



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### A Singular Way

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In my new found identity as a mother, I have found myself a part of a wonderful text list of new moms. The text group shares advice, offers helpful tips, and, yes, as you might expect, bemoans the chronic problem of getting enough sleep. One of the recent topics shared amongst the group was remembering activities and practices that were important to our sense of self before children: cliff diving, vacationing in far flung places, long leisurely dinners, rigorous athletic endeavors besides lifting the car seat out of the car and lugging the stroller up and down stairs.

What came to mind for me is frequenting silent retreats. In my former life, each spring about this time, I would take the train up from New York to the Garrison Institute for a three day silent meditation retreat. We would wake at dawn for morning meditation, practice alternating sitting and walking meditation all day, walk the labyrinth and do yoga in the afternoon and listen to dharma talks at night. Going on retreat for me gave me a deep sense of nourishment, body, mind and spirit.

It also defined me as a spiritual person and a minister—the kind of person who regularly goes on a silent retreat. Now I look back at that time and wonder how or if this practice will be a part of my life again. It's hard to even get to the grocery store by myself with the baby, let alone get away for a weekend. At the pet store the other day, one father of three kids joked with me and said "Do you ever look back at your life and wonder what you did with all that time?" In all seriousness, I do!

I know what you might be thinking, maybe with a bit of a church-appropriate eye roll-- welcome, Lissa, to the world of parents everywhere! Now you see how hard it is!! Whether a new parent or not, many of us struggle in finding the time for ourselves with work, responsibilities and family obligations.

But beyond this is a larger issue that confronts us throughout our lives. After we go through a major life change, be it pregnancy and birth, illness, career change or job loss, divorce or loss of a loved one, we are confronted with a new reality that can be overwhelming and disorienting. We look back the time before our life transition and have in our minds eye those qualities or activities which defined and shaped our identities.

Maybe you have thought of yourself as fiercely independent, and need to accept help after an illness. Maybe you have identified yourself as an athlete and have sustained an injury which doesn't allow you to play that sport any more. Maybe you relied upon your marriage for your circle of social support, and, facing a divorce now are seeking new friends and community. Maybe you thought of yourself as a career-driven person and are struggling to find new employment after a job loss, or you are retiring and searching for a sense of purpose without work.

I've had my own difficulty adjusting to my new life as a mother. I have carried a lot of anger and disappointment about the ways my delivery and birth were not as I had hoped. Adjusting to a new reality of my own limitations postpartum has been really difficult. Needing more help than I know how to ask for and am comfortable receiving has been humbling. I am learning to take things day by day, with lots of deep breaths and loving support from Sam and this community.

Adapting to our changing life circumstances can be excruciatingly painful and emotionally wrenching. We can resist the changes so hard and feel anger, shame, disappointment, even despair. Instead of accepting a new normal, we find ourselves grasping for the past and resenting the present. Regardless of the context of what brings us to these critical moments of transition in our life circumstances, we are caught in a dance between letting go of what was and letting in what it is. These moments of change require us to bring a tremendous amount of compassion to ourselves, lamenting not simply what is lost, but accepting what the present has to teach us. We can discover underneath the endless shifting and adapting an essential sense of self which remains steady and anchored despite the storms.

One of my favorite authors about this topic is Parker Palmer, a Quaker educator who writes honestly about his depression. I find his writing so important as an antidote to the shame and secrecy within which mental health issues are often shrouded, particularly for white men of the baby boomer generation. He writes of his own personal sense of loss during one of his bouts with depression, but also, his surprising discovery of an enduring spiritual resilience. He writes:

*In that deadly darkness, the faculties I had always depended on collapsed. My intellect was useless; my emotions were dead; my will was impotent; my ego was shattered. But from time to time, deep in the thickets of my inner wilderness, I could sense the presence of something that knew how to stay alive even when the rest of me wanted to die. That something was my tough and tenacious soul.*

What remains waiting to be found when everything has changed, argues Palmer, is what he names the soul. I wonder how this word sounds to your ears. Some of us may have reactions to the Christian connotation of the word. Some of the scientifically-minded among us may question the rationality of such a concept. This reflection is not here to argue for the presence of a soul or not, but to help us to understand that very essence of who we are which endures through every trial and transition. Psychologists probe the depths of the personality, what lies beneath our ego, our defended self. How do you imagine it? I think of the soul as a soft, radiant, transcendent core of our being we are bestowed with at birth and carry with us till death. What do you call that? Here in church, we look for a spiritual answer to such questions.

Certainly, looking deep into my new baby's eyes I can see this radiance. Perhaps you have cared for a loved one through illness and have felt the presence of a light within beyond the body's ailments or companioned someone through death and felt the moment of that light departing. Or connecting with your partner or a close friend. And perhaps you have even recognized this essence within yourself, in moments of joy when you feel the most alive or deep sorrow. Perhaps you recognize this essence when you meditate here in the congregation, on your own or out in nature.

Thinking back on my own potent image of the retreat. Spiritual practices can help connect us to our deepest sense of ourselves. Constantly confronted with the noisy chatter of the world, we lose is the ability to recognize our own soul's presence calling to us from within. To listen to our hearts deeply for that presence, we need spiritual practices to help us explore these obscured spiritual landscapes. Not only this, returning to a practice again and again different points in our lives helps us integrate and appreciate our life changes, cultivating compassion and self-love.

At this church, we encourage one another to spiritual growth throughout our ever-changing lives. We do this together as a congregation rather than on our own for accountability, support and community. Spiritual practices we offer include deep listening through chalice circles and fellowship. Through sitting and walking meditation, we calm our minds and engage our bodies. Moments as simple and common as sitting together

and sharing a cup of coffee on a bench in our courtyard or meditation garden become an opportunity to connect soul to soul.

Today we dedicate the labyrinth courtyard in honor of the ministry of my predecessor, Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson. One of Jim's particular gifts was spiritual community building. The design and execution of the courtyard was an incredible collaborative effort between members, staff and the ministry, turning the former "dirt patch" into a hub of spiritual community building. Our seven-circuit labyrinth, represents the seven Unitarian Universalist principles. At the center of the labyrinth lies a colorful chalice mosaic, the symbol of our Unitarian Universalist faith. We are proud of the fact that it is the only ADA accessible labyrinth in the San Gabriel valley.

Throughout history, these works of sacred geometry were built as tools for inner pilgrimage. At a time when the faithful were expected to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, there were always those who could not make the arduous and expensive journey. Throughout time, the labyrinth, designed to symbolize the pilgrimage not taken, became the pilgrimage itself. Our courtyard labyrinth is a spiritual practice which invites us to discover the inner pilgrimage which is always available to us. It is an inclusive contemplative practice for our ever-changing lives. As we cross the threshold and enter the labyrinth, we bring questions about our current circumstances. At the center, we can touch our deepest essence, and bask in its presence. The chalice flame represents that light of the soul within us, guiding us on. We do not have to journey to the Holy Land to seek such a pilgrimage. Everything we need is here.

I am reminded of Mary Oliver's beloved poem *Wild Geese*.

*You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.*

The inner labyrinth journey is one of letting go and letting in, letting go of fear and letting in compassion and self-love. In this life, there is only a singular way: one passage brings us into this world and another brings us out. Let us companion one another on these journeys together, may our common path be blessed.

Amen