

“Getting Clear”

Jenna Crawford

A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist

September 24, 2020

Themes: Clarity as a Spiritual Practice, Looking Toward the Year Ahead, Autumn Equinox, An “Abundance” Mindset, Spiritual Journaling, Our 3rd UU Principle

Last Sunday, Rev Catie reminded us in her sermon that amidst everything that has changed in the last 6 months – in our world, our communities, and in the ways that we do church – there are two things that never change: our relationships with each other in First Parish, and our UU faith. Our relationships and our UU faith might have always, then, been more important than the physical buildings that we gather in.

Rev Catie encouraged us to hold dear to those two things, and to work on, over the next year, cultivating the things that are *within* our control and are so central to being part of a spiritual community: our spirits, and our community. **But how might we prepare ourselves to do the work of relationship- and spirit-building this year? Where do we begin? And what if we are coming in exhausted? What then?**

Back in April, the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, wrote, “Two weeks ago, it became clear to me that my normal spiritual practices were not cutting it. I felt so worn down. I had a longing for more time to be present to the emotional realities all around me. I realized I was compartmentalizing my grief and fear – putting it away in order to stay focused on tasks at hand. While this strategy works in the short term, I’ve learned if I don’t make time to return to the pain I set aside, it finds its way in – generally as exhaustion, short-temperedness, forgetfulness, even depression.”¹ That was in April; we’re now well into September, 5 months further into the pandemic in our country.

I realized, she wrote, I was compartmentalizing my grief and fear – putting it away in order to stay focused on tasks at hand. I suspect that not only might we have a tendency to compartmentalize our grief and fear...but we also probably defer our own needs, which might feel small and trivial in the face of the needs of our larger communities.

Compartmentalizing our own sense of grief, loss, and fear and deferring our own needs are such subtle, natural, sometimes even expected behaviors of the pandemic at this point that we don’t even notice that we’re doing them. In the face of appeals that are meant to help us care for ourselves (advice to, for instance, reach out to your community), sometimes we *even* take those as imperatives of how we can help others,

¹ Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, “A Message from the UUA President: Practices of Self-Care and Resilience,” Press Releases, Unitarian Universalist Association, <https://www.uua.org/pressroom/press-releases/message-uua-president-practices-self-care-and-resilience>.

without even pausing to ask what we need, or want, or what would nourish us this week.

This Tuesday is the autumn equinox, September 22: in the natural world, things get quieter; natural processes begin to slow; there is a turn inward. **Maybe it is a good time for an equinox within ourselves...a time for our own turn inward.**

About a month ago, I realized I needed to make a change. I wasn't sleeping well, would often ruminate late into the night, and sensed that I wasn't going to bed either centered or grounded. I decided that TV had to stop being the *last* thing that I did every night. I could still watch an episode or two, but had to leave time after TV, even just 15 minutes, to write in my journal. Some powerful questions began to emerge: What happened today? Okay, but what *really* happened today? What news reports am I getting entangled in and why? What stories am I telling myself about the day that might not be true? And knowing all this...What are my intentions for tomorrow?

It wasn't until I started spending 15 minutes at night with my journal that I realized just how *unclear* I had been with myself all those months before. I had been keeping up with pandemic numbers and data, with public health best practices, with the news, with how to help others more affected than me – with very little understanding or clarity of how all of this was also affecting me.

And another funny thing happened: I realized that what people were saying I probably needed all along, I really did need. Schedule one phone call every day, maybe even two; go for masked walks with your neighbors; spend more quality time with the people in your "household." The great irony was that none of these things nourished me fully when I thought I was doing them for someone else.

The best gift we can give to each other is to be clear too about what we need, what will nourish us; and one of the greatest gifts of communities like this one is that, in times like this, we are often in need of quite similar things together. UU ministers, and religious professionals of other traditions across the millennia, have observed this phenomenon and given it a name: "a theology, or a mindset, of abundance."

We don't *always* have to pour from our own glass to serve someone else well; sometimes, many times, we can journey together in search for what we both need: be it a good, generative conversation, or in my neighborhood a trip to the local bakery "When Pigs Fly" to pick up a fresh loaf of sourdough and spend a few minutes taking in the aromas of the fresh bread, or a Zoom coffee catch up conversation, or a trip to a wooded area for fresh air and to see something beautiful.

It is a gift to each other to see those needs clearly – and an even greater gift to show up with a mindset of abundance and authenticity, rather than with the mindset of

“helper” or “fixer,” which I must admit as a UU and a seminarian, I fall into far too often.

It is easy to feel uncomfortable about this mode of operating in the world, especially during a global crisis, if you are inclined (as I usually am) to see it as putting myself first. I think some would argue that that’s exactly what it is, and importantly so, but since I’ve started journaling 15 minutes every night, I’ve begun to see this instead as a spiritual practice of “Getting Clear.” As a way to live by intention rather than by inertia, as UU-Jewish minister Rev Joanna Lubkin and the folks at the Academy for Coaching Excellence say. Intention rather than inertia.²

Our 21st century American culture is overfilled with noise, and now, in the face of a global pandemic, occasions of brutal policing particularly toward persons of color across the country, and the climate crisis manifesting in a West Coast on fire, that noise is being amplified. The physical principle of inertia is that an object at rest stays at rest and an object in motion will stay in motion unless acted upon by an outside force; some of us face a world on fire by staying comfortably at rest, others of us, by staying in chaotic/uncritical motion.

Getting clear then, is a radical act of love and service – to draw us into intentional action rather than just being carried along by the next wave that comes.

Far from being selfish, getting clear means discerning, too, out of everything that alternatively outrages or breaks your heart right now: the pandemic, fires, voter suppression, police brutality...get clear: where is your heart? Where is your particular anger? If it’s in the faults in our electoral process, maybe your heart is nudging you toward our congregation’s UU the Vote work. If it’s over the strain on families having lost jobs, you might look into your local mutual aid societies.

And that’s where the second part of Rev Catie’s sermon comes back in: it’s about community, and our UU faith. When you sit with yourself and listen clearly, our sadness, our heartbreak, our anger, often directs us back to one of our 8 UU principles or another – and our desire for a more just and humane world. In your journaling or reflecting, you might ask yourself the questions: *Where am I in all of this? Where is my Unitarian Universalism in all of this?*

Where is your heart? Where is your anger? Where is your heart-break? Our bodies, though historically devalued as a mode of knowledge creation, actually carry within them extraordinary wisdom. On a recent episode of the Tim Ferris Show, Euro-American author Elizabeth Gilbert explained, the body has “been honed by literally millions and millions and millions of years of evolution into this phenomenal machine of...conscious reception, of being able to respond and being able to know. The mind,

² Rev. Joanna Lubkin, “Centering for the Year,” A ritual/webinar for clergy, September 4, 2020. (With reference to *The Academy for Coaching Excellence’s Life Blueprint Guide*).

the thinking mind, is brand new. It's the newest update. It's only 100,000, maybe 200,000, years old. It's got a lot of bugs in it."³

So, on the days that you're feeling tension, or anxiety – maybe tightness in your lower jaw, or a big old knot in your stomach, or your heart is racing faster than normal – maybe, especially now, you can follow those crumbs to where your body is trying to lead your understanding to.

Maybe it wants to tell you that you're desperately in need of some grace and gentleness – toward yourself, toward each other in church and on your church committees, or toward your family. Maybe it's trying to remind you that things are not in fact normal and you are allowed to not be in overdrive until they return to normal.

At the church where I was most recently worshipping, Arlington Street Church, in the Back Bay of Boston, someone along the way decided that all Zoom programs would be caveated with something like: "If your tech malfunctions, take a deep breath. Hopefully it only lasts a few seconds; in the meantime, you can practice the spiritual art of honoring the things we can't control." I don't know how that line made itself into our scripts, but I imagine that it was someone listening well to their body and intuition....listening, maybe even, to their own anxiety, and need for deep centering breaths.

Getting clear is not just a mental, but a full body exercise. In some religious traditions, it's not just a full body exercise, but a community-wide endeavor. In the Quaker tradition, there are clearness committees "appointed to help a member of the meeting find clarity."⁴ Some Buddhist Sanghas incorporate a similar practice called "Shining Light," named as such because members are instructed (sometimes with the help of their communities) to "shine the light of [their] mindfulness on a situation."⁵

You can imagine my disappointment when I learned (although very much expectedly) that I'd be starting this internship with you all virtually. That I'd be going into an empty sanctuary to record sermons and readings, and would have to schedule Zoom calls to meet you all. This is all so weird, and so different than what I had expected.

But I think back to our reading from earlier, by the Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, when he writes, about the pandemic, "And who knows if it was for this time that we have

³ Elizabeth Gilbert, "Elizabeth Gilbert's Creative Path: Saying No, Trusting Your Intuition, Index Cards, Integrity Checks, Grief, Awe, and Much More (#430)," The Tim Ferriss Show.

⁴ Online resource on clearness committees in the Quaker tradition.

⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment*, (Boston: Shambala Publications Inc., 2010), 59-60.

committed ourselves to walk in God's ways."⁶ Of course, Rabbi Yosef is Jewish and so theologically you might have to translate: who knows if it was for this time that we have committed ourselves to each other and to Unitarian Universalism?

In my now month since I've started, I've gotten the extraordinary sense that we are onto something very important, even though we're not gathering at the church together: in the extent to which we really need each other during this time, in all that we are learning about ourselves, our resiliency, and our spiritual lives, and in the way that spiritual communities can provide some much-needed nourishment right now.

And for that, I am hopeful, and excited for our work together this year. I'm excited for us to "get clear" together. I'm excited to begin to get to know each of you albeit in this truly bizarre format, but hopefully over things that really matter to us. I'm excited for us to come together to find and create nourishment, in the face of all that feels barren right now.

May we take some time for ourselves in the coming days then, to get clear. To listen, maybe for the first time in a while, to our own needs, our own sadness, our own outrage, our own bodies, our own intuition. May that quiet listening direct us toward the work that is ours to do; and may it help us show up in abundance and authenticity, instead of dogged obligation.

Maybe, it is a good time for our own inward turn, taking cues from the world around us. *Where am I in all of this? Where are we in all of this? Where is my Unitarian Universalism in all of this?*

May it be so.

Blessed be.

Amen

⁶ Taken from a post that circulated widely at the beginning of the pandemic from the Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, of the B'nai David-Judea Congregation in Los Angeles.