

January 22, 2017

**“Old Bones, New Life: Practicing R.E.”**

Melissa Spindler-Virgin

**In our first reading this morning, Molly shared a journey of growth... the tale of a young woman who used the changing seasons to help remind her of how she wanted to face the world around her as it changed from what she had known. She invited us to consider what it looks like to live as if we are GROWING instead of living like we are dying. This resonated with me – I think when we try to connect the metaphor of seasons to our lives... we have a tendency to think that childhood is our Spring, young adulthood is our Summer, middle age brings the Autumnal warnings of the impending deathly Winter.**

**This, however, would be a mistake in our understanding. We are better off considering our lives to be like that of a growing tree... year after year we grow thicker, push our roots deeper, reach out further into the light of our existence. The seasons of our reality change, cycle through, up and down and back again, over and over... The only given in life is change - and still... we grow thicker. We sprout new limbs even as old limbs break off. We find ourselves growing new leaves, producing new fruit. Growth is an endless game we're playing.**

**After some major transitions in our church's Religious Education programming and leadership over the past few years... this year the Board wanted to capitalize on my years of experience as a Director of Religious Education in other churches and schools, and so asked me to help craft a Strategic Plan to move from a children's church school model to a Lifespan Education Model. I was thrilled to take this on...**

**It's not just that I'm trained as a teacher – I come from a family of teachers, all of my closest friends are teachers, and I married a math teacher – who was from a family of teachers. Part of why I chose to do my internship here at the Universalist church is that I saw that this church shares with me, in our DNA, a dedication to learning and growth. Our building is full of classrooms and the first statement of our mission is that we pursue personal spiritual growth!**

**The congregational survey guiding our Ministerial Search also reveals this truth; many of you started coming to this church because of the religious education program. The gigantic shoes of Jean Brown are kicking around this place still. A girl could get scared off!**

**No... it is all just a testament to who we are at our core as a congregation. This church has an excellent reputation for educating our children about world religions, liberal religious values, in a way that can prepare our young people to be engaged citizens of a truly multicultural world.**

**Maintaining the essence of what has been the best of Religious Education, we built a strategic plan that provides up-to-date and user-friendly curricula that will ensure our young people are exposed to world religions, UU faith identity, spiritual practices and ethical questioning that will prepare them to be lifelong learners anywhere they go.**

**Our vision is that our young people will venture out in the world prepared to be both firm and flexible as life brings them all sorts of new experiences – taking in things they could have never imagined, and standing up boldly for who they are and what they value, playing the instrument of their voice with daft and poise and conviction of their own worth and dignity, with the confidence to step forward even when they feel blindfolded or are surrounded by people they don't know... they will be strong enough to weather whatever the seasons will bring their way.**

**Entwined in the programming for our children, are our own identities as lifelong learners. As we consider what we want our young children to be exposed to... we cannot escape considering our own values.**

**Bringing children to church on Sundays is an acknowledgement that there is something crucial we can offer to prepare our young folks for faithful/grounded/healthy adult living. Bringing ourselves to church on Sundays is an acknowledgement that there is something crucial we can offer to prepare ourselves for faithful/grounded/healthy adult living. The seasons of life continually change around us, and we choose to live as if we are growing.**

**The HARTT school students come here for musical lessons during the week – so if you're in the building in the afternoon of a weekday, you will hear the learning process going on right around you. These students practice certain exercises all week, have a teacher give them feedback and new assignments, and head off into the next week with new exercises to practice. These students will keep practicing their instruments because they will experience that as they practice, they are learning to make music. The more they practice, the stronger that branch of their life will grow, the more dominant to their being... as it thickens and stretches.**

**We come to this sanctuary Sunday after Sunday and we practice our own instruments. We bring our bodies into these pews, we play our voices into music. We practice being in community. Season after season, we come and practice our spirituality – our centering and rite-ing of ourselves back onto course with our best selves – and we grow... bit by bit... we reach our branches ever closer to the light of the sun.**

**But there is more risk to be taken by each of us... there is a lifetime of growth in front of each of us. I read a quote this week: A comfort zone is a beautiful place – but nothing every grows there. I think there's truth to that. Even after you've learned to play the guitar, the growth is in pushing yourself to learn new songs and then to write your own songs, to venturing into new territory. For those of us who joined in the book discussion on Waking Up White or no god but God, or came to the Revolutionary Conversations, I think we know quite clearly the truth of growth than can come only from stepping outside of our comfort zone. And the practice required to strengthen a new branch of our growing selves.**

**I have a friend who decided she wanted to learn about and start practicing yoga. Frugal to her core, Nicole first tried getting a book to read and practice yoga on her own. But it didn't really feel good and it wasn't really fun and she wasn't getting anything from it. So she gave in and found a beautiful yoga studio near her office in Greenwich Village in NYC. Nicole practiced at this studio for at least a year... learning the moves and the breathing and becoming good enough at yoga to also practice on her own. She grew in her strength and flexibility,**

she grew in her ability to make time for herself and get her mind calm amid chaos.

It was a step outside her comfort zone – to say the least. As an introvert, she pushed herself into a group of strangers week after week. Given the location of the studio, she found the classes to be populated with NYU students, or well-kept show wives. She also learned that her body didn't move like or look like the bodies of the 19 and 20 year olds around her in those classes.

But She practiced and practiced, and taught her body to move smoothly from one awkward pose to another, learning how to hear her body tell her when it was okay to push a little further or when she needed to pull back... Yoga taught her to be much more connected to the needs of her body, but it required that she push herself into new and uncomfortable places to be able to learn and grow. She kept attending those classes even when it didn't feel great and she kept practicing and she grew deeper roots and her core thickened. She practiced and practiced and taught her body and learned from her body and she found in herself a new joy and compassion that was more than she ever could have imagined and that she continues to want to nourish and grow.

A few years ago I was asked to take over teaching a weekly adult Bible Study that had been going on for decades. I was thrilled to delve into the Hebrew scriptures, to explore the role of women and theology in some of the less-often-read pieces of the Bible. There was so much I was going to learn! (in my opinion - teaching is one of the very best ways to learn.) However, the class started and ended with prayer, which I was expected to lead. The Lord's Prayer is the only prayer I know by heart, and I didn't particularly like it back then. I found a book of prayers that I would use every week, but I would stumble over the words. It felt so foreign and strange, but the group of learner supported my attempts. It was a bit like Dolores, the Vegas singer of the movie Sister Act, trying to pass for a nun. I would try praying when no one was around - nervous that my husband might hear me and think I had lost my mind.

I left that job and went back to school. In seminary, there were classes and situations where they would ask for volunteers to offer a prayer. Oddly, I found myself volunteering.

**I... a person who muddles around on the atheist/agnostic/humanist end of the spectrum... had learned to love praying. I still fumble around, make notes for myself before I have to pray in public... but I have learned to find a great joy in it, to feel a connection to something larger than myself.**

**Part of the RE strategic plan has been making sure this sanctuary tells visitors and new folks that we value learning and growth. We put in child-friendly materials, made our welcoming bookmarks that you find in the hymnals, and made a commitment to offering some meaningful intergenerational worship during the year that would invite us to engage across our age differences and would result in things like the Stars of Gratitude mural in the portico; Our identity as a learning community is becoming pervasive in the physical space.**

**Starting this Spring, and then really ramping up as our new minister gets settled in, we will be welcoming you into new learning opportunities, chances to practice.... And practice... and grow. Book groups and classes, small groups and movie series... opportunities for you to engage in the DNA of this place.**

**What would you like to study?**

**What would you like to learn?**

**What would you like to teach?**

**How will you stretch yourself into new positions or experiences?**

**Where will you step outside your comfort zone and find growth in your spirituality?**

**We will be bringing in up-to-date and user-friendly curricula that will ensure that all of us, regardless of the numbers of years since our start, are exposed to world religions, UU faith identity, spiritual practices and ethical questioning that will prepare us to be lifelong learners anywhere we go, no matter what seasons of life await us. Whether we support each other in learning to pray, teach in a children's classroom, or share in a small group about some new work of justice... we will each be able to find new and exciting ways to stretch and grow our branches up toward the light of our life.**

**This is the mission of our church: to pursue personal spiritual growth.**

**To minister to each other. To live our faith in our daily lives. Growth is at the center of that. Learning and growing and stretching ourselves is in the very DNA of this church. It is something we do together, ministering to each other, and practicing our faith in our daily lives.**

**Our growing Lifespan Religious Education is an opportunity for you to use your old bones to practice and learn new things. To explore and enrich your life as you know it. It will be in a step outside your comfort zone that you begin to grow new leaves, new fruit. But what's the worst that could happen? You could learn that you love to pray? It's not that bad!**

**Let us face the seasons of life as a community of people who are living as if they are growing! Join me in the unfinished business, this game of growing!**

**May it be so.**