

## **Becoming Whole**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 12, 2026**

Last month, my husband and I settled into a weeklong silent meditation retreat – pausing in self and mind, body and spirit. With eyes closed and breath steady, intention ran deep. Each day we joined meditation sessions interspersed with yoga, Buddhist teachings, nature walks. This time was insightful and fulfilling, and this time was mentally and emotionally difficult. I sat, poised for meditation sessions, and through those prolonged silences, my inner shadows began to emerge in poignant ways. How hard I am on myself. How I judge myself. How critical I am of myself. My mind wandered and meandered through these thoughts, and I felt as if I was a failure at this practice. I brought this lament to a learned teacher. She offered – Jane, start each session with a practice of loving kindness. I was to breathe in my anxieties, my insecurities, my seeming failures. She advised, breath out love and compassion for exactly who you are. I brought this practice to my sessions which became far more productive and fulfilling – as I honored and appreciated just who I am. And upon coming home, I embodied this practice. With loving kindness, my imperfect self became more and more whole.

Today is about cultivating a wholeness by nurturing and celebrating our true and authentic self. Let us begin with a reflection of anthropology – a social science that can help us understand who we think we should be and why. One strand of anthropology is the study of culture. Each culture is shaped by language, environment, history, worldview – offering unique norms and values. What is the beauty standard of a particular culture? What does success look like? What are our gender roles and how do we construct hierarchies? Think of our culture, one that values thin bodies, white bodies, money, accolades, young age, maleness, heteronormativity, a college education. These norms shape so much of who we think we should be and why. What happens to our sense of self if we do not conform to or meet these expectations? We become steeped in an inner failure. We feel a veil of insecurity. Or as if we are draped in the mantra of “not good enough.” We may face layers and layers of judgment, shame, and guilt, whether offered from ourselves or others. Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo

Emerson's writings frequently reflect the sentiment that "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment."<sup>1</sup> This is particularly poignant in a culture that values conformity and holds members to often unrealistic expectations. And yet we must acknowledge that while there are many who have suffered with this, there are also those who have thrived - whose strengths align with these norms who are entirely fulfilled. No identity is wrong. One of life's greatest achievements is to become fully who you are. Each day, each experience, each lesson we learn contributes to cultivating greater insight into who we are at our core. But what does it mean to be whole? To be our authentic selves?

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Swiss psychiatrist and psychologist Carl Jung often emphasized that being whole meant practicing a full and intentional integration of each and every part of ourselves, even that of which we would rather discard. Our full, authentic self includes shadows, those pieces we hide or deny. Our full self includes doubt, it includes contradiction. The woman whose impatience fills her days with frustration, the teenager who hides their insecurities through detailed vanity. Growth comes from acknowledging what we would rather hide. It is not complacency in the practice of self-improvement, for we can always learn, grow, and mature. It comes from compassionately engaging with those pieces of yourself you would prefer to discard through a lens of gentleness and love. Wholeness has nothing to do with being flawless. Wholeness means slowing and intentionally emerging from that cave you have created. It means meeting what you have uncovered with gentle honesty and compassion.

Unveiling who we are requires us to shed the facades we have built. A historic story is told of a five-ton solid gold Buddha statue, created in the thirteenth century. With the threat of invading armies looming, the Buddhist sculptors worked to protect this cherished piece of art. Carefully, they covered the invaluable gold with cheap clay. For nearly two hundred years, the statue remained cast in clay, as those who knew of the treasure passed away. The statue was eventually moved. During the relocation, the clay began to chip away. What revealed itself had

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<sup>1</sup> Theme of "Self-Reliance" by Ralph Waldo Emerson

been hidden for centuries: solid gold. Monks diligently removed the casing, unveiling the treasure within. Since that time, the story has become a powerful spiritual metaphor with varying interpretations. The outer clay can represent layers of facades created of identities we constructed to protect ourselves from the outside world. Power, authority, pride. A façade that distances us from our true selves—something we witness nearly every day—as our protective barriers can lead us to become mean, uncaring, aggressive, or selfish.<sup>2</sup> We do this work to uncover the authentic beauty held within – diligently, just as the monks did – chipping away the facades one stroke of the chisel at a time. We have innate worth. We have our true, inner selves.

How would you define authenticity? Professor and author Brené Brown wrote, “Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are”<sup>3</sup> – chipping away at the clay to find the gold. To me Brown’s definition elaborates on the vulnerability and courage it takes to be our full, authentic selves. We are vulnerable in not knowing how we will be received. We are courageous in not simply acknowledging, but celebrating our own, true selves ahead of myriad societal, familial, personal norms and expectations. Questions inevitably linger in our minds. Will people resent the change? Will I be rejected? Judged? Will there be repercussions? Ultimately, am I willing to face this in order to be my true self?

When I was young, I amused myself by coming up with names for my future children. Claire, Lily, Charlie. As I grew older, my mom and I joyfully speculated about her nickname as a grandmother. In my twenties and early thirties, I began to shape my life with motherhood in mind. I met my beloved husband. I began a full-time job to help support our family. I moved into a neighborhood with abundant children. My husband and I began to plan for my mother to come live with us as support. Everything was aligning itself towards the life I had always assumed I would live. I was doing exactly what society was expecting of me. And then panic hit

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<sup>2</sup> “Uncover the Golden Buddha Within You” by Tara Brach

<sup>3</sup> *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are.* By Brené Brown

as doubts and trepidations flooded in. Without elaborating upon each apprehension or fear, I slowly and painfully came to realize that I was not meant for motherhood. And that began a yearslong grieving process, shedding myself of the life I had always assumed I would live. The life I was, in many ways, expected to live. And – slowly – with that grieving came acceptance, with acceptance came gratitude, and with gratitude became a welcome into this life of authenticity. I am living fully into my childfree life and feel gratitude for crafting this life for myself each day. I am fulfilled. The decision was both difficult and affirming.

So, there is a process in this transformation. There is an intentional and gradual uncovering of our authentic selves, and there is celebrating what we have found. Author and educator Parker Palmer wrote of this initial revelation, quote, “Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.”<sup>4</sup> It is creating a space where you can quiet the deafening shouts of who we should be and instead embrace the whispers of truth. It means connecting with that still, small voice within. Our bodies know our truths. Instead of asserting a false self, we uncover authenticity, hidden under layers of falsehoods we may not have even known existed. Author and theologian Howard Thurman wrote of this second stage – this celebration – in an often-paraphrased quote, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”<sup>5</sup> Authenticity need not be a withdrawal from the world, but a true and embodied gift to it. Have you ever met someone so engaged in their authenticity they radiated? In all of their countercultural joy, held as inspiration towards genuineness? The world does not need people to act as robots nor acquire endless money. The world needs wonder and awe and joy in abundance.

Sufi wisdom tales sometime use the metaphor of a mask to differentiate between a false self and a true, spiritual self. Sufi mystic and poet Rumi wrote, "Tear off the mask, your face is glorious." There are myriad interpretations of, and stories related to, this insightful

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<sup>4</sup> *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. By Parker Palmer

<sup>5</sup> Referenced in *The Living Wisdom of Howard Thurman: A Visionary for Our Time*.

teaching. Of the many I offer one. A mask maker has many different masks he wears. He has one he dons when his goal is to be admired, one to appear strong, yet another to appear wise. He accumulates layers and layers of masks, one façade building upon the next. In the process, he forgets who he truly is, living into the myth of each mask. Who he saw in the mirror wasn't an enemy, but neither was it authentic. One by one he peeled the masks away. Through this process he learned that we do not find our true selves by adding layers of identities. We find our true selves when we remove what is false.<sup>6</sup>

We are called to return to our true, authentic selves. I share an excerpt from Derek Walcott's poem "Love After Love," which we heard earlier,

"The time will come  
when, with elation,  
you will greet yourself arriving  
at your own door, in your own mirror,  
and each will smile at the other's welcome."

"Give back your heart  
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you  
all your life, whom you ignored  
for another, who knows you by heart."

"Sit. Feast on your life."<sup>7</sup>

The poem is about returning to one's full and authentic self after profound loss or prolonged heartbreak. It is about releasing yourself from numerous, life-taking expectations bestowed upon you even by those you may love. It speaks of the ways that love or external expectations can take away from our true selves, and that slow and steady return to our core. "Greet yourself at your own door," the poet offers. Return to yourself - reconnect with just who you

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<sup>6</sup> Varied sources

<sup>7</sup> "Love After Love" by Derek Walcott

are after having drifted away. Reclaim your inner life – your own authentic and innate inner beauty. “Love the stranger who was yourself.” Our true selves can feel like an unknown if we have strayed too far. If we accommodated others by subduing our strengths or altering our values. Your true self is both familiar and forgotten, perhaps unrecognizable, but it is there, persistently awaiting you. It is waiting for that self-love that the poet held within his being. He encourages us to look at this self-love – an arguably enduring form of love – as we return to the stranger we know by heart. “Feast on your life.” Receive yourself with gratitude. With joy. With abundant welcome. The poem speaks of external love taking you away from self, and that innate discovery for the need to return to just who you are.

Returning to authentic self is inherently a spiritual journey. It is a profound acknowledgment and acceptance that just who we are at our core is sacred and truly beautiful. Perfectly imperfect and wonderfully unique. To be fully authentic is to celebrate our strengths and humbly realize that everyone has weaknesses, embracing talent while acknowledging inherent imperfections. It is reminiscent of the self-criticism I struggled with on the retreat. We are called to return, again and again, to just who the spirit intended us to be. This intentional and deeply revealing journey calls us into a deeper awareness of just who we are and allows us to see this innately flawed being as a true gift. It is to say, yes, I am inherently good and whole and loving, just as our faith has professed since our founding. We let go of that which serves to incumber us and our faith journey. We move, with intention, from outer expectations and norms and pressure and return, instead, that inner and forever whispering still, small voice within, the murmur of the divine.

So, offer yourself that loving kindness, meeting insecurities and doubts with a compassionate acceptance. Breathe. Integrate insecurity with compassion, anger with strength, impulsivity with empathy, knowing that an authentic self is not a perfect self, but an honest integration of all that is held within. Chip away at your forever life-taking facades that make a failed attempt at protection and realize the treasure held within. Remove one mask at a time, peeling off a layer of authority, one of power, one of control, until the true and imperfect self is

shown. Whoever you are, whatever your story, whatever mistakes you have made, find that voice within. Listen to the whisper, and live.

May it be so, and Amen