



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Living with Integrity

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The line between sanity and madness is a lot closer than many of us would want to admit. More than half the people in this room deal with depression on a regular basis, including your minister standing before you. Our worth as beings rests in part in turning our struggles into tenacity and our slide into madness towards moments of lucidity. After all, every brilliant writer from Dickens to May Sarton has struggled with self-doubts and flirted with the edge of darkness. This time of year, slipping as we are away from these dark days, is as good a time as any to remind ourselves of our worth as beings.

Our worth as human beings is, I believe, deeply imbedded in our ability to integrate who we are (our dreams, our values, our souls, our faith) with what we do. How many times in your life have you done something you weren't proud of? When my kids were teenagers, I went up to the movie ticket window and said, "three kids and one adult." My thirteen-year old said, "Dad, I count as an adult now. Why did you claim I was still a kid?" Somewhere between her desire to be all grown up and my guilt at trying to pay less, lays the deeper truth that I was folded in the wrong direction. And don't think kids aren't watching because they are. Their integrity rests on your actions. So whether we are cheating at the ticket window or battling mental illness, the fact remains that many of us, most perhaps, are not so well folded. We are out of integrity if we are folded the wrong way.

Rilke wrote: "I want to unfold. I don't want to stay folded anywhere, because where I am folded, there I am a lie." To which Anne Lamont added "We got folded the wrong way by trying as hard as we could to make everyone happy, to please everyone, and to fill every moment with productivity. Our grown-ups said this would bring approval, and approval would bring satisfaction, and they would like us more. But we also learned to sabotage ourselves so that they wouldn't feel eclipsed. High achievement made the family look good, but also seemed to be another nail in Dad's coffin. We agreed to get folded at school and in jobs, to get ahead, shine the family star, fill our Swiss-cheese holes. We got folded and fooled into airless states of accomplishment, estrangement from ourselves, squandering our very short lives. Then we folded ourselves so we wouldn't annoy or embarrass our kids. Self-

importance fueled by performance anxiety, people-pleasing, sloth, and bad self-esteem, wrapped us into small crisp squares like professionally laundered shirts.

“Folded feels like home, small, familiar, hugged. I like smells of soap and steam and starch. Then it becomes oppressive and disorienting. Even a lot of caffeine and cheery new curtains don’t help.

“You see, we got creased in those places such a long time ago that it seems hopeless to begin the great unfolding now. Our integrity got broken. I am not sure we got strong at the broken places, although people love to say this happens....” (Hallelujah Anyway)

Living with integrity means focusing on what is really important to you. Refolding yourself the way you are meant to be. David Brooks talks about the two mountains of life. The first mountain is the mountain of outward concerns; finding love, finding a job, making money, being concerned about what other people think of you. When I was a baby minister I thought I wanted to change the world. So I climbed the first mountain; worked for causes, built congregations, strove to be successful. But the world wasn’t changing much, so as time went by, I worried more about changing the congregations I served but even that seemed illusive. I was on my way down off the first mountain. Then in my 50s I began to climb the second mountain, the mountain of serving others and finding my integrity in service. This is the mountain I am climbing now, which is why I find time for reflection and prayer. This fits my values of compassion, contemplation and service. This is who I am. We all know people who are on their second mountain. Those who serve selflessly, those who don’t need accolades, in fact those who shun those accolades because they aren’t necessary to the integrated life.

Thanksgiving 1993. A soup kitchen on Colfax in South Bend, IN. The food was warm and there was plenty of it. Halfway through the meal the door flew open and these two drunks came in pushing people this way and that, shouting for something to eat. My first reaction was to call the police but I didn’t. Being the only male volunteer in the room, I yelled at them to keep it down and stop pushing. When the first got to the front of line he wanted to know what we were serving, although those weren’t his exact words. I told him and as he took the plate, he sniffed it and flung it back at me. I ducked and the plate missed me, but the food went everywhere. I let loose a tirade that turned more than a few heads since they all knew I was a minister and called the staff upstairs that came down and had the two men escorted out. As I cleaned up from the encounter, I thought to myself “How ungrateful can you be”? Here he had come for free food, warmth and he had thrown it back in my face. I

questioned whether I really did have the guts to be a part of the solution. Not answered easily. As I thought about that incident, I began to realize that my reaction was in part the result of who I was: a white, middle class man, just as his ungratefulness was a result of his being. How many of us, having lived a life full of violence, hunger and rejection would have been grateful for a plate of stale food? I was looking from the top down in life and he was looking from the bottom up; expecting him to be grateful was a condition of who I was and not a condition of his life.

Truly living up to whom we are – to discover our better selves - sets the stage for us to make our lives and the world a better place. Learning who you are can take a lifetime. For a long time I used to think I was handy at fixing things. My dad thought he was, although I never met a sink he repaired that didn't still leak. I tried to be handy, but the great truth teller in my life, Francis convinced me I was not. She is, I am not. I am good with words and thoughts, less so with things. I am good at repairing souls, not faucets.

Rachel Naomi Remen, a wise doctor who has lived her life in incredible pain from Crohn's disease, wrote: "Wholeness is never lost, it is only forgotten. Integrity rarely means that we need to add something to ourselves: it is more an undoing than a doing, a freeing ourselves from beliefs we have about who we are and ways we have been persuaded to "fix" ourselves to know who we genuinely are. Even after many years of seeing, thinking, and living one way, we are able to reach past all that to claim our integrity and live in a way we may never have expected to live. Being with people at such times is like watching them pat their pockets, trying to remember where they have put their soul... Often in reclaiming the freedom to be whom we are, we remember some basic human quality, an unsuspected capacity for love or compassion or some other part of our common birthright as human beings. What we find is almost always a surprise but it is also familiar; like something we have put in the back of a drawer long ago, once we see it we know it as our own." (Rachel Naomi Remen [Kitchen Table Wisdom](#))

Marriage can sometimes be like this. David Brooks says that marriage can integrate two lives into one, both sacrificing for the good of the both. I have seen this. A partner who gives up their life in order to care for the other as they slide into dementia. Long after the one who is sliding has forgotten who their spouse was, the spouse goes on caring because the other is a part of them and always will be. (See [Second Mountain](#))

Beliefs alone will not call us to our better selves; that is the work of action. “The doctrine of the sacredness of the soul sounds vaguely uplifting, but in fact is highly malignant. It discounts life on earth as just a temporary phase that people pass through, indeed, an infinitesimal fraction of their existence...the gradual replacement of lives for souls as the locus of moral value was helped along by the ascendancy of skepticism and reason” (Steven Pinker, [The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined](#))

Our principles, broad and barely religious though they are, are at the heart of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. The first of these, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” is foundational to our own vision of building an inclusive community. It is also the principle most at odds with the existence of evil in the world. After all, how can you believe in the inherent worth of a mass murderer or a child abuser? It’s a legitimate challenge. How do we see the integrity in someone who does harm with the worth we believe lies beneath that malice.

“You stupid good for nothing idiot. Why a flea has more brains than you. What do you think you are, smart? You won’t be nothing.” I winced, as this 300 pound man yelled at his teenaged son. “I can’t see why you were even born. What a waste of time.”

The old man waddled off. The boy stood there blank faced. I was witnessing a terrible family fight. But the saddest part was it wasn’t out of the ordinary. In fact, the old man yelled at his son daily this way. Taking a little bit of his humanity away each time he did it. The boy who had learned to shut out most of the abuse wasn’t able to shut it all out.

When someone tells you that you are good for nothing for 20 years you begin to believe it and lo’ and behold for most abused children, they become much less than they could be or even worse, they pass on that abuse.

And lest you think that this is just some underclass phenomena let me assure, this sort of deprivation occurs in many guises. Children of high achievers who think they are less than worthy if they don’t come home with straight A’s. The man that amassed three fortunes to gain the love of his father who had been dead 20 years but to whom he was sacrificing his marriage. Athletes who die from strokes not because their bodies weren’t in shape but because their sense of self worthlessness put such a strain on them they snapped. Beauty queens who suddenly end up in the hospital with an eating disorder because their own mothers never felt beautiful enough for their father who ran off with a younger woman anyway.

The belief in inherent worth is actually deeply ingrained in the bible. Jesus proclaims that the “kingdom of God is within” in the Gospel of Thomas, and Isaiah proclaims “my whole being shall exalt in God.” In fact, up until the Middle Ages, the early Church defined its saving message not in dying in Jesus for our sins but fulfilling the promise of an earthly heaven, “...the creating wisdom and power of life dwelling in human beings” (Parker and Brock *Saving Paradise* 2008). In fact, it could be argued that the inherent worthiness of all people is deeply imbedded in the coming of age story in Genesis.

Aren't Adam and Eve compelled to eat the apple because of that very power which God gives all of us in her image: the freedom to choose? Adam and Eve were framed. If they hadn't eaten the apple they would have never been *imago dei* in God's image. When they ate the apple they became truly human. In exercising their freedom they were reclaiming their worthiness.

While they disobeyed this direct order from God, they obeyed their humanity by showing some independence. One of part of the path is what the Buddha called right action: Right action is another term for integrity. It takes integrity to see the world as it really is and to act with worth in that reality. Too often we mistake the freedom to crave for a freedom to act.

Fred Rogers talked often of the Jungian concept of Ideation. He for one was able to integrate his deepest faith in the goodness of humanity with his life's work. To do that required a certain righteousness. As Madeline L'Engle once wrote “Righteousness begins to reveal itself as that strength which is so secure that it can show itself as gentleness...” (The Irrational Season)

We sing “I'll do it my way” believing this an expression of our freedom. But we have it backwards. Doing it “my way” may be only expression of our whims and not with what will bring our values into being. Rather than avoiding lying and stealing because we are following a rule, why are we not living truthfully because it is a reflection of who we really are, completely unfolded? Can you hear me?

Emerson wrote in his essay Self-Reliance “there is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is... These

are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members ... Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”

Richard Rohr observed once the essential equation to living with integrity:

“When you get your, 'Who am I?' question right, all of your, 'What should I do?' questions tend to take care of themselves.”

It won't always be possible but it is at least worth your while to marry our faith with our actions. At the very least, consider the possibility that there is more to life than money, more to love than adoration, more to time than events and more to faith than beliefs. There is ultimately a sacred unity that is you, even if it has not been in Abraham Maslow's words “self-actualized”. At least you are on the path. Amen.