

## ***Being of Age: Maturity: the Spiral Journey***

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Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ —

Rev Paul Beckel

**Singing Together** #317 *We are not our Own*

**Chalice Lighting / Covenant**

### **Introduction**

A few weeks ago, we recognized our BUF coming of age class and I charged them to continue to mature: as they face new challenges and opportunities ... as they succeed, and as they make mistakes. Maturity, of course, isn't a threshold that we cross once and then can take for granted. It's more of a spiral journey: forward in time, but not so straightforward as a learning curve.

Coming of age is a real thing—a physical, psychological, and social process—but we can't point to a particular moment when it takes place. So it is with the transition that we are all going through these days, often referred to as “good riddance to 2020.”

And though in some ways the New Year is an arbitrary marker of a point of transition, we are in fact in the season of lengthening days, we are almost post-election, and four million vaccinations have been administered in the U.S., twelve million across the globe. COVID is on the rampage. And it is also true that there is cause for hope.

Not everyone, however, survives coming of age, elections, or pandemic. And even those of us who have survived will experience again the turning of the earth into another equinox, another solstice, another equinox, another solstice ... a spiral journey through joys and heartbreak, our own generosity and carelessness, learning and forgetting.

Thank you for being with me today, this most unusual first Sunday of the New Year, when resolutions may seem more important than ever, or may seem moot in the context of the swirl of uncertainty. Thank you for joining with me, and joining with one another, in this spiral journey.

**Children's Focus** *The Dance*, by Richard Paul Evans

A father watches, and smiles, as his daughter grows and dances through her life passages. As he dies, she dances for him again.

**Meditation**

**Interlude**

**Eracism**

**Reflections**

When I was little I did not like pickles. Or mayonnaise ... broccoli, sauerkraut, or tuna. It would not have even occurred to me to eat kale. The fact that I enjoy all of these now, I do not consider a sign of maturity. The expansion of my dietary preferences makes my life more enjoyable, but does not make me more virtuous.

In our recent coming of age ceremony, I did not tell our BUF teens to eat their broccoli. Rather, I noted that they have reached a point in their lives where everywhere they go, and in their own homes and families, they will be held to a standard of expectations regarding maturity. In part, this will include:

- Taking responsibility for themselves, and taking responsibility for the impact that their actions have on others. (Noting that responsibility, of course, comes with freedom, I also charged them to—their freedom, and to employ their freedom by being themselves, and by taking the risk to live a full and—life.)
- Since I am a great orator, I am sure that the teens remember me saying that to be mature means to remain humble.
- And I urged them to continue to learn. Without, however, stuffing their heads with learning. To learn without pretending that we can truly learn anything without putting what we've learned into practice.

This was, of course, a very abbreviated list of the demands of adulthood. We could point to just about — virtue as a standard for maturity. To examine them all of course, would take a lifetime. So we have a couple of alternatives: We could, with budding adolescent chutzpa, spend our time arguing about what is and is not a virtue. Or, we could pick one, for now, and get on with it.

We could focus, perhaps, on something we're already good at. Virtuous action does not have to be painful. Or we could focus on some area of life where we have some motivation to improve. There *is* a confluence in this moment where our capacities, and what the world needs come together. There is a confluence, *in this moment* where our capacities, and what the world needs come together. For each of us this will be different. For each of us, to respond to this call, be it ever so humble, this is what maturity looks like.

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We should note, of course, that whatever so-called virtue (or characteristic of maturity) we're talking about (or better yet, putting into practice), our quest can easily lead us *away* from virtue or maturity.

A Universalist conviction that the Love which God holds equally for all people... leading into a sense of our oneness with humanity ... leading to deep compassion and a zeal for social justice.... As much as we affirm and promote this progression, we need to stay conscious that fighting relentlessly against equally relentless opposition can lead us into the temptation to feel self-righteousness and moral superiority, rather than humility.

It being the season for resolutions, a study has recently come out about the “paradox of self-enhancement.” It turns out that “practices that are supposed to minimise the ego very commonly enlarge it and ... those who put extra effort into enhancing spirituality are often the smuggest, most self-aggrandizing and unbearable of all.”

This is not an overall condemnation of mindfulness exercises, yoga, or hanging upside down on the jungle gym as a path to inner peace. It is simply a calling to awareness that not only can the best *intensions* be the road to hell, but even the best practices, practiced as if they are the singular ultimate route to enlightenment, can lead us astray.

Mohandas Gandhi spoke of seven sins: “*Wealth without work, Pleasure without conscience, Science without humanity, Knowledge without character, Politics without principle, Commerce without morality, Worship without sacrifice.*”

Science, knowledge, politics, commerce, worship ... can be holy pursuits, or they can beget horrors. So maturity is not just about cultivating virtue; it's also about being self-aware enough to see its potential for abuse. Cultivating virtue, especially in this time of isolation, can too easily lead us into becoming a cult of one. This does not mean that if we find ourselves alone, we're ruined. It means, simply, that, remembering our mortality, we cannot take anything for granted.

When I think of a spiral journey, I think of the unbalancing and rebalancing of my best efforts, stupid mistakes, unintentional consequences, and unearned good fortune ... through time.

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Many Unitarian Universalists go through stages of spiritual development that involve rejecting traditional religious rites of passage, epic stories, and languages of reverence. Unitarian Universalism as a whole went through (is still going through) similar stages of spiritual development. So even those who were born into our living tradition, this still-evolving UU movement, can get caught up in, or stuck in, the adolescent stage of reactionary rejection of anything with even a whiff of religiosity.

You might not have noticed that the meditation that I shared today was line by line an interpretation of what Christians know as the Lord's Prayer, or the Our Father:

Our father, who art in heaven

Spirit of love, here *in us*, and joining us to all that is,

Hallowed be thy name

We speak of you with reverence.

Thy kingdom come

In your name we work for peace, and honor all creation,

Thy will be done

This is our task and our opportunity, here and now,

On earth as it is in heaven

while the stars above obey the laws of the heavens.

Give us this day our daily bread

May there be food for all so that none may go hungry,

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

When we have been unfair, unkind, or thoughtless, may we have the courage to apologize, and the wisdom to forgive when others hurt us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Give us the strength to do as we are guided by conscience. And to turn away from whatever harms us, or hurts others.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever.

For the wonder, the beauty, and the goodness all around us, we give praise and thanks.

Don't get me wrong. I am not suggesting that maturity means becoming an old fart who reveres tradition for its own sake. There are many traditions that are anything but virtuous. (You don't have to look at a gigantic statue honoring Robert E Lee and say hmmm, God loved Robert E Lee just as much as anyone, so why not put up a gigantic statue to honor him?")

Rather, it's important to discern between situations when we need to point out that something is harmful vs when we simply have a different perspective (which we don't always need to share ... especially if it's going to take away from the deeper power of the moment ... or take away from another person's delight in blessing us in their own way.)

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The sweet lament known today as the "Prayer of St Francis" goes like this:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.  
Where there is offence, let me bring pardon.  
Where there is discord, let me bring union.  
Where there is error, let me bring truth.  
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.  
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.  
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.  
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.  
O Master, let me not seek as much  
to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love,  
for it is in giving that one receives,  
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,  
it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,  
it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.

I resonate with these aspirations deeply, but more easily when I remove a couple of words that get in the way of my theological perspective. By removing the words Lord, and Master, and removing the (for me) too specific pointer at where these virtues come from, I'm able to appreciate the prayer's deeper meaning.

Adapting such a prayer, I believe, can help me to more fully affirm its meaning. But this can also pull my consciousness away from the meaning if, every time I call these words to mind, I feel the need to point out—to myself or to others—that it's a beautiful attitude. See, I did it again.

And yet those in Francis of Assisi's own movement have critically assessed this prayer. They say it could not have been written by Francis, who would not have said me, me, me.... One of his close followers [Blessed Giles of Assisi] offers an alternative:

Blessed are they who love and do not therefore desire to be loved ... Blessed are they who serve and do not therefore desire to be served ... Blessed are they who behave well toward others and do not desire that others behave well toward them ....

I most easily resonate with spiritual practices without words, so my brain does not get distracted by analyzing the words. But there are deep and powerful choral songs that I get a lot of inspiration from by singing with full voice, but in a language that I don't understand...just taking in the majesty, and weeping with the lament that is inherent within the music itself.

But we don't always have that option, and maturity often calls us to let go of our resistance. So sing with me now: Amazing Grace.

**Singing Together**    #205 *Amazing Grace*

### **Reflections**

UU Rev Forrest Church defined religion as “the human response to the dual reality of being alive, and having to die.” Coming of age, and then being of age: maturing, slipping, playing, growing, erring, regretting, forgiving, and learning ... all are part of a sacred, precious process: of being alive and having to die.

And so, what is it to live in that in-between? Losing touch with neither the beginning nor the end? Another lovely and paradoxical aspect of maturity is to retain the spirit of the child. The spirit of play, imagination, and trust. Growing older usually means accumulating hurt, and can easily lead to defensiveness. Growing older can also include accumulating more stuff, more comforts, and the fear of losing those privileges that in some ways make our lives more secure.

Michael Mendizza, in an essay called “The Intelligence of Play,” writes: “To understanding the intelligence of Play is to appreciate the difference between learning and conditioning. Real learning, at any age ...is movement from the known to the unknown and occurs in a natural state of wonder, curiosity, inquiry, exploration, testing, observing, imagining.”

Life can condition us in the opposite direction: “Conditioning, which includes the vast majority of schooling, training and coaching, is most often externally motivated. It usually takes the form of rewards and punishments....

“A certain amount of conditioning and habituation are necessary, otherwise we would never master anything, always having to discover anew how to tie our shoes. [But] Every time we master anything — to the state of play to transcend the limitations of habitual and reflexive state of body and mind implied by that mastery.”

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I appreciate this brief story about learning: “Autobiography in 5 Short Chapters” by Portia Nelson

*Chapter 1*

I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in.  
I am lost....I am helpless.  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes me forever to find a way out.

*Chapter 2*

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in the same place.  
But, it isn't my fault.  
It still takes a long time to get out.

*Chapter 3*

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there.  
I still fall in....it's a habit.  
My eyes are open.  
I know where I am.  
It's my fault.  
I get out immediately.

*Chapter 4*

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I walk around it.

## Chapter 5

I walk down another street.

I was sincere when I said that I appreciate this story. It's also worth noting, however, that the process described here is about conditioning. It's playful in tone, but it's really about negative reinforcement. It's also very linear, which life, usually, is not.

I've also been impressed by the aphorism something like: "Life will provide us with the same lesson, over and over, until we get it." It's a little simplistic, as bumper sticker theology and old Richard's Almanac can be, but still insightful when taken in the spirit of another overly simplistic aphorism which I find very meaningful. That is, "whatever is true, its opposite is also true." I got this from my hospital chaplaincy supervisor who cautioned us against the ego of trying to fix, rather than accompanying people who were going through battles we could not possibly understand.

My wish for 2021 is that, when history repeats itself, that we as a society will learn something. And my more humble self finds solace in the fact that even when we have not learned, still we have made it through many incredibly difficult passages to have another go at it.

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As it says in the second verse—the deeper and less sappy verse—of Auld Lang Syne,

We ... have run about the hills,  
And picked the daisies fine;  
But we've wandered many a weary foot  
Since auld lang syne. [the old times]  
We ... have paddled in the stream,  
From morning sun till dine;  
But seas between us broad have roared  
Since auld lang syne.

So let's raise our cups then: cups of comfort when it comes, and cups of kindness as well. May we laugh again with childlike delight, remember the old days, remember our mortality, and give thanks for the time in between.

### Offertory

**Singing Together** #298 *Wake, now, my Senses*

**Extinguishing the Chalice**

**Circle 'Round**