

Spiritual Responsibility
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
Sunday, April 22, 2012
Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I gave up childish ways.” This is an often-used reading from Paul’s letter to the members of the church in Corinth, providing guidance as they matured as a faith community. Becoming an adult, maturing in faith, accepting responsibility for your own spirituality, is an important rite of passage in just about every religious tradition.

Becoming an adult, one gives up childish ways of speaking, of thinking, of reasoning. I often describe the coming of age process that we celebrate in our Unitarian Universalist churches as the counterpart of Confirmation in Christian churches, or the Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah in the Jewish tradition. A counterpart, yes, but with an important difference.

The young people in our churches go through a period of study that is in many ways similar to those studies in other traditions. However, we add a different twist: our coming of age process not only teaches these young people about our faith tradition, its history, its foundations and statements of principle, but in that coming of age we invite them to step into the complex and mature process of taking responsibility for their own spirituality, defining their own most deeply held values and beliefs. And we do this in the context, not of a universal and unchanging set of truths which they inherit, but rather in the context of a faithful and committed, free and responsible, search for truth and meaning, reflecting the fourth principle of our Unitarian Universalist commitments.

The search for truth and meaning is one in which we are all engaged as adult members of this faith tradition, a journey on which these young searchers now embark with us. That is what I mean by spiritual responsibility, taking responsibility to grapple with the big questions, each of us taking responsibility to define our own most deeply held values and beliefs, what we hold to be most fundamentally true about the way the world works and our part in it.

We use the term “credo” for these affirmations of faith that are written by the coming of age students. “Credo” is a Latin word, from the same root as the word for “heart.” A credo, then, is not so much a statement of “this is what I think” as it is a statement of “that to which I give my heart.” When we talk about our beliefs, most often we mean the work of just our heads, our minds. But when we shape a credo, when we turn our attention to the yearnings and commitments of our heart, that impulse comes from a different place, a deeper place, a place where the roots of our lives are planted.

Researchers Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, in their book *Immunity to Change*, offer a new framework for understanding adult development, for which they use the term “mental complexity,” and it reminds me of the way we approach faith development in a Unitarian Universalist church. Development in mental complexity is not simply a matter of getting older and more experienced or more skilled. It is instead a multi-dimensional development of our capacity to shape the mental and emotional maps by which we navigate our way through the world. It includes emotional complexity and connectedness, a linking of mind with heart, belief with commitment.

The first level of mental complexity is socialized behavior patterns, in which our most powerful motivation is simply to fit in, to meet the expectations of others. As we move into greater complexity and competence, we enter self-authoring and then self-transforming patterns, with increased ability to think in new and more open-ended ways, to be aware of and then to challenge our own assumptions and beliefs. We might engage, for instance, in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

As we grow in mental maturity and complexity we increase our ability to live and work creatively and productively in an increasingly complex, diverse and rapidly changing world. We develop a stronger and more coherent linking of our mind and our heart, our beliefs and our credo, as they come together to direct our lives. And so coming of age in our tradition is marked by making a first statement of a personal credo, a personal commitment to living with an open mind, an open heart, and an engaged will and commitment.

This congregation, this Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo, is an intentional faith community, part of this historic and vital faith tradition, that is committed to cultivating a complexity and maturity of faith, an integrity of commitment to deeply held beliefs and values, in all its members whatever their age and stage of development. In this challenging way of faith, we neither seek nor do we teach the easy answers. Rather, we challenge each other to dig deep to reach that which is most true for us, and to live in good alignment with that truth. Today you heard from some of our younger seekers, who have themselves dug deep to discover that which is most true for them in this moment, and then, with courage, they have stood here before you to speak their truth. That is a very complex and mature thing we ask of them, and it is a pleasure to see how well they step up to the challenge.

Over the past several weeks, since the middle of February, in various ways, we have been inviting and hearing the stories of connection and faithful commitment in this congregation, learning more about what this church means to its members, seeking the common themes that can teach us more about what unites us, what inspires us, the glowing coal of connection and commitment at the heart of this beloved congregation. Each story reflects the values, commitments and beliefs of its teller, and as the stories come together we begin to hear the collective values, commitments and beliefs, those that are held in common, and that both hold the community together and move it forward. These stories tell about how each person is part of the larger whole, how we are drawn together in community for reflection, for challenge, for deepening and perhaps for transformation. These are the stories that reflect who this congregation is, and who it might yet become.

The Appreciative Inquiry leadership team has been reading through the stories that have been gathered and recorded in the interviews in March, and I asked them to send me their early notes so that I could to share some of the stories and themes that have begun to come forth.

One person mentioned a special connection to the church's "emphasis on social justice and accepting people who are different," while another talked about specific times during our nation's struggle for civil rights, for peace and for gay rights, saying, "This church gave sanctuary to these groups. (There was) a sense of purpose and solidarity of the members who reflected those issues."

Another shared the joy of finding a community of "intelligent, spiritually rich people who are full of integrity" and yet another mentioned the gift of a "Church [that has] has taught me tolerance & patience with all kinds of differences, personalities & diversity."

The sense of loving connection is strong, whether that connection is by the act of reaching out, as for the person who told that "Someone saw my capabilities, even though I didn't recognize them," or in finding loving connection, as another recounted the experience of being "surrounded by the love and spirit of the congregation while our kids were each dedicated."

There is the experience of homecoming, as in one person's statement that, "I know my story aligns with the church and that I am with my people. That puts my mind at ease and allows me to open my heart." And finally, there was the person who said, "I had a sense that by coming to this church I would be changed. The purpose of church is transformation; to become who we can be. I felt changed by saying yes."

The Appreciative Inquiry team has set up a slide show in the Parish Hall today, of photos that were taken to record the Hearing Each Other experience in this sanctuary on Sunday, March 25. The photos are extraordinary; they simply glow with the energy of new connections being made, loving stories being told, and visions of possibility being imagined. If you missed the chance to share your story of connection to this church, and your vision for its future, there is one more final chance today, a make-up session to make sure everyone has an opportunity to participate – upstairs in the Alliance Room after church. There will be coffee and tea and something to eat, opportunities to divide up into pairs and interview each other, and then to gather in small groups to share your stories, just as the folks did on March 25. You are welcome whether you have been a long time member of the church or just started coming a few weeks ago.

And so, on this Earth Day 2012, it is a fitting time to reflect on our connections – our connection to the deepest commitments of our mind and heart, our credo; our connections to each other in a community of commitment and transformation, and the ways in which our very being is connected, woven into all that is, as an integral part of the interconnected web of all existence. So may we flourish in our faith, and so may the earth and all her peoples grow into abundance and joy.

Sources:

Kegan, Robert; Lahey, Lisa Laskow (2009). Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization. Perseus Books Group. Kindle Edition.