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Becoming a Spiritual Grown Up

Scott Colglazier, who was briefly the president of United Theological Seminary in the Twin Cities, once observed to our interfaith ministers group that there are two ways of being religious, both of which are found in every tradition and theological point of view. There is, he said, the religion of answers, and there is the religion of journey. The religion of answers believes in arriving at some incontrovertible vision of truth, which it then advocates and defends against all challenge; faith being measured by the purity and energy of one's adherence to those answers, whatever heritage they may represent. By contrast, the religion of journey considers faith to be a forever unfinished, evolving approach to life's deepest questions, that constantly calls us to wider sympathy and understanding, believing that there is always more for all of us to learn, and that diversity of ideas, stories, and ritual vocabularies is an important resource in that process.

Now there are evangelical Christians who have a journey interpretation of their faith in Jesus, and there are humanists who consider themselves to have a collection of established answers that are not to be improved by exposure to any other ideas. Whether you have an answer religion or a journey religion is a function of the way in which you understand and practice your tradition, not which tradition it is. Those like me, who are committed to the religion of journey, share a kind of pilgrimage; we are each engaged in a lifelong odyssey of faith, the goal of which in some important sense is the same for all of us. It is the nature of that goal which I want to explore this morning; to consider what it is that draws us forward on a common journey of faith, and how we might know what its destination would be, and what progress for any of us might look like.

This is the question which fascinated the psychologist James Fowler in his ground-breaking research on the stages of faith development. For the goal of the faith journey is not to arrive at a set of permanent truths and answers, but rather to develop the qualities of what I would call spiritual maturity. It is obvious to anyone who has any historical or international awareness that there is something that the world's most acknowledged spiritual leaders have in common; some attributes that characterize the Gandhis and Dalai Lamas and Mother Teresas and Martin Luther Kings of the world, no matter what historical religious tradition they identify with. And of course, these qualities are not limited to those who achieve wide recognition; they exist as well in French villagers who hide Jews from the Nazis, in Rwandan hotel keepers, in neighbors and teachers and elders everywhere, who exemplify for us what it means to grow into the radical acceptance of others, self-awareness, active compassion and sacrificial love that are the highest expressions of any faith, including the faith of humanism. For those of us committed to the religion of journey, rather than the religion of answers, the goal of faith has not to do with what we know or how fervently we believe; it has to do with the

kind of persons we are becoming, with how our hopes and loyalties are shaping our actions, our relationships, and the wisdom of our hearts.

Although, as Fowler points out, we are often fascinated by those special souls who exemplify spiritual maturity in an especially evident way, the real challenge for each of us is not to become renowned saints, but rather to grow up religiously to a point where our faith is a productive and positive influence in our own lives, and upon those around us.

Yet even to say this much raises the question of whether a Unitarian Universalist community could actually be comfortable with the very concept of spiritual maturity; whether it would be okay to think that some people might be further along on the journey than others. Even keeping in mind that these qualities are not a measure of anyone's worth as a person, any more than physical maturity, emotional maturity, or intellectual maturity determines our inherent value as human beings, still, as the Victorian poet William Watson reminds us, there are in life some things worth aspiring to; the things that are more excellent. Every point on the spiritual path has its own validity, but there is a direction to it; if we are doing it right, we progress -- not toward finality and certainty, but nearer to those qualities that fascinate and inspire us when we find them in others.

So I want to suggest that in fact there is a quality of spiritual maturity which is distinct from physical, intellectual, or emotional maturity. It involves attributes of compassion, integrity, awareness, gratitude, connection, humility, acceptance, and trust. People who are spiritually mature are engaging and challenging to be around; they are at peace with themselves, and by their presence, they call others to be their own best selves. This quality has been called many names – enlightenment, Buddha-nature, Christ-likeness, wisdom – but every culture and every religious tradition recognizes it. And I would argue that the fundamental purpose of religious community is to cultivate spiritual maturity in its members. A given church may produce astonishingly beautiful buildings or music, or admirable works of charity, or even social movements that sweep across the culture, but if its own members remain shallow, angry, selfish, unhappy, or oppressive people, then it has failed in its most essential task. A community of people intentionally growing toward authentic spiritual maturity will almost necessarily call forth beauty, generosity, and transformation as the result of their work together, but these are by-products. And I refuse to accept the proposition that the achievement of spiritual maturity is less accessible to me as a humanist, or to us as a humanist-inclusive community, than it is to any other theological cohort.

If it is true that there is a continuum of spiritual maturity, just as there is of physical, or intellectual, or emotional maturity, in each of our lives, then an important part of the church's task is to help each of us take responsibility for our own process of growth. Like these other dimensions, spiritual maturity unfolds in three interconnected but distinct ways. First, we all undergo a process of organic growth with a developmental trajectory that takes us through successive stages of competence. We learn to walk and talk, to use abstract symbols and to take turns; we go through puberty,

make affiliations with other people and groups, learn the patterns of reasoning that are relevant to our environment. This evolution happens almost unnoticed, automatically, like a seed sprouting, unless something goes very wrong. At the same time, we may also have identifiable critical experiences, that suddenly transform our physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual worlds. When someone close to you dies, or you discover that a dearly held belief isn't true; when a certain teacher or book opens up a whole new horizon of the mind, or when you become pregnant – in such moments, things change quickly, and are never the same again. Thirdly, it is also possible to nurture our development in any of these dimensions by deliberate practice. You can train to run a marathon, you can work with a therapist to resolve emotional issues, you can read books or take courses on various topics to cultivate your mind. There is also an extensive tradition of practices for nurturing your spiritual maturity. And I would suggest that much as school is a place for the intentional pursuit of intellectual maturity, so religious community is a place where the bottom line is the goal of increasing spiritual maturity. This is the purpose that is not measured by attendance figures and participation records – are people actually growing, deepening, becoming more spiritually mature as a result of anything that our congregations are doing?

School may actually be a helpful analogy, I think, for there are many secondary purposes served by educational institutions. At its best, the experience there involves all our developmental dimensions, and we find the process engaging as well as challenging. It is good to make friends and admire teachers, to go to the dances and join the clubs and cheer for the teams and be in the class picture. It is sad, and a source of concern when any of those things doesn't happen, but none of it really means anything if you are not actually learning something. And learning, as we know to our cost these days, is not measured by attendance records. It is not even a function of the students' reported enjoyment of a particular class. In the long run I suspect that we tend to remember most fondly the classes in which we really learned the most, but often enough they are not the ones where we had the most fun at the time. So it's a delicate balance. Obviously, if no one shows up at all, then no one is learning anything from a given class. And if the students dislike it because the material is boring, or badly presented, or because they are frightened by the teacher, they probably won't learn much either. But if they complain that the material is difficult to master, and yet they do master it, don't we tend to say, well, that's the nature of school? Sometimes, intentional intellectual development is hard work, and we are not here just to have a good time. In fact, if the educational process works as it should, eventually we take responsibility for our own learning, and actually seek out challenging things to learn, and feel shortchanged if something that was supposed to be a learning opportunity doesn't make us stretch, at least a little.

I want to suggest that the same dynamic is true of religious community, if we approach it right. Where school is about smart, church is about wise. It's great to find a sense of belonging, and opportunities to make the world better, and beautiful words and music and space, but when we gather as a congregation if we are not about the business of becoming more spiritually grown up together, then the institution is not fulfilling its most basic function, and all these other things are just distractions. Of

course, the first challenge that confronts us as religious liberals is to define what spiritual maturity looks like in our world view. It is not about believing a particular set of ideas that we are told, certainly; or accepting the authority of anything but evidence, reality, and the requirements of our own conscience. Indeed, I would suggest that two of the qualities incorporated in spiritual maturity are these: the commitment to abide by logic and facts rather than wishful thinking, and the capacity to hold a position of conscience even in the face of disagreement or challenge by others.

In my experience, these qualities do not necessarily correlate with the length of one's membership in a religious community. I have met people who were deeply involved in church institutional leadership, or denominational programs, or in social activism, who seemed to me not at all wise or kind or balanced, who had no resilience in the face of challenges, and little patience or generosity toward others. Some of them were very smart people in many ways, but they had not found that peace at the core of themselves that is the soil in which wisdom grows. By the same token, I have encountered people who were not extensively educated or socially privileged, in whom I experienced a calm energy and joyful commitment to the world that just made me want to be around them – I expect we have all met folks like that. In the same way that our bodies grow toward equilibrium and health, and our minds demand to know the truth about the world, and our hearts yearn for authentic, reciprocal love, so I think we also have an attraction toward spiritual adulthood. Some part of us always wants to be more courageous and generous, more compassionate and self-aware, more at peace and at home in the world than we yet are. At times, we mistake that longing for a signal that something is wrong within us, but it's not. That impulse is the call toward spiritual maturity, and it is in fact an indication that our humanity is unfolding as it should, that we are preparing to blossom fully into the unique person that each of us has the capacity to become.

Becoming a spiritual grown up means putting away childish things, like grudges and victimhood; like selfishness and the desire to be protected from the consequences of our actions; like greed and self-righteousness; like the search for immortality and the hunger to make everyone else do as we command. Spiritual maturity means taking responsibility for our own behavior and our own boundaries, for the results of what we say and do, whether intended or unintended, and for the future that we help to create. It means enlarging our capacity to tolerate ambiguity, to repent and to forgive, to appreciate the uses of metaphor and the power of ritual, to celebrate and to mourn. It means remembering our finitude and our mortality, not in terror, but with gratitude for the gift of life. It means discovering and embracing our own particular place in the interconnected web of being, and honoring the diversity of all else that makes up that web. It means having ethical principles that we are clear about, as well as a vast compassion for all the pain that is in the world. It means an openness to beauty, whether in art or in nature, whether physical delight or intellectual elegance, emotional catharsis or moral honor. Spiritual maturity means being able to offer uncorrupted leadership when it is your turn, and to be a loyal but not uncritical follower when that is your role. It means having the ability not to tell everything you know just to show how much you know, while at the same time being willing to speak truth to power as needed,

even when that is an uncomfortable conversation. Spiritual maturity begins with an inner centeredness, calm and peaceful, which does not mean that we have solved all our own problems and can now look down upon the rest of the world. Rather it means that we have stopped pretending that the world is other than it is, that we are other than we are, and accepted that the universe is not mine or yours to run, but a gift that is part practical joke, in which we all share.

My list also includes several concepts taken from the world's various religious heritages; from classical Greek philosophy, the idea of Sophrosyne, self awareness in the service of intention, and good personal boundaries; from certain Native American traditions, the phrase Mitake Oyasin, literally 'all my relatives', lifting up a sense of connection to and responsibility for all creatures, and for the earth as a living system. From Buddhism comes Tonglen, the capacity to be present to, absorb and creatively transform suffering, both our own and others'; from Judaism the notion of Teshuva, the willingness to repent of our wrong choices and directions, to change and to turn back, toward a different way that promises greater wholeness. The concept of Islam, as submission to the realities of a world that is often other than our desires, a renouncing of denial and wishful thinking; and from the Christian mystical tradition, the discipline of Memento Mori, the on-going awareness and acceptance of death as our common destiny.

Now friends, be clear that what I describe is the state of being to which I aspire, not one that I have by any means attained. I know what it looks like because I have seen it demonstrated by people in the communities I have been privileged to serve. They have shown it to me in glimpses and flashes at moments when they perhaps least knew they were instructing others about the nature of spiritual maturity. I know what it looks like because I have seen the transformations in so many lives; the critical decisions of high courage that changed everything, and the years of patient, sacrificial practice that have left some of those members just translucent to the light of the human spirit. I want my life to be like that, and there is nowhere else to learn it but in communities like this one. I know of no scale by which to measure it, no cookbook, no standardized test.

Yet I persist in believing it to be true that

"The soul hath lifted moments, above the drift of days

When life's great meaning breaketh in sunrise on our ways,"

and that those moments are precious in themselves, as well as clues to help us along the path toward the fully human and mature person that our best selves yearn to be. This is what makes us truly brothers and sisters, that we are engaged in the task of growing up together, helping each other as best we can, often without even knowing that's what we are doing. Even if we can't measure it; even if the mega churches can't bottle it and sell it, this is what we are about, and it is the most important, most unendingly fascinating, most real enterprise I know.

Reading from Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* and *Holy the Firm*:

It is difficult to undo our own damage, and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave. It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind. The very holy mountains are keeping mum. We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree.

A blur of romance clings to notions of "publicans," "sinners," "the poor," "the people in the marketplace," "our neighbors," as though of course God should reveal himself, if at all, to these simple people, these Sunday school watercolor figures who are so purely themselves in their tattered robes, who are single in themselves, while we now are various, complex, and full at heart. We are busy. So, I see now, were they.

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead—as if innocence had ever been—and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been.

There have been generations which remembered, and generations which forgot; there has never been a generation of whole men and women who lived well for even one day. Yet some have imagined well, with honesty and art, the detail of such a life, and have described it with such grace, that we mistake vision for history, dream for description, and fancy that life has devolved.

So. You learn this studying any history at all, especially the lives of artists and visionaries; you learn it from Emerson, who noticed that the meanness of our days is itself worth our thought; and you learn it, fitful in your pew, at church.