

## **Journeys of Unraveling**

**by Rev. Michelle Collins, June 22, 2014**

A few weeks before I started here at First Unitarian, I was hit with an unexpected question. What did I want to call my newsletter column? At the surface this might seem like a simple question, but I took it as a statement of identity and set about seeing what other folks had done and found a number of examples. Sometimes there was alliteration involved, like Josh's Journal or Morgan's Minutes, or the name might go in a totally different direction, like my internship supervisor who called hers "At the Table" because she liked cooking for people.

I ended up settling on a title that just felt right to me – Journeying Together. It's based on my belief that all our lives are journeys and we are fellow travelers and seekers, journeying our own paths but together with each other at the same time.

And these journeys have high points and low points, sometimes so close together that they are like fast moving roller coasters with the next twist hidden around a corner in the distance or like a coaster that's located entirely in the dark like some of the indoor ones today. I can relate to Steve Porter's 50% theory of life<sup>1</sup>, that about half the thing in life are better than average and half the times are worse. I've got a similar theory for time spent waiting at traffic lights. About half the time the wait is less than average and I feel lucky, and the other half it's longer. Sometimes a lot longer, when traffic is thick and the light's cycle is super long – then it can take 10 minutes or more!

Our life journeys hit rock bottom, too. Researcher Brené Brown remembers when this happened to her. She tells about her experience in gem of a book that I'll be referencing for a number of my sermons this summer - *The Gifts of Imperfection*. If you're curious, the Book Corner has a few copies for sale.

She was working on coalescing data and ideas from a series of interviews she had done with women on their experiences of resilience through shame and what it meant to be Whole-Hearted. Here's how she describes her next work with this:

"As I started analyzing the stories and looking for re-occurring themes, I realized that the patterns generally fell into one of two columns; for simplicity sake, I first labeled these Do & Don't. The Do column was brimming with words like worthiness, rest, play, trust, faith, intuition, hope, authenticity - you get the picture. The Don't column was dripping with words like perfection, numbing, certainty, exhaustion, fitting in, judgment, and scarcity. I gasped the first time I stepped back and took it all in. After reeling in shock for a few minutes, I grabbed my marker off the table, drew a line under the Don't list, and then wrote the word Me under the line. My struggles seemed to be perfectly characterized by the sum total of the list."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "The 50-Percent Theory of Life," by Steve Porter, in *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*, edited by Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, pages 181-183.

<sup>2</sup> Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Your Guide to a Wholehearted Life*, pages x and xii.

Next, Brown folded up her list and put it away for a year. (I can relate to wanting to do this!) She found some good support and began the difficult work of processing it. She describes the time as an "unraveling."

She says: "It's not a coincident that this unraveling happened now for me. The stars were perfectly aligned for a breakdown: I was raw from being newly sugar and flour free, I was days away from my birthday - always a contemplative time for me, I was burned out from work, and I was right on the cusp of my midlife unraveling."<sup>3</sup> Not a midlife breakdown, but a midlife unraveling.

Here's how she describes what UNRAVELING means: "a time when you feel a desperate pull to live the life you want to live, not the one you're supposed to live. The unraveling is a time when you are challenged by the universe to let go of who you think you are supposed to be and to embrace who you are."<sup>4</sup>

Unraveling is a time when we are challenged to let go of who we think we are and the way that we expect things to be and assume they should be. Unraveling is a time when all of this is shaken up and our worlds can be turned totally upside down and shaken like a snow globe.

Brené Brown found this to be a time of intense soul searching which left her in the end with a deeper understanding of herself. Pentecostal turned Universalist Carlton Pearson had a few different changes that he faced with his unraveling.

He was a rising star in his religious community. After finishing as a favored student at Oral Roberts University, he began a new Pentecostal congregation called Higher Dimensions in Tulsa. It grew to be a mega church, led by Pearson's charismatic presence. But then he had an unraveling one day that carried him far from where he was.

He was sitting and watching the news about the genocide of the Tutsi's in Rwanda.

Here's how he remembers it: "And I said God, I said, I don't know how you can call yourself a loving, sovereign God and allow these people to suffer this way and just suck them right into Hell. And I heard a voice say within me, "So that's what you think we're doing?" I said, "That's what I've been taught." "We're sucking them into Hell?" I said, "Yes." "And what would change that?" "Well, they need to get saved." "And how would that happen?" "Well, somebody needs to preach the Gospel to them and get them saved." "So if you think that's the only way they're going to get saved is for somebody to preach the Gospel to them and that we're sucking them into Hell, why don't you put your little baby down, turn your big-screen television off, push your plate away, and go get them saved?" And I remember I broke into tears. I remember thinking, God, don't put that guilt on me. You know I've given you the best 40 years of my life. I can't save the whole world; I'm doing the best I can. And that's where I remember, and I believe it was God saying, "Precisely. You can't save this world. Do you think we're sucking

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, xii.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, xii-xiii.

them into Hell? Can't you see they're already there? That's Hell. You keep creating and inventing that for yourselves."

"The more Carlton started to think about it, the further away from conventional teaching it led him. If there was no Hell, then you didn't need to accept Jesus to avoid Hell. And if you didn't need to accept Jesus, it didn't matter if you were a Christian. It didn't even matter if you came to church. Everyone in the world was saved, whether they knew it or not." Pearson ended up defining this as the Gospel of Inclusion: "Everyone's going to heaven. Atheists, Muslims, gays, Jesus died for them all." It's a pretty classic take on being a Universalist but radical for a Pentecostal.<sup>5</sup>

It won't surprise you that this ended up being decidedly problematic for his 5,000 member church that didn't exactly agree with this line of belief as it was entirely opposed to the basic premise of their faith. As he started to preach his Gospel of Inclusion, things started to fall apart for the church. Half of their 8 pastors left and started a new church nearby, and the offerings started to plummet. In the end, what was once a 5,000 member church had 100 people show up at its 25th anniversary banquet.

But while his beliefs and his career unraveled and of course Pearson was upset by much of it, he still seems fairly content as he talks about it and at peace with where it left him theologically. The ground utterly shifted underneath him and he did stumble around for a good bit, but he found himself. And what he found was as Brené Brown described, ultimately not who he was supposed to be - in the end that felt too inauthentic to continue - but rather he found who he really was. And some of his folks hung in there with him and remain today, despite the fact that many of them have also faced backlash for their support.

I've faced a particularly powerful journey of unraveling also. When I was in my late 20's, with a healthy seemingly invincible body (as most bodies seem that way to the occupant when they are in their 20's), I came down with a painful, potentially debilitating, potentially fatal neurological syndrome - Guillain Barre Syndrome. No known cause; no known cure. While I've talked about this other times, what I wanted to particularly bring out today was that it was at its core a journey of unraveling. The experience forced me to reconsider every normal that I had and everything that I thought should be. Later as I was researching on the internet, trying to find clues for why it had happened, I read about Saturn's Returns. They are the point in one's life when the planet Saturn returns to the position where it was at the time of your birth. That transit takes 27 and a half years. Guess what - I was right at 27 and a half when I had the Guillain Barre. Now what I learned about Saturn is that it can be pretty challenging, and in particular can really shake up your life, even physically, if you are really astray from where you need to be. At the time, I needed some shaking up too and some reason to consider what direction I wanted my life to take - that's why I'm standing here in front of you today.

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<sup>5</sup> "Heretics," *This American Life* on NPR, episode #304, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/304/heretics>.

What's even more, the bell curve for cases of Guillain Barre peak at two ages, and you'll never guess where those are - ages 27 and a half and then twice that - right at one's first and second Saturn's Returns. That's what I think caused it - I needed to have my life shaken up. But I suspect the medical community wouldn't take my theory too seriously.

At the time, everything unraveled pretty quickly and then gradually I put myself back together again. I think the re-raveling is the part that usually takes a good bit longer and a good bit more energy.

So what does it take to put ourselves back together again after unraveling, to make it through a journey of unraveling?

One of my hobbies is collecting different kinds of stories, and I found one that particularly relates to what we're talking about today. It's a "wisdom story" from an unknown source, as retold by Margaret Silf.<sup>6</sup>

There was once a country famed far and wide for its sacred mountain. People from all over the world had heard about the sacred mountain, but the strange thing was, the people who actually lived in that country had a habit of walking around with their eyes always focused on the ground. They never lifted their heads. And if you asked them what they were doing, they would tell you: "We are searching for the sacred mountain, of course. Why don't you join us in the search? This is where you must look."

And so they lived their lives, restless, moving round in circles, walking up and down the many lanes and alleyways of their country, pouring over their maps and arguing with each other about where, exactly, the sacred mountain was to be found.

Meanwhile, the sacred mountain soared to the skies, waiting patiently for the people to discover its beauty and its power, and saddened to watch them picking their way through the world and never stopping to look up.

Then one day, amid all the hustle and bustle of the people's desperate search for the mountain, one of them fell over, and was almost trampled by the milling feet all around him. He lay there, flat on his back, thinking that his end must surely be close, when to his amazement, he looked up and saw the sacred mountain towering serenely above. He tried to tell everyone what he had seen, but no one believed him, so he set off alone to seek the path that would lead him to the mountain.

It was a hard journey, and he kept losing sight of his goal. Many times he fell in his journeying, and every time he fell, he would see once more the mountain he was searching for, and be encouraged to keep on going. As he walked, he noticed that the only other people on the path to the mountain were disabled or sick, or were carrying some great load that had made them

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<sup>6</sup> "The Land of the Mighty Mountain," source unknown, as told in *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*, collected by Margaret Silf.

topple over in their need. He realized that only those who had fallen were ever able to see the mountain, and only those who knew the full meaning of the word "down" could ever look up.

It sounds like the folks who had glimpsed the mountain had faced moments of unraveling. They had fallen down and that's why they could see the mountain to begin with. But they were also resilient through their unraveling - and they kept up with their quests.

There are many different types of journeys of unraveling that we may face: divorce or the end of a relationship, becoming a parent, beginning recovery, retiring, working in a soul-sucking job, facing a critical illness or diagnosis or the illness of someone you care for, or many different sorts of losses. These moments of unraveling will happen whether or not we like it. While they might not all unravel us, I believe sooner or later some of them will. The question that we'll face is how we'll be resilient through them, how we'll put ourselves back together afterwards. I think our resilience can be supported by a number of different things: support from others, whether they've been through it too or just that we can trust them and depend on them, guidance from those we trust, acceptance of our moments of unraveling, finding empathy from others. These are definitely moments that there aren't nice easy fixes for. Brené Brown suggests one last thing: "how much we know and understand ourselves is critically important, but there is something that is even more essential to living a Whole-hearted life: loving ourselves."<sup>7</sup> We need empathy from others, but even more, we need it from ourselves.

We'll have moments when we unravel, and what determines who we are is how we journey through those moments. We may ache during those moments, we may hunger and thirst, we may long for fixes, for companionship, for love. But we can keep moving on each of our journeys, and we can love each other through our journeys as well. May it be so.

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, xi.