



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

We Become More

By the Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

Sunday, April 25, 2021

I imagine that most of us didn't expect our life to turn out the way it did. Mine didn't. When I was teenager I thought I wanted to be an airline pilot, you know see the world, make a lot of money. I had spent my childhood living and travelling all over the world. This seemed like the normal. And then I realized I was too near sighted so I dropped that. Good thing too, I developed a fear of flying about 10 years ago. I was on a plane to Europe over the Atlantic when we flew into a storm. Dishes started crashing in the galley, the plane pitches and fell. I knew from what little I had read that for a large airplane such as this to give you that feeling of falling, that we were indeed in trouble. We rode waves in the storm drenched sky, the pilot throttling up thousands of feet, only for us to hit another patch and fall hundreds. The whine of the huge engines was far beyond normal. Even the flight attendants were scared. When we finally smoothed out, I had this fear, pure fear really, that we were trapped in a metal tube hurtling through the sky. I went back to galley and tried to breath but my emotions were too powerful. I started to hyperventilate. The flight attendant saw me and knew exactly what to do. "Here" she said, "sit down. What you are feeling is normal now. I live in Paris. Have you ever been in Paris?" We talked and she had me thinking of open skies. My breathing slowed. I made the trip home without incident. But the sudden claustrophobia stayed with me for some time. I went to see my doctor. She took my pulse. While holding my wrist she asked if anything had changed in my life. I told her that my daughter, her husband and my 4-year-old grandson had moved out, after a terrible fight. I was estranged from them. The pain was awful. As tears streamed down my face. The doctor took her hand of my wrist and put it on my shoulder. "Your pulse almost doubled. You are grieving."

We have become something more through this pandemic. Grief, trauma, loss, fear even paranoia are all part of us now. Adam Grant wrote in the NYT recently that the name for what so many of us our feeling is Languishing "Languishing is the neglected middle child of mental health. It's the void between depression and flourishing — the absence of well-being. You don't have symptoms of mental illness, but you're not the picture of mental health either. You're not functioning at full capacity. Languishing dulls your motivation, disrupts your ability to focus, and triples the odds that you'll cut back on work. It appears to be more common than major depression — and in some ways it may be a bigger risk factor for mental illness." (NYT 4.19.21)

Somewhere between the valley of depression and the heights of joy, we wander the middle plane of being vaguely hopeful but strangely disconnected. Have any of you felt this? If not

you personally, I guarantee someone you know is feeling this. But something else is happening in the midst of this wandering. We are, I believe, actually becoming something more, more human, more vulnerable, and yes more hopeful. Anyone of us would not have imagined how our life, especially in this last year has changed us. As we slowly emerge from this cocoon, we have become something more. Something different, even as we have lost, we have gained a wisdom that borders on the transcendent.

If you had told me I would be a minister in my twenties, I would have fallen down laughing. My image of the ministry was tonsured monks singing chants, eating coarse brown bread and remaining celibate. Nothing about my life as a twenty something was anything close to that. But I was a man on a mission, solar energy, that was my jam, a country powered by renewable energy. I was an evangelist for that dream. Up and down the mid-west. I had found my own religion, and so it would turn out religion, that search for meaning would guide my Meta story. The greater story of my life. Accidents of time and chance, a failed marriage, substance abuse, a new life with a soul mate, children, all of those could have turned my life in other directions, but I was being called by a higher calling to become more than I was before.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, one of my spiritual heroes and author of many books, calls this mission “living the faith of integrity”. We live in two worlds, Rabbi Kushner, points out, the world of success and failure, bills and money and troubles and then we live in a greater world of meaning, and hope and healing and faith. Too often, we keep those worlds in separate pockets. (See Living a Life that Matters by Harold Kushner)

Today I am calling on us to bring the two closer together. We have lived in the world of loss, now is the time to put a greater meaning to that loss. To realize what really matters; hugs, caring for the broken, supporting the causes that change the world. To become whole means we look at our lives in a new way, seeing what about our life needs changing to be in line with our values. Once I realized that I would never be rich, and once I gave up hoping that I would be famous, I could devote the energy to what really matters in my life: being a good father, husband, brother, son, grandfather, a good minister and an honest man. In some ways our life here is a microcosm of what should be out there in the world. We seek to be a community of people who meld our being with our doing. We seek to be a community that fosters wholeness. We hunger for this community especially now, more than ever.

More than that though we seek to participate in holiness. Friends, that is what we are doing here. Becoming something more. This pandemic has made each of us different from where we began; more likely to appreciate the ones we love, yearning for touch, a meal, a laugh. We have each become something more each in our own way. Yes, we have lost so much, but even in despair we find new hope. The despair of this pandemic has been calling us – is still calling us – out of heartbreak into each other’s arms again.

In the words of the poet Jean M. Olson:

‘Headlights, taillights, going, coming;
 it does not matter inside.
 Draw a curtain across the window,
 lock the door and break the key.
 Let the interior deepen and broaden
 until it exceeds this -little room.
 You will go out when you are ready,
 when the tiny inner Self no longer fits.
 Awareness will come, yet bliss is not the goal:
 pure consciousness, a word to the stranger
 become friend, that is All’.

We are becoming a ONE more fiercely in the ALL that is ourselves, our families, our congregation, our world. We are co-creating the God in all of us. There is a name for this becoming out of what is broken; it’s called Tikkum Olan in Hebrew, recreating the world out of its shards. It’s also called process theology, literally the co-creation of God. This is what we are doing, in the midst of this amazing transformation. Once we realize that all of us – all of us – are blessed with this divine worth, this essential wholeness, then the sooner we can get on with the task of living lives that are integrated with those beliefs. Let me give you an example. I used to be a real penny pincher. I could make the Indian ride the back of the Buffalo. I would never give money to a panhandler. Until I met a messenger. A panhandler I passed on the street who when I ignored him and walked on by said to me, ‘bless you anyway sir’. I turned around and saw a young man, a man my age, and something went click; a moment of grace. “There but for the grace of God go I.” I realized our essential interconnection and I reached into my pocket and gave him all the money I had. Becoming whole will cost you. It has certainly cost us dearly in this pandemic.

At the end of life, we need to be able to say, I made a difference. All of you made a difference. And when this life is over to move on to becoming more yet, either in an afterlife, if that is what you believe, or in the heritage of what you leave the ones you knew. No life is wasted. But I have become even more convinced that, we need to have some agency over when we choose to leave this life, especially if we are suffering. While I don’t agree with the existentialist Jean Paul Sartre that suicide is the only real choice we have, I do think our becoming more also entails a not becoming, a time to let go if it is time, to not suffer needlessly. There is a bill in the CT House Judiciary 6425 An Act Concerning Aid in Dying that would allow for physician aid in dying. If you are interested in supporting this bill contact me and I will let you know how to help.

I finally overcame my fear of flying through therapy and hypnosis. After five years of estrangement, my daughter and her family started speaking to me again. Our agreement was to not talk about what had happened but just to begin again. I met them at the airport. I had no idea how this would go. Not unlike Jacob who had cheated his brother Esau out of his

inheritance and didn't know if when the reunited he would be hugged or murdered. We all hugged again. Tears streamed down my face.

It wasn't the same as it was before, just like we won't be the same as we were before after this pandemic. Something had been lost, nothing would bring that back. But we have gained wisdom as well. We may be wounded by the journey but like any wounded healer we are wiser for having travelled the path. And while I am still never excited about flying, I have lost the anxiety. I no longer carry the medication wherever I go. I have been able, wounded as Jacob was in his struggle with the angel, to go on. We will all go on.

Our healing ministry together is a bit like that. We become more when we see that our giving to one another, with love, talent and treasure brings out the best in us. We become whole when we ask for and accept healing, a generous spirit. To become healed and whole. Amen.