

"This Work We Do"

Sermon by Rev. Tom Schade

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Nobody speaks up for the Prodigal Son. He takes his share of his father's carefully built widget factory in New England, goes to California with a plan to get rich selling pictures of talking penguins on the internet, gets into cocaine and porn stars and ends up twirling signs for a tattoo parlor on Venice Beach. The guy's a mess, and everybody at church chuckles about him behind his back. Parents use him as a cautionary tale when they talk to their younger kids.

The older brother, who thinks his younger brother is an irresponsible fool and should face the consequences of his bad behavior: no more bailouts, he says. The father thinks he deserves the Nobel Prize for Parenting because he let his son move back home. It is from their points of view that the story is told.

Me, at least for today, I kind of digging the Prodigal Son. He followed his dream, and he wasn't afraid to fail, and he did, spectacularly. Next time, it might turn out better.

I also like the protagonist of Mary Oliver's poem, "The Journey." You could assume that the poem is autobiographical, but it may not be. Anyway, she knows that her home life is not good for her and so she starts on a journey to save the only life she can, her own. I like to think that the Prodigal Son took on that same journey. We don't know why he left home. From his brother and father's point of view it is simply ingratitude and pig-headedness, but we never see his point of view, do we? The reasons why these two characters leave home are personal and individual.

Theirs is the journey to the far country, according to others, but to them theirs are journeys to discover the self, the journey to individuation, the journey to find your own place in the world, the journey of self-reinvention.

It is journey that almost everybody takes at some times in their life. In fact, the way that I understand it, it is a journey that we take several times in our lives. The classic circumstance of the journey of individuation is the journey of later adolescence. If early adolescence is all about fitting into a group, defining oneself by one's friends, later adolescence is all about asserting one's self: this is what I believe, this is what I want to do, this is what I want to learn, this is me. The journey toward the self is an inward motion, a motion that feels like freedom and breaking away and claiming oneself.

It is motion that occurs over and over again in life, not just adolescence. Another important point is comes later when careers are chosen, or when old faiths are rejected. It occurs when you decide that working for that particular company is not in

your best interest anymore, or when you decide that what you really want to be when you grow up is something different than what you planned. It occurs when you decide that you will not follow your mother's advice about childbirth, or that you can educate your own children on your own just as well, or better, thank you.

It occurs later in life, when you start building your own goals in life rather than putting all your energy into your career. When you decide that you are not going to devote 80% of your conscious thoughts to work problems but read and think about what you choose. You choose.

For many of you, it is on this journey of individuation that brought you to the door of this church.

And I have been preaching regularly that Liberal Religion's underlying theory of spiritual growth is that you bring the soul into right relationship with the Universe in the condition of freedom. Your soul is your self, and your soul, your self, your spirit must be moving freely to find its true home.

You cannot inhale forever. I know this because I have been taking Yoga classes, and it has become clear to me this fundamental truth of the body – You cannot inhale forever. You cannot exhale forever. Indeed, the number of inhalations and the number of exhalations you take over your entire life (thousands upon thousands, perhaps even millions) will probably end up being close, if not an exact match. Amazing, isn't it?

Not really, every inhalation creates an exhalation; every exhalation creates an irresistible urge to inhale. The most you can do is put a little pause in between two, but it won't last long.

Think of the journey of individuation, the journey to find one's self, the journey of self-possession as an inhalation. You are going within. And once within, you go back out. You exhale.

And what is the exhalation: it is affection for another, it is attraction to others, it is loyalty to others and feelings of solidarity. It is the desire to join in, to fit in, to be a part of community. It is the desire to serve. It is love.

Think of our adolescent, who inhales, goes within to free the self, to claim the self, to know the self and once that happens, he or she is able to truly see and appreciate the unique wonder of another, and a true and deep love emerges. The adolescent inhales freedom and exhales commitment.

He or she goes within and finds and frees the self, and then gives it away. It is a dialectical process. Finding himself, finding herself leads to finding love.

This is how we grow and develop as free persons in community. We alternate journeys within and journeys outside of our selves. We alternate times that we try to define who we are, what we really believe, what we really want for ourselves, what makes us happy with times that we try join ourselves to others, find community, welcome strangers into our lives, and to serve the needs of others. It's a dialectical process.

Say you are on the journey of individuation, and through great study and reflection and inward discernment, you come to the conclusion of what is the truth. And you are ready to proclaim it. No sooner than you proclaim that you run into someone else who believes the opposite as you do. You can argue for a while, but in the end you agree to disagree. The search for a single truth inevitably leads to its opposite, a tolerance for multiple perspectives that make up human society.

And if you follow the path of tolerance and respect for every other opinion to its end, you end up asking yourself what it is that you truly believe.

If you want to fully exhale, to blow out a birthday cake for example, or blow up a balloon, the first thing you have to do is inhale a whole lot. If the doctor says, Take a really deep breath; you first have to exhale.

It is like our bodies: sometimes we are lift weights to strain against the limits of our own strength and sometimes we dance, to move in rhythm with others. These great motions; these alternating journeys, the motion to find and free and possess the self and the motion of creating community, serving, loving and giving the self away: they ebb and flow, tides coming in and tides going out, over the span of decades at a time, or minute by minute.

It is the tides of the spirit.

This Work of Ours. What is this Work of Ours, this work we do together as we are a church together.

We breathe. We inhale and we exhale. We breathe in freedom and honesty; we breathe out love and service. We are not on the same schedule, so we don't always breathe in unison, but we breathe together.

I believe that the living, breathing heart of Liberal Religion in general, and Unitarian Universalism in particular is the inward journey of self-discovery. Our history in this country began with people who looked within and said "I will not give up my Christian faith because I do not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, or that God is condemning most people to eternal punishment in Hell – I will think for myself, without shame, about all matters of the faith." And from then on, it has been the same: Unitarianism and Universalism and Unitarian Universalism have always been one of the ways that people reinvent themselves, to make the holy sacrament of claiming possession of themselves

and their right to live without shame or restriction. We are the religion that understands the words of the Holy Spirit are often just "I AM SOMEBODY – NEVER NEGLECT ME – ALWAYS RESPECT ME – BECAUSE I AM SOMEBODY!"

I believe that Unitarian Universalism could have died, if it were not for the fact that our churches and congregation all across this country have been oxygenated by inward movement of countless gays and lesbians who made this faith a part of their claim of their right to be who they were and love they loved.

When I look out at you, I see so many personal acts of self-definition, self-determination, people defining for themselves their highest values, their understanding of God. We are breathing in freedom.

And we are breathing out love and service. Love in the care of each other. Love and service in the care of the homeless through Interfaith Hospitality Network. Service as we volunteer for Jericho Road Worcester. Love in the desire to worship together, sing together, sit in meditation together, even do the work in the practical business of the church together, service in the form of the food we eat together on Monday night and in Sunday school classes we teach and in the willing sacrifice of our time and money to be together.

We breathe in our search for self; we breathe out our love for others. Whereever in that cycle of breathe, keep going , Inhale fully – seek your truth, your bliss, your self-understanding. Soon it will turn to love and service. Likewise, exhale fully: serve your neighbor, love your friends, strengthen community. Soon you be seeking your inner truth. Welcome that moment when the breath changes direction.

It is not beyond us to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm. Keeping step with the rhythm of life, the seasons of our lives come dancing and pass away.

Blessings on your journey.