

“Welcoming Growth”

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Delivered Sunday, January 30, 2022

First Reading: The 3rd principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association is: Acceptance of One Another and Encouragement to Spiritual Growth in Our Congregations. Today’s reading is an excerpt from a Reflection on the Third Principle by Rev. Rob Hardies, a UU minister.

Spiritual growth isn’t about a vertical ascent to heaven but about growth in every dimension at once. It’s spirituality in 3-D. Growth in spirit doesn’t measure one’s proximity to a God above, but rather the spaciousness of one’s own soul—its volume, its capacity, its size.

We need souls that can take in the world in all its complexity and diversity, yet still maintain our integrity. And we need souls that can love and be in relationship with all of this complexity. Instead of fight or flight, we need a spiritual posture of embrace.

Second Reading: Our second reading is an excerpt from a reflection by Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr titled “Everything Belongs: The Three Boxes”:

Whenever we’re led out of normalcy into sacred, open space, it’s going to feel like suffering, because it is letting go of what we’re used to. This is always painful at some level. But part of us has to die if we are ever to grow larger... The role of the prophet is to lead us into sacred space by deconstructing the old space; the role of the priest is to teach us how to live fruitfully in sacred space. The prophet disconnects us from the false, and the priest reconnects us to the real at ever larger levels. If “priests” have been largely unsuccessful, it is because there are so few prophets.

Sermon/Homily: Welcoming Growth

Three years ago, when I was in search of a congregation to serve, I read the materials from quite a few congregations that were in search of a minister to serve them. There were several things about OUUC that stood out and that made me consider the possibility. One was that the social justice work here was named “Faith in Action.” That told me that this congregation wasn’t afraid of words like “faith” even though the language of reverence carries some baggage that may need to be unpacked and sorted through. It also told me that this was a congregation that understood how important it is to know our values and to act in ways that bring our values into the world. Values like interconnection, dignity and transformation. This was a congregation that knew about putting faith into action.

How a congregation brings its life energy into the life of the world and works for justice, that is one of the ways that congregations grow. People who study congregations call this “incarnational growth.” This simply means making an abstract concept more concrete; like making values real, like putting faith into action.

Scholars say that incarnational growth is only one of five ways that congregations grow, and that a healthy congregation grows in all these ways. For those of you who like to get more information after a service, we’ll put in the chat a link to these five ways to grow.

[put in chat: <https://www.uua.org/leadership/library/five-types-growth>]

Another way that congregations grow is organically. This simply means how a congregation builds a community, one that supports individual growth, connection, and making a difference in the world. It’s about the governance model, or how a congregation makes decisions and allocates authority and responsibility. It includes the congregational covenant or the agreements we make about how to be together. It’s about having physical space and staff to support the size of the congregation. We’ve

learned in the past 2 years that it also means supporting virtual space and infrastructure. Organic growth is nurturing the living fibers that bind us together.

A third way that congregations grow is maturational. This is the ability of a congregation to challenge, support and encourage its members to grow spiritually. This is how a congregation supports us as we deepen our faith and broaden our understanding of the sacred. It is also how we support the spiritual growth of current members and at the same time have a welcome path for newcomers.

This kind of spiritual growth means that we learn to recognize differences, knowing that diversity is a value that helps us all grow. And it's how we handle disagreement and behavior that is out of covenant. A mature and healthy congregation is one that has clear expectations of behavior and that can lovingly hold accountable all those who are in the community.

Just like with people, maturity doesn't happen just because a person or congregation gets older; it requires intentional focus on learning and putting into action the wisdom that comes from that learning.

The fourth way that congregations grow is in connections, meaning how we are connected to the rest of Unitarian Universalism, connected to the Pacific Western Region, and connected to other congregations in Olympia. A growing congregation knows that it is not alone and is connected to something greater.

Last, congregations grow in numbers. Growth in numbers doesn't just mean adding new members; it also means maintaining the number of members already within the congregation and keeping track of losses to understand why they happen. Numerical growth means changing the things that need to be changed in order to retain healthy members. It means acknowledging that some losses are healthy or inevitable when we don't compromise our ethics or principles.

As we prepare to celebrate the 70th anniversary of OUUC in June, we can celebrate all the ways OUUC has grown. Some of you have experienced the growth of the congregation from a family-sized fellowship to a mid-sized program-focused congregation. The congregation grew from the little white church in Tumwater to the current building. As the congregation has grown, the structures needed to support the growth have changed with more organization, more staff, and policies. And I hope many of you have grown spiritually. As we grow individually, we also grow collectively. OUUC has grown a lot over the years in all these ways and we must continue to grow in order to be healthy and relevant.

What is clear is that growth means change. It means learning new skills, new ways of being. It means letting go of what no longer serves us or serves the community. It means grieving what we miss from the way things used to be. Growing takes work and sometimes it is painful; grieving sure is painful. Part of maturity is being able to feel our own pain and to be compassionate in the face of another's pain.

Right now, our staff team is learning and growing together by reading "My Grandmother's Hands" by Resmaa Menakem.

The book's subtitle is "Healing Racialized Trauma and the Pathways to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies." We are learning together how supremacy culture has shaped us and shows up in our work.

In his book, Menakem identifies two kinds of pain, clean pain and dirty pain. I know that "clean" and "dirty" have all kinds of meanings and not all of them are useful or just. It helps me to think of it in medical terms: a wound that is clean can heal, a wound that is dirty will get infected and not heal.

Clean pain is the necessary discomfort of healing, the pain needed to mend and that supports growth. Menakem writes:

It's the pain you experience when you know exactly what you need to say or do; when you really, really don't want to say or do it; and you do it anyway. It's also

the pain you experience when you have no idea what to do; when you're scared or worried about what might happen; and when you step forward into the unknown anyway; with honesty and vulnerability. (p. 19)

I'd name this as the pain of growth, spiritual growth for individuals and for congregations.

The other kind of pain is what Menakem calls dirty pain; the pain of avoidance, blame and denial. It's the pain that we try to lessen by turning away or by hurting others, it's the pain of cruelty and violence in our words or actions. It's the pain that causes us to fight or flee, emotionally or physically. Dirty pain creates more pain; it never leads to healing or health.

When we bring our clean pain to our faith community, when it is a safe place to be vulnerable and share, we can seek comfort; it's one of the ways we minister to each other, we help each other through the pain. We can accompany and witness the growth and healing of each other. It's how we live into our third principle of acceptance and encouraging spiritual growth.

When we bring our dirty pain into our faith community it is the job of the community to notice and name what we are doing, to notice when the pain is hurting others, to shelter those being hurt, and then to help us realize that we are acting out of our unhealthy pain. Even though we are in community, we cannot change someone else or grow for them. We can't feel someone else's pain for them; we can empathize to help them work through it, but we can't take on the pain of another. What we can do is accompany, witness, challenge, and hold each other accountable to our covenant, doing this all with love, an embracing soul.

Growth in maturity requires that we not allow a concern for growth in numbers cause us to compromise our values and principles. Sometimes the kinds of growth are in tension with each other, requiring our careful discernment about values and priorities.

As we got to know each other in the minister search process 3 years ago, I heard many stories about how much change and transition OUUC had been through. When I arrived here as your minister, it quickly became clear that some of you had experienced or were experiencing a lot of pain. Some of it was clean pain, pain that was part of a healing process, a process that takes time.

And it was clear that some were left with the results of what Menacam calls dirty pain—avoidance, blame and denial. This kind of pain is not unusual in congregations, especially those with lots of transition. Some of that pain is still here, and it keeps coming back; it will until we address it.

Here are some ways that dirty pain shows up in my life and ways I notice it in the life of our congregation. It's the pain of holding on to a past expecting it to continue, while knowing that it will never be again. The pain of clinging to plans that we love and invested in, and that may not fit a world that has changed. The pain of past conflicts that remain unresolved. The pain of past communal decisions that we as individuals disagree with. It is the pain of avoiding the grief we'd feel if we mourned that past; the discomfort we'd feel if we faced that conflict. It is also the disappointment that the pain is still here. I wonder if any of those sound familiar to you.

Then, 7 months into our new ministry together, we went into COVID. We pivoted with success and we are doing pretty well!

Now, almost 2 years into the global pandemic, there is more pain. We have suffered so many losses, including losses of people dear to us. I feel this pain, too. I grieve the loss of beloved members and friends and the loss of the ministry with you that I had imagined—my imagination back then wasn't creative enough to include a global pandemic and two years of virtual church!

And underneath the new, some of the old pain is still here. I know this is true for myself and I see it is true for our community. The conflicts, disappointments, hurts, and

challenges resurface, sometimes in familiar ways and sometimes in new ways. The pain of denial, avoidance and blame doesn't heal until we clean the wound. It will hurt for a time, but then the healing can begin. That pain doesn't define any of us as individuals and it doesn't define this congregation; we are more than that. There is much that has been worked through. And there remains work for us to do.

This brings us back to where we started, putting our faith in action. Sometimes we think that putting our faith into action is how we act "out there"--out in the community or out in the world. It is. And it is also how we act in here—how we are in relationship with each other. Putting our faith in action is how we live our values in the congregation: how we treat each other, how we welcome those who are different from us, if and how we transform conflict, how we tend to the building, what we ask of each other and of the staff.

In his essay on the 3rd principle of Unitarian Universalism, Rev. Rob Hardies says that "the purpose of church is to provide spiritual sustenance for world engagement." I agree. There are many wonderful organizations that we can be part of that do good work in the world. What is unique about a faith community, the reason we exist and are so needed, is for spiritual grounding and spiritual growth. At its best, a faith community is where we can discern what we believe and how to act out of those beliefs. A faith community is a place where we can learn and practice the skills of being together: how to listen deeply and speak honestly and directly, how to negotiate differences, and how to transform conflict.

What we learn here is what we bring out there. Here we can learn and practice the skills we need in order to help create the world we envision that is loving, just and healthy. If we don't learn these skills, we add to the hurt in the world rather than help with healing.

As we move through this time of pandemic, one thing is clear: we will never be the same. Ways of being that didn't serve us have been laid bare. Every individual, community, nation and every congregation is being invited to ask who we are now and

who we want to be in the future. Nationally we are wrestling with climate change, racism and threats to democracy. As a congregation we are working to develop healthy processes for decision-making, authority and responsibility, how we live into the new mission, and how to create a sustainable shared ministry. These questions and challenges are not new in the nation or in this congregation. How we addressed them before is no longer sufficient. Find new ways that are inclusive and just is the work we are called to now.

We are being invited to grow. We have been moved out of what was normal and invited into sacred space. In this sacred space we are asked to grieve the past, to grieve what we have lost. It's going to feel like suffering, because it is letting go of what we're used to. We decide if we experience clean pain or dirty pain. We decide how we will act as individuals and as a community, because in sacred space, on holy ground, we can also dream. It's the opportunity we have been given!

There is plenty that we cannot control. How we answer this call, respond to this invitation to grow, that is up to us. We can work through what is needed to be healthier, more loving, more just. We can encourage each other to individual spiritual growth, and we can mature as a congregation. We can learn and practice new skills. We can grow into a shared ministry. We can decide to put our faith in action right here. We can welcome growth. I know we can.

It's ours to choose. May we choose well.

Let's move into a time of holy silence together.