others' fabulous from within, so it may save and bless the world.

As examples for some of these types of horizontal identities I know have been welcomed in here at Neighborhood Church, of course there's our LGBT community, but there's also recovering sex addicts, breast cancer survivors, recovering alcoholics, veterans, people who navigate mental illness, parents who have lost children, the under-employed, people who have become disabled, and not necessarily visibly so. Until the world is more compassionate, we need places like Neighborhood Church where such life experiences and identities are valued. These are warrior experiences, and we are blessed when we get to hear about them and receive their wisdom. It's a gift.

In terms of parenting, I've come to think of this as one of the most important things I need to accomplish. My kids are not me; at some point they're going to break my heart because they are so *unlike* me. It will take radical nurturing to make sure my kids know they can be who they need to become. I will love and support them on that journey.

But I think this transcends parenthood and extends to all of our most important relationships – with family and friends, with our colleagues, and community members. Why not extend this

radical nurturing to them, too? In this way, our faith asks that we take a parental view of the world. How do we do it, how do we bring forth what is within others that needs to come forth?

You have to prove yourself trust-worthy by being a good listener and genuinely interested in what it's like to be someone else. You have to model acceptance, and more than that, a hunger for celebrating diversity. The word, "tolerance" is out of vogue in this conversation – to tolerate someone is only one step above disdain. We bless others who have different life experiences from us and different identities by acknowledging that *they* have the power to bless us; that in fact they have something to teach us, they have something we want. We are, in fact, open to being changed by those we may at first fear, or disdain, or feel uncomfortable around. As we invite them to be seen, they in turn invite us, initiate us to their beauty.

UUs talk a good talk when it comes to honoring diversity, but the matter of dignity must be embodied. Saying we value the worth and dignity of every human being is hollow unless we embody that.

I was surprised by how much this book challenged what I thought were my fairly advanced ideals of diversity. There's a "neuro-diversity movement" that is essentially against prenatal testing for conditions like Down Syndrome. Proponents of this movement say that the resources going in to further advance such testing should be going in to making life better for people who are here and have Down Syndrome. Just as testing is advancing, they're getting closer and closer to medical treatments of DS that can make a huge difference in one's quality of life. Which is more important? These are ethical questions for us to answer in our increasingly brave, new world.

I found myself drawn to this concept of neuro-diversity – what right do we have to take a life away that has dignity because it's nevertheless a life, and that, more often than you might think, the parents say they wouldn't change anything about? In fact, many of the parents testify to how parenting special needs children has changed them, helped them to clarify what really matters in life, and drawn out strengths they never would have known they had. Many parents point to their spiritual evolution and how faith plays a role.

Here's an example in the book. Susan, the mother of Adam who has Down Syndrome, starts bringing him to Jewish services. "Adam loves schedules, ritual, the singing," Susan says. "Judaism really works for us because it has struggling and mystical stuff built right into it."

Of the many nuggets of Jewish philosophy she quotes, she rests particularly on the Talmudic notion, drawn from Exodus 37:9, that God exists in dialogue. "In the Torah, they describe building this huge tabernacle out in the wilderness," she said, "and on top of the vehicle that carries the tablets, they put two angels facing each other, because that is where God exists, between people. The day Adam was born, my life became purposeful, and it has kept purpose

ever since. God exists between us. I knew that soon after he was born, but Judaism gave me a vocabulary for it.”

Unitarian Universalism is working on having this caliber of power to offer people like Susan. We believe we have the moral obligation to make the world more compassionate, more accommodating – and the more we can embody that, the more people will have faith in it. Because we are so freedom-loving, we believe in choice, but more so, we believe in life, and the right to live with dignity. Part of liberal religion’s stand is that diversity ennoble us; compassion and acceptance ennoble our world. We are literally in the business of facilitating our evolution toward a more just and inclusive society. We are in the business of belonging. We are in the business of bringing forth that which is within.

To add some nuance here, I interviewed my friend Angie, the mother of an autistic boy of eight years, named Leaf. Angie wants nothing more than to bring her Leaf forth, to see him emerge out of the autism that she thinks of as a force-field. They are forever trying to get through this force-field to one another, and she’s not so sure about the neuro-diversity movement. “Are you kidding?” she asks me. “If there was a pill that removed the autism of course I would have Leaf take it.” What parent doesn’t want to remove their child’s difficulty?

At the same time, it’s the most difficult things we do in relationship with others that are often what makes love so powerful, and life so meaningful. Liberal religion says, we’re not going to shy away from that difficulty, we’re going to take it on, embrace it, and wring meaning from it; that in fact, we believe struggle toward a higher end can be the means to achieving a high contentment.

Toward the very end of the book, Solomon says, “Pain is the threshold of intimacy, and catastrophe burnishes devotion . . . While I mostly fell for the friends I adore because they are wise, kind, generous, and fun, I have loved them most acutely when they or I have been most sad, because there is a psychic proximity in desolate times that happiness does not match. . . . As a parent, (*he goes on*), for all that I relish glee, I know that attachment happens when things turn dark. Parenting is an exercise in safety, and the perpetual menace of danger is what exalts parental love above affection; without the night terrors, the spiking fevers, the litany of bruises and woes, it would be a second-rate entertainment. It took me some time to understand that attention to one’s children’s needs is the essence of gratification. From that perspective, it made sense that the difficult loves of these pages are so deep. I want more than anything for my children to be happy, and I love them because they are sad, and *the erratic project of kneading that sadness into joy is the engine of my life . . .*” [my italics]

And so, may we mother, may we parent, with the patience and genuine curiosity of radical nurturing - and not only to our children, but to all who inhabit our world - that we might reach that higher echelon of grace, of true intimacy, and compassion. Inspired by the peril of destruction, may we instead bring forth what can save us, and by doing so, bless the world. Amen.