



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

Grow in Harmony

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The fall is a nostalgic time for many of us. Maybe some of us are still in school, or think back on this time being in school, with anticipation and of what will happen in the year to come. If we are parents, sending off children off to another year can bring mixed emotions. I love seeing the side by side photos of your children in their back to school outfits as they grow—but know these photos are bittersweet as they grow so fast!

In the Jewish calendar, Friday brings Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, a time to celebrate the coming of a new year but also to take stock of the year gone by.

How have we grown? Where have we fallen short? What have we learned and what are we still struggling with? How can we forgive the past, and greet the future with an open heart?

Over the past few years, the reflective time of the Jewish holidays has become especially meaningful for me personally. This year, in my reflection, I am remembering back to two particularly two difficult Septembers that would change my life completely. I want to share a very personal story with you.

I've had a few big loves in my life. Almost ten years ago, I was in a relationship with a woman I was very much in love with. We had our differences, but, believing love could conquer these differences, I was committed to working things out. I was left completely heartbroken when she broke it off suddenly in early September, leaving me spinning and grasping for what was next. I had everything planned around that relationship. I was finishing my studies at Union Theological Seminary and had planned to stay in New York City to do my ministry internship and finish my training.

At the time of our break up, I had no plan b for my life. We lived together and I needed a new place to live. Not just a new place to live, but a new life. I moved into a sparse dorm room up at Union for a month, a room with only a bed, a meditation altar and a few books as my sparse possessions while the contents of our apartment were put in storage. I spent a lot of tearful and fearful fall nights alone, not knowing what was next for me. I prayed for a way forward. I found a good therapist to help me confront my patterns and begin to heal. I leaned on my friends and family.

Somehow, I gained enough strength to start to imagine a new life, and I started to cast my net widely into the future. The internship I thought I had just outside of New York City also fell through, and on top of everything I needed to find a new place to complete my training. By November, I had applied to one of the most prestigious internships in the country, and by December, I had received the internship and was making plans to begin after graduation. I was terrified at the prospect of leaving New York City, picking up my far away from any of my friends or family in Minnesota.

The pain of that break up was excruciating. While I thought I had lost everything, the empty space left in its wake launched the biggest four- year period of growth in my life. I following my calling and establishing my career, living on my own in New York City, and settling into a life rich with friendship, culture and activism. Most of all, I was content with myself in a way that I had never felt before. I was strong in my body, mind and spirit. I vowed to put myself and my calling first, and to give myself time to find the right partner.

So when my former partner appeared in my life, I was at first skeptical at best, then increasingly hopeful that she had changed as I had. I let her back in, and began to plan for a future with her only to have her break it off again suddenly less than one year later, in that same cruel month of September.

This time around, though I was similarly devastated, I let the break up break me open to future possibilities knowing I had tried everything I could to make it work. Without that break up, I would have never come out to Los Angeles for the first time a few months later, my friends helping me nurse my broken heart with sunshine and driving me by this beautiful church for the first time. Without that break up, I never could have dreamed that I could leave New York or would have the opportunity to serve in this wonderful congregation. I never would have met my fiancé Sam, or planned together to start a family. It's really remarkable how many positive changes happened as a result of these two heartbreaking times.

This September, another four years later, I'm overwhelmed with gratitude for our partnership as I begin my third year as your minister. I'm savoring all of the sweetness, the harvest of my life at this time of year. I am plan for my fall wedding and birth of my first child with the love of my life. And I don't take anything for granted, knowing that from my deep pain has come my joy. I humbly pray that what I delight in today will not be taken away from me, but I also know that my deepest periods of growth have come from such losses.

Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's recent book *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy* was written after a period of tremendous loss in her life. Sandberg's husband Dave Goldberg died suddenly at the age of 47, leaving behind Sheryl and her two young children. The premise of the book is exploring the concept of Option B—what happens when life's plan A doesn't work out—and another option must be explored. It's about coping with the grief, sadness, disappointment and anger after a profound loss- of a job, a loved one, a relationship, a pet, a dream. Option B is about discovering resilience, even joy, in an unexpected new path.

Sandberg's co-author, and friend, is Adam Grant, an author and professor of organizational psychology at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. In a recent interview with the Atlantic magazine, Grant explained that:

When psychologists started studying resilience, they thought there were two paths. One was to be broken by tragedy or hardship, to walk away with post-traumatic stress disorder, debilitating depression, and severe anxiety, and the other was to try and bounce back and return to the state you were at before the event. They were really surprised to discover that many people end up with a third response, which is not just bouncing back but bouncing forward, and that's about emerging with some positive change from a negative event. That's not to say that the grief or sadness goes away, or that anyone is happy that it occurred. But alongside those negative emotions often come improvements in people's lives, where they're able to say, "I'm stronger. I lived through that, I can live through anything. I'm more grateful." "I have new relationships, or my relationships are deeper because people have helped me in ways that I never thought possible, and I've become closer to them because of that."

This third response to the unexpected losses and transitions in our lives—"bouncing forward" as Grant puts it-- is what I want to talk about today. At this time of the year, how can we look back at the challenges of our lives over the past year, even the most painful ones, as opportunities for reflection that might lead to growth and positive change?

While Grant and Sandberg looked to contemporary trends in psychology, roots can be found in the classics of 20th century psychology. In his 1943 Theory of Human Motivation, psychologist Abraham Maslow looked at

human growth and development through the lens of what he called a “hierarchy of needs.” The response to change Grant calls “bouncing forward,” Maslow first called “growing forward.” Maslow saw healthy human development, what he called self-actualization, as a constant navigation of the safety and security of the past and the unknown of the future.

In an article called *Defense and Growth*, he writes:

.....We must become fully aware of the (.....) attractions of safety and security, of the functions of defense and protection against pain, fear, loss and threat, of the need for the courage in order to grow ahead. Every human being has both sets of forces within him.

One set clings to safety and defensiveness out of fear, tending to regress backward, hanging onto the past, afraid to take chances, afraid to jeopardize what she already has, afraid of independence, freedom and separateness. The other set of forces impels him forward towards wholeness, towards full functioning, toward confidence in the face of the external world.

Therefore we can consider the process of healthy growth to be a never ending series of free choice situations, confronting each individual at every point throughout his life, in which he must choose between the delights of safety and growth, dependence and independence, regression and progression, immaturity and maturity.

Safety has both anxieties and delights; growth has both anxieties and delights.

We grow forward when the delights of growth and anxieties of safety are greater than the anxieties of growth and the delights of safety.

To grow forward in our lives requires us to push past our fear of losing our comfort and security to embrace the new possibilities lying in wait. Alice Walker articulates this beautifully in an essay from her collection “Living By the Word”:

Some periods of our growth are so confusing that we don't even recognize that growth is happening. We may feel hostile or angry or weepy and hysterical, or we may feel depressed. It would never occur to us, unless we stumbled on a book or a person who explained to us, that we were in fact in the process of change, of actually becoming larger, spiritually, than we were before. Whenever we grow, we tend to feel it, as a young seed must feel the weight and inertia of the earth as it seeks to break out of its shell on its way to becoming a plant.

As Walker points out, while growth is inevitable throughout our lives, we are not always conscious or aware of what we are going through. It can be isolating and confusing to go through these periods of growth, as individuals and as a community. Being honest and open about our struggles and sharing our stories with one another are two of the most important things we can do to support one another in this religious community.

Over the past two years, the board has worked with the congregation to develop a new mission and “ends” for our congregation— goals for which our church strives, and around which orients our programs and ministries.

One specific end that our board has taken up for study and reflection this year reads:

Together, we, of all ages and identities, embracing our Unitarian Universalist faith and principles, challenge our minds and hearts to grow.

The board is asking each of us to take up the following question as a part of our spiritual lives and to embrace it as a congregation:

“What possibilities exist when we challenge our hearts and minds to grow?”

This end states plainly that growth is a challenge for us. Periods of growth don't always come “naturally” or “easily” but they are inevitable, and if coped with can lead to a healthy and positive future.

Our congregation has been going through a period of growth over these past few years since the departure of Senior Minister Jim Nelson and my call to be your new minister. As is common with any church, after the departure of a former minister, feelings of loss and grief accompany the excitement about the future of a new ministry. These feelings of loss are accentuated when staff members retire and move on to new ventures. It may be hard to imagine life without these beloved staff members. They have been your ministers, your connection to love and belonging.

It's hard to lose what you know, and to trust that what lies ahead. As Music Director Stephen Grimm has announced his retirement at the end of this year, I know many are already feeling a sense of loss, and a fear of what will become of our music program. While transitions are never easy, together, we will find a way forward that honors the past and continues the excellent choral program Stephen has built here at the, and inherited from his Predecessor Ed Low. We will celebrate Stephen's ministry with us, and celebrate the possibilities for the next chapter of his life in retirement, with family and new projects, after a long tenure of faithful service here.

And, when it is time, we will welcome and embrace change—fulfilling our end to challenge our minds and hearts to grow, and expanding our sense of what is possible for us as a religious community. As we welcome Matt today as our Settled Director of Religious Education, we model embracing change with enthusiasm and faith in the future. When we “grow forward” together as a congregation, we are a community where we learn to support one another through the many changes we experience in our own lives, our congregation and in the world. We comfort one another through the pain of life's transitions, but we also help each other make meaning of these changes and imagine how they might enable us to thrive in new ways.

“Roots hold us close, wings set me free,” we sing nearly every Sunday. Growing forward is a slow letting go of what fear and anxiety holds us back from fully living in the present. We harmonize the past and present into a path that leads can lead to a joyful future. While we all experience the bitterness of loss and heartbreak, may we discover, again and again, that we are ultimately made for love.

Shanah tova, may it be a sweet new year for all of us.