

THE BURIED LIFE

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Forrest Church had a wonderful ability to express important truths simply and succinctly. “Do what you can,” he said. “Want what you have. Be who you are.” Volumes could be and have been written on each of these themes. My sermon this morning is about the importance of being who you are.

Let me begin by reading these lines from “The Buried Life,” a poem by Matthew Arnold:

But often, in the world’s most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life;
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course;
A longing to inquire
Into the mystery of this heart which beats
So wild, so deep in us—to know
Whence our lives come and whence they go....
And we have been on many thousand lines
And we have shown, on each, spirit and power;
But hardly have we, for one little hour,
Been on our own line, have we been ourselves—
Hardly had skill to utter one of all
The nameless feelings that course through our breast,
But they course on forever unexpressed.

I see *The Lion King* is making the rounds again — this time in 3D. But I suspect there’s more to its continuing popularity than special effects. As you know, the story has to do with a young lion, Simba, son of Mufasa, the Lion King. Mufasa’s brother, the evil Scar, schemes to get rid of Mufasa and Simba and become the king himself. Scar causes a stampede in which Mufasa is killed. He convinces young Simba that he is at fault for the death of his father and arranges to have him disposed of as well. Simba escapes to the jungle where he is befriended by Timon, a wisecracking meerkat, and Pumbaa, a big-hearted warthog.

Time passes and Simba grows from a cub to a young lion. In the meantime, he has adopted the worry-free ways of his amiable friends. One day Simba comes to the defense of Pumbaa, who is being attacked by a hungry lioness. This lioness is none other than his childhood friend Nala. Nala informs Simba that he is the true king and that he must return and reclaim the throne from

Scar, which, of course, he does. He and Nala become a pair, they have a cub of their own, and the Circle of Life continues.

The story's been compared to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but that's not where it comes from. It's actually taken from a well-known Hindu fable, the gist of which is that an orphaned tiger cub grows up among a flock of sheep. One day the flock is set upon by a full-grown tiger. He sees the young tiger and takes him to a pool of water where he can see himself in the reflection, discovering that he is in reality not a sheep but a tiger. Hamlet never forgets who he is. He bides his time until he can take his revenge. On the other hand, Simba — out of fear and a sense of shame — does lose his identity. He forgets who he is until he's reminded by Nala of his true nature and destiny.

This simple fable is the stuff of folklore and literature. It appears not only in *The Lion King*, but also, for example, in *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau and in Emerson's essay on "Self-Reliance." It's so common because it's perennial in human experience. Often, in adult life, we *have* forgotten who we really are, if we ever knew in the first place. As a parent I saw that my own sons came into the world with a distinct personality, a soul that was unique to each of them. I think every parent knows this about their own children. They are not born *tabula rasa*, blank slates to be written on, or empty vessels to be filled. Buddhists call this innate personality our original self. We can nurture or thwart this original or authentic self, but we cannot create it nor erase it. It's always there even if it's buried under the weight of inauthenticity and false expectations.

It's no accident that this fable, in most of its guises, involves youth because we know that adolescent boys and girls are especially prone to forgetting who they are. All youth are at risk for loss of self-esteem as they begin to take their cues about acceptable appearance and behavior from peers, the media, and culture as a whole. Boys *and* girls frequently stifle their creative spirit and natural impulses out of fear and a sense of shame. Sometimes parents are to blame for imposing their own expectations on their children. All too often young people lose touch with their original nature, their birthright gifts. Teaching Coming of Age in all of the congregations I've served, I know this happens in Unitarian Universalist families as well.

It's possible to recover and reclaim this authentic self on our own or with the help of others. It can happen sooner in life or, as is so often the case, much later. Sometimes, tragically, it doesn't happen at all and we persist in leading a false life in ignorance of our true self. In my case, I had help, and from one person in particular. His name was Earl Holmer. He was a professor at my *alma mater*, Gonzaga University, although I never had him for a class.

One day, during my senior year, Earl invited my wife Linda, and I out to dinner at the nicest restaurant in Spokane. Over the meal he asked me if I'd ever considered attending a seminary. He knew that I was a Unitarian Universalist and suggested that I had the makings of a minister. Intrigued, I thought that he might know something about me that I didn't know about myself. And so, along with applying to other graduate schools, I sent an application to Meadville Theological Seminary.

I was accepted and offered a generous scholarship, and so, along with Linda and our six-week old son, Ben, I set off for Chicago. It was not exactly a straight line from there to here. As Emerson says in his essay on "Self-Reliance," "The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks." But here I am today, after thirty years in ministry, receiving the Angus MacLean Award, for which I feel humbled and grateful. For all the difficulties of such a challenging profession, I have never regretted my choice and have always felt that the ministry was my calling in life.

This wasn't true, however, in Emerson's case. Emerson had come from a long line of ministers, up to and including his father. And so it came as no surprise to anyone in the family when young Waldo announced that he wanted to become a minister himself. He shrugged off the misgivings he had concerning his shyness and lack of self-confidence. He felt uneasy in the company of most men and women. "What is called a warm heart," he confided, "I have not." Such an admission would have raised red flags with today's Fellowship Committee, but Emerson persisted and was eventually approbated to preach.

By most accounts, Emerson was a good preacher, but he was never really comfortable in the ministry. His self-doubts came to a head during the year following the tragic death of his first wife, Ellen. He felt inauthentic in the role and, in spite the great weight of responsibility and expectation that he carried on his shoulders, he refused any longer to compromise his integrity. Later that year he resigned his position and traveled to Europe. Upon his return he embarked on an uncertain career as a lecturer and essayist.

How many of us have had the courage to do the same thing — to give up on a livelihood that we have spent years in preparation for, a career that everyone in our family expected us to pursue, and one that, in Emerson's case at least, was devoted almost exclusively to meeting the demands of others? The stress he was under nearly ruined his health. Thomas Moore, a contemporary writer in the same spiritual vein, offers a commentary that's appropriate in Emerson's case — and perhaps with respect to many of us as well:

Far beneath the many thick layers of indoctrination about who we are and who we should be lies an original self, a person who came into this world full of possibility and destined for joyful unveiling and manifestation.... Chronically trying to be someone other than this

original self, persuaded that we are not adequate and should fit some norm of health or correctness, we may find a cool distance gradually separating us from that deep and eternal person, that God-given personality, and we forget both who we were and who we might be.

Fortunately for Emerson — and for us — he was able to discover and develop his authentic, original self. But the truth still holds that, for any number of reasons, that self often gets lost or buried somewhere along the way. Out of ignorance or fear or a sense of inadequacy, we forget who we are. We look to others for validation. We don't trust our own instincts. We succumb to the expectations of our parents and our peers. As another contemporary writer, Parker Palmer, observes:

We arrive in this world with birthright gifts — then we spend the first half of our life abandoning them or letting others disabuse us of them. As young people we are surrounded by expectations that may have little to do with who we really are, expectations held by people who are not trying to discern our selfhood, but trying to fit us into slots. In families, schools, workplaces, and religious communities, we are trained away from true self toward images of acceptability; under social pressures like racism and sexism our original shape is deformed beyond recognition; and we ourselves, driven by fear, too often betray true self to gain the approval of others.

We are disabused of original giftedness in the first half of our lives. Then — if we are awake, aware, and able to admit our loss — we spend the second half trying to recover and reclaim the gift we once possessed.

It's vitally important that we try to recover and reclaim this gift. Our very life depends on it. So far as I know we are given only one life to live, and if we fail to live this one, or end up living someone else's instead, then we will have wasted it. Life's too short to spend just getting by, living superficially, being busy for the sake of having something to do. Too often, people trade their birthrights gifts for a mess of potage in the form of luxury goods and meaningless entertainment. Starkly confronted with his own mortality by pancreatic cancer, Steve Jobs offered this advice to Stanford University graduates:

Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.

Emerson sensed this, too. He could have played it safe. He was a popular minister. His congregation wanted him to reconsider his decision to resign.

But Emerson believed that each of us is born with our own genius, a unique contribution we are intended to make. We may safely trust our genius, Emerson says, but “God will not have his work made manifest by cowards.” If we fail to put our heart into finding and following our true vocation or calling, then our genius will desert us. “Trust thyself,” he admonishes: “every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you.”

Living an inauthentic life, in conformity with the expectations of others, “scatters our force,” Emerson insists. We become a cipher rather than an individual, known by what we do rather than who we are. If we conform, we are predictable, false and partial persons. If, on the other hand, we begin to live our lives with an authentic sense of self, fulfilling our genius instead of stifling it, then all of that dissipated energy is focused on guiding us along the pathway of life. Our life flows with enthusiasm and excitement. We feel that we are in possession of our true self, doing what we are meant to do. We believe in ourselves. In order to live a life of passion and purpose we must find out who we truly are and what the unique gift is that we have to offer the world.

One of Emerson’s British admirers was Matthew Arnold, like Emerson a poet and essayist. In his poem “The Buried Life,” Arnold speaks of the melancholy that comes of the failure to discover who we truly are. Often, in “the world’s most crowded streets” and in “the din of strife,” there comes “an unspeakable desire after the knowledge of our buried life,” a longing deep in us “to know whence our lives come and where they go.” We find that “we have been on many thousand lines.... But hardly have we, for one little hour, been on our own line, have we been ourselves.” If we’ve only been on the lines laid down for us by others, we can never be on the one that is uniquely ours. We can only find that line by inquiring into the depths of the heart.

It’s comforting to know that far beneath the layers of conformity, inauthenticity and false choices, of ignorance, fear and forgetting, there’s a core self that has been patiently waiting for us to discover and affirm — to know that those “floating echoes” from “the soul’s subterranean depth” that Arnold speaks of can at last be heard and heeded. This can happen at any age — thirty or fifty or even later. But when it does happen — on our own, or, as is so often the case, with the encouragement of others — it’s with such a sense of joy and relief that we experience it. It is a deeply *spiritual* experience.

As much as Unitarian Universalists of all ages need to know their history and heritage; to be religiously literate and theologically grounded; to seek justice, to fight for the oppressed, to care for the earth, and to be compassionate human beings, they also need to know who they are and what they are called to do. So far as our work with children and youth is concerned, I would invite

you to consider these words from *A Thousand Clowns*, by Herb Gardner, where Murray is speaking about his son:

I want him to be sure he'll know when he's chickening out on himself. I want him to get to know exactly the special thing he is or else he won't notice it when it starts to go. I want him to stay awake and know who the phonies are. I want him to know how to holler and put up an argument. I want a little guts to show before I can let him go. I want to be sure he sees all the wild possibilities. I want him to know it's worth all the trouble when you get the chance. And I want him to know the subtle, sneaky, important reason why he was born a human being and not a chair.

It goes without saying, I hope, that this is our wish for girls as well as boys. It's not inevitable that any of those we teach or minister to should live a buried life. As religious educators we're called to practice *maieutics* — in Plato's view, a spiritual midwifery of the soul. Everyone has latent deep within a unique genius, an original self, which, if his or her life is to flourish, needs to be brought out and developed. For religious educators such as ourselves, I would submit that being spiritual midwives is the “subtle, sneaky, important reason” why we were born human beings rather than chairs.

To be sure, we wish to encourage Unitarian Universalists of all ages to do what they can and to want what they have. Just as importantly, we also need to make them see all the wild possibilities of life and to know that being themselves is worth all the trouble if given the chance. Amen.