

“Embracing the Shadows”

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City MD, January 5, 2020

Every year around the first of January we are inundated with beauty ads, health ads. Fix this! Fix that! Commercials of beautiful models selling creams to lift sagging eyelids, or a person with perfectly sculpted six-pack abs selling Bow Flex machines to help tone the body. This is the time of year of New Year’s Resolutions, a time focused on noticing and fixing our faults. This “fixing,” this is something society has taught us for years. Making oneself “good enough,” straightening teeth with braces or excelling in every subject in school or having just the right attitude. When will we be good enough? I wonder, what if we were born good enough? Born with inherent goodness. What would happen if we embraced our vulnerabilities, insecurities – if we embraced and accepted instead of focusing on fixing. What would happen if we embraced our shadows- embraced our whole selves? We could live a life of compassion, and live a life of integrity. This word “fixing” implies that something is wrong. Self-improvement comes from a place of acceptance; a centered whole. We can all and should all work on ourselves; but healthy improvement does not come from judgement. Healthy improvement is a gracious acceptance that perhaps we could do better – we could work on our anxiety, we could aim to forgive another or ourselves, we can confront addiction. But this doesn’t mean something is inherently wrong with us! So when the world screams “Fix! Fix! Fix!” we can respond, “I am already whole.” How can we approach this tradition of New Year’s Resolutions with integrity? How can we accept our whole selves, inherently good, without fixing?

It is part of the human condition to have shadows; everyone has vulnerabilities, insecurities.

This is simply a part of being human. Many folks suffer from anxiety or succumb to judgements or are quick to anger or perhaps often feel not good enough.

And yet we have an opportunity to work to honor these vulnerabilities; to embrace what causes us to feel insecure. To embrace our wholeness is to live a life of integrity.

Many of these shadows, this oppressive darkness draped us - what can be seen as faults, are instead simply a reaction to the world around us – coping skills. Perhaps we were expected to excel in the classroom, expected to be quick to answer questions and chastised for less than perfect grades, and developed anxiety. Author and priest Richard Rohr writes that while these traits may at one point have helped with survival, they may eventually get in the way of individuals living freely as their true self.

As that glittery ball descends in Times Square, as we count down those final seconds of the year, as we prepare to make those resolutions to carry us into the year ahead, let us grant ourselves the opportunity to see our shadows as residual efforts of reacting to a lifetime of engaging with our surroundings.

Perhaps bullying caused us to withdraw, or an angry parent, quick to temper, led us to be angry in turn, or regular criticism made us self-critical. We began to feel that heaviness; that weight of the darkness draped over the light of our true selves. And yet these responses – withdrawal, anger, the tendency to be self-critical, while they are hinderances now, they once helped us to cope. Dare we say, “thank you”? Perhaps we became critical of ourselves as a defense of

others being critical towards us, protecting us from harm. Can we offer thanks to this piece of us for helping us to cope? Can we pause to say, “thank you,” too all pieces of us?

And once we thank, we can let them go. We can improve our overall well being with grace and acceptance. These traits may eventually get in the way of individuals living freely as their true self. Our true self – that beauty, that goodness that we have at our core. Our true self, a self we become closer to as we accept all pieces of ourselves. I feel my true self in my heart. I wonder where yours may be.

This gratitude, this acceptance, this allows us to live a life of integrity – this allows us to acknowledge and accept and even embrace all pieces of us. This allows us to cherish the good, and to understand the shadows. What may be seen as faults are simply a reaction to the world around us. We are inherently good – our faults result from the circumstances we have been presented with. It is the same with all of those in our interdependent web. We are all inherently good.

This goodness – this inherent goodness – this is fundamental to our faith as Unitarian Universalists; for what is Universalism but universal salvation, universal goodness. Before the merger of Unitarianism and Universalism in 1961, these two faiths were separate. They both stemmed from Christianity. Universalism was founded on the idea of universal salvation; that everyone would eventually be saved. Universalism has this idea of original goodness, not original sin, not the fall of Adam and Eve. Everyone is inherently good. Sin can be chosen, but this is often a result of pain or a result of ignorance. This idea that the holy loves everyone; In universal theology, the holy loves all people, and all people are holy. If the holy loves everyone,

faults, sins, and all, can we, too, find this love and compassion for ourselves? For others? Can we live our values by loving that which the holy loves?

Teresa of Avila, a Christian saint, espoused that we may destroy the good while trying to get rid of the bad; this is how she interpreted Jesus's Parable of Wheat and Weeds, a parable where Jesus asks a servant to let both wheat and weeds grow together until harvest (Matthew 13:24-30). She asserts that a sinner is a person who does not love themselves enough – a person who lacks the ability to notice, to admire, to accept and to love the full self. To this saint we need all love ourselves, our true selves – as the reading earlier suggested, this split of loving the good and rejecting the bad is sinful. To this saint, it is a necessary to love ourselves! If we look inside ourselves with a lens of care and compassion can we accept whatever is termed “bad” while simultaneously embracing the “good”? Not a dichotomy, but a wholeness.

Father Rohr writes that what is sacred is to find the holy, what he calls God, in the present moment, in any present moment, what he calls “the sacrament of the present moment.” This means finding the holy in the good and the bad. To find God everywhere. In our human minds we may divide things into good or bad, we may create binaries, and in doing so miss what Father Rohr says the spirit sees – we may divide into parts instead of seeing the whole. And to see the whole? This is integrity. Father Rohr writes, “In Christian theology, this inner presence is described as the Holy Spirit: God as immanent, within, and even our deepest and truest self.”

We may divide into good and bad – compassionate vs judgmental, accepting vs insecure – instead of one beautiful interconnected whole

Yet even with that judgment, that insecurity, the holy sees this, and the holy loves this, whatever holy means to you.

The holy can be found in these instances just as the holy can be found when we offer kindness to stranger or use our pain for good or give our time to the betterment of the world. We need not separate, but accept.

Father Richard Rohr writes, “The mystics, those who really pray, know this. Those who enter deeply into the great mystery do not experience a God who compares, differentiates, and judges. They experience an all-embracing receptor, a receiver who looks at the divine image in us and almost refuses to look at the contrary.” A receiver who looks at the divine image in us and almost refuses to look at the contrary. Can we gaze at our imperfect reflection in the mirror with this same compassion and acceptance?

To live a life of integrity is to accept all of who we are. In Universalist theology, we are inherently good. Our shadows are a reflection of life circumstance. We need embrace these shadows just as we embrace the good, just as a loving God would.

Author Parker Palmer writes, “I now know myself to be a person of weakness and strength, liability and giftedness, darkness and light. I now know that to be whole means to reject none of it but to embrace all of it.” I now know that what it means to be whole means to reject none of it but to embrace all of it.

We heard the words of Rachel Naomi Remen earlier. “Integrity rarely means that we need to add something to ourselves: it is more an undoing than a doing, a freeing ourselves from beliefs we have about who we are and ways we have been persuaded to “fix” ourselves to know who

we genuinely are.” Integrity as an undoing, not a doing. A freedom from fixing and an embrace of the full self. This is hard work!

I know I have felt the need to add to myself. As part of my training for ministry I served as a chaplain for teenagers struggling with mental illness and addiction. On my first day I buzzed into the secure building, walked up a short flight of grey, plastic stairs, walked through a wide corridor and reached my supervisor’s office, ready to do it just right. I wanted to be the perfect minister! But there is no such thing as the perfect minister; there is no such thing as the perfect anything. But I tried – and in trying I added to myself. I tried to be constantly available for pastoral care and in doing so bothered these kids by asking persistent questions. I tried to uphold rigid boundaries, not sharing anything of my personal life, and, in doing so, remained an untrusted mystery. I tried, and in trying made few connections. I added to myself, when what I really needed to do was undo this, and be me, my true self. And eventually I did this, and in doing I learned. I learned that by being fully myself I was able to initiate and maintain healthy relationships with those youth; to have those important conversations; to build trust; to be a minister. To be my genuine self.

And when I think about those youth I remember youth battling flaws that arose from difficult life circumstances; extremely difficult childhoods that led to coping skills that were now getting them in trouble with police or that they tried fixing with drugs and alcohol. I spent my time with these struggling kids who were simply trying to survive. And if we look at these kids or anyone else who is struggling and making bad decisions – if we see these folks as inherently good, and acting out due to life circumstances – if we can see the world this way, if we can see individuals this way – we can live a life of compassion. We can claim our own integrity and use

this understanding to better the lives of others. Let us take this out into the world. My compassion for these kids and this understanding of what results from a harsh life offered me the honor to hear their stories and help them heal.

We all – including me, including those youth, including everyone in this room – we have these flaws, these complexities, these vulnerabilities. Integrity comes from accepting all of this. We need not “add” anything to ourselves to rid of vulnerability, but instead free ourselves from this societal impulse to “fix.” A life of integrity is to free ourselves from what we should be, and instead accept exactly who we are. Only with this acceptance can we truly heal.

And in doing this for ourselves we can see this in others. Folks who are making bad decisions, who are causing harm, their actions may often arise from difficult life circumstances. This can perhaps help us make sense of things. That alcoholic that turns to the bottle every day – perhaps they were raised in a dysfunctional household. That boss who is super critical of your work, perhaps they themselves were criticized often. This doesn’t condone this behavior, but it helps us make sense of it.

I asked earlier, how can we approach this tradition of New Years Resolutions with integrity? As that glittery ball slowly descends in Times Square and the East Coast counts down the final seconds of that last year, can we focus on acceptance instead of fixing? When those shiny advertisements flash across our screen, begging us to fix - Instead of buying that cream or splurging on a Bow Flex, can we perhaps accept ourselves fully? We need not fragment ourselves, we need not split into good or bad. We need integrate; accept everything; learn from everything. The more we strip down instead of building up, the closer we are to our true

selves. We are all inherently good. Let us be kind to those pieces of self; let us accept all of us;
for this is to live a life of integrity.

May it be so, and Amen