

Marye, Marye....How Does Our Spiritual Garden Grow?

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Sermon

3rd UU principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

In the last 25 years so much has been discovered in science that I am joyfully reeducating myself about astronomy and neuroscience. I have shared my interest in the cosmos and in the brain that changes itself at other times in this pulpit. Part of our new knowledge is thanks to new technology – the Hubble Space Telescope and the MRI.

But what about the spiritual realm? What technology is helping us continue to understand of the meaning of life? Have our spiritual, meaning making questions and answers changed in our life times? What role does our USH congregation have in our search? Is there anything new in religion as there is in science? What does the cutting edge say to us?

We quoted Dr. Robert Lanza's, eminent cellular biologist, on the OOS. He says, "The farther we peer into space, the more we realize that the nature of the universe cannot be understood fully by inspecting spiral galaxies or watching distant supernovas. It lies deeper. It involves our very selves."

Encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations involves our very selves and obviously so does acceptance of one another. What's new in religion therefore may not be expanding information about what we can objectively observe as in cosmology or neuroscience, but rather the expanding subjective understanding of our inner selves with which we live all the time.

The subjective spiritual growth cutting edge, however, is not to allow ourselves to become stuck in our comfort zones, locked into familiar patterns, closed in with our blind spots, repeating clichés, defending what we have always been, making excuses when we have acted inexcusably. We have to grow our spiritual garden.

Does our USH congregation offers us tools for our own subjective spiritual growth in keeping with this 3rd principle of acceptance of one another and the encouragement of

spiritual growth in our congregations? YES. Here are 7 tools or processes I can think of to share this morning.

1) RELIGIOUS FREEDOM:

Religious freedom is in the bedrock of the UU tradition. However, with this freedom to search for those beliefs most meaningful to us comes the related expectation that we will use our freedom all our lives, all our lives. That we continue to explore and integrate new experiences both subjectively intimate and transcendent [arm toward heart and up] and objectively, imminently practiced in action [arms wide]. How long has it been since an experience or a book or sermon has really shaken you and caused you to reflect for days after? To even change what you do? Are there more ways we could support each others' explorations? How shall we best use our freedom together?

2) ALIGNED VALUES

Freedom is NOT "ANYTHING GOES:" As my divinity school trained UU son observed, "You still have to deal with your ... [well, I'll paraphrase here,] "stuff." Are we open and inviting to feedback on our blind spots? Do we even acknowledge we have blind spots? Ask your kids or partner if you are not sure. Can you accept the spoken witness that you have, knowingly or unknowingly, overstepped an important boundary? I remember one night as I was leaving a Board meeting, I flipped off a cynical view of things here at USH. Rev. Cathy came back to me before I got out the door and offered her observation about how that kind of comment hurt our work together. I was surprised at her steady witness and grateful for her strength to speak to me and let me decide what to do with her observation. She held up our aligned values. UUs do not believe that anything goes.

3) EMBRACING GROWTH

Life is a set of NESTED DOLLS. I tried to express this in a poem in 2002.

A TREE IN ME

At the beginning of each season of my life,
 ideas of God sprout like spring leaves
 and offer a summer of comforting shade.
 At the end of each season of my life,
 the outgrown gods turn and fall.
 Sometimes in the bareness of winters,
 I have called out to my old gods,
 saying how much I miss them.

Now I long to strip away my outer bark,
 to know deep inside my trunk
 something - essential, still and peaceful,

even when the ground gives way beneath my roots,
and beyond my branches, winds of change
blow away my sky. Marye Gail Harrison 11/03/02

Could you embrace a model of experience as a set of nested dolls as philosopher Ken Wilber suggests? We all bring within us, like each year's ring growth on a tree trunk, the accumulation of all our life experience. Each period of personal growth must wrap itself around, embrace, encompass, all that has come before in our experience. We see this so graphically with young children who never forget how to roll when they can crawl, or how to stand after they can walk, or to run after learning to skip. For example, I started as a Methodist, left my faith in God after studying science more, became a UU, focused on transcendent wonder in nature, circled back to explore the Christian mystics and centering prayer tradition, on to cosmology and Eastern based meditation and psychological approaches using inquiry methods, recently neuroscience. Beyond all that I am amazed by my mystic friend Barbara, my private Eckhart Tolle. The image of nested dolls has given me permission to keep exploring and integrating to find meaning. I am always adding really even as I seem to move on. My trunk is continuing to expand, but ONLY metaphorically speaking, of course.

4) PERSONAL INTEGRITY:

Each of us must make meaning of our own experience, integrated and aligned as best we can. This is the source of our personal integrity, that we are true to our own experience even when it is different from others.

And when we are in a community of acceptance at USH we can be different without being an outsider. Our inner lens to see deeply is like the original Hubble Space Telescope which initially produced a distorted view of space objects. A team was dispatched at great expense to correct it and now the Hubbles reflects back clear images. In a free and accepting UU community through our interactions with one another, we can learn where we see in a biased blurry way. With each others help we can repolish our lenses toward greater clarity of understanding of life.

5) GENUINE ACCEPTANCE

With so much diversity of beliefs, can we REALLY ACCEPT ONE ANOTHER? What if in my nested doll model of life your beliefs are in a stage I left behind? Don't I need to urge you into my view for the sake of your own growth?

Remember the story of the child who found the butterfly wiggling and struggling to emerge from its chrysalis? What happened when the child helped the butterfly out?

The butterfly's wings never developed because for butterflies, the struggle of the unfolding process is what pumps the strengthening fluid into its wing veins. Only then they enlarge, unfold and dry, allowing it to fly on its own.

What a UU community can offer us is a welcoming, engaging but not judging, safe place to struggle and emerge in our own time, over and over, with strong wings to fly on our own.

6) USH COMMUNITY

With all this spiritual diversity, WHAT DO WE HAVE IN COMMON?

We have shared work based on aligned values. The aligned values are guided by our tools starting with the Principles themselves. But we go beyond that to guidelines for democratic meetings, consensus building through small group meetings, healthy relations practices where we speak up when we witness bullying, however subtle, and offer feedback never as an accusation but as compassionate observation taken for whatever it is worth by the recipient. Remember how Rev. Cathy responded to my cynical remark. She spoke to me from our aligned values.

Thirty years ago in 1985 the UUA General Assembly adopted with only one dissenting vote the UU seven principles and supplementing sources of our UU faith. The 6th source, earth based religions, was added in 1995.

We also have in common our caring for each other in times of joys and sorrows, our work for social justice and peace, our thoughtful discussions about important issues, our volunteer taught, age appropriate programs for our children, the great fun we have together when each of us feels permission to bring more of ourselves to the shared table.

We all do not have to have the same sources of meaning in our beliefs to have a coherent community. But we all do need to contribute in some way to the areas where we are aligned or our community will disintegrate. It takes all of us to make a sustainable UU village.

7) INTENTIONAL STUDY:

From time to time a number of us have talked about expanding our programs as a vibrant learning community. While this would take a lot of work to implement, just ask the Adult Program folks about that, it is a tool at the heart of encouraging the growth of our spiritual garden. We have wonderfully strong traditions in Great Decisions, Small Group Ministry, and Non Violent Communications here at USH. The methods of these programs could be applied in new areas of study together.

Here are some of my brainstorms I hope will stimulate yours.

What about an SGM format for the intersect of science and religion with group members supplying the readings? Meet with Leslie Waite and me after the service under the stairs if you are curious about that.

Or a group exploring Celtic Christianity with its rich mix of Celtic imminent nature based sacredness with Roman Catholic transcendent, hierarchical focus. J Phillip Newell in his book "Christ of the Celts" writes beautifully about this integration. Seabury Life Care residents on pilgrimage to ancient Irish sites all read the book. I also like poet John O'Donohue who wrote "Anam Cara – a book of Celtic Wisdom." Then there is intense Ken Wilber's Integral model I mentioned in relation to the nested dolls. In his model he tries to explain consciousness, integrates most everything – science and religion, the subjective and objective, ancient and modern thinking. While it is not easy reading, it provides a life time of study and wonderful tools for blending various parts of our experience that don't easily integrate. What about a journal writing support group, maybe even on line? We could look at the debate "Biocentrism" by Dr. Lanza triggered about which came first, life/consciousness or materiality. One of my favorite thinkers is Michael Dowd who spent a weekend here several years ago and since wrote the book "Thank God for Evolution" in which he integrates science and religion in a very accessible way. Or Episcopal priest John Shelby Spong who recently wrote "Eternal Life: a new Vision - Beyond religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell." Or on the other hand atheist Sam Harris's "Waking Up –a guide to Spirituality without Religion." All of these books are listed on the back of your OOS.

So Marye, Marye, how does your spiritual garden grow?

As Lanza said, our life task is deeper. It has to do with ourselves, how we perceive things. Spiritual growth is not just study of the big picture, it includes self understanding and integration of our accumulated experiences. This happens best in the company of accepting others in a place where covenants are honored to keep us safe, a place we can question ourselves, look at our blind spots, share our caring. It happens here at USH at our best. Spiritual growth is opening myself to experiences I never had before and taking the time to reflect on them so that the nutrients they offer might fuel my growing ring for the core trunk of my life. This centering strength sends down deeper roots to help nourish me further especially in hard times. It also allows me to extend my branches, leaves and fruits more and more broadly as I circle through the seasons of my life.

Yes, Marye, Marye,how does your spiritual garden grow? How would you answer the question? I look forward to hearing your growth stories and developing new ones together as we go on. May it be so.
