

“Character and Wholeness”

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Today is the Twelfth Day of Christmas, memorialized in the song that would have our true love giving to us today 12 drummers drumming along with all of the other gifts of the season. Now that I have planted that song in our heads, some of us will get stuck here as we try to remember all of the gifts of the 12 days of Christmas, so shall we just go through the list and get that out of the way? Feel free to join me! “On the 12th day of Christmas my true love gave to me.....12 drummers drumming, 11 pipers piping, 10 lords a leaping, 9 ladies dancing, 8 maids a milking, 7 swans a swimming, 6 geese a laying, 5 gold rings, 4 calling birds, 3 french hens, 2 turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree.” Fabulous!

Whatever you may think about that song, some find it very annoying, it tells us something of the significance of these 12 days. In the Christian story and tradition, these 12 days mark the span between the birth of Jesus and the coming of the Magi, the wise ones who traveled to find the cause of the new star they saw in the East. Tomorrow is Epiphany, the day that the Magi visit Jesus in the stable, as the story goes. This begins the season celebrated by Christians as Epiphanytide that continues until Ash Wednesday in February this year.

In secular terms, during these 12 days, we say goodbye to the old year and begin a new one. This may be a time for reflection on the past and looking forward to the future. Some of us even set new year's resolutions.

It is said that when the Magi saw Jesus laying in the manger, they fell down and worshiped him, opening their treasures and presenting gifts, not of ladies dancing, turtle doves or swans a swimming, but of gold, frankincense and myrrh. In that moment, the divinity of Jesus was revealed to the wise ones, though the rest of the world was unaware, at least for a time.

And, in secular terms, an epiphany is an “aha” moment, when we experience a life changing event or a shift in our perspective, and things are never the same. In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we might interpret tomorrow, the feast day of Epiphany, as the moment when the wise ones saw the “spark of divinity” in the baby Jesus, the spark of divinity that William Ellery Channing preached is in each of us. This is a foundation of our first principle where we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity in every person. When we act in accord with our first principle, we seek to be aware of the spark of divinity in everyone, and our perspective changes. When we act in accord with our first principle, we know each other in our wholeness.

For the past several months we have been exploring a new spiritual theme each month in worship, in our Covenant groups and in other gatherings. We dove into expectation, belonging, attention and awe. As we begin this new year, our spiritual theme for the month of January is “integrity.”

There are two different and related definitions for integrity. The New Oxford American Dictionary defines integrity as the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; moral uprightness. We may say that someone is a person of integrity, meaning that they are moral and honest. I'll talk more about this definition later in the month.

The other definition of integrity is consistency and wholeness. Leadership consultant So-Young Kang says this:

Integrity stems from the Latin word ‘integer’ which means whole and complete. So integrity requires an inner sense of ‘wholeness’ and consistency of character. When you are in integrity, people should be able to visibly see it through your actions, words, decisions, methods, and outcomes. When you are ‘whole’ and consistent, there is only one you. You bring that same you wherever you are, regardless of the circumstance. You don’t leave parts of yourself behind.

Integrity means that our values are reflected in who we are and how we are in the world, we are whole and consistent, and are experienced that way by ourselves and by others.

Sometimes it is easy to have our actions match our values; it's easy for us to walk our talk. Other times it is much harder, and we have to weigh and choose.

In the first reading today, psychologist Bob Barret tells of his experience that he had of conflicting values in an exercise intended to increase empathy for those facing a terminal diagnosis, recognizing that those at the end of life face so many losses. After listing the 16 people, things and values that Barret held most dear, he was asked to give them up, one by one, choosing the order in which he would do so. At the end of the exercise, he was left with two cards that said “family” and “integrity,” and he didn't want to choose. Who would? In the end, Barret chooses integrity because without it, he decided that life for him would not have value.

This reading is part of a piece presented by Barret in a “This I Believe” segment on National Public Radio. Later on in the piece he tells of his work in the 1980's with gay men facing AIDS, and his dawning awareness that he was living a lie. Over time he became aware that he was gay and was afraid that if he came out, if he claimed his

identity and integrity, he would lose his family, friends, and profession. He was afraid that they would feel betrayed and ashamed. He had to choose between family and integrity.

Barret came out to his family at age 48. And when this story aired in 2012, Barret was in his 60's living as an out gay man and in relationship with his family in a way that works for them all. As he puts it, "today we've found ways to live in our love — each of us true to our own integrity."

Barret's is a story of listening to the still, small voice within that tells us who we truly are. His is story of making hard choices, weighing values to see how we can be true to ourselves. A story of going ahead, even when we want to bury our heads in bedcovers and sew them shut. His is a story of seeking wholeness for himself and his family.

As I listened to Bob Barret speak his truth, I was so touched by his story and his transformation, not only because it is powerful, but because it mirrors a story from my own family. You see, my Dad is a contemporary of Barret's and also a man who came out as gay in his late 40's. I called my Dad to share this story and ask his permission to share his and ours. It was one of many deeply moving and connecting conversations we've had on this topic over the years.

My Dad and I are connected in a unique way: I was born on his 20th birthday. So, we not only share a birthday, but we share the "0" birthdays. I am his only daughter, and in some ways much like him.

My Dad was the second of four sons in a working-class Italian family in the Midwest. He was the first in his family to go to college and he worked as a high school teacher and school administrator for most of his career.

To come out as gay in the 1980's, my Dad also risked many relationships and his career. Although my parents were already divorced and my brothers and I were young adults by then, Dad wasn't sure how we would react. My brothers and I found ways to remain in good relationship with Dad then and over the years. For the rest of his family, Dad simply didn't talk about his private life. A kind of "don't ask, don't tell." When his parents, my grandparents, died, it seemed to me that part of Dad's mask could come off.

And, as a teacher in Florida, my Dad risked his livelihood if he came out. The mid-80's was the height of the AIDS epidemic when much wasn't yet known about the disease and fear ran high. Anita Bryant was rallying against gay rights, running a campaign to

“Save our Children.” Gay men were seen as dangerous for medical and social reasons, and especially dangerous to children. Dad was convinced, then and now, that he would have been fired if he hadn't kept this part of himself hidden. As much as I wish it weren't so, I can't argue with him. When he retired, another part of his mask could come off.

Dad was in a 25-year relationship with Jim, longer than my parents were married, until Jim died too young of cancer a few years ago. When Jim died, my whole family grieved with Dad and his community, my Mom, my brothers and their children. Another part of Dad's mask came off.

Dad and I have talked about how much the world has changed in his lifetime. My brothers raised their children, my nieces and nephews, to know Grandpa and Jim. Nothing unusual, just the way it was. This gives me hope for the future.

I have had just a small glimpse of the cost to my Dad's body, mind and spirit of wearing a mask all those years, when the inside didn't and couldn't match the outside. The cost of not being fully seen and known by parents and siblings. The fear of losing loved ones and his life's work. The longing to be made whole. He tried so hard to sing the songs that others gave him, songs that weren't his. And, I am aware of the irony that if he hadn't tried to be straight, to be who he was supposed to be, my brothers and I wouldn't exist.

My Dad is a good man and a good father. I would say that he is a man of integrity, honest and with strong values. I am sad that he was asked by his family, culture and society to be something other than who he was, that he had to choose between relationship and wholeness, between livelihood and consistency, between survival and integrity. I am so glad that he now lives as a gay man in a community that helped him find his own song; mask lowered, fully himself, in integrity, whole.

Not all stories have a happy ending, not then and not now. There are many in the LGBTQ community in the US and around the world who are not able to fully be themselves. They have to hide parts of themselves in order to survive, let alone thrive. Violence against those who identify as queer, especially those who are trans, is everywhere and rates are rising.

There are many ways, implied and explicit, that we are asked to be something other than who we are. It is worth rejoicing when we find a community that can see our divinity and helps us see it ourselves.

Erik Erikson's model of development suggests a stage at the end of our lives called Integrity vs Despair. This model was revolutionary in suggesting that we continue to develop throughout our entire lives, not just in childhood and youth. At each stage Erikson sets up a polarity, such as trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame/doubt, initiative vs. guilt. Erikson says that, at the end of our lives, we reflect on who and how we have been. If we feel guilt and remorse, we may feel despair and helplessness. If we have a sense of accomplishment, we may feel closure and completeness, integrity.

The reality of course is that most of us experience both integrity and despair, remorse and accomplishment, not just at the end of our lives, but throughout. We balance both and all, and in the process we develop our wisdom. With luck, like the Magi, the wise ones, we develop the wisdom to see the divinity, the wholeness, in others and in ourselves. Not perfection, but the wholeness of life. That's the bargain of living.

I'll close with these words from Rev. David Blanchard:

“Our songs sing back to us something of our essence, something of our truth, something of our uniqueness. When our songs are sung back to us, it's not about approval, but about recognizing our being and our belonging in the human family...”

May we find the courage to seek and speak truth.

May we offer to each other of the peace of knowing that no part of us needs to hide.

May we be a community that sings back songs of love that our spirits may be made whole.

May this be so. Blessed Be. Amen.

Let us turn our songs of wholeness inward into a time of silence together.

For a humorous take on the 12 Days of Christmas, go [here](#).

The article by So-Young Kang is [here](#).

Bob Barret's piece “Living With Integrity” on “This I Believe” by NPR is [here](#).