



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Character Driven

Rev. Lissa Anne Gundlach, Senior Minister

May 22, 2016

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 [information@neighborhooduu.org](mailto:information@neighborhooduu.org)

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Today we recognize the final Sunday of the religious education program, honoring our children, youth and families. We celebrate our teachers, youth advisors and facilitators, and the contributions they have made to shaping the spiritual lives of our young people. We also acknowledge our high school graduates, Allie Izzard, Marie Haeffliger and Francie Johnson. We celebrate these young women, the incredible gifts they have given to our church through their leadership and presence. We also give them blessings for the bright futures that lie ahead of them. Allie, Marie and Francie graduate from high school, but they also graduate from our religious education program. They have shared their beliefs with us through their Rites of Passage faith statements and their powerful preaching. They have invited us to witness to their growth and their struggles, and have gifted us with the opportunity to see ourselves as both role models and companions with them on the journey. We are grateful to be a part of these young women's stories, and pledge today our continued listening ear, loving heart and open mind as they begin their next chapter.

As I am settling into living in the Los Angeles area, I still marvel that many of the people I meet are engaged in the entertainment business and creating some of the television shows which are shaping progressive culture. My friend Jen Richards has written and starred in a web series called HerStory, which tells the story of Violet, a transgender woman, navigating love and friendships in Los Angeles. When Jen talks about her work, what is most important to her is bringing forth untold stories which, when shared, have the potential to move our culture towards more openness and acceptance. There are typically two directions writers like Jen can go--- character driven stories or plot-driven stories. Character driven stories revolve around the inner developments and progress of the characters. Plot driven stories are action oriented, telling stories based on a concept, these are the thrillers and mysteries, sci-fi and fantasy, and period pieces. Of course, a compelling story needs to have a good balance of both character development and plot. Without enough action and intrigue, the show finishes with us wondering what really happened, and without enough character development, we are left wondering why these stories need to be told at all.

If the history of Neighborhood Church were turned into a television show, which I wish someone in this town would pick up, our series would feature many plot twists and turns. We could lift up the story of the move from the old location to the new, the drama of the sanctuary floods, the litany of dynamic ministers and dedicated leaders. But mostly, the story of our church would be fundamentally character-driven. Here at Neighborhood, the stories of our lives intersect with the steady presence of this institution. We mark rites of passage today to acknowledge that we are in the business not of marking achievement as a plot point in their young lives, but of developing character, which will continue to grow and deepen over time.

Our Unitarian ancestors like William Ellery Channing and James Freeman Clarke described the goal of our religion as salvation not by works or by faith alone, but salvation by the inner work of developing character. Channing talked about the journey of character as striving for a

“likeness to God,” the goal of the spiritual journey is to allow the wisdom and presence of the divine to be fully expressed within each person.

Character is about who we are, shaped by what we do, the actions and choices we make and the process by which we make them. At every point in our lives, we are confronted with choices. Character develops through our ability to navigate these choices grounded in a sense of moral purpose. We come to church to hone our sense of moral purpose with our seven Unitarian Universalist principles and our liberal religious heritage, and to be accountable to a community of people with whom we are in relationship, and a diverse world in which our liberal moral orientation is but one amongst many.

Dana Greeley, former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and one of the ministers of my home church, First Parish in Concord puts it this way:

Faith is supposed to produce good works. We must improve our community and our world, all the time, in every way possible. No city in this country, or anywhere else, is yet good enough or hopeless or beyond improvement. No church, no business, is good enough or beyond improvement . . . character is part of our good works. We are not saved by faith, and our civilization is not saved by faith, without character. Character is not achieved in a vacuum. It means human relationships, and daily duties, and honesty, and generosity, and sympathy and mercy. It means accepting our responsibility and doing our best, wherever we can. Faith without character . . . is dead.

In Greeley’s words, the faith and our good works do not deliver us to heaven but ultimately determine the nature of our character, manifest in the contributions we make towards the world and through our relationships. We are often greeted with choices that force us to grapple with opposing forces within and outside of ourselves: our desires to improve and aspirations of progress are constantly hitting the walls of our flaws and limitations. One of the greatest preachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Riverside Church of New York’s Harry Emerson Fosdick once said in his book *On Being a Real Person*, “The beginning of a worth-while living is the confrontation with ourselves.”

In this way, while shaped by nurturing, support and encouragement, character is strengthened by inner tension and conflict. Without the opportunity for our character to be tested, we fail to know where the fault lines are within ourselves. Sometimes, the only way to know who we are is to make the wrong choices. Developing character can be misinterpreted as moral perfectionism in our striving for constant improvement. This can be an especially hard parenting moment to negotiate with younger generations. We want our children to develop a sense of moral compass and yet we know that our moral compass is oriented through testing, and making mistakes. Ultimately, character building involves not only making the right choices, but the wrong choices. It calls us to be patient with ourselves, our loved ones and our children in making mistakes, and to offer compassion, love and forgiveness instead of judgment.

Character is not a simply an outward striving towards perfection, but an inner striving towards authenticity. Psychologist Brené Brown, in her book *The Gifts of Imperfection*, writes that: “Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It’s about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.”

For me, perfectionism is a disease I know too well. All my life, I have been plagued with a fear of not being perfect. Growing up, I had a father whose love felt very conditional upon being perfect-- doing the right thing, getting good grades in the right subjects and following the rules. I did this pretty well as a high schooler, getting good grades and getting into the right college. But college was so much more difficult, and as I came out as queer and grew into a young adult, being perfect by my father’s definition was no longer possible. I was afraid I would somehow be less lovable and less worthy.

Even as I have grown, and my relationship with my father has improved, I still fear the rejection that may come from feeling “not good enough” as a daughter, partner, and yes, even your minister. While I still am uncomfortable in my imperfections, I am trusting being vulnerable and letting my own humanity shine through allows others to do the same. The first principle of our faith calls us to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person, not the inherent worth and dignity of every perfect person, so why shouldn’t we apply this first principle first to ourselves?

For a recent birthday, a former partner surprised me by taking me to a tattoo studio. She was surprised that I immediately knew what I wanted . . . a compass rose, which now covers my right wrist. This compass is a reminder of both the freedom I have to explore myself within the wide open space of our world and my responsibility to my moral compass which grounds me in our principles and my commitments to others. This is how our faith changes me and inspires the best within me. In *Spirit of Life*, our signature hymn, we sing “roots hold me close, wings set me free.” The roots of our faith remind us of our commitments, what binds us to each other and to our highest aspirations, individually and collectively. The wings of our faith give us the freedom to explore, to soar, and yes, even to fall down, make mistakes and be anything but perfect.

This is how we develop character driven lives, lives not marked by the plot points of our success or achievement, but on the inner journey of healing and liberation, leading us to our deepest, most authentic selves. As we send forth our youth into the world, may we all find ourselves bound deeply in a generous, forgiving love, holding us close and setting us free.