

Just as You Are

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 28, 2024

Today in this space made sacred by our presence let us reflect upon the joy, liberation, and compassion held in self-love. This topic touches me in the deepest crevices of my heart and soul and mind. I have witnessed the devastating lack of self-love – detrimental consequences of one who, through no fault of her own, could not see her own worth – even if echoed in the words and sentiments of anyone in her midst. An aunt who took her own life as the veil draped around her muted those words of compassion and care and worth as her own inner voice offered words of worthlessness and self-hate. And, too, I have the experience of one steeped in anxiety, self-judgment, and profound self-criticism as I made my own way through the tunnel of despair towards that distant, glowing light of self-love. Through therapy and prayer and meditation and the unconditional love of others the inner veil of hurt and pain lifted; my body and mind free and liberated in ways I did not know possible; life began anew. I lift this up as a story of hope and promise and resolve offered to each of us – I am not at all unique in this way – we can each find this. We can each find this. Grounding ourselves in our reflection today, I want to start with a brief mantra we can offer ourselves, perhaps one we can speak to our image in the mirror. This is a mantra I offer myself each day, adapted by Tich Nhat Hanh: I see you. I know you suffer. I love you. May we pause in a moment of knowing, all of who we are is just right. I want to take some time to elaborate upon what may be a rather unfamiliar idea.

Let us begin our exploration of this topic by reengaging with the words of Yolo Akili Robinson, whose reflections we heard earlier. There is nothing wrong with us, and yet, with intention, we are on a constant journey of crafting who we are, embodying new behaviors and healing old wounds. We are just right, and yet we can always grow and mature and foster even more beauty. He names that this grows out of the basic core that resides within each of us, that core held within the deepest, most intimate space of our very being. There is no such thing as a core born of self-judgment, of inherent unworthiness – that is what this imperfect world offers us, teaches us. There is nothing wrong with us – our core is pure and whole and sacred. And yet,

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith January 2024

we will stray from our cores, friends. We will stray. And, when we stray, may we begin, again, and again, in love. May we begin again in love.¹

Being just right is not about perfection. This goal, this dream, this drive is entirely unachievable. In truth, striving for perfection can deter us from this path of self-love, chasing the unattainable; it reinforces ideas of failure. It is like reaching and reaching and trying to capture a star. Let us pause in truth and reality – we have each made mistakes, perhaps terrible mistakes, fostering regret we cannot rid ourselves of. And yet what matters in these inevitable transgressions is our response – what calls us back to our core – how can we begin again in love? Do we make amends? Do we forgive ourselves? Do we learn from our misdeeds? Do we own the harm done and as such begin the process of reparations? May we begin a process of healing. We will never achieve perfection – we will never grasp that star, that moon, that galaxy – not as a parent, an employee, a friend, a lover, and that is ok. That is just right.

We are not perfect, yet we are a gift; the greatest gift, our only gift – we are ourselves. We are a gift from God, from the universe, from science and evolution, from the source of all that is, from Goddess or stardust. We are a gift of no known origin. Yet no matter the origin, each life is wildly improbable and should be treated as such – tend to it. It is all of who we are. Our anxieties, insecurities, self-judgements, depression. All of us – our talents, our joys, our compassion, our intellect. This is who we are – this is our gift to the world. Care for it. Love it. In tending to our own gifts, we cultivate a beauty that shines and radiates which we can in turn offer to others. Self-love can never be selfish, for loving ourselves changes the world. It begins from the inside out.²

The inside – our hearts. Our hearts are different at different times – we heard this during our Story for All Ages. Closed, open, a shadow, a light, a guide.³ Our hearts can be warm, bursting with joy, or filled with lament and sorrow. Each of these can be embraced for just what it

¹ Quote from *Soul Matters Worship Resources 2024*

² *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* by Parker Palmer

³ *My Heart* by Corinna Luyken

is. Let us connect with the lament, for it means we have loved, and lost. Let us connect to the light, for it means we have a goal, a destination, a hope. Let us connect with the shadow, for it means there is beauty shining down upon us, even if momentarily obscured. Let us connect, and connect, and connect, and embrace ourselves for the joy of being a living, breathing, loving, sorrowful being on this planet we call home – having a heart that grants us the awe and wonder of feeling and knowing the whole gamut of human emotions, offering strength and purpose and wisdom and love.

We are just right – imperfect, a gift, a vessel of every human emotion. And. I want to pause to reflect on how we cultivate this self-love from what we hold within – not what we imagine is held beyond – not held in prestige, in romance, in children, in wealth. Instead, I believe we can receive unconditional love from two sources – ourselves and what we hold holy. God loves each of us inherently, Goddess held us in her very womb, the universe birthed us of billions of years of stardust, nature holds us in the embrace of the wind. Unconditional love. And we, too, can echo that very same love back to ourselves. Beyond ourselves and our sacred, we don't need to look anywhere else to connect with and know true self-love, true self-compassion. We risk looking beyond for all that we already hold within.

We cultivate this from within, not beyond. I want to follow my previous reflections with another quote, this one from author Stephen Chbosky, “We accept the love we think we deserve.”⁴ In reflecting on these words, I cannot help but think of my aunt, who was unable to accept and internalize those words of compassion, care, and love because she did not hold them for herself. These words and sentiments may be present all around us, but until we feel within that we are worthy, we are never going to engage with or internalize these sacred offerings; we do not accept this because it does not appear to be real or even possible. We cannot hear words of love if we do not know what inner love is. We cannot hear words of compassion if we do not know what inner compassion is. And so, when we love ourselves, we can welcome these affirmations and this love and allow ourselves to internalize this, connect

⁴ Quote from *Soul Matters Worship Resources 2024*

with this, learn to cherish this and grow from this. We can engage with and internalize all of this because we know it to be true in our very hearts. Self-love allows us to receive the love around us; that which we cultivate within serves as an invitation to the beauty and wonder and the care of world we are immersed in.

Accepting ourselves, being just right – this is a journey, not a destination. This is a deeply spiritual journey. There is no one endpoint, but continuing growth. I want to reflect, again, on words we heard earlier, this time from author Marianne Williamson. We are born with love, and we learn fear. The spiritual journey is, I quote, “the unlearning of fear and prejudice and the acceptance of love back into our hearts.”⁵ It is faith that guides home the love we have lost. It is a journey from hate and fear towards uncertainty and hope towards love and compassion and acceptance – guided by all we hold holy; guided by something which is greater than ourselves. We question, we reflect, we contemplate. It is a practice of prayer, of meditation, of worship or mantras or study or nature. It is whatever connects you to that love and all that is, with all you hold sacred. Some of this pain and judgment is triggered by deep wounds, that which broke our core, our love, our faith, our trust. How can we heal these wounds? Prayer – offered to a tree or an entity or a departed beloved – cannot foster fear, but heal it, as we connect to what is held most sacred and life-giving to us. Mantras – I see you, I know you suffer, I love you – this does the same. Meditation brings the breath from the lungs to the heart to the intellect, mapping the journey of love from our core to our mind. When we find our core, when we find our sacred, anger and prejudice simply do not make sense – there is nothing holy or inherent or life-giving about these learned attributes. Instead, we reconnect with that inherent love; each of us on our unique faith journeys – whether a theist or an agnostic or a humanist or a religious naturalist – whether we engage with an entity or the expanse of nature or our ancestors. We are each invited on a journey to reconnect with this love. Spirituality is not what you believe, but that you believe in something.

⁵ *A Return to Love* by Marianne Williamson

Let us circle back to God or the sacred reinforcing and cultivating self-love, a critical piece of this spiritual journey we are exploring. Priest Henri Nouwen offers powerful words – Christian words, admittedly, but universal nonetheless, applicable to any divine entity – mountain, Goddess, stardust. “When Jesus talks about faith, he means first of all to trust unreservedly that you are loved, so that you can abandon every false way of obtaining it.”⁶ And so, I offer these words and this truth: You are held in the love of all that is, was, and ever will be. And you can truly and unconditionally love yourself - for all of who you are. You can abandon any other way of trying to falsely search for the love you hold inherently within. The ability to search within and not without – that is a faithful life. To trust we are loved – that is a sacred life. To allow this ultimate, inherent love to penetrate your very being, to free you, to enter and embody your core – that is a holy life.

I think of my own journey – when I was in that space of defining myself by those who I gathered around me – friends, sometimes. Sometimes not. Where the only love I had for myself was what I desperately tried to find through the affirmation of another – a wildly unhealthy venture. When all I knew were my imperfections, my flaws, that which made me unworthy, that which I attempted to cover with makeup and clothes and the material. I think of my aunt, too, and know I will never truly understand the pain and self-judgment she held within. I know now what I wish we both knew then. We were just right – and we held within us that potential for a journey of healing. I wish we knew that imperfection is holy. Pain is temporary. That we were each a gift. That sometimes our hearts were sorrowful, but at other times they would be filled with promise and joy. I wish I knew then the faith I have now – that spark within and that essence beyond which loves me unconditionally. All I truly needed was this divine love and the love of myself. We each hold within us the potential for joy and delight and pleasure, for introspection and wonder and curiosity, for worthiness and dignity and compassion. Let us not search beyond for what we – each of us – hold tenderly, eternally, and faithfully within. You are good, you are whole, you are loved.

⁶ *Letters to Marc About Jesus* by Henri Nouwen

May it be so, and Amen