

**“Spiritual Maturity
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The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel once said, “The goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments.” “The goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments.” What have been the sacred moments in your life? When have you needed to act with grace and courage? When have you faced something, something hard, something that reminded you about all your values – compassion, honesty, love, faithfulness - something so challenging that it just threw all those nice words in your face to see if you meant them?

A family is facing as many challenges as they think they can take - five children, two careers – and one mundane day after a baseball game they learn that their oldest son’s best friend is homeless. They believe in compassion, they believe in generosity. And they face a sacred moment. Can they do what they believe in? The father faces his own pettiness, competitiveness, resentment, and the very real worry that he can provide. I know families like this. A friend of mine, Phyllis, adopted her 16-year-old babysitter whose home fell apart. I know an aunt who took in her niece and nephew when their parents died in an accident. Not without some trepidation. Not without moments of resentment. But with enough courage and open-heartedness to come through for these young people.

Your moment may come when someone you love is dying. Physicians say that many people express the desire to die at home, not in a hospital, with their family. Families say yes, absolutely, and have no idea how difficult caring for someone in the last stages of life will be. The suffering they will see, the help they themselves will need, the courage. When I was first dating my husband Robert, I learned that he helped care for his mother in the last days of her life. He helped change the colostomy bag once; he changed her diaper. I was telling a friend about all this, and said that I thought I was falling in love. He said, “You, um, think diapers are sexy?” I said, “Yes. Somebody brave enough to do that, yes, very sexy.” It was his sacred moment to face. We all have them. Coming out as gay or lesbian requires such courage; it is a sacred moment. Staying in a marriage when it’s difficult; leaving a marriage even when it means sacrificing material comforts and friends and a familiar life. All sacred moments.

And when we contemplate such moments, we wonder if we will be the person we hope we will be in them. If we will have the courage to act on our principles. They are not only the big moments. They are as small as deciding to listen to your spouse tell you about her day when you are really tired and just feel like watching television. You hope you will be the kind of person who will turn off the tv, but there are no guarantees. Or taking your plastic bottles home from a restaurant that doesn’t recycle, instead of sticking them in the trash like everyone else. Someone asks you if you believe in recycling, you say, Heck yeah. We have to do it. And you may or may not. Sacred moments come in all shapes and sizes. They each ask something from us.

Having the courage or the capacity to act on your principles – whether it’s being compassionate to your partner or to a stranger, dealing with disappointment, caring about the earth, or speaking a difficult truth – all these are the marks of spiritual maturity. We all have it to some degree. Some people in our lives have it to an amazing degree. Our purpose in life is to develop it more. We need, I believe, to be around people who share our values, and can help us learn to live them. We need people who love us and comfort us and celebrate our lives – and we also need people who challenge us to mature. Growing up – which is another way to say developing spiritual maturity – takes a very, very, very long time. We don’t always face sacred moments as we would wish. Our idea of ourselves and our real selves don’t always line up.

I remember my first year in seminary at Meadville/Lombard, in Chicago. The fall of 1992. The campus was lovely with its falling red and yellow leaves. This must be the time of year when all colleges take photographs for their brochures. It matched right up – gorgeous. My classes were interesting, and I felt surrounded by new friends. I loved exploring the city on the El. In the second quarter, everything changed. Winter had set in. Gray, raw Chicago winter, which was certainly no colder than my native Minnesota, but minus the bright skies and dazzling white snow. Minus my old life. I was missing dear old friends, favorite haunts, my family, and for reasons I couldn’t fathom, even the job I disliked so much. The romance of going away to school had vanished. And in its place, were dull, difficult lectures, and well-meaning strangers. I suddenly felt set apart from my classmates, so filled with purpose and dedication for their work. When I think of that second semester at Meadville, I can still hear the dull, smacking sound of my enthusiasm hitting the pavement. Why was I there, really? Did I really want to do this? I had to make a decision.

Well, reader, I stayed. Obviously, or I wouldn’t be here now, right? This might not seem like a terribly momentous occasion to you. Stay in school or don’t, what’s the big deal? Well, four years earlier, I had had another “freeze” moment in the very same city, also in graduate school. The adventure had worn off, the pressures and the loneliness mounted, and I couldn’t face them. I stopped sleeping for weeks. I stopped functioning altogether. I came home shaken, feeling like a huge failure. But in four years, wonderful things happened. Francois Fenelon, a 17th century mystic, once said, “Slowly you will learn that all the troubles in your life – your job, your health, your inward failings – are really cures to the poison of your old nature.” I worked hard on myself. Some things, I worked hard for, others came as gifts, like the fruits of the spirit Paul promised the people of Galatia. And as he said, they were more than just ideas, and sentiments of the heart. They were there when I needed the maturity to stay when I wanted to run.

It reminds me of the famous “serenity prayer” of AA and all the 12-step programs – “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” I know UUs who like this prayer, and they say, you know that prayer that goes “Hmm-hmm-hmm the serenity, to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference”. I swear, I’ve heard more UUs say this, not realizing it. It shows that the *hmm-hmm-hmm* part of the prayer may not matter all that much. It may just reveal a truth about spiritual growth and maturity that transcends individual feelings about God and language about the holy. William Pietsch, a psychologist who has worked with many in recovery from addiction, wrote a wonderful little book about this prayer. He has worked with a lot of people who have prayed for

serenity, courage and wisdom over the years, especially courage. He says that he once thought of courage as a fierce and unwavering devotion to principle, no matter what. Instead, he found the opposite to be true. The people with the most courage to face difficult times were the more flexible ones. The people with minds open enough to take in new information – about themselves, about the world. They were people who could see everything as their teacher, as the Buddhist tradition advises.

People in 12-step groups, as I and some of you can attest, are made up of people who are continually working at spiritual maturity. We find our lives transformed – because we have to. We will die if we don't. Alcoholics will die from the ravages of alcohol. They will die, like I would die, from obesity. If they were not constantly about the business of developing spiritual maturity. The most spiritually mature people I've ever met – including churches – are the old-timers in my meetings. I have often heard people in recovery say that those plain, repetitive meetings in ugly church basements are the most spiritual experiences of their lives. And they are disappointed that their church does not measure up. Why is this, do you suppose? Because they are more serious about what they do than we are. Meetings are not an option. Spiritual practices like prayer and following the steps, which include confession and making amends and continuous study, are not options. Spiritual friendships that help individuals keep their commitments to the work are not an option. Service is not an option. The old-timers know that if they don't do these things, the disease will return, and they will die. Church doesn't inspire this level of commitment. The consequences of not doing this work are not as clear. And yet I am convinced that we do come here for a more awake, less lonely, less frightened life. I am convinced we come here for courage to live, too. Our UU faith tradition, with our commitment to living with open minds and hearts, is ripe for helping people face life with flexibility and courage. If we work at it.

The purpose of the church, writes Michael Durall, is to develop spiritually mature people. It is our best chance to make a difference in the world. It is the one thing that can cut across our differences in theology and political views. And churches are full of people who want to live their values, to be awake and of service to others; to not be numb and afraid everyday. We want to care more about people than things. We want to feel a sense of purpose. We want to have the courage to face the sacred moments of life. And we struggle.

The early churches certainly felt this struggle. The letters in the New Testament don't make the most exciting reading. They're not stories, like the gospels. Dominic Crossan says that it's like finding a letter in the street and trying to piece together what happened. Ever wonder why Paul tells people so many times to love one another? You get that wonderful speech to the Corinthians that is read in just about every wedding I conduct: love is patient, love is kind... He's not telling them this because they have it down so well.

They had horrible disputes over leadership. Paul has all those instructive things in there about women keeping silent in the church because guess what? They weren't! In fact, many people now feel that there were women *leading* some of the churches, which is why he makes it quite clear that they can't. While this makes me pretty happy from my modern worldview, it was causing them a lot of tension that they didn't know how to handle. The gospels, which were written after the letters, all show a kind of hierarchy among the disciples. This or that person saw him first in the resurrection stories to lend them credibility. Jesus took this or that person with him to perform the miracle, because it shows that *they* were to become the *true* head of the

church. They fought over status, just like Republicans and Democrats, just like the Star-Bellied and Plain-Bellied Sneeches, just like us. There were property disputes, and even instances of sexual abuse and violence among them. They, like us, had a lot of work to do to become spiritually mature. It took a lot of courage.

And yet, writes Michael Durall, a Unitarian Universalist with great hopes and dreams for our movement, churches must be about the business of developing spiritually mature individuals and as a community. As I considered what took place in my own life over the four years between my two attempts at graduate school, and what made the difference, there were some things that took place in community. I was part of a group of writers dedicated to practicing our craft. I did some honest self-reflection and worked out some of the poisons from my past in therapy. I took a risk and taught a small group at my Unitarian Universalist church – a class in writing and spirituality. It made the spirit start to come alive again in me. I began to learn the essence of my faith, and what I needed to face difficult moments. I built strong relationships with people who helped me through. Wouldn't it be marvelous if we could help people do even some of this work at church? We can.

Spiritual maturity is actually why we have church. We must support people in maturing individually – and we must work at maturing together as a community. I am excited about the work that has begun in our congregation to combat racism and to partner with an African American church. And let's not kid ourselves. Working with people who are different from ourselves, facing up to the difficulties of overcoming prejudice – in our society and still in ourselves – will take a steady heart and mind. It will test and strengthen our faith, and we will need to work together to grow as a spiritually mature people. This new project of ours reminds us that we can't just think of spiritual growth as something for our individual lives. It's a shared endeavor, requiring a commitment to our shared values as Unitarian Universalists. It requires people who are curious enough, and willing to consider doing the work. At whatever level they can. And it takes some understanding on the part of the church as to what people want and need on their spiritual journeys, right where they are now – and to offer the support and guidance to do it. It will come through worship, through study, through small groups supporting one another, through social action.

After worship today, we are holding discussions in small groups about spiritual maturity, and how we get there. We will divide into groups, led by some of our able facilitators. We will talk about spiritually mature people in our lives who inspire us. We will talk about how we might grow and become more like them. We will talk about how we as a church might grow together. I invite you to join us if you can.

May we grow together in spirit and in truth. May we know the richest fruits of the spirit among us. Amen.