

Qualities of Renewal

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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An unprecedented storm raged through the south and northeast, a man wearing a Jesus t-shirt punched a woman in the face at a school board meeting, wildfires ravage the western landscape, guns in our emergency rooms, death and disease on the rise in our communities, further dismantling of women's rights in Texas, soldiers killed by bombs, refugees living in diaspora, our congregation once again closing its doors. Given this, and even more, what nerve I have to offer you a message of renewal this morning. I've spent a lot of time with the concept of renewal these past weeks. One important thing I've gleaned from my discernment is that though it may seem the wrong time to talk about renewal in the face of adversity, the reality is that there is never a wrong time to think about and embrace renewal, especially in the face of adversity.

We all go through valleys and peaks — but oftentimes those valleys can seem insurmountable, and it seems making it back to the mountain top is a faraway dream. After all, life is a series of peaks and valleys. It seems many of us get stuck in our valleys while some of us can make it back to the mountaintop — more agile, better than before and ready to take on the next challenge. What makes the difference between those that have more mountaintop moments versus those that seem stuck in the valley?

Without continuous, methodical, conscious efforts to renew ourselves we can become stuck in the “valley of dry bones”. Self-renewal is the process of renewing oneself. Do you harbor these valleys and give them prominence in your life? Malaysian author, Vishen Lakhiani, estimates that 99% of the world's population on the planet is stuck in what he calls the “Victim Stage”. The stage where we harbor a victim mentality and self-pity. Giving our valleys prominence, leads to missed opportunities and ultimately lack of growth. Borrowing from nature and human biology, our capacity for self-renewal hinges on the existence of personal growth factors. John W. Gardner, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under President Johnson tells us, “A society's ability to renew itself hinges upon its individuals. Young countries, businesses, and humans have several key commonalities: they are flexible, eager, open, curious, unafraid, and willing to take risks. These conditions lead to success. However, as time passes, so too comes complacency, apathy, and rigidity, causing motivation to plummet. It is at this junction that great civilizations fall, businesses go bankrupt, and life stagnates.”

There are spiritual laws of self-renewal that are critical to reclaiming your mountaintop, what I call the qualities of renewal. We must first take a personal inventory. Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu once wrote, “He who knows others is wise; He who knows himself is enlightened.” The very first step in taking a personal inventory is to survey your valley — are you standing with mostly dry bones? That failed relationship, depression, divorce, the death of a loved one, the business that failed or the career that never took off, health issues, dispirited by the social bruises in our world. These can physically, emotionally and spiritually consume our very existence and block any hope of self-renewal or personal growth. A personal inventory that explores our deepest thoughts will bring to light: how much of our days are spent harboring negative thoughts that block

opportunities and blessings; how much of our day is spent pitying our personal situation with little thought or recognition of the small blessings on a daily basis; how much have we really forgiven ourselves and others for past hurts and missed opportunities; and, how much of our attention and effort is placed on actually achieving our goals. Prayer, meditation and our intuition are also key in setting the direction in our lives

John W. Gardner shares more wisdom and tells us, “Life isn’t a train ride where you choose your destination, pay your fare and settle back for a nap. “It’s a cycle ride over uncertain terrain, with you in the driver’s seat, constantly correcting your balance and determining the direction of progress.” Many great leaders are considered great because they did something almost no one else believed was possible — they literally set the direction of progress for generations to come. They didn’t focus on the small stuff — they had a vision and a mission. For self-renewal, it is critical to refocus and set the direction of progress in our lives. A new commitment to new priorities will also help keep hope alive. Hope is exactly what we need the most of right now. Setting the direction of progress is the act of setting your goals and vision for your life. However, this isn’t about attaining position, fame and power — as the be all and end all. These goals should embody service to humanity and making the world a better place. As Albert Einstein said. “Only a life lived in service to others is worth living.”

Hope and optimism drive us forward to achieve our goals. It is that fierce optimism that can withstand all shocks, all mistakes, all barriers — that is needed for self-renewal. It is standing in the face of relentless obstacles and finding a pathway to succeed. Many extraordinary individuals employed fierce optimism, above all. Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote that “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” Winston Churchill almost single handedly kept hope alive for the Western world in the early days of World War Two when Hitler’s rule over Europe seemed unstoppable. He instilled hope with his words when almost everyone else had lost hope. Churchill decided he was going to stand up to Hitler even if no one else stood with him (for that first year of WWII, almost no one stood with him). Similarly, Martin Luther King kept hope alive for millions amidst the degradation, and abuse of individual, and institutional racism. He did this by setting the sights of his followers on a better day. He helped them imagine a land where people were not judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. Our Unitarian ancestor William Channing understood this citing salvation by character. Unitarians speak warmly of salvation, but in terms of character. We prefer to think of it as an achievement dependent on deeds rather than creeds. We are concerned with the ethical relations and understanding of life, not about the salvation of souls.

These great leaders set dreams much broader than themselves — their goals were bigger than generations after them could have even imagined. Their hope and optimism led to some of the greatest movements of our time and transformed humanity to become better, stronger and more resilient. Spiritual transformation is a process, and as life happens there are tons of ups and downs. It’s a journey of discovery — there are moments on mountaintops and moments in deep valleys of despair. Spiritual transformation is fueled by a growing awareness of the reality of the soul. There is a conscious commitment to a life of self-discipline and active service in the world. Spiritual disciplines such as meditation, study and service become habits of daily living. It becomes less about personal ego and worldly achievements. We can’t all get to the top, and that isn’t the point of life anyway. Spiritual qualities such as compassion, wisdom, and inclusive love take center stage. Spiritual self-renewal means relinquishing your old and limited identity and

becoming something more expanded, powerful, and closer to your true self. It is not enchained by what others think — or society's dictates about what encompasses success (e.g. money, job-title etc.). With spiritual transformation, the focus of your life has gone through an evolution- its not focused on the valleys anymore — it's now focused on turning those valleys into mountaintops — through serving humanity and achieving happiness in the now.

For Unitarian Universalists, spiritual growth includes all of the ways that people of all ages grow as compassionate, ethical and fulfilled human beings. Spirituality comes from cultivating awareness, and paying attention to beauty, hospitality, gratitude, forgiveness, reverence, wonder, and mystery, and many other things that provide meaning. There is a lot of bad stuff happening in our country right now, and there are always it seems, bad things happening in the world. Part of what we believe and value in Unitarian Universalism is that we must engage with injustice, that we must fight for what we believe is right, that we must help those in need. This is incredibly important, in fact central to who we are. And, we also need to give ourselves permission to rest, and renew. This is a common conversation for those who give care professionally across all sorts of different vocations. Therapists, social workers, ministers and more – we all talk about the need to fill you our own well, so that we have something to offer others. It's also true for everyone – especially as the world demands more of our fierce, justice-seeking love, we need to make even more sure that we are taking time to re-fill our own wells.

So what do I mean when I say spiritual renewal aside from the terse obvious answers of “to be made new again but you know, like, spiritually “to be reinvigorated spiritually of course” and “to feel fresh ... ?” If I was selling a moisturizing body wash, this would suffice but in terms of spiritual renewal, these words only scratch the surface. spiritual renewal is not just about feeling reinvigorated nor is it a “spiritual high.” While I recognize being reinvigorated is a good thing and appreciate there are all sorts of highs in life, these things are more responses from a particular experience. Nothing wrong with them, but they are not worthy pursuits as they diminish our faith to be flimsy vehicles for “feel-good moments” which is alien to what Jesus taught about being His follower.

Spiritual renewal has more to do with two things. First, reawakened and rediscovering identity and second, a galvanized sense of mission and practice. When do you feel most yourself? What do you do that gives you the most joy. Why is it when you are this certain person or do this particular thing that you think to yourself, “This is me” and further, why does it feel so deep and so spiritual?

We generally feel this in a handful of moments doing a few things. We experience this in our relationships, we feel this when we hold the hand of someone dear to us. At times we feel this when we serve others, when we listen and support a friend or when we create or restore something beautiful. It's been my experience that as we go through life, we refine our callings, we add more intentionality to our practices, we reduce the unnecessary, maybe even abandon what we deem worthless for the sake of something better. Spiritual renewal is not merely a “life plan” but has more to do with that life transformation.

What renews your faith in the world? What renews your faith in life itself?

May it be so.