

## “Whose Are You” Sermon by Leah Purcell, Credentialed Religious Educator

10/20/19 Service

### First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

It's that time of year – Halloween is coming. How many of you get dressed up for Halloween? Go trick or treating? Give out candy? How many of you remember costumes you wore in your childhood?

I was always a princess. My mom had saved her dresses from when she had been a bridesmaid. And each year we trussed one up for me to wear over a warm sweater. The neighborhood I lived in those years was ideal for tick-or-treating. There were single family and two-family houses close together on streets with sidewalks and streetlights. You could go out for about 30 minutes and return with a heavy bag. Usually we made 2 rounds. Around the block from us lived the Larsons – two elderly sisters that lived together; my mom had known them for years and we were back yard neighbors. They would give out candy and they would also invite kids and parents inside. They had a big table right by the front door. And you could sit down for a few minutes and one of the Larson ladies would serve you popcorn, cider and cookies. Yes, one used up valuable trick or treating time, but it was rather cozy and I remember it fondly. It made me feel like I belonged to my neighborhood

Perhaps you have a fond memory of Halloween, one really neat costume, the time you went friends. Maybe you're looking forward to this year's Halloween.

I think it's interesting how powerful childhood memories can be, especially memories from when we were school aged. I think it's because this is when we start making connections to people outside the families we were born into.

Theories of developmental stages are something I learned a lot about in college as a psychology major. But mostly it was about cognitive development – how our brains worked.

I learned that infants see their world first through their parents and then their families. Babies respond most often to the sounds of their parent's voices. Toddlers learn to trust adults outside their immediate families. And so on, and so on, all the stages through adulthood. In my work as a religious education I've learned about the social and faith development of children and youth. Young children develop a sense of belonging to a faith community through the connections their parents have with that community. It's one reason why regular church attendance is important. When a child is about school age, a faith community can give them a sense of grounding and identity directly. For children, action is important, so it's the going to church that matters. Sometimes children want to wear special clothes to Sunday school and services; they want to be engaged in projects. And of course, becoming an adolescent brings new insights that affect their faith development. And here is where the idea of a straight path of development really breaks down.

In her book *Nurturing Children and Youth*, Rev Tracey Hurd points out that we often think of developmental stages as “improvement”. “The complex thinking of an older child is more valued than the thoughtful intuitiveness of a younger child... [but] maybe we can think of developmental unfolding as ‘getting different’, not necessarily ‘getting better’”. Because as young adolescents are able to start considering new ideas and to see ideas from different perspectives, and because teens can consider who has authority, their development can go sideways. Middle schoolers might explain to their friends that they go to “their parents’” church. And as teens get older, new ideas about can either bring them closer to or separate them from their faith community. Keeping them in the faith often depends on how their questions and doubts are treated. And here's where Unitarian Universalism is so valuable, even lifesaving for youth; because we invite questioning. And we are a covenantal faith; our values inform how we treat each other. Teens appreciate the safety and order that their group covenant creates. Many youth say that our high school youth group is the only place in their lives where they can be their full, true selves.

The same is often true for adults.

From Tracey Hurd's book: "At every stage and turn in life, we have deep need for love, belonging and worth." Our first Principle names the dignity of worth as inherent to each individual, but it doesn't say how to obtain it. Our last Principle reminds us that we are connected. We need relationships and a sense of belonging to feel our worth.

"The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all" writes Rev Mark Morrison-Reed. This from a responsive reading in our grey hymnal

Isn't that the first big task of creating a congregation where each of us feels we belong? The bonds between us do exist. Mark Morrison-Reed goes on to say "There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others."

What would you say are some of the things we do at Albany UU to unveil those bonds, to learn about the specific things in each other's lives?" I invite you to think for a minute.... And I'm going to invite your responses. This is what we do in Family Chapel, if you have an idea, raise your hand and I'll repeat your response into the mike.

We have our joys and sorrows in the service for the adults; I do the same for family chapel once a month, and everyone is invited to share in joys and sorrows in multigenerational services. Sometimes people write their concerns on the yellow cards so that our caring network folks can follow up with them. We have our pastoral care associates as a way to connect. Our welcome in the service; often we have chalice lighters and we learn a bit about them then. Coffee Hour. For children and youth, our Religious Education groups are places to learn about each other. They have circle time, check in's, games, discussions and snack time to share about what's going on in their lives. And the adult guides are part of that too. These groups are learning communities. Adults have discussion groups, learning events, and support groups. Often the work of committees and teams includes a check in or social time *and snacks*.

And I would add here that just being here together creates belonging in our community. You may not share at joys and sorrows or join a support group. But you're here. In just greeting one another, seeing and hearing each other, we celebrate our connectedness. So, it's important that we mix it up - that so that people of all ages are together, and singing, breathing, meditating, responding together. We're not a group of nerdy birdies all with the same likes and dislikes. We're enriched by our differences.

Let's return to Mark Morrison-Reed. He has a second important thought to add.

"It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together our vision widens, and our strength is renewed."

And there is so much to struggle against. We see the issues with great urgency every day. Climate Change; gun violence; political corruption; patriarchy and misogyny; white supremacy culture; unhealthy and dangerous use of the internet; relentless materialism. And yet alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and we know by experience that our strength is too limited to do all that must be done.

Sometimes we need to move back from our activism and find ways to renew ourselves. Being part of a community can be a source of strength, a spiritual touchstone so we can go out and do the work of social justice.

And, not all social justice work is activism- it's not all out there. We have work to do in our congregation. We as are the products of our culture and as a result white supremacy culture, patriarchy, trans phobia and materialism have its effects here among us. So, let's use some of our spiritual strength to address within ourselves. We have resources. For example

- Rev Sam and Dan Miyake, our ministerial intern are leading a learning series Transforming Hearts: Transgender Inclusion in Congregations

- Our congregation is part of the workshop next Saturday on Preemptive Radical Inclusion: Bear Witness, Save Lives
- You could attend the play Whitewashed, The Racism Project play Friday, Oct. 25, 7:30 PM, YWCA, 21 First St., Troy.

You don't need to write that down; I got those from Windows Weekly which you receive in your email each Thursday.

- For families, we have a resource Soulful Home. It has activities to find the sacred in everyday spaces. Some of the activities give parents ideas on how to talk about social justice with their children. And I've created this Monthly Messenger with ways for anyone to bring the themes of the month home.

And maybe we could do things differently on Sunday morning to help us create belonging in our congregation, renew our strength and to work for justice. The service this morning is a bit of an experiment. It was a service for all ages, but with the option of child care for younger children. I think it's important for our spiritual development to have babies, children, teens, adults and elders rub elbows. To sing together; to see each other's faces.

In one of the congregations I visited on my sabbatical this spring, this is how they do the service every week. Afterwards they have refreshments and then they have another 45 min to an hour for Religious Education for all. That's when Sunday school groups meet and it's a time for adults to have choices to explore religious topics. It could be a discussion of the sermon, or a social justice topic or an opportunity for spiritual deepening. And with the children, youth and adults all having groups at the same time, there would be opportunities for groups with several generations work together on social justice projects.

It would be quite a change for us, but maybe not impossible. We're thinking of giving it a try for the month of January. I've been talking to folks about this since August. And I've gotten some valuable ideas from them.

I'd like to hear your thoughts about this morning. So, I'll stay in here in the Sanctuary after the service and if you want to join in a 15-30 min discussion, please come up front after the service.

I end with these words from Rev. Barbara Hamilton-Hallway

*May you find shelter in being seen for who you are.*

*May you find hope in this place.*

*May you dwell always in your goodness.*

*May goodness and hope be your eternal home.*