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Growing Together as a Community of the Spirit

It was the winter of 1979, a time of major discontent for me. I felt stuck in a job that was both stressful and unrewarding. I enjoyed the company of my family, which included my baby daughter, but life often felt like one long series of chores. There seemed to be an emptiness at the core of my being. One morning I went out for my usual morning run in the Berkeley Hills. It was rainy and cold, and I was soaking wet and feeling very sorry for myself. Suddenly, I was seized with a moment of revelation. Out of the blue, I experienced an image of the Hindu God Shiva, multiple arms upraised, dancing, and balanced on one foot. I had lived in India for a couple of years, and I had always been somewhat bemused that Hindus had a polytheistic worldview. At the top of their pantheon were Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. I understood the creator and preserver parts, but why, I had always wondered, would you worship a God known as the destroyer?

Well, in this moment in the Berkeley Hills, I suddenly understood the role of Shiva in the world. For there to be warmth and sun and growth, there needs to be cold and rain. For there to be light, there needs to be dark. For there to be life, there needs to be death, so that the great cycle of life can continue. The self-pity I was feeling disappeared, replaced with an understanding that I, too, am part of the life-cycle. That the great wheel keeps on turning, through dark time and light, through fallow periods and fertile ones, from death to life, and back to death again in an endless circle.

The immediate effect of this experience was to get me to begin in earnest what had always been sort of dilettantish. I had always been fascinated with religious and spiritual practices, but now I became a serious practitioner. I joined a Buddhist center, founded by a noted Tibetan teacher. And I plunged into being part of that community. We practiced meditation a lot, but we also had numerous classes and discussions. And for the first time, I found myself in what I would call a religious setting, where doubt was encouraged, where it was OK to question everything. And I had lots of questions – I challenged the teachers and leaders, over and over again. And yet – I found that even as I questioned, I could participate whole-heartedly in all the various activities of the meditation center. This was a new experience for me – to be both a doubter and a whole-hearted member at the same time.

Years later, I left that Buddhist center. I don't need to go into the reasons for my leaving here today. Suffice it to say that there several scandals that made me feel disillusioned about the way that this particular community had reacted to crises. My disillusionment had nothing to do with my belief in either the teachings or the practice.

Fast forward some 20 years to the winter of 1998. By now, my body had told me that running every day wasn't so good for it, and I was taking long hikes in the hills as my morning exercise. Karen and I had recently become members of the Berkeley UU congregation. And once again, I had found a religious community where I could question and all I wanted and still throw myself whole-heartedly into the activities of the community. Once again, it was rainy and cold. Once again, I was feeling sorry for myself. This time, I was stressed and anxious, because my business partner and I had

just decided that our efforts to start a publishing company were not going to come to fruition. We had published some good books and journals, but we weren't making the kind of money we needed to stay in business. I was in my late 50s. Who, I wondered, is going to hire someone my age, who has just had a business venture go belly up. And it happened again. Seemingly out of the blue, the idea came to me – I could go to seminary! We live in Berkeley, the Graduate Theological Union is right here! I could become a minister. And I did! Very soon, I applied to seminary, was accepted, and began to study for the ministry. For a couple of years, I worked part-time while studying, but eventually, I decided, with lots of support from Karen, to be a full-time student.

The striking thing for me about these moments of revelation, separated by many years, was how instantly I went from being in despair to changing direction completely. There was no sense of questioning, no drawn-out weighing of pros and cons – suddenly, I just knew the way forward out of my despair. There was a profound feeling that I had connected with something transcendent in those moments. I suspect that we all have such experiences at various times in our lives. I don't know exactly what to call them. To me, though, each time I felt that I had some sort of spiritual -- or religious -- experience.

[PAUSE – TRANSITION]

This fall, we have been talking about who we are as Unitarian Universalists. What do we believe? What do we stand for? Unlike most denominations, we don't have creeds. To be a member of this community, you don't have to subscribe to any particular doctrine. In our opening words, we proclaim that we welcome all who come "with open minds and warm hearts." Yet we do have a set of principles that we look to – what we call our "Seven Principles." And this fall, we have been working our way through those principles and discussing what they mean for us, as individuals and as a community.

Our third UU principle calls on us to "affirm and promote: . . . acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. UUs stand for acceptance of one another in many different contexts. When we say we welcome all we mean it -- we began ordaining women more than 150 years ago, and today more than half our ministers are women. Some denominations are still wrestling with this issue. We have welcomed gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people for many years, and we have been leading voices for marriage equality throughout this country. We have been active in promoting separation of church and state and in efforts to create dialogue among different religious communities. And so on – acceptance of one another is an important part of who we are.

It seems to me, though, that our third principle refers specifically to acceptance of one another's religious, spiritual, theological beliefs within our congregations. we acknowledge that each one of us has his or her particular path, his or her individual set of beliefs. And we acknowledge that each of us will grow, and change, and develop, in our spiritual lives. This morning we sang that UU standard "Bring Many Names." It embodies our commitment to acceptance of one another's diverse theologies – we bring many names, many different ways of conceptualizing our religious paths.

How do we bring together the first and second parts of our third principle? Can we both accept one another and yet still encourage spiritual growth within our

congregations. OK, so we accept the diversity of individual religious and spiritual paths that we bring to this fellowship. How can we also encourage spiritual growth together? Are we so broadly diverse in our views that it is impossible for us to be together in community? Can we bring together our individual spiritual seeking with our desire to be part of a community?

Well, let's go back for a moment to the stories of individual experience and insight with which I began this talk. Each was clearly an individual experience. I was alone; they were insights that came to me personally; and they were insights that related very specifically to my life. Many people might react to such experiences by concluding that "God told me what to do." Or, "I was called by God to change my life, to change direction." I did experience these moments as profoundly religious -- or spiritual -- ones, but not in the sense that "God" was somehow intervening in my life. No -- quite the reverse -- it felt to me as if I had suddenly been open to something that had been there all along. As if something had happened within me to enable me to connect with a spirit, a power, a presence, that was already there. I am reminded here of the words of our great Unitarian, Ralph Waldo Emerson, that in such transcendent experiences, we are "drinking the soul of God."

But the significance of each of these experiences extended way beyond the individual moment itself. Each led me into community as a way of learning the full meaning of the experience. The first led me to make a connection with a Buddhist community, and I maintained that connection over many years. Together in community with other students and practitioners, I was able to take that original experience and as use it as a basis to grow and develop spiritually.

The second experience led me directly into preparing for the ministry. Seminary gave me an opportunity to be part of a community of students preparing for ministry in many different denominations -- Congregationalist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, and so on. This rich experience provided a context within which each of us could pursue his or her own personal spiritual growth. But it also provided an opportunity within which we could share our experiences and learn from each other.

And finally, these two experiences provided something I had never experienced before. Growing up, I was full of questions about my experiences of church, but questioning certainly was not encouraged! Quite the contrary! So I felt that being religious meant that you couldn't have doubts and you couldn't ask questions. For many years, I had stayed away from active participation in a religious community because of this feeling that there was no room for questioning in congregational life. But, first as a Buddhist, and then as a Unitarian Universalist, I discovered that it's OK to have doubts, it's OK to ask questions. And that a major part of life in a religious community can be a respectful sharing of our thoughts and feelings.

And not only that -- my experiences showed me that it's possible to hold these two strains in a balance. We can give voice to our doubts, our questions, our feelings. And yet, even as we have these doubts and questions, we can put ourselves wholeheartedly into the life of the community. To me, this is what our third UU principle is all about. On the one hand, we honor and cherish our individual religious path -- our Emersonian quest for the transcendent. And we do so by using our reason, by engaging this brain that we have been given. On the other hand, we join together as a community of seekers, even as we recognize that our paths are not all the same. We accept one

another, and at the same time we come together as a community of people who are growing and developing in our spiritual selves.

And it's this paradoxical quality of our UU congregational life that I want to emphasize here. I want each one of us to feel that this is his or her spiritual home. That this is a community to which we can bring our sense of seeking, our questioning about the nature of the universe and our place in it; our individual quest for meaning and purpose. As Rilke said, I want this to be a place where we "live the questions now." In our adult education class, "The Changing Face of God," we have been doing just that. We are watching videos of talks by leading Christian thinkers, and then we are engaging in lively discussions about what meaning we can find in these talks. We disagree about many things, and yet we can be together to learn from each other. We accept each others' points of view, and we grow together spiritually, in community.

And I want each one of us to feel that this is a spiritual community in which each one of us can participate whole-heartedly. That was the shocking insight that I first got from joining a Buddhist community. We can put ourselves fully into the life of the community, even as we question and argue. That's what I would like to see us be as a Fellowship – a community in which we participate sincerely and profoundly, even as we continue to walk our individual spiritual path. And even as we continue to question and to seek.

And this leads me to my concluding thoughts about life in this Fellowship. We were founded some 16 years ago by a few visionary leaders. Those leaders and others have carried this Fellowship along to where it is today – we have grown to more than 80 members, we meet in three separate locations, we are becoming more and more of a presence in the community. And if we are to become the kind of community that we all envision – a community dedicated to reason in our thinking, and to compassion in our relations with others – we need to have each one of us participate wholeheartedly in the life of this community. By all means, we should question, we should argue, we should continue to follow our individual path. But if we want to be a community that provides a beacon of light in the Mother Lode, then we need for each one of us be a joyful active, participant.

This means more than showing up on Sunday morning, although being here on Sunday is important. We get out of this community what we put into it. We grow in proportion to what we give. So, I ask each of you to think about what it is that you most like about this community, and what you might contribute to building that part of our life together. I challenge you to bring your skills, your enthusiasm, your caring and compassion. And I urge you to find ways to put your heart into this community, to build it, to make it one that we all see as spiritual home. There's a South African song that goes, "We are the ones we have been waiting for." We are this community, there is no one but us to build it and nurture it. As Annie Dillard wrote, "there is no one but us to ascend to the mountaintop. There never has been."

Together, let's affirm our acceptance of one another and our sense of being a community that promotes spiritual growth;

Together, let's participate wholeheartedly in building this caring, compassionate community.

Together, let's make this community a beacon of hope in these difficult times. May it be so! Blessed be! And Amen!