

“Life in the Labyrinth: Coming Home to Ourselves”

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Reading: From *The Pearl* by Rev. Linda Haggerstone

... the tiny grain, a speck of grit
soon begins to grow,
becoming full and moon-shaped...
It grows within me 'til the time comes:
the womb-like chamber
of my heart opens wide
and the pearl wakes, breathing the first breath
of a new dawn...

Sermon/Homily: Life in the Labyrinth: Coming Home to Ourselves

I haven't been in this building, I think, since that topsy turvy Sunday morning of the first virtual service, back in March 2020. And still, being here today feels like coming home. So, I am going to share some tender bits from my life and trust that you wonderful people will come with me on this journey.

I used to choose a word for the year. In late December I would sit down with my journal and write until I got settled into goals related to career, relationships, health, and spirit. I would spend time with those thoughts until a word kind of fell out. My colleague and friend Tim Atkins introduced me to this practice. Tim is a religious educator in Oklahoma and has served on our Unitarian Universalist Association's board of trustees and in other denominational roles. Since 2019 he has shared a piece for the Unitarian Universalist Worship Web weekly reflection Braver/Wiser about this spiritual practice he has of choosing a word for the year, so this may sound familiar to you.

In January of 2020 I chose the word “Become”.

[Share slide/photo: “belong”]

I had been approved as a candidate for ordination by The Chaplaincy Institute, I had accepted an invitation for a chaplain residency at St. Joe's and also to train as a Clinical Pastoral Education Educator. The wonderful job I had been doing for four years was winding down. I was becoming. I sat with my magazines and scissors and mod podge and prayed a hopeful prayer. Be ready, here and now, make it your year of thriving, planning ahead, be proactive. There is even a clipping of a picture of a labyrinth.

Not one thing that I expected for 2020 happened in the way that I anticipated. Nothing. Nothing.

That job I planned to leave carefully and lovingly ended more quickly than I anticipated,, my ordination was postponed at the last minute because of COVID... eventually happening in a virtual ceremony in late June, my mother died halfway across the country on the day after my ordination. Many of you were right by my side as all of this happened. In the fall of 2020, I began my chaplain residency but when it became clear to me that I could unknowingly spread COVID to patients I couldn't make myself visit patient rooms and I had to resign. All those words I cut out, all those plans to become went sideways and upside down.

I traveled down a path that seemed to be heading forward, toward a goal, moving ahead, reaching. And then the path turned back on itself, then moved ahead, then turned back. Winding switchbacks.

I had to soften that plan of becoming. The sharp edges of striving for what I aspired to do, to create—the very way I planned to become all the things had to shift and change. It wasn't all good. If my ordination hadn't been postponed until June, maybe I could have been bedside when my mother slipped away from this life—holding her hand, singing her favorite hymns. If COVID had not swept through, I would have continued my training as a Chaplain with a very different path in ministry maybe good, but maybe not.

And...if things hadn't gone sideways I wouldn't have been in this building when word came in March 2020 that schools were closing and the Unitarian Universalist Association president was recommending not to meet in person. Sara wouldn't have told Rev. Mary that she'd seen me tape a phone to a chair and go live. Together we figured that whole thing out. Those weeks in the early pandemic were so tender and so fraught and.... at the same time in community, we found spots of joy. I remember the meetings we had to practice using Zoom, we would pass around the host role, and practice muting and unmuting and sharing our screen. We laughed together as we all learned new things. We helped each other. We were scared and mourning and bereft and yet, when we could soften, shift, turn with the path, find our way there was joy and hope and love.

If things hadn't gone sideways, I would not have called my colleague at The Chaplaincy Institute to see if they needed anything while I looked for new work after I left the hospital. I wouldn't have learned that their Community Minister had just resigned. I

wouldn't be about to accompany my 24th candidate for ordination as they take their vows, receive the blessing of community with the laying on of hands, and be ordained.

If things hadn't gone sideways, would I have slowed down, considered my values, my authentic being? Would I have been striving and grinding and pushing through, focused on reaching the goal, getting the achievement, staying on schedule and moving forward, onward, ahead.

The truth is, I am happy. I love my job, I love my ministry, I love my spiritual direction practice. I am healthy, balanced and more spiritually grounded, I think than I have ever been. This path that seems to turn and turn and turn has allowed me to move toward alignment with my authentic being. It has brought me home. Home here. Home to myself.

There are other questions this raises for me. Why the grind, the striving, the pushing through? Why? . I think there are many reasons we can point to: protestant work ethic, late stage capitalism valuing achievement over all else. And, I wonder, is there something within that constellation of culture that causes some of us to just feel like we're not enough unless we strive, grind, push.

When we slow down, soften, align, maybe that's the point when we become the people, culture, community we long to be. I think about a newborn baby, the complete holy sacred being that is a tiny fresh baby. They do have to work so hard to learn to walk, and talk, and feed themselves and all of the things that they need to learn to do. But they don't grind. They don't strive. Most babies just go by, day by day. Learning, growing, becoming 2 then 5. It's a joyful becoming. That clear, clean unfolding.

I hold tenderly my ministry now and what brought me to answer the call to ministry. I keep a bell on my altar at home to remind me of that call, and to remind me to come home to it when I get tangled in too many to do lists.

This softening, aligning with authentic identity and coming home can apply many places.

We can do this with institutions. Not too long ago I attended a zoom birthday party for the founder of The Chaplaincy Institute where I serve as the community minister. She dreamed of this whole school and community and then loved it into being. She shared stories from her life, from the time of the inspiration for ChI and of time creating art installations and writing and teaching across the globe. She is a living inspiration of what happens when we become the people we dream of being. I don't want to go back

to how the school was in 1999, and ...I want to come home to the dream of healing and oneness that came to her on a hilltop in India one sweltering night some 30 years ago. I notice that as I let go of too many meetings, too many projects and too many data driven goals, I become aligned, aware and awake in a way that allows that becoming of her dream to actually flow.

What about here at OUUC? Do you remember what brought you through the door or to the Zoom invitation or the youtube link? Maybe it just happened today, or maybe last year or maybe decades ago. What might happen when you remember that call, that spark? As we assemble here onsite and online, how do we align with that spark?

Might the becoming we seek emerge gently sometimes? Softly, releasing the striving and the pushing through.

I honor this turning back and round back again that has been my path in these last few years. Labyrinths finish where they begin, the beginning is the end, the return to where we started.

I believe as the hymns says that all life is a gift which we are called to use to build the common good. Becoming the beloved community we dream of is good, and beautiful. My goodness the world needs healing. So much.

Still, there is nothing so beautiful as being where we belong, as emerging into the aligned, alive people we long to be. May we all know, like the child playing hide and seek who looked into the mirror may we all know the very spark of the universe deep inside ourselves. Home, here, home.