

“You’re Invited...”

Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

September 19, 2021

I’m sorry.

I’m sorry for the pain you live in and think you cannot share. I’m sorry for the loss you’re going through and for the aloneness you sometimes feel. I’m sorry if you’ve forgotten how amazingly, spectacularly, beautiful you are and how dear you are to this world.

I’m sorry it hurts, and that it hurt, the memory of when you were left out, not invited, or told you didn’t belong.

I understand because I too have lived in separation, pain, and fear of others finding out the whole of who I truly am; because I too had things happen that made it difficult to feel safe, included, and loved just as I am; because I too thought the answer was to leave parts of myself behind, outside the door, hidden even from myself.

I, too, am human.

We all come into this world beautiful and desired by life, or we wouldn’t be here. You are not an accident, and neither am I, nor is anyone around you, inside these walls and beyond.

We live as though our lives are single stories, and indeed they are; however, they are also much more. Our lives are a multiplicity of stories woven together, feeding into others. Our stories are made up of our experiences and those of our ancestors and the culture and time we live in. Our stories carry memories encoded in our DNA and family patterns. Our stories intersect with the stories of our neighbors and friends and people we may never know but who harvested the food we ate for dinner last night.

We like to imagine that we are special, unique, and set apart, and we are. We are also no different from every other person and every particle of this universe. We are made of atoms and star dust. We repeat the same patterns of life, death, and renewal, each of us living universal story lines, over again.

Many of us were not told that we are part of the cosmos, spectacular, magnificent, and one of a kind, while also ordinary, average, and more alike than different from other expressions of life.

Most of us were taught to look at the world through a binary lens. We weren’t taught about wholeness or the ironies, paradoxes, and seeming contradictions that life contains. Things were good or bad, right or wrong, and people fell into those same categories. There were things about us to be illumined and things to be forgotten.

Unity is our ministry theme for this year. How do we begin discussing the idea of unity? Where do we dive in? Within ourselves, of course.

First, let me remind you of the journey we took to get to this year’s theme. The first year I was here, our annual ministry theme was *Story*. It wasn’t planned; it happened organically. One of my first sermons focused on the power of stories, and it stuck. We kept returning to it over the first month or two, and before long, one of you said to me, “*Story...it’s like our theme this year.*” And so, it began.

In my second year, our theme was *Journey*. Our individual stories had begun powerfully comingling and creating our collective story; our journey had begun. *Imagination* seemed only fitting for a theme as we entered our third year together, with COVID in full swing. Acknowledging and dealing with the realities of COVID required us to imagine things anew, whether we wanted to or not.

The events that took place over last church year felt, at times, beyond our wildest imagination. The realities of rising divisions and increasing political tensions played out in the national election, the attack on our Capitol, and the vaccine and mask uproars, among other things.

I began hearing common refrains from parishioners. “*Help me understand how to talk with my friends and family who think and vote so differently from me. I’ve lost friends. I’m losing hope. I have no hope.*” It was clear that unity had to be our theme this year.

Unity doesn’t mean conformity or unanimity and doesn’t mean that we can or will all think alike. Nor should we. Difference is essential to wisdom.

Unity, as I am using the term, simply means wholeness. Wholeness, wherein there is space and room for all, including all of our ourselves and

“You’re Invited...”

September 19, 2021 page 2

all of our differences. This does not mean that we accept injustice as inevitable or accept harm being done to ourselves or others. It does mean, however, that we can seek understanding. Let's not lose the goodness and growth that can come from exploring such a seminal concept as unity by looking for the loopholes. I believe that much good can come of this exploration, even as we do not come to total answers.

Over the year ahead we will look at unity through the role of dialogue, the lens of world religions, and our own Unitarian Universalist faith. We will delve into unity in the spheres of cosmology, relationships, and social justice. We will look into the phenomena of paradox, contradiction, and uncertainty, all of which are foundational to unity, and explore the roles of spaciousness, tending, and awakening as they relate to wholeness and unity. We will apply the questions and concepts of unity to ourselves, this congregation, and the larger world, just as we approached our Values, Mission and Ends process, looking within, among, and beyond ourselves.

We will be disappointed if we expect neat, packaged, easy answers. There are none. However, that does not mean we shouldn't do our best to dig deep, seeking further understanding.

Let's start with you, *your* stories and life experiences. What better place to begin searching for unity than within ourselves? None of us live in a state of unity or wholeness all the time. If we did, we wouldn't be human. We all have parts of ourselves and our experiences that we would prefer to keep hidden, suppressed, and in the shadows.

Imagine your life as a book. Take the book off the shelf. I am serious with that invitation. Take the book of your life off the shelf. What do you see? What color is its cover if it has one? Is it hardcover or paperback, thick or slim, dusty or glossy? Did you take it down from high up on a shelf or did you need to round a corner to find it tucked away in the eaves?

Mine is hard covered, rather old, and a faded navy blue. Its pages are cream colored, thick, and a bit dusty.

What do you find when you open your book? Are there pages turned down from wear, indicating

places, stories, and memories you return to time and again, for better or for worse? Are there pages folded in on themselves in hopes of not being noticed? Do some pages have darker ink than others, the dark ink seeming to shout, "Look at this, of which I am proudest." And does the faded ink symbolize regrets you'd like to forget?

This is your book, my friends. Everything belongs. There is not a thing in that story that hasn't played an important part in your becoming who you are today, not a one.

Fred Alan Wolf in his book *Dr. Quantum's Little Book of Big Ideas: Where Science Meets Spirit*¹ writes "Within your own mind and body lies a majestic story filled with drama, pathos, humor, intelligence, fantasy, and fact. It is no less than the story of the entire universe, particularly, its own creation, transformation, and ultimate purpose."

Yet so often we hide parts of ourselves, an action that leaves us feeling less secure, concerned about how to keep those parts hidden and cut off from the love that holds us. In disowning of parts of ourselves, we can lose connection with our souls or our innate beautiful essence. The Gospel of Mark says, "What good is it for a person to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"

Anyway, it is often our foibles, big and small, that allow others to love us. We are loved in the sharing of our pain and errors, though we believe otherwise.

I receive more response from sermons in which I talk about my challenges, or my "flaws," if you will, than my successes. People share how relieved they are to know they are not alone, and then they want to know how I did it – whatever it is we may be discussing. How did I overcome addiction? How did I become brave enough to use my experience with sexual abuse to speak out against such an atrocity? How can I be so vulnerable publicly?

I do it because living in hiding left me dying inside. I do it because to hide who I am is to perpetuate societal lies about perfection, good

1 Wolf, Fred Alan. *Dr. Quantum's Little Book of Big Ideas: Where Science Meets Spirit*, Moment Point Press Inc., Needham, MA, September 2008, p. 21.

“You’re Invited...”

September 19, 2021 *page 3*

and bad, and I do it because it is impossible for me to live in authentic connection, yet hide parts of who I am.

And I am still human. I still hide things I fear that I will be judged for or that will lead others to tell me I don't belong. My two divorces, for example, or the centrality of Christian mysticism in my theology of love. "What if these things make me seem unworthy?" I worry. And there, I just did it. I just shined the spotlight on two parts of my story I try to hide.

I am not suggesting that we tell our whole story to everyone we meet or anyone who asks. I am suggesting that it is unkind, if not cruel, to ourselves to hide parts of ourselves because we think they make us unworthy, unlovable, or anything less than beautiful. This hiding often takes away some of the most important gifts we can offer this world.

Our stories are ours to share when and with whom we choose. We will share them at varying degrees and in chosen relationships. I pray we all have some people who do know it all, every nook and cranny of our story.

What is the expense of hiding some part of our stories or ourselves due to shame? It is a huge cost, I promise you. We are so much freer to serve the world and to live fully, authentically, and joyfully when we accept all of who we are and all parts of our stories.

"People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own Soul," said Carl Jung.

May we welcome each other's souls and their beautiful essence, and may this be a refuge for all, exactly and wholly as they are.

Amen and blessed be.