

Sermon – 2017 12-31

OPENING WORDS

From “Eager to Love” By Richard Rohr –

Cut off branches

The motivation, meaning, and inherent energy of any action comes from its ultimate source, which is the person’s foundational and core vantage point. What is his or her real and honest motivation?

“Who” is doing the seeing? Is it the “cut-off branch”, the egoic self, trying to do the seeing? Is it a person needing to be right, or is it a person who wants to love?

There is a very different kind of seeing from a branch that has remained lovingly and consciously **connected to its Source**.

When Jesus spoke of a cut-off branch, he meant a person who can only see from its small position of “me” and what meets “my” needs. It seems to me our society is largely populated by such cut-off branches, where a commitment to the common and real good has become almost a rarity.

Seeing from a pair of glasses beyond our own is what I call “participative seeing.” In the truest sense, I am that which I am seeing. This primal communion immediately communicates a spaciousness, a joy and a quiet contentment. **This is the new self.**

SERMON 12-31-2017 By Joyce Ramay

A New You for the New Year

Every Sunday, our worship associates welcome you with the words: Whoever you are, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, whomever you love, you are welcome here.

How many of you are giving much thought to where you are on your spiritual journey?

Do you come to All Faiths on Sundays for the joy of celebration, the wonderful music, the warmth of community, and a sense of belonging? Those are all good things. But are they enough?

New Year’s has traditionally been a time for reflection on the past, and resolutions for the future. It is not unusual for people to seek self-improvement – getting rid of bad habits, or maybe resolving to exercise more, have a better diet, improve skills, get a better job, or have more social engagement. A Google search for A New You brought up mostly physical things – like losing weight or having cosmetic surgery.

But when you are thinking about self-improvement, do you stop to consider where you are on your spiritual journey?

It’s possible that it could be the most important question you may ask, because so many other things really depend upon the state of your soul, and the condition of your inner spirit.

James Fowler of Harvard, Emory and Boston College, wrote a book about the *Stages of Faith*. This may be a good time to review them.

Stage 1 – Intuitive Projective stage – “*The fantasy-filled, imitative phase typical of ages three to seven, when self-awareness is first attained.*” You have probably left that stage behind, but there are some people, who never advance beyond that.

Stage 2 – Mythic-Literal – “*God is anthropomorphic,*” (a kind of Big-Daddy in the Sky), “*and stories and symbols are taken literally.*” This is a key attribute of many fundamentalists, who take words and images as concrete representations of God or Truth.

It is not unusual to find people stuck in this stage, because it provides a tangible sense of certainty and security.

Stage 3 – Synthethic-Conventional – “*Believer is governed by unexamined ideology and precepts received from authority figures.*” If the priest, parent, boss or president says it is so, it must be so. This relieves a person of accountability by making others responsible for religion and values. You just obey – you go along to get along, and expect everyone else to follow the rules, good or bad. This stage often gives a sense of belonging, but reflects continued dependency.

Stage 4 – Individuative Reflective Faith – *“Individual assumes responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes. It is a stage of critical reflection, when stories and symbols are de-mythologized, and self-actualizing drives begin to emerge.”* You no longer just accept what you are told, but you assert your independence, and your ego takes over. You become your own authority. Most UUs have probably reached this stage of their journey. This is a good thing, and you may be content to stay there, but it has its limits, if you only use it to reject everything, and as an excuse for doing your own thing, no matter what its impact may be on yourself or others. The hazard is that some people, who remain in this stage, make a God out of their own egos and independence. And it can also lead to an existential sense of alienation. For many, it is an important stepping stone on the path to something more meaningful.

Stage 5 – Conjunctive Faith – Integrative. *“Alive to paradox, and the truth in apparent contradictions, strives to unify opposites in mind and experience. Maintains vulnerabilities to the strange truths of those who are Other. Freed from the confines of tribe, class, religious community or nation.”*

This is when you decide that maybe you don’t have all the answers, and things are not as absolute as you once thought. This is a stage where you may engage in interfaith activities. You may explore, by study and traveling, to know more about others, but the Other remains the Other.

Stage 6 – Universalizing Faith – *“Individuals acquire a taste and feel for transcendent moral and religious actuality ... devotion to a universalizing compassion ... enlarged visions of universal community.”* This is the Universalist approach to faith, and also that of Hindu Vedanta. It is characteristic of our own Transcendentalists like Emerson. You no longer believe that you alone have a monopoly on truth or virtue. This transformative faith is what we can aspire to here at All Faiths. We can proactively seek greater understanding and inclusive inspiration from our many sources. We recognize and respect the validity of ideas that come from many people, even if they do not agree with us. We become open to enlightening discovery, by actively searching to know more, to feel more deeply, to experience more expansively, and to love more completely.

As you travel on your journey, each stage of development enlarges your center of identity – so that your sense of “I” and “We” expands from a narrow identification with self, race, political affiliation, and religion, to encompass a broader range of humanity.

With this opening comes a corresponding expansion of your moral compass. You encounter a deeply heart-felt living experience of unity - unity with other humans, unity with nature, and ultimately unity with the cosmos, the divine.

In this process, we engage in an awesome transformation of our essential identities – we see ourselves as integral and united parts of the “Universal We.”

Fowler said that Stage Sixers are rare, but they are becoming less rare, thanks in large part to techniques of consciousness-raising that we have imported from Hinduism and Buddhism, and greater acquaintance with some Christian mystics.

A 2009 Pew survey found that 49%, nearly half of the public, say they have had a religious or mystical experience, defined as “a moment of sudden religious insight or awakening,” and that is twice as high as it was in 1962, when it was only 22%. Spiritual writer Owen Waters refers to this as **The Shift**. There is a growing realization that something spiritual is happening on a wide scale.

Throughout the centuries, those stuck at Stages 2 and 3 often perpetrated damage, destruction and even death by forcing their faiths on others, and persecuting or excluding those who did not accept their beliefs, rules and rituals. But there is hope. When you reach Stages 5 and 6, you find a substantial increase in your capacity to love, to have compassion for others’ joys and sorrows, and to share your time, talents and treasures for worthy causes.

When you move from Stage 5 to Stage 6, you move from simply tolerating others, to embracing them as part of your own identity.

In these higher stages, selfish egocentric pursuits of money, wealth, power, fame and glory are replaced by a deeper desire to serve others, to share, and to make this a better world. When you leave the

lower stages, you are, in effect, dying to that old narrow self-identity, as you advance towards a broader identity – a new you.

Richard Rohr states: “*From evolution and the lifecycle of stars to our own lives, transformation and change appear to happen through periods of loss, crisis, stress, and even death. Physicists today would say that loss of energy or matter is not real. There is only transformation. Think of the changes water goes through in its journey from cloud (vapor) to liquid (rain) or solid (ice) and back to vapor. What may look like loss or death is in fact a becoming.*”

Across the course of your life, you grow out of a stage of dependent infancy, to rebellious adolescence, to responsible adulthood, and eventually to becoming one with all that is.... if and when you reach the stage of the Sage or Great Soul.

So tonight and tomorrow on New Year’s Day, take some time to ask yourselves: Who are you? In what stage of faith are you now? What transformations are occurring in your life?

Do you still live in a world of dreams and fantasies that cannot be realized?

Are you prone to simple obedient acceptance of opinions, facts, and rules imposed by others – whomever you consider to be “expert authorities” - without really trying to explore and discover if those “experts” are truly knowledgeable or wise?

Or maybe you are at that self-important stage of rejecting all the religious nonsense from your childhood experiences, as if that is all that religion represents. Perhaps you are still rejecting a God or a system of morality which is the one you were exposed to in Stages 1 and 2 – which any fully mature persons would, of course, leave behind, as they move toward a higher stage of spiritual development. But remember, rebellion is just a stage. Eventually you will probably want to participate in constructive creation, and transformation of your worldview, as you develop a new you. It’s never too late, and it is a lifelong process.

The New Year is the perfect time to do a “soul-searching” inventory, to really find out where you are, and who you are. At first, you may feel that you are satisfied with being in Stage 3 or Stage 4, but then you might realize that by remaining there, you could possibly be depriving yourself of a deeper, richer, and more fulfilling life.

Is it time to set aside some delusions of self-sufficiency, and become better connected to each other, and to all of creation?

Is it time to make more encompassing love the focus of your life?

If you do that, you will find that you are suddenly falling in love with many things that surround you every day, and you will become more nurturing and caring of them.

You will discover a sense of the sacred in your relationships, not only with your mates, friends and family, but also with nature and our Mother Earth. And you will sincerely respect and take care of the vulnerable and most deprived among us.

Instead of living in a passive state of expecting the world to take care of you, you will become actively engaged in protecting, enhancing, and sustaining life in all its beautiful manifestations.

Instead of being alone, you will be “*Side by Side.*” You will open yourselves to the power of loving relationships.

Instead of grumbling about imagined slights and rejections, you will suddenly discover a friendliness and warmth, emanating from nearly everyone around you. You will “*Accentuate the Positive and Eliminate the Negative.*”

Suddenly, you will open your eyes and say, “*You are so beautiful!*” to people, trees, flowers, dogs, cats, butterflies, and skies – and even yourself. The entire world will open its arms and charms to you. You will be entranced by a magnificent rhapsody and ecstasy, as you embrace and are embraced by the Great Spirit of Life.

And you will look in the mirror, and see a **Beautiful New You for the New Year!**

May it be so!

Beautiful, You Are – Jamilla Brooks

And now I want to share with you an experience I had recently when I heard our local poet, Jamilla Brooks, recite her inspired poem. She is here with us today to tell you, all of you, **Beautiful You Are!** Welcome Jamilla Brooks.

Closing Words – By Joyce Ramay

Part of becoming a new you is to recognize the gifts you have received. Ask yourself, what do I love to do? What activities give me the most true joy? What things get my total attention?

When you do this, it will help you to discover what your personal mission is. We all have a purpose in being here. Sometimes we don't find it, because we are impeded by somebody else's ideas of what our missions should be. Or we think it is not grandiose or important enough.

But a mission is something that you genuinely care about. Maybe it's writing poetry, like Jamilla Brooks. Or playing the piano like Joseph Brauer. Perhaps it is singing like Donalie Benyak and Bob Way. Maybe it's being a speech maker like Barbara Gaiser. Or organizing things and serving as an administrator for a church, like Regina Kilmartin. Maybe it's helping people and giving them a warm welcome when they arrive at services like Joe Gayton. Perhaps it's providing gracious hospitality like Robert Bennett. All these people are engaged in something that they really enjoy, and that they are truly good at.

Once they discovered what gave them joy, they did not just keep it to themselves. They share it with us, and help to make this a better world for all of us.

Joseph Campbell said, "Follow your Bliss". So as you spend time at this end of one year and the beginning of another year, reflect on what gives you the most joy – and then make a commitment to nurture it and share it. You and your gifts are needed. You are part of a blessed community, and you can share your blessings with all those you encounter.

In closing, I want to share a prayer of gratitude sent to me by Asma Tahir, daughter of our servant Ashraf Tahir, who served Haneef and me for 14 years in Pakistan.

Dear Allah,

As I thank you for the gift of life,

I also thank you for the gift of wonderful people I have met along this journey.
Some of them inspire me, stretch me, challenge me, encourage me and love me.

All of them helped me to realize how meaningful and beautiful my life is.

I love them so much.

Bless them with good health, peace and joy.

Grant their prayers, too.

Amen.

**Have a happy, blessed, beautiful and grateful New Year!
You are all so beautiful!**