

## **Our True Selves**

**By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 14, 2025**

I was raised an atheist. Both my mother and my father grew up in Catholicism, attending mass while disconnected from the creeds and offering inauthentic prayers. As young adults, my parents both separated from organized religion entirely, each of them finding their own path towards atheism. My sister and I were raised by our single mother without a faith tradition. My atheistic self was even quite critical of religious theologies and creeds surrounding, primarily, beliefs connected to death and the hereafter. And, yet, in my late teenage years, my faith journey began. Was there something greater than this tangible world? What happens after death? If there is a God, why would God send people to hell? While in the midst of this theological meaning making, I stumbled upon a Unitarian Universalist church. Here I was taught of inherent worthiness and dignity. I found spiritual sojourners with their own questions. I was offered a life-giving understanding of all things sacred and holy. Engaging with my true, authentic, theistic self, my theology began to bud then blossom. My journey brought me to a sacred and beloved group of Unitarian Universalists. I went from a lone and confused sojourner to a beloved part of an expansive faith community. Finding answers alongside others to my theological queries, I felt I truly belonged.

This suggests the question, how can we know our authentic selves? When our words resonate with our hearts, our actions with our values, our decisions with our convictions. And we are always discerning our hearts and values and convictions. We are like Russian nesting dolls, living many iterations of our true selves as we learn and grow and pause in holy contemplation. Sometimes we forge a new identity, as I did in my theism. I connected with a new self that gave me new meaning and purpose. As a theist, I connected with my spirit in a much deeper way, cultivating a new kind of authenticity.

How can we cultivate our true identity and live with purpose in this world? I offer a short reflection, pulled from Jewish leader Hillel and various rabbis. It is when we know our

strengths, for we each have them. When we celebrate the gifts given to us by all things sacred and holy. So many of us do not focus on the myriad blessings we offer those in this earthly realm. The teachers offer, it's when we do not let others determine our value - it is dependent on us. It's not how others perceive us but how we perceive and know ourselves. In the same vein, it's to surround ourselves with people who value us and all we have to offer. This text offers, be authentic. Live each of our days with integrity and do not alter who we are to please others. Quote, "It isn't enough to just be yourself. Be extremely yourself."<sup>1</sup>

This sounds unachievable, perhaps, and it is quite possible that no one will ever achieve it, at least not fully. But we have guides to help us try. This question of authenticity is so overarching that myriad faith traditions propose an answer. As a reminder, this month's theme is belonging. To clarify, when I speak of belonging, I mean when we feel accepted and welcomed by a community as our full, genuine, and vulnerable selves. When we are authentic, we are not swayed by the peer pressure of other groups but find ways to connect and belong with others that are lifegiving and meaningful.

At a Quaker retreat that I recently attended, I was part of several discernment circles, both as a listener and as the focus person. The goal of the circle is to discern how the focus person can be most authentic to who they are. Let me describe the unique practice. Someone who is searching for discernment sits in the middle of a circle of peers and asks a question for the group to focus on. What job offer should I accept? How can my actions be more in line with my values? After a prolonged silence, a peer offers a reflection question in response. What is the spirit calling you to do? How does your heart feel at this moment? This is a spiritual practice that invites the presence of the spirit, the inquiries of others, and an invitation to listen to that still, small, voice within. What is held within your soul, your spirit, and your intellect, always present but yet to be discovered? I sat in awe watching those grappling with purpose unearthing their true selves by centering in the spirit. When it was my turn to offer a question to the group, I asked this: What is it I am called to do, in this moment, with my one wild and

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article\\_cdo/aid/4327020/jewish/10-Steps-to-Knowing-Yourself.htm](https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/4327020/jewish/10-Steps-to-Knowing-Yourself.htm)

precious life? Ministry, yes. But what about meaning deep in my core? I was asked a handful of questions, and, though I cannot remember the specific questions they offered, I hold true to what I discerned: my purpose is to find, connect to, and be guided in each of my days by all that I hold sacred and holy.

While working in these small groups, I reflected upon an observation: that which is a profoundly meaningful life for one may not be a life well lived for another. This is applicable to a yearslong discernment that my husband and I dedicated ourselves to. It was that deeply personal and difficult decision of whether or not to have children. Ultimately, many people find true meaning and purpose as parents. For myriad reasons, my husband and I decided that was not our path. And we are content and at peace with that choice. We, like the Quakers, connected with our holy, with each other, and with what we hold true within us. With these deep and true discernments of self-identity, of purpose, of meaning making, life-giving and affirmative authenticity is realized.

Christianity has its own theological response to this question of belonging and authenticity found in the stories of Jesus. Jesus brings outcasts to society by healing them, including them, and respecting them, all of which leads to a return of an authentic self of the afflicted as compassion leads to transformation. Jesus saw the untouchables, the outcasts, for just who they were as beloved beings made in God's image. Through his touch and his love, the sick were miraculously healed. I pause to incorporate my own Christian theology: that Jesus healed the sick not from a source of miraculous divinity, but because of the unconditional, miraculous love he offered those who only knew condemnation. Jesus worked to bring the least of these back to the community, as a way for them to thrive. I think of the story of the leper, the tale of a man who was shunned and deemed an outcast from society due to his disease. This man approached Jesus to help in his physical and emotional turmoil. Jesus, a being of compassion and love, touched the untouchable, and he was immediately healed. The man was no longer defined by his disease, but by his true, authentic personhood. He healed because of love, and of

recognition as a full human being. This allowed him to release the veil of self-disdain, finally embodying who he was at his core. And thus, he could find authenticity and belonging.

There are stories of tax collectors and sinners that illustrate Jesus' actions and beliefs as well. Jesus sat at the table and ate with those deemed sinners, sharing bread and treating as worthy those of whom society rejected. He engaged with the prostitutes, the poor, the disabled. Jesus not only loved them but taught that the outcasts are receivers of unconditional divine love. Through compassion, the afflicted connected, not with the hate and exclusion they were subjected to, but with who they were deep within. They became their authentic selves and, I believe, held true to this authenticity by believing in Jesus' unconditional love. These stories teach us about the life-changing power of compassion. We are not Jesus, but we can use these teachings in our daily lives by respecting and assisting immigrants. By acknowledging the unhoused in the streets as full and beloved beings. By working for affordable housing or advocating for a woman's right for bodily autonomy

Buddhism offers its own responses to the questions posed. The first I want to address is the understanding of delusions. This encompasses anger, jealousy, impatience, pride – any of those mindsets that cause us suffering. Buddhism teaches that these potentially detrimental states of mind are not truly a part of who we are. We do not inherently possess any states of mind that are unwholesome. Greed, judgement, animosity – these delusions lead us away from our true selves. Yet with mindfulness and intention, we can change. I learned that when I get impatient in traffic, when my body tenses up as frustration creeps into my being, that this is not who I truly am. Instead, through mindfulness, I can foster calming patience, and as such create a true and authentic peace of mind within. I simply sit in my car alongside many others. I return to my authentic self.

Buddhism furthermore teaches that these delusions arise from what Buddhists call “self-cherishing.” The more important we think we are, the more we are inundated with delusions that cause us suffering; that which separates us from our true selves. I am more important

than you and, as such, I offer you disdain. I am a success and as such you are a failure. Our suffering results when we place our own happiness well above the happiness of others. This impedes our ability to belong. We have to realize that we are truly not very important. That all of those we encounter need to receive our heartfelt compassion, care, and love. To be released of this self-importance, Buddhists teach, is to re-connect with our true selves. We are called not to focus on ourselves, but to lift up the needs of others.

Buddhism also teaches about the practice of cultivating good within us. What Buddhism teaches is that, with intention, we can feed the good and starve the bad. Just as plants in a well-tended garden, those we care for thrive and those without water and nutrients sink back into the ground. So is it with our minds. If we tend to joy, peace, and patience, then it is joy, peace, and patience that will prevail in our minds. If we starve jealousy, anger, and impatience, they recede into the recesses of our minds. We become our true selves by releasing our delusions and connecting with that which is life-giving. We become authentic beings when we focus on cultivating goodness and beauty.

The world's religions teach us that authentic living is not only possible, but vital. To settle in true and meaningful discernment, to love unconditionally, to release ourselves of all that leads to suffering – this strips away any inauthenticity we have cultivated and instead connects us with our core. Falsehoods slip away as truth is revealed. We belong to family, friends, faith communities. It is my own younger self, fully embracing my own theism and, as such, finding this life-affirming church. We cultivate peace, assurance, compassion, joy, authenticity, and truth. We live both self-assured in ourselves and as part of something so much greater. We belong, in all of our beautiful and broken selves. In all of our joys and sorrows. We belong.

May it be so, and Amen