

Falling With Grace
July 28, 2013
By Patty O'Shea

This service and this sermon are dedicated to the first Unitarian Universalist principle: "To affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." That means you, in case you sometimes forget. YOU have inherent worth and dignity, and so do I. Even when I forget who I am. Even when I fail, or fall short, or make a mess of things, I still have inherent worth. You have inherent worth. No matter what.

When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a card shark when I grew up. Or fairy princess. Either one, really. My father taught me to play poker, and one day when I was 5, before I had started kindergarten, my mother took me to my uncle's house so he could babysit while she went to her bowling league. I approached my Uncle Dick with a deck of cards. "You want to play cards?", he asked, thinking I was going to opt for Old Maid or Go Fish. "Yes, I would like to play cards", I said. "Poker, five card draw."

Eventually, I lapsed back into aspirations of Fairy Princess-hood, like many little girls. When I got older, I gave up the pink wand and glitter for the idea of becoming a teacher. When I reached my twenties, already in college, but not enchanted by the course of study I had chosen, I decided I wanted to become one of Joni Mitchell's Ladies of the Canyon, so I actually hitchhiked to British Columbia to live on a commune. In a canyon.

We are all drawn to the idea of persona- how we envision ourselves, or how we WANT to be envisioned.

I guess there is nothing wrong with that, as long as we don't get so caught up in the persona that we forget about the PERSON. What kind of person do we want to become? In our immaturity, we may mistake "persona" for "person", not realizing that it is not the outward perceptions of others, but our inward sense of ourselves that counts. What are our innate gifts, and what qualities and attributes do we want to nurture so that we become a complete, authentic person? In projecting persona, we just set forth a sense of a person that we want others to see. What about the whole person we are, in all its complexity?

Even after my Ladies of the Canyon days, still not fully formed, I relied on the persona of HELPER, entering into the helping professions of counseling and care giving, and I realized that HELPER is more archetype than it is fully descriptive of who I am. When people meet us for the first time, they may ask us what we do, but rarely do they ask who we are. I wish I had asked that question of myself more throughout my life. Better late than never, I am asking it now.

I would like to think I am entering into the Crone stage now, becoming a wise, experienced older woman, but again I wonder whether we limit ourselves by these single labels and set ourselves up for failure.

To quote my mentor, John Looney, "Nobody is ever just one thing." Saying, for instance, that I am a helper, a crone, whatever label I choose, limits me, and limits those who know me. I am someone who helps, but that is what I DO. Who AM I? This question needs to be asked over and over again throughout our lives. What is my true nature? What do I love and what am I good at? What makes me happy and fulfilled? Irrespective of my job, my possessions, my friends, who am I?

A while back, a friend described what she called "Impostor Syndrome" It is a phenomena that happens in competent, accomplished people, suddenly reduced to insecurity and self doubt, wondering what would possibly make others speak affirming words about them, like "wise", or "articulate", or "accomplished" or "competent". Dozens of people may be telling you messages of affirmation, yet in that funhouse mirror of your perception, you see a distorted mess, who is not wise, articulate, or even likeable. I thought my friend was being creative, naming her personal experience with such an apt name, but I came to find out Impostor Syndrome is a phrase coined by two psychologists in 1978. Dozens of articles and books have been written on the subject. At the core of Impostor Syndrome seems to be that disconnect between who

we actually are, and the expectations of ourselves or others. If it is we ourselves who are trying to hold together an illusion of a persona we have chosen, it is very hard work. In a way, it is living a lie, or an evasion at best. In our hearts, we might feel that we are not putting forth the whole story, but perhaps we don't want others to know about the weaker or less accomplished parts of ourselves. Hiding these aspects of ourselves is constant work, and can lead to depression, other maladaptive behaviors, and ultimately, shame.

So maybe it is the expectations of a culture that we be one homogenous thing at a time, or maybe it is what we have come to expect of ourselves, or maybe it is both, but I believe it is a form of dualistic thinking, and therefore very limiting and a roadblock to true authenticity.

"Persona", that thing we put forward in public, and "archetype", the original unadulterated form of something, are not errant concepts in themselves. It is what we do in our habitual dualistic thinking that creates problems. When we think dualistically, or in "either/or" terms: if you are one thing, you cannot be another. If you're a cowboy, you can't play with dolls too. If you are a card shark, you can't win a bunch of money at the poker table wearing a pink tutu and waving a magic wand.

But if I AM a card-playing fairy princess, or a caregiver who sometimes doesn't care, or a wise old crone who makes stupid choices at times, where does that leave me? It leaves me with cognitive dissonance, and a discomfort with what I have come to believe are my fatal flaws, but that have really been part of the whole me all along. I feel like an impostor!! It leaves me in an absolute panic to find the persona for my person to hide behind. I often find myself in a panic to retain a hold upon the reins of my persona. I become ashamed that I cannot. It is that over-simplification behind which I hide to keep people from knowing about the not-so-good parts of myself.

Its weird, shame is that intrusive thing that leads us to question everything about ourselves, yet it is that glorified notion of what we should be, that, when we fall short of the mark, leads us to become ashamed. We paint ourselves into an impossible corner, and then when the impossibility of the situation makes itself clear, we are drenched in shame. Shame that we cannot be what is absolutely impossible to be. A disconnect is created in this state of shame that leads to depression, self-loathing, and keeps us from being happy. So do I have the courage to tell you that in my job, I help people, and I am good at it, and it comes naturally, but sometimes it overwhelms me, I am also sometimes egotistical, I don't ever pay my bills on time, and I know that I am overly sensitive? Do I have the courage to tell myself these things?

Author Anais Nin said this:

"We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another; unevenly. We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present. We are made up of layers, cells, constellations."

If she is right, and I really think she is, giving ourselves simple labels is not only unrealistic, it sets us up. If the spider is working from a template of spider web perfection, then the web that succumbs to the distortions of wind, rain, invading insects, human disruption, will never be considered beautiful. But if she weaves in spite of interruptions and never ever forgets that she is a spider, there will be beauty in the finished spider web. If she doesn't assert that she is a spider who always weaves perfectly symmetrical webs, then she is free to work around the road blocks and create something beautiful from the core of her being.

The language of a lot of self help gurus these days is that 'you are perfect right here, right now, as you are.' Sometimes that language strikes me as hype, but I don't think it is. A baby is both perfect now and also possessing of full-on potential. Yet nobody faults a baby for not being a fully-formed adult. Can we be that generous with ourselves? Can we realize that no matter what age we are, nobody is finished?. We grow and learn at every turn in the road. Yes, in this moment I can tell you my flaws. I can tell you where and how I fall short of the person I ultimately want to be. But you and I are worthy of love and acceptance in this unfinished state.

So then, what happens when we become vulnerable, or allow ourselves or others to see the whole person that we are, warts and all? What happens when we look in a regular mirror, and neither a fun house mirror that distorts in an unflattering way, nor a filmy, soft focus mirror that makes us look fabulous? What happens when we let go of persona, whether it a prestigious label describing what we do, or of what we have, and start noticing who we ARE? If we really, viscerally feel that we are, at no point, a finished product, maybe we can begin to drop the label, develop compassion for ourselves, and have great patience with the things we are discovering about ourselves. We can hope that others will have compassion and patience for us too. But it doesn't always work that way. Ours is the final vote that matters. Like Teddy Roosevelt said... "It is not the critic who counts. It is not the man who sits and points out how the doer of deeds could have done things better and how he falls and stumbles. The credit goes to the man in the arena whose face is marred with dust and blood and sweat. .." How do we summon up the courage to love ourselves enough to dare greatly? It is suggested that the only way to true authenticity is through looking at ourselves truly, fully, deeply, without guise, mask, obfuscations of any sort. And with love. It is a courageous act to begin seeing things as they are, and not the airbrushed way we think they should be.

The remedy to that hurt we may experience when we find new pieces of our true selves that may be unflattering, is love. Self love. Expansive love. We can also love each other, because I am going to venture a wild guess that this subject is resonating with a few of you today. I can love you because you are suffering too. I can love you because you are human. You are in this familiar boat with me.

There are no guarantees that this road will be painless. Much the contrary. I can almost guarantee that it will hurt like hell. We open ourselves up to others, hoping they will accept this new information we are discovering, without judgment. They may. They may not. They may have already glimpsed it while we were hiding behind our persona and love us anyways. We will find out things about ourselves that we cannot ignore anymore. We may accept them as part and parcel of who we are, or we may see a road clear and necessary for us to make some changes. Either way, to move forward, we need to admit to the whole of our beings.

I will never forget the day I discovered I am a control freak. It didn't sound like me, but there was overwhelming evidence. Still, I didn't believe it, so I tested it out on others. I said, one day in a group of people, that I know that I can be a control freak at times.... And NOBODY argued with me. Nobody. Crickets chirping in the otherwise silent void. It was a rude awakening. It even hurt. It also informed me that we cannot hide our true nature.

We anxiously await a kinder, gentler world in which people are not looked upon through the prism of judgment, or do not look upon themselves in shame, but through a clear lens of compassion. But we can be part of what brings that world closer if we begin right here, right now. Remember, Jack Kornfield said "If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete."

Let us end this talk in the tradition of the Buddhist practice of Tonglen:

Breathe in the pain and suffering of others around you into a spaciousness inside of you. Breathe out a beautiful turquoise ribbon of comfort for their suffering. Allow it to wrap gently around them, holding them in a place of true love and acceptance. Now, do the same thing, but with yourself in your mind's eye. Breathe in your suffering into a spaciousness that will allow the suffering to dissipate. Breathe out, allowing that beautiful turquoise ribbon to wrap itself around the authentic you, allowing a full acceptance for yourself, so you won't need to hide any longer.

Pause

Thanks for your attention. Blessed be.