

Growing Older: Stages of Faith

A sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

The philosopher Plato is credited with the familiar quote;

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” I’ve yet to meet a Unitarian Universalist who did not agree with the wisdom of that statement. We are inveterate examiners of life.

Who am I? On what can I rely? What meaning can I make from the reality of death and evil? How shall I live?

These are the four fundamental religious, ethical, faith questions.

Our ability to engage with and our interest in these questions evolves over the course of our lives. From early childhood to our elder years we revisit these core questions again and again.

Who am I? On what can I rely? What meaning can I make from the reality of death and evil? How shall I live?

I’ve consulted many experts in my research this week.

From James Fowlers’ “Stages of Faith Development” to Robert Coles, “The Spiritual Life of Children” to “The Soul of the Child” by Michael Gurian, to The Evolving Self by Robert Kegan to “The Art of Aging” by Sherwin Nuland...but I found my way back to “the Gospel According to Peanuts” for a description of how we live into our questions.

Picture Charlie Brown, Lucy and Linus laying down at the top of a grassy hill in summertime and looking up at the clouds.

Lucy says "if you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in the cloud formations...what do you think you see, Linus?"

Linus lying flat points up..."well, those clouds up there look to me like the map of early British Honduras on the Caribbean..."

Charlie Brown looks perplexed but remains silent.

Linus continues, "that cloud up there looks a little like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor..."

Charlie Brown looks out from the cartoon...appearing dumbfounded.

Linus again; "and that group of clouds over there gives me the impression of the stoning of Stephen...I can see the Apostle Paul standing there to one side..."

Lucy responds; "Uh Huh, that's very good...what do you see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?"

"Well, I was going to say I saw a ducky and a horsie, but I changed my mind."

Like the peanuts gang, we do our examination of life...in the company of our friends and family, and in chosen communities like classrooms and churches, or temples or mosques- dialogue and the testing of our perceptions and conclusions is essential to our process in these matters.

Coming to a moral understanding of self, world, and other is part of spiritual exploration- a spiritual exploration aimed toward right living. Examining life is a process of reflection leading to action...and action leading back to reflection.

Much of this thinking and sorting about life is undertaken subconsciously, we develop a mindset, a world view, a set of truths inherited from our families...and over time, in our busyness and focus on achievement...we fail to lay down in the grass and spend time in reflection. We stop questioning our assumptions and continue to see only duckies and horsies.

In the information saturated world in which we live today, it is hard to make time for reflection...it is easy to be pushed and pulled by the opinions of others...it is tempting to give in to the myriad opportunities for escape from thinking, avoidance of spiritual matters. Here is where I should confess my American Idol addiction!

Often we get into a loop of our own habits of thinking or our ever-present anxieties...and we lose sight of our center...we forget hard won wisdom.

The past few mornings, I've been waking up early and worrying about the flu epidemic. I go through my list of friends and family and keep track of who's traveling where and wonder how much they are at risk. And I wonder what I should be doing, or how I should be thinking about it.

My anxiousness causes me to forget my hard won wisdom.

UU minister, Bill Houff offers this wise gem..."The greatest tragedy in human life is to live unaware of one's divine identity."

This is the truth I want to offer you this morning...encouragement for you to be aware of your divine identity. All the big questions of life and death and evil and right action can be seen anew from the perspective of this truth...that we all have a divine light within...that whatever comes, whether it is economic struggle, flu pandemic, war and other violence, racism, grief, and pain, - all joys and sorrows of life will be held and blessed by our very human divinity.

This I believe. I have faith in the divine light within all people.

We see this divine light most easily in babies and children.

This is the reason for grandchildren and Religious education programs...to remind us all of the divinity of the child.

I have a photograph of my two oldest grandchildren on my desk – they are ages 2 & 3...and in the photo..Noah, is giving Sasha a comforting hug...every time Sasha, the two year old, comes to our house, her eyes light up and she asks...where's Noah? Being in the presence of those you love, brings joy to young children...let us be reminded.

At an older age, children begin thinking more deeply about life and death questions.

There was a family from Illinois – the 8 yr old daughter became ill and was diagnosed with a life-threatening blood disease. A search went out to find a donor of blood compatible with hers. As she weakened, they looked and no donor could be found.

Then it was discovered that her six year old brother shared her rare blood type. The mother and their minister and doctor sat down with the boy to ask if he would be willing to donate his blood to save the life of his sister.

The brother did not answer right away. He wanted some time to think about it. Six year olds can be quite thoughtful as they examine their lives. After a few days he went to his mother and said, "yes, I'll do it."

The following day the doctor brought both children to his clinic and placed them on beds next to each other. He wanted them to see how one was helping the other. First he drew a half pint of blood from the young boy's arm. Then he moved it over to his sister's bed and inserted the needle so her brother could see the effect. In a few minutes color began to pour back into her cheeks.

Then the boy motioned for the doctor to come over. He wanted to ask a question, very quietly.

Will I start to die right away? He asked.

You see, when he had been asked to donate his blood to save the life of his sister, he thought he would give all of his blood...that's why he needed a few days to think about it.

And then he simply gave what is in the heart of every human being to give when we are truly connected.

All who were present saw the light of divinity in both the brother and the sister...and for a few days, perhaps, they saw the divinity in each person they met. And their faith deepened.

At each stage of life, we live into the questions of identity and meaning , of love and death , in different ways.

Etty Hillesum, was a teenage girl, a Jewish girl, who lived during the time of the Holocaust in Europe. Years after her death in a concentration camp, her writings were published...and her love of life and her ability to see beauty all around her is profoundly moving...in spite of the fear and degradation seeping into life at that time...she was in love with life, she was in love with a young man.

She wrote of one day in her "Interrupted Life" - the title of her memoir...

"Last night when I cycled home from S. I poured out all my tenderness, all the tenderness one cannot express for a man even when one loves him very, very, much, I poured it all out into the great, all embracing spring night. I stood on the little bridge and looked across the water; I melted into the landscape and offered all my tenderness up to the sky and the stars and they water and to the little bridge.

And that was the best moment of the day.

And I felt this was the only way of transforming all the many deep and tender feelings one carries for another into deeds; to entrust them to nature, to let them stream out under the open spring sky, and to realize that there is no other way of letting them go."

She gave what is in the heart of every human being to give when we are truly connected.

Teenagers remind us of the light of first love, and of the tenderness of which we are capable. And so our spiritual journey continues and our faith in life deepens.

Young adults take the idealism and romanticism of their teen years, and bring it to the formation of their values and principles. As they struggle with leaving home, higher education, career choices, marriage, divorce, and a new level of identity-formation...they may seek a new affirmation of their inner light...as an adult.

A young man came to join a desert monastery where life was very hard. One of the desert fathers offered this wisdom;

"In the beginning, there is struggle and a lot of work for those who come near to God. But after that, there is indescribable joy. It is just like building a fire: at first its smoky and your eyes water, but later you get the desired result. Thus we ought to light the divine fire in ourselves with tears and effort.

And so we move through our middle adult years with tears and effort and also with joy. Continuing to light and re-light the divine fire within...with a little help from our friends.

And so our spiritual journey continues and our faith in struggle deepens.

When we are old, the challenges increase. There are so many losses. We must begin to think about death and dying. We wonder of the value and meaning our lives have held.

When we are old, we may think that our spiritual journey is coming to an end, that our examination of our lives is complete...that we have wisdom/faith enough...or that we are no longer needed. But still we feel longing and desire, still we are part of a larger whole...still we seek and want to learn more...

We still ask; Who am I? On what can I rely? What meaning can I make from the reality of death and evil? How shall I live?

What do I see in the shape of the clouds?

It is told that soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha passed a man on the road who was struck by the extraordinary radiance and peacefulness of the Buddha's presence. The man stopped and asked, "My friend , what are you? Are you a celestial being or a god?"

"NO", said the Buddha.

"Well then, are you some kind of magician or wizard?" Again the Buddha answered, "No".

"Are you a man?"

"No."

"Well my friend, what then are you?"

The Buddha replied, "I am awake."

This is the highest and deepest truth of faith development...this is the path on which we will see the divine light in ourselves and others...it will happen , if we are awake.

Blessed Be/Amen

