

***Healing our Wounds of Faith*** by Rev. Doug McCusker

This morning, you've heard about the many ways that we can be wounded in our lives and about the power of healing, especially from a caring religious community. But sometimes the wounds can actually come from the very community that we trust with our heart and soul to walk with us on our spiritual journeys.

My spouse, Marie and I maintained a long-distance relationship for 2 years before we got married. We were separated by 50 miles while I was finishing up my undergraduate degree. For my last semester I moved in with Marie and commuted to class. Halfway through the semester, we found a larger apartment a little closer to my school. On moving day, I got a bad case of the flu. So Marie asked her parents to help with the move.

They had no clue that we were living together. They were good Southern Baptists who would not have approved. But as they were moving the boxes, they saw my name on some of them, and the clothes were a dead give-away. We were busted. Marie's Mom looked at the two of us and before she could filter her thoughts said "You know you're going to hell in a hand basket?" Hell's bad enough, but in a hand basket?

My Catholic parents felt the same way. They refused to visit us as long as we lived in our den of sin. We had violated a religious taboo, and our families condemned us to hell. Eventually we got married and all was right again. But the sting of their righteous judgment stuck with me for quite a while.

Thank goodness that the threat of eternal damnation did not hold the sway over us that it once did. We both grew up in devoutly religious homes in which the teachings of the church influenced the values and mores that our parents taught us. Some I still cherish today, but others, especially those involving sexuality, have been discarded as I have matured and developed a faith of my own.

Once a quarter, the Membership committee holds a class for newcomers called UU 101. It's an introduction to Unitarian Universalism and an orientation of our Fellowship. Anyone who wants to become a member is required to take the course so that they know what they are committing to. My favorite part of the course is the icebreaker; the "getting-to-know-you" part. We ask all participants to take an index card and write on the upper left corner, one religious concept or belief that they cherish and hold dear. On the upper right, they write a concept or belief that they have rejected. On the lower right, they write a concept or belief that they are exploring or struggling with, and finally on the lower left, their religious tradition of origin.

I love this exercise because it offers people a framework from which to talk about their religious journeys. Everyone has a chance to share their index cards. Invariably, we find ourselves immersed in storytelling from the heart. Hearing others tell their stories can be healing and comforting, especially when we find common ground.

Our faith stories describe our relationships with beliefs, language, rituals, symbols and practices. And of course, these religious relationships are formed and influenced by communities that set expectations and pressure to conform to their cultural norms.

Many of us were born into a family religion, meaning our religious relationships were inherited from our parents. Whatever they were going through, we came along for the ride. As that icebreaker exercise realizes, we inherit both blessings and curses from our families. Some beliefs, language, ritual and practices are blessings that can still

provide us comfort and direction in our lives, while others feel like curses that we run from without addressing for fear of re-opening old wounds.

In her book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* Kathleen Norris writes about her personal journey to reclaim her faith by forging a new and deeper relationship with the religious vocabulary that once scared and repelled her.

She writes, "Blood inheritance - and by that I mean not a genetic code but the family milieu in which one is raised - is not a curse that renders us helpless, but unless we recognize the patterns, and make choices other than the ones that have caused our families pain for generations, we are doomed to repeat them. It is the teenager in all of us who resists this aspect of inheritance, imagining herself to be free of all that old stuff. It is in adolescence, after all, that we need to invent ourselves.

To the adolescent, inheritance can seem a simple matter of the "nothing" family, the "nothing town we're stuck in, holding us back, and the culture supports this facile negation. As Americans, we want to be free to move on to the next "best thing." To look back goes against the grain. It limits us, and contradicts the wisdom that Miss America imparts, every September, telling us that we can be anything we want to be.

Surely we are more than the sum of our blood inheritance, our family traditions, or lack of them. In religious development, as in psychological development, we must become our own person. But denial of our inheritance doesn't work, nor does simply castigating it as a "nothing"... There is a vast difference between blindly running away from old "nothings," and running with mature awareness toward something new.

At an interfaith conference of Buddhist and Christian monastics held several years ago at a Trappist monastery, a reporter asked the Dalai Lama what he would say to Americans who want to become Buddhists. "Don't bother," he said. "Learn from Buddhism, if that is good for you. But do it as a Christian, a Jew, or whatever you are. And be a good friend to us."

The Dalai Lama is not Miss America, and does not say what we want to hear. His remarks go to the painful paradox at the heart of religious inheritance. "Whatever you are" is what you are born to and raised in. What matters is healing and transformation, the life you make of it. And that is up to you."

I, like many of you, was raised in a different religious tradition than Unitarian Universalism. Is the Dalai Lama telling me that I am still a Catholic just because I was indoctrinated into that faith as a child? Maybe not in the eyes of the Vatican, but I think I see the larger point that he is making. Forget the labels. What makes us who we are is a combination of what we experienced from those who nurtured us, what we learned from others that challenged and reinforced our values, and what we instill in others who learn from us.

That means accepting even the parts of our background that we carry around as unwanted baggage. Denying those things or running from them risks being stuck under their power, or missing out on an opportunity to distill the blessings from the curses. This is not easy, but it is necessary if we are to heal and be a voice for change.

One of my favorite poets, Emily Dickinson, expresses the pain of carrying around an unexamined wound. She writes:

A great hope fell  
You heard no noise.  
The ruin was within.  
Oh cunning wreck that told no tale  
And let no Witness in.

The mind was built for mighty freight;  
For dread occasion planned.  
How often foundering at Sea  
Ostensibly, on Land.

A not admitting of the wound  
Until it grew so wide  
That all my life had entered it  
And there were troughs beside.

A closing of the simple lid  
That opened to the sun  
Until the tender carpenter  
Perpetual nailed it down.

We must first declare the baggage as our own if we are to heal and grow. Open it up, look inside and see that mixed in with the painful memories are bits of resilience, independence and insights. Mixed in with old bell bottoms and platform shoes are jean jackets, tops and rings. They may still fit and resonate with how we want to carry ourselves in the world. While you may not want to wear those bell bottoms anymore, you can accept that they were once a part of your identity and as you have changed you can say goodbye to them with knowledge of who you are now.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in spiritual freedom that challenges us to develop our spiritual path from the puzzle pieces of our past, present and future. For some people, the religious experiences of their past were so painful that their spiritual path now is essentially a polar opposite of before. I call this throwing out the baby Jesus with the bath water.

The problem with this approach is that the power of discernment remains with the previous experience, but in a negative way. An anti-faith is not a faith, nor a spiritual path. Knowing what you are not, is not the same as knowing who you are. Rejecting religious practices with code words like “too churchy” keeps us in spiritual adolescence, still hurting from the wounds of the past. We are called instead to examine our inheritance and transform ourselves into a positive spiritual presence; to reclaim our religious relationships and mold them into sources of strength. “It’s not forgetting that heals, but remembering and rebuilding.”

We offer many outlets for this healing to take place within a caring environment: starting with our Sunday worship where we practice being a loving community of religious seekers; adult religious education classes, like Building Your Own Theology and UU 101; Chalice Groups where you are invited to engage with spiritual and religious themes; counseling with me as your pastor and visits from our pastoral care

team; social justice and community action ministries to express your personal faith in the service of others; and spiritual practices with affiliated groups such as the Insight Meditation group.

As for me, I know that from time to time my Catholic guilt raises its ugly head. As long as I'm aware of it, I can manage it, and maybe even use it to be responsible and conscientious. I also know that when I sing *Spirit of Life* I'm channeling the transpersonal Holy Spirit of my formative years. I owe my love of religious community to the nurturing church of my youth. I may have remade my theology, but I still love ritual, and I still pray as a spiritual practice.

I am grateful for my Catholic upbringing because it was the fertile soil in which I was raised. I am also grateful for the existentialist philosophy studies of my college years, the humanist teachings of my middle-age and the more recent eastern religious influences. These are some of the sources that make me who I am. Every one of you has your own personal mixture of sources that make you who you are.

Being conscious of our blessings and curses allows us to be responsible "gardeners of the spirit"; open to new experiences where growth is encouraged. We must be stewards of the loving commitment of our forbearers and nurturers of our progeny. As you go about your week ahead, think about one religious item - it can be a belief, word, symbol or ritual - that you cherish enough to put into a spiritual last will and testament for the next generation. Likewise, think about a religious item that you no longer holds meaning for you. Repurpose it, or dispose of it.

Live today with gratitude for all that you have received, the blessings and the curses, the joys and the wounds. Embrace your healing as a way of transformation so that you may be an inspiration to the living story of humanity.